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Fraser Fir

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Fraser Fir

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

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Preface

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live... We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely... by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria — which is our actual experience.”

-Joan Didion

My cousin and sister had grown weary of sightseeing. Both residents of the east coast—my sister of Boston and my cousin of a tiny closet on the Upper East Side—they were exhausted by walking through the permanent galleries at my glacial pace, yet had indulged me all day at MOMA. I decided to go to the Met by myself. With a borrowed MetroCard in my hand, I set out to see Monet’s water lilies. The cold outside was muted, not the sharp cold that burns your nostrils, and the night felt soft, a rare quiet moment on a usually loud and trafficked street. Big snowflakes, the kind that catch in your lashes and drift lazily from the sky, trickled down in wandering paths like streams from a river toward the pavement.

When I was little, I loved a book about a Swedish girl in a white smock who visits the Marmottan in Paris to see her favorite artist’s works and discovers that Monet’s paintings are just “blobs and smears” up close. She is then delighted to step backwards from the paintings in order to discover the familiar images she so admired previously in books. She loves the way the brushstrokes capture light on the water, evoke the feeling of *looking* at the flowers rather than the actual plants. The temporary snow shimmering on the black pavement reminded me of Monet’s haystacks: the close up flecks against a filthy city street when I squatted, swiping the snow and finding only a layer of cold wet grime on my finger, and yet when I stood and looked down the block, the scene was magical, everything glowing almost as if the bus were gliding through the air toward the stop.

I entered the museum as if I had entered a house of worship, paid the small donation fee and thought of dabbing holy water on my forehead. I wandered through the halls searching, not bothering to consult a guide or a map and enjoying the anonymity of it all. When I finally found Monet's room—the panels of lazily pixellated flowers covering every wall—I started to cry.

I am not a person who cries easily. I stare at the overhead light. I gnaw holes in the sides of my cheeks and the insides of my lips. And yet something in that room made me feel as if I was a kid all over again. How could I have lived for twenty-five years and still know almost nothing, still feel the same sense of wonder and confusion when I looked at the green circles resting on a murky pond, wonder how he could know where to put the brush down and make a mark.

Without stories, I think our lives resemble Monet's paintings up close; we can easily become overwhelmed by the brushstrokes, by the sheer volume of experiences accrued, in my case, over only two and a half decades of living. How easy it is to get lost in the smears of color, fat translucent mustard ovals and marigold flecks, to fail to see the how they all connect. Stepping back and examining, at an arm's length, from across the room even, allows the image to come into focus.

The essay allows the author to step back, to find the narrative in barrage of seemingly disparate events and experiences. We need stories to live, because narrative creates meaning. Stories motivate us to act—they cast us in our own lives, provide motivation that allows us to fight off a sense of hopelessness. Without stories, it is easy to succumb to the crushing weight of indifference—to embrace defeatism.

The following collection of essays describes events, ideas, and individuals I have encountered over the past twenty-six years. “Prospecting” and “Fraser Fir” explore how I changed the stories I told about myself and in the process, changed my life. “Underdog” delves into my sister’s passion and sacrifice in her quest to achieve athletic greatness. “Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation” and “Jay” deal with death and grief. Whether the focus was inward or outward, my intention was to analyze experiences and characters in order to reveal larger truths. These are hardly new themes, but the voice is fresh. Travel writer Judy Copeland describes the appeal of nonfiction as access to a completely foreign territory. “Perhaps what readers still look for is the remembered or imagined journey: all the Lonely Planets and Fielding’s in the world can’t get you inside someone else’s imagination. That’s the last unknown.” These essays allow the reader to embark on a journey throughout my unconsciousness. These are not new stories, but they are human stories, stories that we return to again and again that make us more human, told from a new perspective.

From these essays, a larger theme, of growing up, emerges. Of being buried in the brushstrokes and eventually, finding the lily in the frame.

Jay

Jay said he would die before he turned thirty. He told me this in tenth grade chemistry class.

“Oh really,” I said, my nose wrinkling with skepticism. “Who do you think you are? James Dean? Everyone says that they are going to die young but then they get older and feel differently.”

“No, I am serious. Listen.” He grabbed my hands, which he always did to get my attention. He could sense a rambling lecture coming on, knew that in order to get me to focus, there had to be physical engagement. “When I die, I think you should have me taxidermied.”

“Jesus, Jay.” I was loud enough to cause Mrs. Jithendrenathan to look up from her desk and regret allowing us to choose our lab partners that day.

“And you can put me at the bottom of your steps posed with my hand out like this.” He held his palm out, rough like tree bark, with his fingers spread. I started to laugh, hard, and could feel Mrs. J glaring in our direction. I pictured Jay’s face warped into a big permanent smile, dressed in a flannel, occasionally employed as a coat rack. “And your kids can high-five me on the way to breakfast.”

When I introduced myself to Jay in the hallway outside of gym, we were both exactly fifteen years old. We were born on the same day: November 13th. In chemistry class, a few months into our friendship, he said, out of the blue, “I think you’re ready.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Ready for the hill. I think you can cut it. I’ve been talking to some of my people, and we think you can cut it.” His people was David Green, his best friend at the time who once shat in his hand and threw it at Jay, and David Green’s twin brother.

After school I nervously waited by the bike rack. I didn’t know if I could cut it. I was pretty positive I could not cut it. When Jay and his friend arrived, they hopped on their bikes and

started peeling toward the edge of the parking lot, Jay yelling over his shoulder, “Come on,” and I knew it was the first test. He was small but powerful, half-persian with thick black hair that was sometimes cut into a Mohawk and sometimes shaved close and sometimes long and floppy—a mushroom cloud around the circumference of his skull. He had the strongest hands, like he was born for climbing, and huge calf muscles from miles and miles of pedaling. The burning in my thighs was growing more noticeable and I feared what would happen when we actually got to the river. Jay talked easily over his shoulder while we sped through the city streets; he was confident in traffic, knew he had a right to the shoulder of the road.

When I saw the first hill, I didn’t think I could cut it. “So um, what exactly should I do,” I asked.

“Just let go. There is no trick, really, just let go and bend your knees.” And then he was off, hurtling down the hill and I could only chase him. As I gathered speed I started to ride the brakes, inching down, not realizing flexing the breaks might pitch me over the handlebars. “And don’t brake,” he screamed from somewhere ahead of me, like he could read my mind.

Talking with Jay always felt like he could read my mind. When we were in a room together, everything seemed to fall away and blur at the edges except for Jay, his soft dark eyelashes and too loud laugh, the way everything blurs when you meet someone who can look right through you and see your heart. He taught me how to fry pancakes in bacon and how to build a superior snow fort, and that you should always have three points of contact while climbing. He introduced me to the secret beach in Minneapolis, the one where you could roll joints in the open, and he taught me how to not be afraid.

After high school Jay and I moved into the second floor of a house we called Thug Mansion with a couple of friends. The landlord was a slumlord who wore Hawaiian print shirts in the bitter December weather; when we showed up to see the place he was kicking beer cans into an adjacent yard. The house was big and white with ugly brown awnings and we loved it immediately; wood floors and windows were ours for only 1,000 a month. The night we moved into Thug Mansion was glorious. We hauled our belongings up the creaky stairs with a frenzy that could only be produced by newfound freedom. The first night we slept at the place, we had no electricity and only two mattresses between four people. Our friend Severin, who was the coat check guy at the Ordway Theatre downtown, had swiped a bottle of Tanqueray and we toasted ourselves over and over again. Jay and I fell asleep on my twin bed, our foreheads pressed together, drunk with the prospect of making the house our own.

How I loved that house. The living room was alive. There were plants along the entire front wall, framing the window and slowly inching toward the back, gaining territory in the room. Things kept expanding—like the mural above the couch. Our narrow coffee table was cluttered with art supplies, stolen Prisma-Color markers and recycled paper. People gathered in the space and inevitably would begin to create. These drawings rippled out until they dominated not just one wall, but multiple walls, a spider web of color—teething vaginas, evil teddy bears, pictures of snowflakes and tender sketches of old friends. A plastic Rocket Ship bank that held booze donations in monetary form sat on the mantle, along with a poster from *Rebel Without a Cause*. At some point we acquired an organ, similar to the way we acquired a fifth roommate—someone found it and brought it home without consulting anyone else. I met Renee at a party and invited her to move in, prompting Jay to raise an eyebrow at me: “What is all this shit in the meditation room?”

Our kitchen was sort of shabby, but I always remember the meals we cooked—breakfast stir fry and spicy tomato sauce with pasta; thick vegetarian stew that we chased with cheap Fat Tire beer; banana chocolate-chip pancakes—more than the grime that crept out from the sink and the scum that coated the walls, the cold draft from the back door.

In the evenings, full with rice and beans covered in hot sauce, we listened to the adventures of Lewis and Clark on vinyl. I would eventually fall asleep to the sound of Jay breathing, imagine his broad chest rising and falling. We shared a room and our beds were feet apart; like siblings we slept with the comfort of knowing we could wake one another in the night if need be. Sometimes I would check, just to be sure. “Jay,” I would say. “Yeah, Boober?”

In the mornings Jay would call the weather hotline on speakerphone so we could access biking conditions. If it was bad he would give me a ride in his truck, which had a skull and crossbones painted on the side, and we would blare Zeppelin all the way to work or to class or wherever. And sometimes, if the weather was really bad, or we were feeling tired or tired of working (him) and schooling (me), we would just not go and then spend the day in bed watching *Dumb and Dumber* and eating El Fudge cookies. When I used to teach enrichment classes to seventh and eighth graders in the summer time, it was different, because I would always go. I loved the kids. I would get so tired sometimes, that I would fall asleep with my eyes open, a pile of papers, half graded, slipping from my lap. Jay would wake me up in my chair with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for dinner. “You are doing that dead sleep thing again and it’s fucking creepy.”

The slumlord called me up one day—he always called me and no one else who lived in our house because he had a crush on me—without realizing that I had illegally sublet my room and

was now in college in New Orleans. He said, “The boys downstairs are saying that there is water coming down into their unit through the light fixture. Is there something going on over there?”

And I said, “I am sure there is a very reasonable explanation for this but I am not home right now. Can I call you back?” I hung up the phone and I called Jay. He didn’t answer. He was never much of a phone user. So I called again. On the third time he answered and I said, “What the fuck is going on over there? There is water pissing out of the light in the kitchen downstairs.” Our neighbors were frat boys—Joey, Luke and Chad. One time I saw Joey come home carrying a beautiful blonde who was wearing nothing but a Miss Minnetonka sash. They liked to drink keg beer and drive a moped in figure eights in our large front lawn and despite all this, I sensed they were not amused.

“Jos. Listen, I lit this firecracker, right.”

“Oh a FIRECRACKER.”

“A *waterproof* firecracker.”

I could hear his giddiness and I wanted to be pissed but I was very, very jealous. How I longed to be lighting fireworks in the living room, blowing things up. I missed our house so much I ached. I pretended to be annoyed. “Oh yes. That.”

“I didn’t have anywhere to throw it so I threw it in the toilet and BOOM. The whole thing exploded.”

That first semester in New Orleans, with the entire length of the country between us, I missed Jay often. I missed Thug Mansion and our long, destination-less bike rides around the city. I missed our morning routine: bowls of cereal on the dingy orange couch, elbows bumping into one another, with Richard Pryor on the record player. Jay never really believed you had to learn

in a classroom and he never worried about what people might think if he didn't go to college, unlike me, who fretted over the expectations of my family, but he believed that I was destined for great things. I had a head for school, he always said, and when I was holed up in my room reading, or lesson planning, or paper writing, he knocked softly, tousled my hair, and asked if I was getting smart. He was protective. If I had work to do, he made sure no one bothered me, skipped me in the circle when passing a joint around the living room.

I called him one night, standing outside in the heavy wet New Orleans night. "Jay, I miss you." I wished so many times I had kissed him, remembered all the nights I had caught myself just staring at his forearms while he washed the dishes, could remember the way he smelled—like bike grease and the grease of unwashed hair—and longed for him to look at me again from so I could feel again like a chasm had opened up in the center of the floor and all the noise and company of other human beings had been sucked away. When we were in a room together, it always felt like just the two of us, no matter who was there.

"Where are you?" he asked, and I felt every single mile of the 1,223 that separated us.

"Outside. A party. It's just—I don't know if I fit in here." In the street, beautiful girls in fitted dresses and heels walked to the next frat house arm in arm, the same girls in my dorm whose lives seemed to move from event to event, from this dress to that one. When I lived with Jay, I didn't have many clothes. I lost them in a storm. I wore his clothes, Carhartts and flannel splattered with with white from his job as a painter. I drank cheap beer in basements, listened to the adventures of Lewis and Clark on vinyl. I felt out of place at the private university. Everything was too fancy, overwhelming.

"I am proud of you." And he was.

When he decided to buy an old boat and attempt to motor down the Mississippi, I wanted to go with him more than anything. I thought about leaving school. But he said that I had big things to do. He never went to college. He went out west, to climb the Rockies. He went down to the Gulf of Mexico and sailed for six months, bought a spear gun and spent the days drinking and fishing. He came to visit me in New Orleans with his friend Arthur. Arthur, staring at me in the middle of Toulouse Street in the French Quarter said, "May I be so bold," and then kissed me on the mouth. Jay looked startled and I hoped it was because he knew it should have been him. And I thought that we had all the time in the world. I thought we would be friends for the rest of my life. And then he died.

I was abroad in Lebanon and I was twenty-two. And I thought that I should go home for the funeral. I wanted to go home. But I know what he would have said: *Don't be silly, Josie, don't come home for me.* And so I stayed. I walked through the Jeita Grotto, with its haunting dankness, the limestone rippled in layers almost as if it had been liquid turned solid right after someone had dropped a pebble in it. I drank in the wild clubs of Beirut, bottles of vodka at the table, girls with long silky black hair and fire behind their eyes, mirrored rooftops that opened so you could welcome dawn on the dance floor. I hitchhiked through West Beirut to the all boys beach, strolled through the campus and imagined the students protesting, standing in the square after the university president had been assassinated. And I was humbled by how stupid I had been, how I thought that everything was forever and I would always feel the way I did when we rolled up to that apartment and made it ours, when we drove up to the woods for no reason and rode on the hood of an old blue Volkswagen and leapt off our porch into piles of snow in t-shirts, our skin burning with a million hot needles, the next adventure a bike ride away.

Dissection

The package arrived right before recess, a mass grave enclosed in cardboard. I immediately had my suspicions. Ms. Quam divided us into small groups and handed each a frozen worm wand about ten inches long: a stick-straight, sterilized version of the slimy slippery fish bait of my summers on the lake. The frozen worm smelled faintly of formaldehyde, not like the other dead worms of my childhood doomed to rot on the pavement post-thunderstorm, or forgotten in a bucket meant for a fishing expedition that never happened. She presented us with a model, too, a perfect museum-quality worm display. The incision on the model worm had been made with great care and a sharp instrument, the blade cleanly splitting the outside cavity, the organs undisturbed, the skin of the earthworm stretched taut away from the body and held in place with push pins.

The actual dissection is hazy—I remember using the worm corpse as a sword before being scolded—but I still can feel in my fingers the peculiar sensation of prying the partially thawed worm apart, a familiar feeling not unlike trying to separate slices from a frozen loaf of bread. Our clumsy and small fingers, barely adept at zigzagging through construction paper let alone carving muscle, failed us. The worm I dissected might as well have met his fate on a sidewalk in July, flattened by a bicycle tire after emerging from the depths during the afternoon downpour.

None of our attempts came close to the scientific exactness of the model worm, within which it was possible to see all the tiny organs on display like jewels in a vitrine. Earthworms have five pairs of makeshift hearts running down their center, two long columns of heart pairs stacked vertically. All I heard during the lecture was that worms had ten hearts. In second grade a heart was a heavy pounding in my chest that I noticed while in line for the drinking fountain in gym class, sweat dripping down my flushed round face to the da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM after

forty-five minutes of capture the flag; a red and yellow colored illustration in the nurse's office with thin lines that connect the word to the part; the shape of a valentine accompanying a bag of chocolate candies. Ten hearts seemed like a pretty badass trait, one that might propel me past Roger Muños, the fastest kid in my class, and how cool, I thought, that if you chop a worm in half in might become TWO WORMS.

Only when I was much older, when I learned that the “hearts” of earthworms are not hearts at all but something called Aortic arches—psuedohearts—did I begin to see the true value of having ten hearts: upon being severed, the ability to leave a part behind, to keep crawling blindly through dark soil despite missing half the self and then, to heal.

Underdog

I watch the opening ceremonies at a dive bar in the States and send a rope of Miller Lite through the air when the camera stops on my sister, her cartoony bright blue eyes wide under her beret. Dressed like a patriotic Girl Scout, she is waving, blissful, surrounded by hulking professional basketball players in similar attire: Ralph Lauren, made in China. “There she is,” I shriek, pointing at the flat screen, my pride a lump in the back of my throat that makes it difficult to swallow.

On the big screen, in high def, she looks stunning. The navy blue beret—part of the official Team USA opening ceremony attire—that looks so silly on LeBron James looks cosmopolitan on her, and for a second I think of that tiny ferocious red headed French rebel of our childhood bedtimes; Madeline also knew how to rock a beret. Black mascara defines Susie’s long lashes, but she wears little make-up, her face glowing with all the hope of the athlete who has not yet competed. She is the girl next door, with the type of body that makes all the heads swivel when she walks into the yoga studio in a sports bra: strong, lean limbs, deep cleavage, small waist. And then there are her thighs, which are huge. They seem almost grotesque, disproportional to her body. They are thick, bulging, as if her skin were a tight nude dress stretched over her powerful, fast twitch muscles. Explosive. When fencers lunge, they leap. The force on the heel of the lead foot is up to seven times a fencer’s body weight—close to the impact of Shaq landing post-slam-dunk¹.

¹ After landing the contract to provide shoes for the US Olympic fencing team, Nike formed a design team and began working on a fencing shoe. In addition to conducting interviews and testing several prototypes, Nike also invited top competitors in the sport to their laboratory, fitted their shoes with pressure sensors, and asked them to perform a series of fencing moves. The researchers were shocked to discover the amount of force generated during impact by a fencer’s lead foot was among the highest they’d seen in sports, close to the level of impact measured in basketball when a big man lands after a slam dunk. <<http://www.fencing.net/776/first-look-at-the-nike-fencing-shoe/>>

Susie's presence in the Parade of Nations—that cheesy, feel-good international pep rally-ish stroll around the stadium—is a testament to years and years of lunges and squats, of footwork drills and for me, late nights sitting outside of the fencing club with the heater in the Dodge van blasting dry hot air, the Minnesota winter bitter against the windows. The beaming 22-year-old with long shiny chestnut locks is the same little girl featured, with her sweat dampened hair hanging limp around her face, on the Twin Cities Fencing Club website, a small medal hanging by a red ribbon around her neck. In the photo she looks so young, her face still filled out, her cheekbones not yet defined, but the ecstatic grin on her face is the same as the young woman on the television, the same grin she wears in my memory of a time she chased my friend Nick through our backyard so many years ago. Nick, stumbling over scattered objects--the old push mower, empty buckets, a hockey net--while trying to avoid the freshly washed clothes hanging from the line, the dog shit hidden in tall grass. Tenacious, she backed him against the weathered red bricks of our house, poking a slender branch in his face, the same smile, taunting: “You think *you*...are going to beat *me*?”

The first time Susie stepped onto the strip with a weapon, she was nine. A journalist from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* reported that she had thumbed through a phonebook one day and randomly picked out the Twin Cities Fencing Association. “That's bullshit,” she says when I recount this story. “Some reporter made that up. *Do you enjoy reading phone books for fun? That's what this little girl liked to do.* Makes me sound like a freak. I wanted to start fencing—it looked really cool in *The Parent Trap*. I looked up the club in the phonebook...”

The baby of the family, she was looking for a way to distinguish herself from her two older sisters. Our mom agreed to pay for ten lessons, assuming my sister's interest would soon wane; it did not.

I arrive in London on the second day of the 2012 Summer Olympic Games and proceed to tell everyone I meet why I am there: to watch my baby sister compete. I tell this unprompted to a group of American law students on a post-bar exam European vacation. “She looks exactly like me,” I say to them. “Except she's um, a world class athlete. So she's in better shape.” I tell the girl at the counter of Pret-A-Manger while purchasing a tuna fish sandwich. I tell my other sister, Katie, about every half hour: “We are here to see our little sister in the Olympics.”

While traveling abroad, I usually try to keep a low profile, mute my American-ness. I claimed Canadian while traveling over a reconstructed bridge in Lebanon bombed in 2006 during the July War after the tour guide started making pointed remarks about the American/Israeli alliance. I shook my head sheepishly when Malians chanted “George Bush” as I walked through the market in Mopti. But in London, I am seized with a previously unknown patriotic fervor. I am manic; I chant U-S-A and swig Budweiser and wear obnoxious Bald Eagle embroidered clothing. The atmosphere is charged, electric. As little girls, my two sisters and I mimicked our heroes in the living room. Yamaguchi. Kerrigan. Strug. Our socks serving as makeshift ice skates on the hard wood floor, we would attempt triple lutz jumps and open axels. Gymnastic floor routines were staged on the raft up North at the cabin, with extra points awarded for splashy, technical dives into the cold Minnesota lake. A decade and a half later, my sister

Katie and I were about to watch Susie take the world stage wearing a Kevlar jacket, brandishing an épée.

In a track meet, competitors line up beside one another, eyeing their opponents discreetly. Sure, there might be some posturing, some puffed-up chests, skeptical glances directed at puny calves, but it does not provoke the same instinct as lining up face to face. The racer aims to differentiate from the pack. Fencers are at war: one winner, one loser.

A narrow extended black rectangle serves as the fencer's field: “the strip” or “*piste*”² is forty-five feet long and six feet wide. The strip dictates the dynamics of the sport. The patient fencer maintains position, but also keeps a distance, luring her rival, waiting for her to grow impatient. Frustration leads to careless mistakes. Her opposite is my sister, who prefers to dictate the action. The drama of fencing, like boxing, is in the moments just before the violence.

The psychology of the strip fascinates me. The imposition of limits breeds creativity; the challenge is in finding the most interesting way to move from point A to point B, to outsmart your opponent in your approach. When I ask my sister about this though, she just shrugs: “I just play the game. I don’t make the rules.”

Modern fencing is divided based on the weapon used: foil, sabre, and épée—the blade my sister uses. Her weapon is stiff, the heaviest of the three. The weapon is connected to a score box by a long electric cord; when the tip of the weapon makes contact, a point is recorded. The entire body is fair game for an épée fencer (in foil, the target area is limited). Like a real fight, épée

² French for track

favors the tenacious and the scrappy—anything goes and the only thing that matters is whether or not you strike first. Against weaker opponents, my sister always goes for the feet, which earned her the nickname Shoesie. The toes are a notoriously painful spot to be hit.

When Susie was in junior high, my mother received a call from the school. A teacher had noticed angry, dark purple bruises spotting my sister's pale skin. My mom explains that fencers often bruise despite wearing protective gear. Apparently when they questioned my sister, she just laughed.

Watching a match from a distance is a surreal experience, each fighter on a strange leash, confined to move in one direction. The gymnasium fills with the clatter of weapons. Lights flash when a touch is scored, accompanied by a sound not unlike the one that signals the unlocking of a prison door.

The gym where my sister's career began is a dingy, un-air-conditioned basement, built originally as a Jewish community center in the 1920s. The hoop still stands above what used to be a basketball court, the free throw and half court lines now taped over, the wooden floor divided into bizarre dry-land swimming lanes. Often I picture her gruff coach, Roberto Sobalvarro, as the star of a documentary about gymnasts in Eastern Europe: a girl cries softly, clapping chalk in her hands, while a stern man repeatedly shouts a foreign word that can only mean *Again*. Except that Ro is Guatemalan, and although occasionally aloof—gruff even—he is not driven to win at *all*

costs³. In a 2012 interview with the *Pioneer Press*, Ro cited his favorite coaching memory (up to that point) as the moment my sister gifted him her junior world championship gold medal.

Not long after her first lesson, Ro began coaching my sister at a discounted price, and eventually stopped charging her for lessons; he knew immediately just how good she could be. Lessons at the club cost, according to the most recent prices, \$180 a quarter, or \$60 a month.

Early on, other fencers called her the Elvis Presley of fencing, because she was “too young to be that good,” but her temper cost her matches. Her early meltdowns were of epic proportions. Ro once told a reporter that Susie “had a chip on her shoulder the size of a table.” After losing, she would slam her helmet to the ground, fling her weapon aside and stomp off the strip, her mask slowly wobbling to a stop. Standing among the other spectators—a few parents and athletes—my mom’s face would burn, and she would quietly withdraw from the crowd and follow my sister at a distance.

Mini-golf outings as a family were complicated; my other sister was the better (more patient) golfer, but my mom was forced to rig the score lest Susie lose it and launch her putter into the windmill. During a floor-hockey game in ninth grade gym class, she mangled two fingers on her fighting hand (she’s right-handed, but fences left) while trying to rip the flag off of another student’s hip. Ro wanted to sue, an idea my mom shot down fairly quickly considering our public school fought tooth and nail for resources and frankly, teenagers who have yet to harness their speed sometimes get injured. The incident served as justification for Susie being

³ Twenty-six year old Chinese diver Wu Minxia was notified of her grandparents’ death a year earlier only *after* she competed and won gold; she was living in a government sponsored training facility and the coaching staff chose not to tell her lest it distract from her training. Her mother’s eight-year-long battle with breast cancer was also kept secret. <<http://deadspin.com/5931182/chinese-diver-wins-gold-is-finally-told-that-her-mother-has-cancer-and-her-grandparents-died-a-year-ago>>

exempt from the notoriously hard to get out of requirement that every St. Paul high school student faces: mandatory PE. Yet Susie logged more hours at the gym than anyone I knew in high school—often taking lessons and fighting in practice bouts three or four hours a night, several nights a week⁴.

In high school I used to sit in the car outside of the fencing club, resentful that I was forced to play backup parent when I had a paper due the next morning. Teenagers in baggy sweats would filter out, their heavy breathing made visible in the cold air, and head to their cars well after nine PM. I would stew until my sister finally emerged, her sweaty face glowing under the streetlamp. Upon registering my frustration, she would offer the obligatory apology, but her mind was somewhere else, on the strip, setting up the half-step fleche, perfecting the approach.

When we were growing up, a big snow meant my sisters and I would head out of the Twin Cities to the local ski hill and fling ourselves off amateurish jumps, looking for big air on our snowboards, but after Susie broke her fingers, Ro explicitly forbade her from lacing up her old Burton boots. I offered her an extra lift ticket and my mom shot me that look, don't tempt her, and I quickly rescinded: "Apparently your body is too delicate for extreme sports."

Slowly, fencing edged out all other parts of her life. Katie became the director of the drama club; I did a lot of slow motion hippie dancing in the school musical *Hair*. While Susie flew to Kansas City to compete, Katie and I spent evenings sipping partially frozen Summit beer clutched in gloved hands, our labored breath hot white puffs visible as we hustled across the frozen outdoor rinks. Or filming silent movies for French class, a strategy I devised in order to

⁴ There are competitive practices on Tuesday and Thursday nights, and the club is open Monday through Saturday evenings and Saturday days.

avoid actually speaking, subtitled the effort in what I considered a clever artistic hoax. My world was constantly rotating, everything a new adventure to which I could devote manic energy, while Susie spent long hours with Ro each weeknight and Saturday mornings, tournament weekends increasing in frequency from a few times a year to once a month to nearly every weekend, the club discreetly funding her trips. To train in France, she missed Prom, Senior Snow Tubing, Senior Ditch Day—essentially her last semester of high school.

“I think of it like a job,” she said to me once, about her daily workout routine. “Even when I don't want to go, I have to.” Even when there are doubts. “Sometimes people ask me, like it's some profound question, have I ever thought about quitting? If you do something for twelve years? Of course I've thought about quitting. Every great fencer has said, at least once, probably many times, 'I hate this fucking sport.' It's a love hate relationship.”

On the day of the individual competition, my mom rises early, prodding my brother and cousins out of the bunk beds at our hostel. The area where we are staying is called King's Cross after the old train station, a seedy neighborhood on the cusp of gentrification and an hour away from the ExCel Arena in East London where my sister is fencing.

My mom is nervous. In need of coffee, she paces around the room and threatens to leave stragglers; today is her day as much as it is my sister's. There are ten of us, but by the end of the week we will be eighteen—spanning in age from my seventeen-year-old brother to my octogenarian grandfather. We all wear grey t-shirts with TEAM SCANLAN printed on the back, and USA FENCING on the front, and while I am slightly embarrassed about the “family reunion

at Wisconsin Dells” vibe, I am also charmed by the way my grandfather has tucked his shirt into his slacks and belted the ensemble. I don stars-and-stripes Lolita sunglasses; my brother and his best friend from his hockey team wear flag-print knock-off Zubaz.

After being body scanned and searched, we gather in front of the building to take photos. My mom jokes that she feels nervous because the venue shares a name with the place of her employment. She is a suite captain at the Excel Center in St. Paul, topping off drinks and refreshing hors d’oeuvre plates for the duration of the NHL season. When we finally reach our seats, a few rows away from the action, she turns to me and says, “Josie, what if she loses?” She is chewing on her lip, and the lines around her eyes that record worry are visible.

“Mom, who cares? This is the Olympics. You have got to calm down—we’ll never make it through the event. So what if she loses. She is an Olympian.”

She is still an Olympian and her fencing chops earned her a full ride to college. After my mom called the coach of the Princeton fencing team and said my sister would attend whatever college came up with the most money, the school put together a financial aid package that ensures my sister will graduate debt free. While my sister was swearing into one of the elite “Eating Clubs” her sophomore year, I was living in an apartment with a hole in the roof, a damp spot on my ceiling marked with black mold. Fencers at Princeton are entitled to free massages, a fact that I felt particularly envious of after I injured my shoulder to the point that I cannot lift it above my head without immense pain; I don’t have health insurance, so I popped Ibuprofen and hoped for the best.

We sip sodas in our seats and wait. Because of the difficulty of obtaining tickets, our group is separated and scattered throughout the seats. I am squeezed in between my mom and grandparents. Katie is a few rows back, sitting with an American fencer who is assisting the men's épée team.

The bleachers slope down to a large rectangle with four pistes. Each strip is outlined in neon light, the overhanging set-up similar to that of an arena rock show. When my sister's name appears on the electronic board above the third strip, my stomach lurches. The LED declaration SCANLAN, SUSANNAH (USA) v. KRYVYTSKA, OLENA (UKR) makes her accomplishment real, as if up until this point she might not actually have been competing.

The huge screens that hang down from the ceiling and flank the wall show the requisite Olympic propaganda film. On the screen, the fastest swimmers in the world swoop their arms forward, Butterfly in a vivid blue pool. Mariel Zagunis, the second American to win a gold medal in fencing (she did it twice—once in 2004 and then again in 2008) appears on the screen. Susie used to name Zagunis as one of her heroes; now, she is her teammate. Both of Zagunis' parents are Olympians, a lineage, I learn, not so uncommon—many athletes come from generations of Olympians. I glance over at my mom, whose arms are buff only from hoisting heavy trays of food.

When she spots Susie, my mom's hand slingshots down and clamps around my forearm, the way you might grab your date when the killer silently slips in the back door in the scary movie. "There she is."

We scream so loud our friends and family back home, who woke up in the middle of the night to stream the match online, swear they hear our voices on the broadcast.

Susie thrives under pressure. The end of the 2009 season was rough. A packed schedule left her physically and mentally exhausted. Forced to cram for Monday class on red-eye flights home from weekend tournaments, she was struggling in her classes. After bombing a final, she called me looking for reassurance, and I told her that no one would care if she got a 'C+' in her Physics class because eventually she would have an Economics degree from a school whose faculty boasts the head of the Fed. But she sounded tired. Overwhelmed even. And the US team bound for the world championships was pretty much set.

Fencers earn points based on tournament standings; more important tournaments are assigned greater point values. Points determine rankings. Only one major tournament remained in the season: Summer Nationals. The fourth ranked fencer in the country chose to compete in a tournament in Costa Rico instead, sure of her place on the team. The odds were against Susie; the fourth spot had to bomb, and my sister had to take first.

In footage of the finals, she bounces like a boxer on the balls of her feet, a dancer in a metal mesh mask and white fabric armor. Squatting low, her sword points directly at her opponent as if she is calling her out, calling the game winning homerun over the bleachers, pointing: "I got your number." Then they fight, bodies tense, growling, until one strikes. Susie ties the score again at seven and even on the video, you can see that a switch clicks. She stabs low, hitting the other girl in the ankle. Eight. Then again, just below the kneecap. Nine. Ten. Each time she scores, her other hand—which during play hangs to the side of her body, not quite

limp, but almost an addendum, a part attached—snaps up, as if released by a rubber band. When she scores the winning touch, a deep shriek escapes from the mask, as if all the control required to direct the tip of her sword is released. The sound could be mistaken for a gross display of arrogance if it weren't so guttural, a demon freed. But then, almost as if she has just come out of hypnosis, she composes herself, pushes up her mask, and heads to the middle of the strip to shake hands.

The girl who my sister knocked off the team apparently sobbed when she heard the news. No one expected Susie to make that team. There were quite a few who did not expect her to make the 2012 US Team. Which is why my mom took to calling her “The Comeback Kid.”

Olympic fencing bouts contain three periods of three minutes each with a minute in between, like a boxing match. Each touch—when the point of the fencer's weapon makes contact with her opponent's body—is worth a point. The winner of the bout is the first girl to score fifteen. If neither fencer has scored fifteen at the end of time, the fencer with the most points is declared the winner. In three short periods of three minutes, one girl is eliminated, and one advances.

My sister looks nervous, but she scores the first two touches of her Olympic debut. Kryvytska scores the next four. In the second period they trade touches. I stop holding my breath, and when my sister gets two touches in a row, I leap out of my seat. People turn and stare but I keep shouting. When Susie loses a point, I curse under my breath, talk to myself, C'mon Suze, C'mon, pleading with her. In the third period, Kryvytska scores fifteen before my sister does.

After 21 minutes and 44 seconds, my sister's chances of an individual medal are zero.

I am in awe of just how much my sister has sacrificed to lose in the first round. Literally months of her life have been spent on long flights, the glow of the aisle lights and the reading light above revealing her reflection against the tiny plane windows, the special darkness of 30,000 feet. On leave from college to train full time for the Olympics, she watched her classmates graduate; hours upon hours that might have passed in the library, editing a senior thesis, were logged instead in the dingy basement gym, going home to sleep in her childhood bedroom on the ground floor of my mom's house after a long night of training, the cycle of tearing and repairing muscles. While her former roommates from school might take the train from New Jersey for a weekend shopping excursion, Susie flew into the city to take lessons at the New York Athletic Club, slipping through the back door because only members are allowed to enter through the lobby. Instead of eating at the school cafeteria, or the sandwich institution beloved to all drunk Princeton students, Hoagie Haven, Susie attended nutrition seminars in Colorado Springs, pushed herself on high altitude runs. And yet, this feeling is not unfamiliar. Susie has always been sort of an outsider.

Most fencing families are wealthy—the sport screams old money and white dueling gloves, the way the uppercrust might settle disputes. My family hardly fit that mold. Though fencing had allowed her tremendous experiences, a sum of cultural capital that allowed her to pass in the world she inhabited, when her fellow classmates asked where she summered, I imagine she thought about the three of us sisters, all working banquets on the riverboats, pushing heavy metal carts loaded with bad buffet food down the docks, folding napkins and draping

tablecloths for nine dollars an hour, scarfing down cold mostaccioli the moment drunk Elvis took the stage donning a white suit that could have been sewed on. At Princeton, Susie found herself attending the sorts of parties we all used to work. The ones my mom still works, worked all along, partially to support Susie's fencing career.

One night at a frat party at Princeton, during a friendly game of beer pong, she unleashed on a pretty co-ed who made the mistake of commenting on my sister's table manners, the way she treats every ping pong ball sunk in a red Solo cup of beer like the three-point game winner at the buzzer. The girl leaned into her male teammate and pointed at my sister: "Who is that psycho bitch?"

Susie redirected her stare from the remaining cups to the girl: "That was so mean," she said. "I just can't even believe that." And then she hit five cups in a row. The girl did not hit a cup for the rest of the night.

The sense of sacrifice haunts the Olympics, places a crushing weight on athletes, a pressure that only intensifies as the competition draws near. Six months before the games, my mom forbade everyone from saying the "O" word. My sister skipped Christmas with the extended family, wary of the amateur advice, well-meaning questions that only heightened her anxiety. I did not believe her at first, when she expressed her stress, until we were accosted at a yoga class by an acquaintance, the mother of a high school classmate. "You just have to win," the woman said, with no idea of how those expectations started to weigh on my sister, all the love and support becoming an anvil around her waist.

In the months leading up to selection of the Olympic team there are a series of tournaments, the World Cup, that are assigned point values. In the nights leading up to the first World Cup, my perpetually jet lagged sister suffered bouts of insomnia worse than usual, and in the second round of the tournament, crumbling under self-imposed stress, she had a full on panic attack: asthmatic, right there on the strip.

The next tournament yielded better results, but she stalled around fourth place--the Tonya Harding spot, my mom jested out of earshot of Susie. Susie started to hate fencing. She resented her coach, whom she had long had a tumultuous relationship with (the relationship was so difficult at times, and yet so important to her development, she wrote her college essay about it). “He thinks he can control what happens on the strip,” she said. “He can't. That's me.” Her Olympic dreams begin to fester, as she continued to have mediocre showings in the World Cup tournaments.

But then, with only a few weeks to qualify, a finish in the top 16 in Budapest launched her from seventh place to third. The next tournament, no American made it out of first round, and her fate was sealed.

One of the older girls on the German team announced that immediately following the team event in 2012, she planned to hurl her fencing bag into the River Thames, and after relaying this to me, my sister says, “I know how she feels.”

Yet even in her most difficult moments, she fights cynicism with a grace that emerges. She remembers the fencer who talked her down during her panic attack, coaching from the sidelines—even after Susie had beaten her—and is grateful. My workout wardrobe is entirely

furnished by the United States Fencing Association and The Princeton Athletic Department.

“The best part about amateur athletics is the free gear,” she always says. Every morning, when I am back at home for the holidays, Susie wakes me up with a grapefruit and yogurt, accepts no excuses, and demands that I work out with her. She never belabors the fact that she's in better shape than I am. When my bicycle was stolen, a large package arrived at my house: her old road bike, a gift from a former coach. Upon hearing about the theft, she had boxed it up and sent it cross-country. Conscious of her status as a role model, she plays mother hen on international trips, watching out for the younger girls on rare trips to nightclubs, in practice and during matches. She gives lessons at the club and someday, she hopes to establish a scholarship there, so a little girl like her, who has the fire but not the finances, can take lessons for free.

My diabetic grandfather needs to eat, so we shuffle out to the concession stand. My mom says that my sister looked beautiful and poised and I think of the disappointment in her face, how she hid it when she walked over to shake her Ukrainian opponent's hand. I feel slightly guilty because for a second after she lost, I felt relieved, and then immediately ashamed. As I struggle, in my early twenties, to map out a life for myself, it is hard not to compare myself to my younger sibling, who at seventeen was a member of the first US women's team to win the Fencing World Championships. Yet I think my sister is the only person in the world who I would feel comfortable playing assistant to, giving up the limelight. I would ghostwrite her autobiography, take the nasty public falls if she ever ran for office.

We sit at a long cafeteria-style table and eat bangers and mash and talk about the match, agreeing that Susie could have easily beaten the girl. My brother, who was sitting with my dad, eventually finds us and tells my mom that immediately after the bout, my dad disappeared.

“He takes the loss so hard, so he has to go walk around,” Mom says to me, exasperated. They've been divorced for years, and my father, an alcoholic, is difficult to pin down, prone to bouts of absence and withdrawal even when he is sober. “Could he at least supervise the seventeen-year olds?” The loss is not easy for her, either, but she hides it well. She wants to see Susie, to comfort her, but she knows better than to pressure my sister. Instead, she waits, hoping my sister will come to her.

About forty minutes after being eliminated, my sister approaches. A stack of laminated credentials slung around her neck announce her athletic achievement, and other spectators waiting in line to purchase meat pies eye her, perhaps wondering what sport she competes in, if she is famous. I run to hug her.

Despite all the weight training, she is slender—looks slender even in a tracksuit, and I remember her saying that all the anxiety had diminished her appetite.

“Hi, everybody,” she says, giving hugs around the table, even the politician. “Thanks for coming. I am sorry you came all this way to see me lose.” Her attempted joke falls flat, fails to cover for her forced smile. Her eyes are too watery and every muscle in her body is tense, fighting the urge to sob. “We are so proud of you,” I whisper in her ear.

The moment passes and her jaw relaxes; she starts bragging about sitting next to Michael Phelps and Ryan Lochte in the Olympic Village cafeteria. My sister Katie and I show her the

“gold medal” one of my coworkers at day camp made out of the plastic beads that melt together when pressed with a hot iron. We’ve poked a hole and strung a cheap gold chain through it. “We brought this, uhhhh, just in case...things didn’t go well,” I say, and she laughs.

She switches back to jock mode, her bravado returning. “Don’t worry, dude, in the team event we are about to dominate.” This is the girl who, after breaking those fingers in ninth grade, taped a blade to her hand in order to practice footwork with the proper weight balance, sneaking out to the gym against the doctor and my mother's orders, practicing even before the bones had set.

At the tube station, we encounter pink-vested volunteers who direct foot traffic and intercept confused foreigners. These volunteers become the Olympics for me, a militia of ever-cheerful direction givers. Over 70,000 are stationed throughout the city. At the venues, they are perched in lifeguard chairs and armed with megaphones, offering running commentary as spectators stand in line: “It’s a beautiful sunny and seventy, unfortunately very uncharacteristic for London.” The organizers dub these folks “the Games Makers” and I am floored by the level of British patriotism materialized in a willingness to stand, unpaid, for hours. And yet, they are authentic, funny, human.

An especially sassy young lady with a flat tone monologued outside of the Olympic Stadium where Usain Bolt would win the 100 meters, 200 meters and 4x100 meters over the course of the games: “This is a moment in history we will tell our children about. We will tell our children’s children that we were there, at the Olympics. Or that we were outside, and we

heard cheering, faintly, from inside. My mouth is dry, but I'm still talking, because I am that dedicated. I am that happy I am going to overcome it. This is a moment in history."

Even though the Olympics are just a series of games, of contests determined by arbitrary rules, by hundredths of a second, I still struggle to wrap my brain around the history, the epic nature of the event. During the original games in ancient Greece, all conflicts between participating city-states were temporarily suspended. The games put wars on hold.

The mood on the morning of the team event is different. We've spent several days exploring London; trekking to all the spots where Jack the Ripper massacred his victims; finding Westminster from the top of the London Eye; riding the Thames Clipper under the Olympic rings hanging from Tower Bridge. My mom has not left the United States in twenty years, and as a promotion, Proctor and Gamble has gifted every mom of an Olympian from the United States a 1,000 dollar charge card, which becomes our vacation fund. The trip has been a chance for us to be together, enjoy goofing off. One night, I accidentally set off the fire alarm in the hostel, forcing everyone out on the street in the middle of the night. I am secretly horrified by this event—proof that I am royal fuck-up—but my cousins and brothers laugh and laugh. "You put the electric water heater on the stove top?" We bond over travel mishaps, challenge one another to scale public sculptures, and invent a game on the tube in which you have to balance, standing, in the circle that links two cars together without holding on. We call it train surfing. My sister Katie, trained in archaeology, gives us a tour of artifacts in the British Museum that were stolen from other countries (most). While Susie is in the Olympic Village regrouping, stewing in ice baths and sprawling on the table for painful massages that are meant to release the lactic acid

from her bulging calves, we eat fish and chips and drink hard cider. I can't help but think she is missing out a little bit.

The structure of the team event allows for more breathing room. There are four fencers on each team (three competitors and one alternate); every competing team member matches up against every fencer on the opposing team, in three-minute bouts. Team USA will face the heavily favored Italians in the first round. If South Korea is the underdog team of the event, then the US is the under-underdog. The BBC commentators don't even bother covering the match because it's believed to be a wash. Italy is expected to trounce the Americans in a sport long dominated by European countries. But halfway through the match, one of the announcers notices that something strange is happening—the US is beating Italy, and handily. Susie faces Fiamingo and outscores her by one in her first bout. She loses two touches to Navarra in her second bout, but earns them back against a young woman named Nathalie Moelhausen who wears black tennis shoes, and whom Susie swears up and down is a “cheater and...probably a bad person.” (No good narrative exists without a villain, and what are athletic competitions, if not a good narrative, a story about two characters, a conflict, an eventual resolution, a winner and loser.)

For my tenth birthday I received a single strand of freshwater pearls (nothing too fancy, but special to a little girl) and in the heat of an argument, seven year-old Susie tore the necklace, scattering the oddly shaped off-white beads across our wooden floors. But over the years, Susie has learned to control what many fencers call the “inner motherfucker,” and the outbursts common in childhood are no more. On the strip she is a master of her emotions, her anger harnessed and converted into concentration. And yet for a second, when she furrows her brow

and her face warps into a scowl, I fear that she is about to unleash on Moelhausen. And then she catches herself, maintains composure. The touches look effortless.

When she scores the last touch against Moelhausen, my sister rips off her mask and her yell is primal, instinctual, coming from somewhere beyond consciousness. In the stands, my yell is identical. The final score is 45-35. Susie and her teammates advance to the semi-finals, to the disbelief of the sportscasters, who keep remarking on the “major upset.”

Many of the top ranked teams are upset in the first round; Germany, Ukraine, and number one seed Romania are all defeated. The commentators are merciless. During the matches to determine 5th - 8th place, they remark how degrading it is “for athletes of this caliber to participate in these matches,” essentially the loser brackets. I take secret satisfaction knowing our team defied their expectations.

Before the semi-finals, Katie and I are giddy. In singsong voices we chant: “We're going to the sem-is, we're going to the sem-is.” We know that no matter what happens, the US team will either land in the finals, or have a shot at bronze. The semi-final match is close, and after the second bout, we lead by one. In the third bout, however, the Koreans edge ahead, and in the fourth bout we give up three points. During the match, I scream the names of my sister's teammates, and violently cheer for my country, but I can't help but be most concerned about my sister's performance, terrified that she will give up more points than her teammates. She loses all three of her bouts, but her teammates don't fare much better, and the Koreans advance to the finals.

The United States will face Russian in a fight for bronze. The stakes are not lost on us. Minnesotans, we grew up on hockey, love the smell of the ice, and we revere Herb Brooks, the coach of the 1980 Olympic Hockey team. He led a group of college kids from Minnesota and Boston to a gold against the heavily favored Soviets at the height of the Cold War. I imagined my sister's coach recycling Brooks' pep talk before the game: "You were born to be a player. You were meant to be here. This moment is yours."

My sister texts my mom before the match: *Kelly is going to fence instead of me. If she doesn't fence, she doesn't medal.* There are four spots on the team. Three competitors and one alternate. According to Olympic rules, if Kelly did not fence in at least one bout, she would not receive a medal (if the team were to medal). My sister has done a very gracious thing by allowing Kelly to step in, and yet we cannot help but feel upset. She has earned this spot, after being written off, and we wonder if she was pressured to step down. Kelly's younger sister Courtney is on the team and had the highest point ranking going into the Olympics; there was speculation, in the tournaments leading up to the games, that Courtney intentionally threw bouts in order to help her sister gain points. In an individual sport, they have always been teammates. As pissed as I feel, I try to regroup, because I want the team to succeed. When Kelly blows the first bout and loses four points to her opponent, my sister is the first one to go to her, kneel next to her, keep her spirits up; "Forget about that match. You got the next one."

When it became clear that the US was going to defeat the Soviets back in 1980, sportcaster Al Michaels started counting down with the clock, screaming: “Do you believe in miracles? YES!” Susie was screaming the same thing when her teammate Courtney scored the winning touch. A snapshot of the moment immediately after the United States seized the bronze in sudden death overtime captures my sister in midair, her feet higher than her teammates' waists. The other three girls are hugging. Susie is hovering behind them, her long hair splayed out behind her, her knees hugged tight to her chest.

We run out of the arena chanting SUZE-S-A, my sister, my mom, my brother, me and my dad, all of us sprint to the tube station, and then all the way to the America Hospitality House, where a party for the women's épée team is raging. We drink too many complimentary bottles of beer, dance too erratically, are louder than all the other families.

When I see the medal, I need to hold it in my hands, attempt to bite it to make sure it's real. The thing is heavy, and bigger than I imagined—about a half an inch thick. I try on her podium jacket—inspired by a World War II era bomber jacket, the jacket is a burnt gold color and the pockets are embroidered with the words, Land of the Free, Home of the Brave. A little boy at the America House taps the middle of my back. “Excuse me,” he says, “but do you think your sister would take a picture with me?”

In some ways, it's bittersweet. I wanted my sister to win, not just her team. But I watched her in the stands, coaching her teammates, lifting Kelly's spirits after she went down and decide that spending nine minutes on the sidelines doesn't diminish any of her accomplishments.

Months after the Olympics, my mom is out of work because the hockey team is on strike. I am back to scraping by on my stipend, working at the wig shop on the weekends, and Susie is living at home, taking math classes at the University of Minnesota in order to catch up so she can re-enroll at Princeton in the spring. I keep thinking about my grandfather, tearing up in the middle of his toast to Susie, his gnarled hands tightly balled into fists. “My mom never even read English,” he started, and then stopped, trying to locate his voice despite the pressure in his throat. “Immigrants. She came from Lebanon and then lost everything, and your other great-grandparents came from Ireland with nothing and now, only two generations later, an Olympian in the family. What would my mother think? What would she think?”

Because she represented her country in what is considered the world's forefront sports competition, my sister gets to meet the head of state. In the pictures from the White House, a secret service agent looks on nervously as my twenty-two year-old sister approaches Obama. She is wearing the international version of a high school letterman jacket in navy and white leather, a circle patch on the front with an American flag in the middle, her eyes are wide, and the same cartoony grin from the opening ceremonies is stretched across her face.

How we teased her as kids, when she announced at the kitchen table, “You guys better be really successful, because someday, I’m going to be in the Olympics.”

Picking the Line

It was not the tiny stripes tattooed down her ear, suggestive of both tribal markings and large predatory animals, but her fierce blue eyes that drew me in first, rimmed with black, resembling those of a wolf in the darkness, piercing even from a distance and visible even when the animal is not. She had this way of staring that could both frighten and arouse.

I met Erica in West Africa, sweaty and far from snow. Only thirty-four hours off the plane, I felt the way a cat looks when it slips off a shelf unexpectedly, a normally self-assured creature batting wildly at the air, first swinging for footing, then contorting in the hopes of landing paws first. I was sleeping in a small room at a hostel outside of the capital of Ghana with about thirty awkward Americans, waiting for orientation to begin the next morning. The group was not as diverse as it liked to think it was, mostly white middle to upper class college students—Liberal Arts majors—all jockeying for social position with adventure capital. Most of the cursory interactions I had began something like this: “Well when I was hiking the Mayan ruins in Mexico” or “Last summer when I was backpacking through Prague I went to literally the most insane rave.” I had spent the summer before working two jobs in Minnesota and was well aware that traveling abroad is a privilege. But Erica was not talking to anyone as we disembarked from the bus and received housing arrangements. She was standing apart from the group, a big waterproof orange bag on her back—I admired that she traveled light, too—and she looked cocky, like she was trying to deliberately distance herself. I thought, I would like to be her friend. Against better judgment and because I feared ending up with a judgmental missionary for a roommate, I tapped her on the shoulder. “Excuse me. Would you like to share a room?”

Later, when we were waiting for yet another orientation dinner to start, she grabbed my beer bottle out of my hand and tapped the top lip with the bottom of her Star beer. The beer foamed everywhere, and I almost regretted my decision when I had to endure skeptical glances from all the super eager sober Christians in my study abroad program.

The first night I spent in our house, a shared commune in Okpongolo a mile from the university, she suggested Chinese food. She had been traveling across Africa for months, had contracted typhoid fever while teaching in rural Tanzania and had spent two weeks “sitting over a hole in the ground with a bucket, shitting out of both my ass and mouth.” While in Zimbabwe, she failed to have a bowel movement for 11 days. Hours away from anything resembling a pharmacy, she ate an entire bar of soap—a natural laxative. I was enamored by her worldliness, which manifested itself in a sort of traveler’s cynicism. She dismissed most NGOs, had no illusions about the fact that she was gaining far more from her experiences traveling than she had to offer.

Later, after eating a diet that mostly consisted of rice for a few weeks, I understood both the cause of her constipation and also, her craving for Chinese food when she finally arrived in Accra, a relatively large city with a diverse restaurant scene. I also started to understand some of her cynicism, observed firsthand the inefficiency of agencies that attempt to help others according to an agenda, do-gooders who do not bother to consult communities about their needs. At the time though, I felt like a sell-out for coming all the way across the globe to eat fried rice. I said ok anyway, because I was curious. She said, “Okay. Let’s run.” And so the first night we roomed together, we ran three miles to a Chinese restaurant, along the highway, in the dark, with bad Nigerian wine lubricating our steps.

Erica is a freeskiier, an activity that in the past year alone has resulted in two deaths in the United States. Freeskiing, or big mountain skiing, pushes limits, seeking out the most aggressive skiing accessible from a resort. For big mountain skiers, there is a designated aspect of slope with boundaries within which skiers must remain in order to be judged. Competitors are judged on five criteria: speed, line, fluidity, technique and time. The objective is to pick out a line, or path down the slope, that caters to your abilities and ski it “in the most fluid, technically sound manner.” The difficulty of this is increased because the areas where competition are held—the venues—are picked specifically for certain terrain features such as cliffs and heavily treed sections of mountain.

Before she began gaining attention—and sponsors—as a serious freeskiier, she was turning heads in time trials, racing competitively since the age of 4. While extremely successful, she felt trapped. She’s prone to bouts of running away, which to some extent, was what she was doing in West Africa.

Her debut into the world of ski racing is considered somewhat of a fairy tale within the ski community. A small town girl with big dreams, she grew up in McCall, Idaho in America’s Rocky Mountain playground with little knowledge of the fierce nature of competitive ski racing on the East coast. At fifteen she was invited to what was, at the time, the premier ski academy in the lower 48: Burke Mountain Academy in Eastbrook, Vermont. It was presumed that she would make the US Ski Team by the end of her sophomore year—contingent on her continued performance in time trials. That season she completed only 5% of her races, disqualified for missing gates or falling. Battling an eating disorder and depression, she left Burke and headed

for Salt Lake City, Utah. She just quit, gave up her scholarship, and walked away from a chance at the Olympics and a professional ski-racing career. But she never stopped skiing.

While most of the other people who were studying in my program felt the need to constantly assert their status as world travelers, Erica has this sort of quiet humility, perhaps gained from surveying the skyline from 13,000 feet up. At that height, the importance of human existence is leveled by the sheer enormity of nature. It is a certain type of individual who both defers to the power of the wilderness while challenging it at the same time. When you leap out of the helicopter hovering a few feet above the ground, there is a moment before your skis hit the snow; it is a moment of uncertainty. There is not only a belief in the possibility of doing the impossible, but also a respect for the elements of the environment that no one can control.

“The best athletes that you will find in this community don’t give a fuck about what other people in the community think,” she says to me one night. The only thing she ever admitted to being afraid of was whitewater, and she kayaked the entire series of class five rapids on the Zambezi in Zimbabwe nonetheless.

Erica was my constant companion in Ghana. She introduced me to grilled plantains, taught me how to negotiate for a cab, how not to get ripped off in the market, and how to travel cross-country by bush taxi. When we are headed into a club in the city one night, she cautions against wearing shorts, or bringing a bag. “Don’t make yourself an easy target.”

Although she once told me that skiing is the “most profound” but also “most tumultuous” relationship, she’s ever had, one of the reasons she left Burke after her freshman year was because she had an affair with her significantly older coach. She told me about it on long

sleepless nights in our hot room when the fan stilled due to the rolling blackouts in the city. While we lay awake in our bed drenched from a cold bucket bath, the moisture from the water and our sweat indistinguishable, she confessed that somewhere deep down she still loved him. The relationship began on hour-long car rides twice a week, her coach driving her from the boarding school to visit a psychologist to discuss the deep trenches of her depression, her fluctuating weight. That he knew just how vulnerable she was makes his betrayal, in my eyes, that much more severe. How lonely she must have been, how different it must have been when skiing became hours of work, snippy comments about her weight instead of long walks in her backyard with her brother followed by true play—finding the best line on the slope. Erica to me seemed completely invincible, a freak extreme athlete, and yet, when I thought of her sneaking into her coach’s room at night, glaring away the other girls’ leading comments, I was reminded that even the strongest people are not unbreakable. I would sometimes hear her in the bathroom, throwing up her dinner, unable to cut all habits learned in her early adolescence. She preferred to gorge on bread, because it was soft and came up easily.

Erica’s break from competitive ski racing was prompted not just by personal problems but also by the intense and often cutthroat racing culture. “The difference between ski racing and skiing,” she said, “is like the difference between showing a dressage horse and cowboy-ing and ranching. It’s a very different community and philosophy.” She left both the prestige and the pressure of racing in order to escape and pursue what she considers to be a more honorable purpose: integrating the outdoors into her daily life and philosophy, reconciling the dichotomy between natural and man made worlds.

Every day on the way to the bush canteen, the small market where students came to drink and eat mounds of tomato-y jollof rice for fifty cents a plate (and buy packs of cigarettes for the

same price) Erica and I passed a monkey, the pet of one of the professors who lived on campus. The monkey was tethered to a tree in front of the white house, and spent its days repeating the same cycle. He would scurry up and around the tree, winding his leather leash against the trunk, and then, when he reached the highest point on the tree, leap. The result was a homemade theme park ride, as the monkey sailed around the tree like a tetherball. After watching this whole process, Erica remarked, “I know that feeling exactly.”

Erica started skiing when she was only one. “I was born into this lifestyle,” she says. Most of her childhood family vacations were spent in southern Utah canyoneering or backpacking. Canyoneering refers to technical descents in canyons, employing rappels and ropework and requiring wilderness navigation skills.

The rest of Erica’s family—all avid kayakers, climbers, and skiers—instilled in her from a young age a love of thrill seeking. Her 28-year-old brother, a guide on Everest, had a death defying experience while attempting to reach the summit of Lhoste Couloir, the fourth highest mountain in the world after Everest, K2 and Kangchenjunga, in order to make the descent on skis. His oxygen mask malfunctioned and he was forced to ski down at an altitude of 27,000 feet with an angle of 50 degrees—in the dark.

I have never almost died but Erica just shrugs off the potential dangers of freeskiing. “You have to be convinced of your chances,” she says. There is a large raised scar on her thigh, from when she shattered her femur while snowmobiling to an area of Brundage, her home turf in Idaho, inaccessible by lift. She has another pink scar snaking down her knee after suffering a torn ACL last season. She took a nasty tumble down a cliff and, due to “the fucking inept ski patrol,”

was forced to ski down the rest of the course on one ski. In college, Erica lost one of her closest friends in a skiing accident.

Erica often told me her lifestyle “forces an individual to think beyond the immediate and conceive of something greater,” and while she reveres the purity of the sport, she hated the more superficial posturing that permeates the culture.

“Gear whores” is a term that refers to those who are more concerned with their image and position in the hierarchy of extreme sports. I immediately think of orientation, of the guy from Connecticut who kept regaling the group with tales of safaris with his dad, of shooting zebras. There are also many unfortunate stigmas attached to those who pursue extreme sports: stoned bros and crunchy granola hippies who are liberal to the point of impracticality. But the real thing that ties participants together is a sheer passion for the environment and adventure.

There is a necessity for a certain degree of self-promotion. Image does matter. And pursuing these feats can be expensive. But it is important to recognize that marketing yourself should be “means with which you can pursue what you love,” and not your primary focus. Proving yourself is extremely important, which Erica says can be discouraging, but she takes comfort in the fact that “when you are out there [competing], it is you alone on the mountain.” She gained most of her sponsorship by skiing for photos for companies like Oakley and Mammut. The photographer hurls a snowball into the air and the skier has one shot to make the most dynamic part of their turn at that exact spot. Her sponsors provide expensive equipment and sometimes provide competition fees.

Erica told me the reason she left racing for freeskiing was because she “didn’t want to be confined in gates anymore,” which could also be the metaphor for the outdoor community. Backcountry implies a perpetual search for a bigger, better, and yet to be explored wilderness. It

is a restless exploration of self on the edges of the environment, a willingness to push your body to its physical limits. It is a discovery of the sacred and profound, both in nature and within.

When I saw Erica off at the airport as she departed for the States, she asked me if I remembered the monkey. Sure I did, I said. And then she reminded me of this incident in which, recounting a story about how the monkey stole my sunglasses, she said, “If a monkey steals your roommate’s sunglasses, you fuck that monkey up.” And then she said, “Just remember that I would fuck up a monkey for you. That’s all.”

I stayed in West Africa after she left and traveled all the way to Timbouctou, in Mali. I rode in the back of a pick up truck through Burkina Faso wedged behind a cow with a baby on my lap, the dirt staining my hair red. I met a guide who offered to take me to Dogon Country, to see the cities in the cliffs and to celebrate a local Muslim holiday in which each family sacrifices a sheep. I watched hundreds of people kneel in their best clothes in the blistering heat to pray, appearing from far away as stains of color against the endless sand. I melted my shoes on the tail pipe of a moto-bike in Togo. In Mopti, after being robbed, I talked my way onto a cargo boat and rode up the Niger River. I ate with the crew at night, huddled around a communal bowl, scooping rice and goat testicles into my mouth with my right hand. When I reached the Sahara Desert, the parched landscape stretching infinitely out into the blackened and star splattered night, I imagined the Tuareg people, nomadic people, making the treks across to the salt mines with only the stars to guide—thought of them making this journey today, still by camel. When I reached the edge of the desert, my cheeks were reddened, wind burned and seared. Standing at what seemed like the very edge of the earth, looking out at the vast ocean of sand, I thought of

Erica on top of her mountain. Both of us with reddened cheeks, both tracing the line where the earth meets the sky.

Shaking Shells

I sit on a bus and wait. There is no scheduled departure time; the bus departs when all the seats are full. A woman walks briskly toward the center of the market, swinging a pile of what at first looks like feathers, shining against the marigold, aquamarine and tangerine orange of the cloth folded around her waist. I am transfixed by what is actually a clutch of about ten chickens, bobbing upside down. The birds are fastened to a section of rope by their claws, wings bound but their wattles and combs flapping.

One of the chickens manages to free its wings, which results in futile flapping while the other chickens cheer their partially liberated kin to take flight. This is a sight I dream about: the one rogue chicken—in a burst of unprecedented strength seen more commonly in mothers of threatened young—lifting an entire brood of captives and flying them to freedom. It provokes the good kind of sharp breath.

The fetish market in Lomé, Togo, is a large lot bordered by small huts, specializing not in blow-up dolls and leather harnesses but in the raw materials necessary for many traditional ceremonies and medicines in West Africa. Heaps of crocodile heads, baboon skulls with protruding teeth, desiccated carcasses of vultures and owls, dead chameleon and cobra bodies whitened by the sun, and pelts of varying shape and color—many poached illegally—occupy the tables in the center of the market. The smell dispels any question of authenticity. Traders stand around hawking their wares, demanding what ails you. It is, after all, a pharmacy of sorts: the goods sold in the market remedies for pneumonia and arthritis, for lovesickness and bad luck. I picture a widow, sick of the way grief wrecks the body like food poisoning—the loss of sleep, constant waking in the middle of the night in cold sweat; thrashing in response to the violent spasms of pain; the lifeless and clammy pallor—seeking help here, clutching a bird's foot.

I cannot look away from the pile of monkey skulls. I stare into pairs and pairs of vacant eye sockets and think of glass eyes in hunting trophies displayed by my uncles. How they terrified me when I was little. Minutes go by. It feels strange to be here without a reason, the way it feels to enter the house of worship of a religion I do not practice. I am not sure what to

buy. I pause on a chimpanzee hand and a fully inflated, dried out blowfish before settling on a wooden figurine—well-endowed and covered in nails.

The story of how I ended up in the fetish market is not new. I was numb to the blinding whirlwind of sensory overload that was my first two years of college—an overwhelming and constant barrage of cheap liquor and temporary acquaintances; too close conversations about “shit that’s fucked up about the world, man”; exhausting academic debates about problems of water access and failing public schools that would never be solved by self-righteous first-year sociology students; a quiet, desperate desire to be inspired. And also: the exhilarating and terrifying fun; marching through the streets in celebration of Carnival arm in arm with best friends and flinging plastic beads into the oak trees on the quad; reading books that split open my belief system like a seam bursting on too tight pants. There was no time to stop and process, to filter the experiences and organize them into a neat idea of identity. I was unsettled and restless and unsteady and so I did what many young people do who are restless and willing and reckless. I picked a destination on a map that seemed far away and applied for scholarships. After a night of chugging malt liquor out of glass bottles, I walked to the post office and got a passport photo taken. I was twenty-two. With the exception of a brief foray into the Canadian wilderness via canoe, I had never been out of the country before I left for the University of Ghana, Legon.

A young boy motions at my group and insists we meet with one of the healers, herding us in the universal manner that tourists are herded in tourist destinations from Stonehenge to Graceland, and a manner that I became familiar with after traveling in West Africa for several months. He is an expert wrangler: charming and persistent. He guarantees a more authentic experience than merely browsing the market, and gestures at other foreigners milling about the merchandise, shaking his head as if to say, those poor saps—although I am certain they will also

be offered this unique opportunity. We sit on the floor of a tiny hut and wait, the crude structure muting the blinding equatorial sunshine but not blocking it completely; the walls glow. The group's conversation includes both predictions at the price of this spiritual consultation, as well as wisecracks about the potential scenarios that might play out in a tiny hut at the fetish market—ingestion of hallucinogenic herbs and subsequent removal of clothes/seeing of visions, witnessing of goat sacrifices—borrowed from crude interpretations of Voodoo only seen in Tupac music videos and the live performances of Dr. John. I reminisce about some rather vague advice I once received about my *Love, Destiny, Career & More* to the tune of \$3.99 a minute.

When the old man enters the hut, accompanied by his broker, we are hushed. I am most affected by the interaction between the young man who ushered us and the older one he regards with awe. The younger man helps the older to sit and lights his pipe, eager for us to witness his mentor's gift. The cynic in me says the routine is rehearsed, but it works despite my best posturing to convey otherwise. The healer's eyes fix on the dirt floor, and he smokes in silence. Finally, he lifts his gaze to us and addresses the younger man, who translates his words into French. The healer then pulls out several objects, while the translator explains the function of each—a smooth stone to cure insomnia, a small wooden sculpture to protect travelers, a tiny clay creature to protect the home.

All of the charms are for sale, and the broker bundles them up, but we shake our heads. The whole process feels a little underhanded—no one agreed to purchase any charms—and the pressure from the healer is intense. He is frowning at our reluctance. The pricing is determined by the gods, the translator explains, although we are free to negotiate.

I settle on a tiny clay lump with hollow eyes, triangle ears, and a horsehair ponytail sprouting from the top of his head. The lump has a perfectly rounded 'O' for a mouth. "That's

for the cigarette,” the younger man says. Through his translator, the healer says that this lump will bring wealth and health to my family and ward off evil. In exchange for protection, the talisman demands nicotine—at least one smoke a year. I feel strangely better about my own vices and the healer blesses my cig-smoking charm.

He shakes a basket filled with shells and tosses the shells onto the ground, as if he were playing Craps. He frowns. Snake eyes, I think. He tosses the dice again and the translator says 50,000 CFA, about one hundred US dollars. I shake my head. After a couple rounds of shell shaking, we agree on a price. I declare to myself that I do not feel bad about paying what I suspect was too much. I work to quash the paranoia that plagues all travelers—the feeling of being taken advantage of. The healer makes some money this way, and paying makes my experience seem more ok. Or at least, less invasive. The sanitized version of the fetish market does not satisfy my curiosity. Travel is the perpetual search for the mirage that is the “authentic experience,” and I am left wanting. What is the experience like for someone who visits the market as I would a doctor’s office? How does the healer treat malarial fever? Or a broken leg? Or for that matter, a broken heart? When he and the ailing meet, I doubt there is any shell shaking.

When a Ghanaian friend, Didi, sees the nail man from the fetish market, she yelps. We are standing in the shared dorm room of Didi and my American friend. There is an atmospheric shift and it feels the way it does right before a thunderstorm when the pressure drops. I can hear the spit in Didi’s mouth and her eyes go wide trying to assess the danger. She tries to keep her voice level, but her breath is heavy when she says, “You cannot keep that. It is black magic.”

The religious figures in Ghana, according to the last census, break down roughly into thirds: Christian, Muslim, and traditionalist (which is what all religions that are not Christian or

Muslim fall into). Didi is a Christian, but of a certain variety common at the university: fervent and often aggressively evangelistic. She fraternizes with a group responsible for the 5:30AM “WAKE UP: TIME FOR JESUS” wake-up call. About once a week, this group, which I’ve christened the “Christian Militia,” parks their van in front of campus housing and one of the members begins to preach on a bullhorn, the proselytizing amplified by what I imagine must be an incredibly expensive sound system.

A lapsed Catholic, I find the prevalence of Christianity in Ghana alternately charming and irritating. A moment of silence and a simple prayer to thank God for arriving safely after a night of terrible travel cross-country in a bush taxi—a trip in which the driver fell asleep at the wheel and nearly steered a vehicle carrying fourteen passengers into the bush—is a welcome prayer. Bullhorn-assisted sermons, not so much.

Didi demands Emily remove the statue from the room, despite Emily’s protests that it is just a souvenir. Didi insists that the statue is sacrilegious, a false idol, but the way her eyes follow the statue as Emily stows it out of sight in a desk drawer indicate fear. Later that evening, when Emily returns to the room after a meal, the statue is gone.

This bothers me, for reasons that reflect more on me than Didi. I want to confront her, ask—if you are such a Christian, why are you so afraid of a piece of wood? Christians do not believe in black magic.

Occasionally, I am disturbed by the idea that the Christianity in Ghana is a product of colonialism, a hegemonic order that deemed all things African as less-than. It was not so long ago that missionaries forbade Ghanaians to wear traditional dress in church. One day in West African Traditional Ethics 6337, our professor vocalizes my discomfort. “Look at you,” he says, addressing the class of co-eds, “dressed in your *jeans*.”

He launches into a discussion of taboos. Never eat, or shake hands, or exchange money with your left hand. Before beginning to eat, always say, “You are invited,” to your companions. Always greet someone before asking a question. Never make love in the bush. Do not whistle while you eat. Although often practical in origin—the left hand was historically used to wipe after defecating—many taboos that persist in Ghanaian society derive from Vodun and other traditional religions. Along the coast of Ghana, the Ga traditionally forbade fishing on Tuesdays, due to the presence of a sea goddess who wished to play with her children. It had the added benefit of mitigating the effects of over-fishing.

One girl in the class says you are not supposed to turn on the light in the room if someone has died. The instructor asks why. “I don’t know. You just don’t.” She shrugs. The class laughs.

“How many of you believe in taboos?” he demands. Sheepishly, hands go up.

“Hypocrites,” the instructor says, “all of you are hypocrites. How can you adhere to taboos and still declare yourselves Christian?” I immediately think of Didi. The professor laments the loss of traditional culture, but he has just proved his point—it never really disappeared. All these ideas live inside us, despite how we might outwardly protest. Didi might be a Bible-thumper, but she is not taking any chances with nail man.

One night on campus, I walk home alone. It is close to midnight and I am breaking all the rules. I have had a few too many apeteshi shots chased with Star beer, and I decide to take the short cut across the bad bush. I hear a hum that sounds like many people muttering somewhere in the hot night. It is the sound of living things in the dank air, the trees buzzing, feral dogs running, my ears ringing from overcompensation, working double to pick up the slack for my other senses.

As I walk across a large field in the middle of campus, I see figures moving ahead of me, blurry shapes. The hum grows. Voices tangle and then get louder but it is too late to turn back; I am scared to move on but more terrified of retreating, showing weakness. I get closer. There are twenty or so people who appear to be walking in the grass on a grid that doesn't exist. They are chanting. I march purposely forward, bathed in voices, terrified, until I realize they are speaking in tongues.

Upon my recognizing it, the sound transforms. Although the trance-state of the individuals is still unnerving, each in his or her private unconscious, they are together, praising God, the collective volume of their jumbled words a quiet roar.

I keep walking and the voices fade into the steamy night. When I finally reach the road where I turn to head home, I see the lantern of the egg sandwich seller—her stall pops up each night only steps from my door. I watch her carefully crack one egg and then another with one hand in one fluid motion, then turn from the camping stove to fill mugs with hot water for tea. Her motions are graceful. A few people huddle over sandwiches, sitting on benches; they talk softly, lean into one another. In the stall, the woman's children sleep behind her, carefully tucked in blankets and curled into one another. I keep my voice low when I order, two eggs and cheese on the soft--but not the sweet—bread. I eat quietly on a wooden bench, silenced by the absurdity of believing that one experience can be more authentic than another and sure that the sacred is most often found in the ordinary, in the simple act of frying eggs.

Old Growth

I ignore the cold mud that creeps up past the edges of my sandals and trudge on. The whole forest is wet, freshly rained upon, and the air is strangely un-humid for southern Louisiana—thin almost. Panes of sunlight filter through trees and reflect off the puddles that stretch out like webs in all directions, the ground a network of shallow reflective pools. The leaves are brilliant shades of green, neon chartreuse. My sister and mother are along for the walk, a tour of a Bottomland hardwood forest, an ecosystem typically found in lowland floodplains along rivers and lakes; this swatch of forest flanks the Mississippi, tucked in one of the last turns before the river follows one of the long fingers of Louisiana that extends out and dumps a load of pollution collected along its cross-country trek unceremoniously into the Gulf. Our guide, a somewhat gruff ecologist, is wearing jeans tucked into white rubber shrimp boots and eyed us skeptically when we trudged up to the meeting point in sandals. His face is tan and his sleeves are rolled to the elbow. I was embarrassed, having grown up in Minnesota, that I hadn't thought to wear long pants and hiking shoes when I suggested that we drive out to the property--part wilderness preserve, part artist retreat--that morning. We are outdoorsy people, capable of portaging canoes and burning thick black leeches right off our calves with jimmy-rigged lighters. And yet there we were, standing before him with bare toes, woefully unprepared. But my mom was unfazed by his critical glance and only shrugged her shoulders. "We'll be fine," she said authoritatively, and he responded by turning and heading into the woods.

The guide glides through the forest at a quick pace, and we quickly win him over with our willingness; he has no patience for the squeamish couple that balks at the muddy trail and leaves them behind, makes no allowances for another couple that has a young toddler in tow. Minutes into the walk, he turns to the child and says, "Stop it. Stop doing that." The child freezes mid-

stomp and retreats behind his mother's leg, having been delighted by sending rivulets of muddled water into the air only a moment before. The ecologist's tone is severe, and a little harsh I think, given that the path is essentially one long-ass puddle, a trench of temptation for a kid. "Your footprint will take at months to disappear." Previously I had only thought of the footprint idea as a metaphor, a preachy lesson displayed on glossy brochures promoting environmentalism. The guide is qualified to speak on this topic because he spends many if not most of his days walking the 7.66 acres of property and managing the endangered forest. I imagine him for weeks in the future passing the tiny sneaker sized indentation and shaking his head, as if the child were the hunter in Bradbury's famous short story "A Sound of Thunder," the one who crushed the butterfly.

Two artists, a married couple, purchased the land the guide is charged with managing in 1969 and eventually established an artist's retreat. They also set out to restore and conserve the natural forest on the property. Bottomland forests are characterized by their proximity to water; the periodic flooding of the land and the materials that are deposited by the floodwaters dictate the species that flourish in these areas—Oak, Elm, Hickory, Maple, Hackberry, Sweetgum, and Bald Cypress, with its knobby knees that grow up from the roots, the state's official tree. The knees of the cypress give the woods an ethereal feel, strange wooden stalagmites rising from the marshy ground. Bottomland forests are extremely important in regulating flooding—the land acts like a sponge, absorbing excess water, and the trees are an important buffer against storms—but they are disappearing at an alarming rate. Statewide, the loss of forests from before the areas were settled is 50-75%⁵. Primary, or old growth forests of this type are very rare. Initially, they were cleared for settlement; this specific area was cleared in the 1700s to establish a sugarcane

⁵ Smith, L. M. 1993. Estimated presettlement and current acres of natural plant communities in Louisiana. Louisiana Natural Heritage Program, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Baton Rouge, LA.

plantation. Now the forest faces a whole host of threats that are mostly—at their roots—manmade, including several invasive species that were introduced to the ecosystem as decorative shrubs.

The guide—who has spent a large portion of his career studying hurricane ecology, both in Louisiana and the Florida Everglades—points to a fallen tree that resembles a woodsy picnic table with a grass cloth. “That fell during Gustav,” he says. “And the thing is when it fell, it opened up a spot in the canopy for sunlight to penetrate the ground.” A shaft of golden light pours through an opening in the treetops. He points to a fern. “This would not grow if this tree hadn’t been downed.” I think of the tiny saplings poking up through a maze of charred trunks after the Yellowstone fires of 1988, brave and skinny and alive out of the burnt and ashy earth.

And yet despite the resilience of the plants, his job (officially titled environmental curator) seems sort of moot. He monitors multiple plots on the property, charting the new growth and carefully eradicating harmful invasive species in an attempt to restore the forest to a primary state—essentially, a very old forest that has been allowed to evolve undisturbed. If his work is continued, the forest will be restored in 50-70 years. But this is only on a small scale. The perimeter of the property butts up against 900 yards of forest owned by the government, where Chinese privet grows rampant. But at least this forest is protected from development. Across the state, Bottomland forests are cleared to make way for housing developments and farmland. Not to mention, he tells us, that the whole coast is sinking into the gulf—“and they call me a doomsday guy”—he says with a laugh. “Realistically, this isn’t going to make a dent, what I am doing. You just need more people doing this type of forest maintenance.” And yet, he monitors the land the way a mother scans the body of her child, knows every birthmark and

dimple, inquires about every bruise. He measures the trees in each plot the way she measures her child's height against the wall, carefully, noting each bit of growth in soft graphite.

After the walk we stay and chat with the guide, who seems to have relaxed a bit now that his official touring duties are over. I marvel at his job, imagine spending hours and hours trekking through the forest, eventually coming to recognize even a shrub—identical to hundreds of others—freshly trampled by a wild boar. How easily a novice would be lost among the trees, swear that the pile of decomposing trunk was the same they had passed an hour early, could begin to feel the forest closing in, the disorientation of the foliage, find themselves walking for hours in the same loop.

The guide asks if we want to see something. The answer is yes, and then he starts to ask if we mind getting wet and then laughs when he looks down at the dried flecks of mud in constellations across our bare calves. “Obviously you don’t.” Later, he will give us poison ivy soap to wash the traces of the weed off our bare feet. We hike in a different direction for about five minutes, and then he crouches next to a stalk and two green leaves the shape of an arrowhead. I might have walked right by it, or smashed it under the cork sole of my sandal had he not pointed it out, but now, when he is hunched over next to it, I know I am looking at something special. “This is called Ladies Tresses.” I can’t help but be disappointed that the orchid is not in bloom, and I ask him, has he ever seen the flower, and he says yes, but only once or twice. Once or twice in years. And my disappointment dissipates. It wouldn’t seem fair if I had wandered into the woods one day and been treated to a rare orchid in bloom. That’s a sight that should be reserved for a keeper of the woods. Later, I look up pictures of the flower. Multiple delicate white mouths alternate up the stem, and the flower seems delicate and strong,

defiant even—a thing of exquisite beauty, the petals pristine white against a muddied and green background.

At the clearing, where the house and studio meet the woods, a band is setting up. The tour is part of a larger festival meant to celebrate the sacred space, where painters and sculptors and writers apply to spend months working a few steps from the forest. A pick-up truck is parked at the mouth of the trail from which we have just disembarked. “Who parked here,” the guide shouts, his voice level but betraying his annoyance. “No one should be parking here.”

“Hey sorry, man.” A guy in a flannel with a scruffy beard smiles. “We just gotta unload the drum kit.”

The guide recognizes the drummer and smiles, says, “Hey no problem. It’s all about the music,” and then more quietly, “Those treads will only be there for oh, I don’t know, years.” He tries to play it off as sarcasm, but I can tell the deep grooves from the tires in the soft ground upset him on some level that he doesn’t want to reveal to his friend, and that his smile is ever so slightly forced.

Prospecting

He railed a big line of what he thought was heroin. Turns out it was Ketamine, an anesthetic used to tranquilize horses.

“Don’t go to Colorado,” I warned. Daniel had been clean, taking the beginning steps of twelve; Nick in Colorado was bad off.

I have never been to that house in Colorado, but all houses like that are the same. Few furnishings. No sense of settled. The sort of house in which sadness permeates the cracks in the floor, accruing with dust and flakes of human skin: throughout, a coating of desolation and filth. After he snorted the line of K, Daniel wandered outside. Had he collapsed in the house, he would have died alone. But Daniel collapsed across the street, visible through the windows of a restaurant that in my imagination is a stale chain diner, a T.G.I. Fridays perhaps, one of many that dot the freeways into the horizon. But I am not sure, and Daniel is unable to tell me because at that point he was dead. He had fallen through a K-hole; his heart had flat-lined.

“I died,” Daniel wrote from rehab. “They stuck a needle in my chest, a la Pulp Fiction, to jump start that shit.” Like his body was a car in need of jumper cables, the thick slabs of muscle in his chest batteries waiting for the jolt. He asked me to write. I didn’t.

In the beginning, New Orleans seemed to fold out in front of us, the city an endless and sprawling adventure. We met in spring, in the French Quarter on a brilliant, technicolored day, the sunlight twinkling on the surface of cold beer in plastic cups. Daniel insisted we trade shirts and wore my low cut v-neck long after the dirty golden hour of dusk had turned dark. He was a flamboyant dresser. His favorite accessory was a black cowboy hat embroidered with hot-tart pink and blood red velvet flowers. When he donned Texas Rose, it was an indication that he was

going after it--it being the intangible sensation of giving yourself completely to what may come, imbibing with abandon.

That first day, we meandered through the city, singing old country songs and smoking pot in the bathroom of various establishments on Frenchmen street. We would disappear into the ladies' room, the bartender winking at us; I marveled at the freedom with which we moved. After a few hits we would return and storm the dance floor, inappropriately drunk for the early evening and yet still, tourists smiled at us: It sure looks like those kids are having fun.

The early light of the morning found him crying in my bed, describing the rotating cast of men that beat the shit out of his mom until he got old enough to go after them. I was uncomfortable with this level of exposure, with his watery eyes and the outpouring emotion, the bewildered and panicked way he tried to grab my gaze. He just kept saying, "I'm really fucked up, but it's not my fault. I'm really fucked up." He was coming down and vulnerable, the day a microcosm of our entire relationship. Daniel was my Mad Hatter into the world of prescription drugs. He was well versed in exploiting the system; his dad was a pharmacist and he knew how to procure prescriptions for everything from Xanax to Oxycontin. We snorted painkillers and spent evenings flying, fancying ourselves gods, holding court at the bar, drinking into the dawn, stumbling back to his house to make ketchup sandwiches--anti-depressed, anti-anxiety filled nights that rolled into days. In a city with no mandated "last call," I never had to go home.

We used to wander the streets together in the afternoons, consuming forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor, falling in love with the city and the way the sun filters through the trees and creates that hazy, magic light, spots of sun dappling the pavement, the soft glow magnified by Klonopin and freshly hand-rolled joints. The houses in New Orleans have personalities, brightly painted structures devouring all available space on city blocks, the walls and arches

leaning in almost as if they might collapse, the porch ceilings painted sky blue to ward off ghosts. Or wasps. Demons take different forms.

Daniel had inherited his dad's encyclopedia of pills, a heavy tome akin to a drug user's bible. I always trusted him, the way he partitioned out dosages, portioning lines with the precision of an architect, structuring the highs and lows of our evenings. I always assumed he knew what was enough and not too much.

In many ways, we were an odd pair. Daniel is short, with a boyish face, dark wavy locks. Crass and offensive, aggressively Southern, self-identified white trash. I was outgoing but still harbored the traces of a modest midwestern upbringing. Longhaired with long legs, I towered over him and cringed at his mannerisms. He seemed determined to offend everyone in the entire world; I just wanted people to notice me.

But he was tremendously fun to be around. He emboldened me; if the mood struck, I could blow off all my classes and sneak a flask into the library. We would run in a place where we weren't supposed to run, our fingers tickling the spines of books. It was impossible not to be taken with the way that even a trip to buy cigarettes with Daniel could become something else entirely, how all of a sudden you found yourself on the banks of the Mississippi, four hours later, solving the pictogram puzzles on the caps of Mickey's malt liquor "hand grenades," deciphering the tiny pictures and watching the clouds for rain. We were enablers, yes, but also genuinely fond of one another's company; the two are not mutually exclusive, but they tangle and shade relationships.

He was brilliant, too, even though he almost failed out of college. After barely graduating, he managed to talk his way into law school. He was happiest while researching cases, delving into the lives of those charged with car jacking and possession, armed robbery and

murder. He used to show up to his internship at the public defender's office in cut-off denim shorts small enough to make the office secretary uncomfortable, but despite his disregard for professionalism, the lawyers loved him. Daniel always committed, building cases for those who couldn't afford counsel, spending hours scanning witness testimonies, following up on every obscure tip, every piece of evidence. He had wanted to be a lawyer since he was a little boy. "I'm gonna defend all those fuckers back home and keep their asses outta jail." He wanted to protect his mom with the law, too. But no matter how many books he studied, Daniel's mom always went back to bad situations, falling time after time for false promises: "This time'll be different." When Daniel was on a bender, he liked to say he was out prospecting for gold. "We've been out here fer daaaysss," he would drawl, the opiates slowing his jaw, exaggerating his Georgia accent.

One night, late, when we were in the thick of it, he knocked on my door. "Open up, you trick. I am awake and I want to play das Ambien challenge." I opened the door reluctantly and followed him into a night that felt like bathwater—wet, hot air. We sat in his trailer and popped two each of the hypnotic-sedative and tried to slap each other to stay awake, laughing at our feeble attempts to fight the effects of the strong sleeping pill. And in the morning, we wake sitting upright on the couch, posed in comical positions, our limbs sore and stiff.

In those days, I would laugh about the nights before over mimosas, the cost of irreverence yet to be realized.

"Dude, were you arrested last night?" a friend asked. "I saw you getting into the campus police car."

"No, dude. They fucking drove me home. I tipped 'em ten bucks." I would laugh at anything. Accidental crack smoking. Waking up in strange places, waking up in California King beds in upscale hotels in the CBD, waking up with my cheek flush against tile. Being thrown out

of bars where pissing on yourself earns you a spot on the wall of fame. These events were all fodder for self-mythologizing, a story titled: Train Wrecked. I wanted to construct an indestructible image of myself, wear my shortcomings like a badge before others could point them out. In the legend of me, I could choose which parts to include, which parts to minimize, and creating a character was simpler than sorting through and accepting the self.

The bar where we used to hold court was a small dark shed lit by Christmas lights. I knew every coke dealer who frequented the dive and scored there often, handing off wads of crumpled, sweaty cash for little plastic baggies filled with stimulants and baby formula, the same baggies that housed the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches of my childhood. On the bathroom wall in this bar, scrawled in black marker: *life is only lived by the damned.*

It's not hard to feel famous in a place like New Orleans. The nightlife cast of characters is both eccentric and familiar. The creepy masseuse who offers pressure point relief in exchange for beers, preaching spiritual healing while copping a feel. The servers fresh off their shift in tuxedo shirts, top buttons undone, bowties hanging. The impossibly beautiful girls with short dresses, bare legs, glowing faces, dewy skin moistened by the dank Louisiana night—the girls who disappear to the bathroom every five minutes and return with sparkly eyes, bright and bushy-tailed. There is a sense that if you stay away from the nights too long, you will miss something, but it's always the same—perhaps different faces, but the same roles. Whiskey shots. Too close conversations, ripe breath that hangs in the air like a helium balloon slowly dying. And sloppy dancing, partners slumped together for support, searching hands probing and pushing at one another's flesh.

When perched at the bar, time seemed to move with the swell of the crowd, bodies filling and draining the space. The movement of people was barely perceptible but all of a sudden the

bar would empty out and I would see Daniel toward the end of the night, the dark red capillaries burst in the corners of his eyes, his button-down rumpled and stained, the heavy, sickening stench of booze fermented on his tongue mixed with the warm scent of heat trapped in heavy clothes. He liked to party in menswear fit for a hearing but his suit never masked his depravity, the rumpled clothing overcompensating. Daniel would profess his love for me over and over, refer to me as his future ex-wife. “I know you’ll leave me, but I just want the chance to make you happy.” His need weighed on me, pressed too hard, like my belief that I was damned, suspending me on a bar stool until 7am. In the mornings, I would stagger to the toilet and vomit yellow bile, lie, sweaty and cold on the floor and hug my chest to try and keep my insides from coming out. I kept telling myself a story that wasn’t true, and eventually, I had to let it go.

By the time Daniel went to Colorado, I had started running on the bayou in the twilight. I ran until my feet blistered, white fluid filled pockets clustered on my heels, and kept running long after the blisters burst, outrunning the restlessness to the point of exhaustion, satisfaction. Until my ears buzzed and burned. I would run until I collapsed in City Park, reeling from the heat and notice the way the canopy of oaks filtered the light, the magic, and wonder how I had seen it before, flushed to see it again and fall in love with a city through a different, more clean lens.

After overdosing in Colorado, Daniel came to New Orleans for a week to pack up his belongings, an intermediate stop on the way to a more long-term rehabilitation facility back home in Georgia. He called every night that week, begging me to see him. “They’re all whores,” he said, not referring exclusively to women. But the truth was, a lot of people Daniel and I used to know were gone. They left the city by interstate or in the air--plane tickets paid for by wary family members, the concern conditional.

He threatened suicide. I told him to stop with the melodrama--an asset of our friendship was the blunt, open communication--but I knew the idea of leaving made him sick, almost like he would rather die here than live anywhere else. Especially that “fucking boring pisshole of a place Sacramento,” where he’d lived briefly for a few months before fleeing right back to the place neither of us could quit; for Daniel, any place but New Orleans was Sacramento.

All he wanted, he said, was a potluck with a few friends, a goodbye. I agreed to come.

He asked me to bring wine and my unspoken skepticism festered in a pause. A last hurrah, slated between in-patient stays. He reassured me. “I just want everyone to have a good time.” I wanted to believe him.

At the grocery store, I picked out big glossy local tomatoes, garbanzo beans, soft mushrooms, bright yellow peppers and green lettuce that looked as if it had been pressed to hold its shape—the perfect form of the edible leaf. A salad seemed an appropriate send off: fresh and vibrant, full of life. I took pleasure in slicing the vegetables, marveling at the efficiency of a sharp blade, and thought back to a time when I ate one meal a day, some shitty sandwich or a piece of cold pizza, when I had trouble keeping food down in the mornings and had liquid dinner at night.

Salad in hand, I knocked on the door of an apartment I’d never been to in Pigeon Town. Monica, who introduced me to Daniel, was standing beside me, anxious. We waited. There were muffled voices inside. Curtains were pulled back and then dropped again. A few long moments passed. Then finally someone emerged, stepping and quickly shutting the door behind him: a tall man with a long ponytail and a pockmarked face. He looked at us, pursing his lips, and I knew.

Leone, Daniel's ex-girlfriend, came out of the apartment, a cigarette to her lips before the door closed behind her. "I don't know what to say. Don't know what he drank, but when I got here, he was all fucked up." Her expression seemed tired but also, as if she anticipated the situation, had expected to play this role in the drama of the evening. "Trying to figure out what he took, Gavin's going to try to figure out, to try to ask the dealer, he lives on the next block." She gestured toward the pony-tailed man, who nodded and walked off.

Leone fidgets when she talks. Clean on her terms, she still smokes weed and pops Adderall often, but it's prescribed. She hasn't touched a drop of alcohol—or any other hard drugs—in three years. She talks fast and interrupts herself. "I think codeine," she said, sucking hard on her cigarette and snubbing it out and replacing it with a fresh one in one movement. "He was, what a fucking idiot—buying from a guy whose name is fucking Sketchy Pete. He drank a whole bottle, of what must be codeine—gotta be codeine. Promethazine." She started to complain about having to pack all of Daniel's stuff and then asked us if we could please go inside and keep an eye on him, just for a few minutes. "Give someone a break," she said. "He can't be trusted."

Inside, Daniel was sitting in an oversized armchair, swaying slightly, liquid making trails down the front of his white undershirt like entrails, like he had been gutted. Too much saliva in his mouth. A large metal bowl filled with water and ice cubes sat on the table in front of him, and a tall pint glass of milk on the end table beside him. When we entered the room he lurched forward, but the lack of coordination prevented him from getting up, so he just sort of struggled with his arms extending, his head rolling and bobbing the way I imagine a mother overcome with grief at the death of her young child might look. Except Daniel's eyes were lifeless, unfocused. He didn't recognize me. "Wake up, asshole," I yelled when I saw his eyelids

flutter and then settle down to rest, my tone entirely too harsh. “I’m going to slap you if you don’t wake up.” He registered something, but not the words, and jerked up. His head remained loose, however, limply hanging on by his neck, the muscles unresponsive. He tried to stand and then he tried to speak. He seemed to be searching for a word, not unlike when a person searches for a translation, the right phrasing in a second language. He held his hand out toward Monica’s boyfriend and nodded, as if he was introducing him. I walked back outside and said, “Maybe you should bring him to the hospital. I think he should go to the hospital.” Then I left. The next day I got a phone call from Daniel. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I heard you came. I remember—“

“No. You don’t remember.” And then: “Are you trying to kill yourself?”

The plan, he said, had been to see all the people he loved and then off himself. “But the dealer gave me the wrong fucking stuff.” □□

I can’t remember the exact moment when I started to hate when Daniel would knock on my door in the middle of the night but it happened. Maybe the change was slow and maybe I did not realize I was changing. It started to scare me when he would say, “We’re out prospecting, come out, come with us, we’ve been mining for days,” and I would be terrified that he might never come back. That he would stay on the other side. What I remember is the night of his going away party. I remember thinking I didn’t want to sit there all night and keep his eyes open, bring a cup to his lips because he couldn’t, hold my hand in front of his mouth and make sure his breath still moistened my palm. I was tired. I wanted to go home and eat salad on my porch, watch the sky turn in and over like it was coming to a boil, water my basil plant, read a book until I fell asleep—the simple motions of my day, what remained when my feverish immersion ceased. I wonder now how I would feel if his body had been discovered the next morning, skin pasty and ashen, fingernails tinted blue. If his heart had stopped while I lay in my bed.

Jazz Fest Triathlon

I arrive at the bar with my friend Michelle, and I say, “Maybe we should stretch?” Instead, we buy a pitcher of Abita beer for seven dollars and fifty cents.

The bar is Parkview and the time close to noon. Giddy with excitement, Michelle and I try to determine the participants from the regular daytime drinkers. “That guy looks like he’s ready to run,” I say, pointing to a clean-cut twenty-something with uncomfortably tight red shorts. As people trickle in, the patio outside the bar—which consists of some plastic picnic tables under an awning—starts to buzz with playground trash-talk best engaged in by old friends. “Dude, you are going to choke so hard when I shove a stick in your bicycle spokes”; “Hey asshole, you actually going to participate, or just get your tee-shirt and peace out?”; and my personal favorite, a tall man with an unkempt beard who just keeps shaking his head: “Amateurs.” Everyone is taking bets on who will appear on this year’s jerseys. By the time the pioneers show up toting a huge cardboard box, the excitement reaches a pitch and the crowd gathers around for the reveal of the coveted uniforms of JFT 2012.

The Jazz Fest Triathlon is an athletic drinking event. Or a well lubricated sports competition. Part hash, all New Orleans, it is a celebration from the people who know best how to celebrate, who understand perhaps a little bit better than the rest of the country the glory of a cold beer on a swamp-ass hot day, the every day hero, the profound joy of dancing in stomped grass as the sun sets on one of the greatest music festivals in the country and who will dance in mud up to their shins in rain that falls hard and diagonal. When I am first invited to participate in this event, I feel just a little bit closer to reaching that elusive status of local; while I’ve lived here for six years, use “we” in conversation, am loyal to certain bars and cantankerous at the mention of others, I don’t know all the secrets yet—am still discovering afternoon oyster spots,

old salmon colored houses with wild overgrown yards and secret fountains in secluded courtyards. The triathlon represents all that is magical about the city. The way biking to see an old man in tight jeans play guitar on a hot April day can be transformed into an experience akin to worship.

The biking portion of the triathlon begins at the New Orleans Museum of Art in City Park, a vast urban green space double the size of Central Park. Each event commences with a shotgun start—a cheap can of cold beer is punctured with a key and flipped upside down in order to speed intake. Everyone races to chug twelve ounces first. No weapons are fired; although one time, an honored guest charged with kicking off the running portion of the competition decided a firework would be a perfect JFT substitute for the more traditional flare. But before the first event begins, jerseys are distributed.

The first year of JFT—the event has been going on for fourteen years—the “jerseys” were K-Mart tees with iron-on numerals. The second year, feeling the success of the first year’s turn out (eight warm bodies) the design was more intricate. “Some like to call them singlets,” my friend Spitz tells me. He is a writer and a puppeteer and an artist, but more often than not, his forearm is sore from flipping burgers. He was also present at the lunch in which the idea for Jazz Fest Triathlon was presented by his best friend Hunter at a dingy bar in the CBD, the kind of place where you look in the window and think, *They serve food there?* He is also the primary designer of jerseys. “I don’t know,” he says. “Perhaps we take ourselves a little too seriously.” Every year the jersey features local celebrities or featured Jazz Fest performers, often satirizing current events in a longstanding New Orleans tradition of mocking the incompetence of public officials. The year after Katrina, then Mayor C. Ray Nagin was featured on a pair of water-skis

cruising around rooftops peaking over the water line with a speech bubble above his head, containing the phrase he made infamous: “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The faces that grace the jersey are meant to commemorate the time period as well; the year the New Orleans Saints won the Superbowl, in 2009, Drew Brees was featured hoisting the Lombardi trophy⁶ over his head alongside Steve Martin in flippers and fleur-de-lis tatted, red bean-slinging trumpeter Kermit Ruffins riding a Big Wheel—“none of this sanctioned by anyone,” says Spitz. “The NFL did not gives us the rights. Or the AP. Or Kermit.”

The color of the shirts this year is a glorious faded eggplant purple; the texture is that of a shirt that’s been worn all summer on the lake up at the cabin, the tiny pilling giving it a soft white glow. The letters are crisp, invoking 1970s punk rock album covers or ransom notes composed by serial killers—white type against black, in little tiny squares: JAZZ FEST TRIATHLON 2012. The face of Saints head coach Sean Payton, recently suspended over the Bountygate scandal, is photo-shopped onto the body of folk singer Theresa Anderson, who is pictured in a sparkly red gown riding an enormous egret. Bruce Springsteen holds up one of the bird’s wings, and former Saints safety Steve Gleason—who blocked a punt, recovered it for a touchdown and lifted the spirits of a city in the first game back in the dome after Hurricane Katrina—controls the other wing. The third puppeteer is Slab, the mustachioed leader of the all male dance troupe the 610 Stompers, wearing the group’s iconic uniform: tiny blue shorts, white knee high socks, sweatband and shiny red track jackets.

The people are not disappointed. Crumpled up shirts are held up like medals—“I GOT ONE”—and the good sizes go first. Within a half an hour, all fifty-five shirts are claimed and there are those without. “The distribution of t-shirts are a political firestorm every year,” Spitz

⁶ The football was replaced with a watermelon.

tells me. The shirts are subsidized mostly by Hunter, a coach and geography teacher at a public high school, and the proprietor of JFT. Always selling himself short, he is quick to point out that he is not a decorated war veteran like his older brother. But over the past few years, he has slowly built up his basketball team, appeared in a playoff game. Created something where there was nothing. Cash donations are stuffed in two plastic 16-OZ “To-GO” cups, but he still fronts most of the costs. There are no corporate sponsors of JFT, no gaudy logos adorning the backs of the jerseys.

Michelle and I slice our shirts horizontally down the back, so our spines are exposed through what look like purple fish gills. Other people hack off the sleeves and use them as wide Jimi Hendrix headbands. Others shred the bottoms to create fringe. Those with unaltered tees stand proudly like kids at a summer camp in their new gear. The collective excitement is palpable and people keep greeting each other in the way you greet people you are genuinely excited to see, sometimes people you have not seen in an entire year. One friend spots another friend and launches into his arms, the taller of the two swinging the shorter around. Spitz, bearded and donning vintage track shorts and a marching band helmet begins to direct people toward the road. Hunter, in equally tiny shorts, is slapping people on the back and thanking them for coming. The purple shirted participants mount their bicycles. The dredges of beers are drained. Pedals are pushed.

My bicycle is out of commission due to an unfortunate incident⁷ so I secure a ride in a wheelchair (and agree to push the second shift). The wheel chair is old and unruly, however, and pushing it proves to be mad. After two blocks of struggling, I decide to just run to the official starting line at the steps of the museum.

⁷ In which a driver ran over the wheel while exiting a parking lot in what I’ll just assume was a massive SUV.

Cans of Natural Light are punctured in preparation for the shotgun start. After a foamy thirty seconds in which I chug (most) of my beer, the race begins. A friend offers to give me and another who do not have bikes a ride so the three of us hop onto one bicycle—one on the handlebars, one on the seat, and one unlucky grunt charged with making the Schwinn move forward. Racers whiz by us while we amble along in the bright afternoon. In the distance I see the wheelchair leaned and U-locked against a pole, a strange and wonderful sight to greet tourists as they disembark from the streetcar. Welcome to Jazz Fest.

The New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival was first held in 1970 in Congo Square. The price of admission was three dollars. The rising cost of admission is a fact many New Orleanians bemoan; originally comprised of mostly local acts, Jazz Fest has grown exponentially. With the addition of major headlining acts, ticket prices have skyrocketed. This year, a single-day pass costs sixty bucks. Old timers will tell you that back in the day, you could pull your cooler in with cold beer and snacks. Hunter has a penchant for dumping full beers on his head, which becomes an expensive endeavor once you set foot within the festival gates these days; a 12-oz can of Miller Lite will set you back five dollars inside the festival, which might not seem too steep until you compare it to the price of a pitcher of High Life at the bar that hosts registration: \$5.50.

The rising costs of the festival evoke a narrative familiar to many homegrown cultural events and hip neighborhoods across the nation: as the festival increased in popularity (and price) it started to become too expensive to attend for the people who made it special and interesting in the first place. The creators of culture could no longer afford the culture they created. And yet like any gentrification story, it is complicated. The increased revenue from tourists is a big boon

to the city. Tourists are drawn by big name acts like the Dave Matthews Band and Jimmy Buffet. Big names drive up the ticket prices. Yet as Jazz Fest becomes increasingly corporate, JFT remains grassroots. Pure.

An artist named Jacques (who was the peddler on our three person bike taxi) says JFT is a way of “reclaiming Jazz Fest for the locals...it’s a Mardi Gras Krewe for everyone. Non-elitist.” When I point out that it began as sort of a boys club, he attributes it to the “fraternity-ness of an all boys Catholic school” (all the founding members went to Jesuit) and then laughs. “Quickly we realized that if we opened up a Women’s Division, we might actually get girlfriends.”

We are among the last to pull up to the gates, but everyone is gathered and high-fiving like its summer camp. Upon entering the fairgrounds, Michelle and I seek out daiquiris, the alcoholic slushies that I reserve for once or twice a year. Flushed from the already exciting first half of the day, we debate what to do before the second event—whether we should eat crawfish strudel or crawfish monica or crawfish beignets, see Ani di Franco or the Dirty Dozen. I wolf down my favorite—cochon de lait with horseradish—and try to forget about the run that looms ahead. I dance like a maniac, seizing as if I had been punched by the Holy Ghost. Michelle has lots of freckles and has had more jobs—chef, graphic designer, drug dealer—until she landed in her current gig, writing code. She’s a total computer geek but today she is a dancing god. Together we lift our knees high and circle around, bobbing our heads with each step, shaking our hands toward the heavens.

There is chatter of past JFTs, remembering rain-outs and sneak-ins. This year, several members are arrested and briefly detained for slithering under the fence that borders the cemetery and making a run for the stage. They manage to work their way back into the festival and join the group. They are hailed as heroes. And idiots. The official documentarian of JFT is

a lawyer and dad of two. He claims his title proudly, like a young reporter with press credentials at the Superbowl. Around the fairgrounds, strangers also stop us and ask to take photos. “We look for y’all every year,” says one woman from Texas.

Around four in the afternoon, everyone regroups around the Fais-Do-Do⁸ stage, which hosts mainly Cajun and zydeco acts. Jazz Fest consists of several stages. The last band has just finished, and everyone seems to be waiting. I have heard rumors of “geezers humping watermelons” and am not disappointed when I see the Watermelon Man, a living reincarnation of the spirit of Jazz Fest. He was a pretty well known runner in the city, but now his legacy is as keeper of the Fais-Do-Do stage. He has a grey beard and a belly full of beer and begins to lead a chant: “Watermelon, watermelon, ripe to the rind. If you don’t believe, pull down your blind. don’t ask why. Sell it to the rich. Sell it to the poor. Sell it to the lady standing in the doooooooooooooor.” The chant repeats and the crowd follows. The Watermelon Man presents his namesake, a fat green oval, high above his head. The sight is reminiscent of a funeral I attended once, in West Africa, in which the deceased was propped up on a plank and posed as she had looked in life—in this case, with a bowl of fish in her arm and dressed for the market, because she had been a fish seller. The mourners at that funeral had seemed to multiply with each step of the procession, and so too was the case for the crowd following Watermelon, until the voices in unison were loud enough to compete with the music at other stages. Finally, everyone circles up and the Watermelon Man slams the melon down onto the grass. People move like dogs to grab hunks of the fruit. With juice running down their chins, everyone looks like overgrown toddlers. He does this every single day of Jazz Fest—all seven.

⁸ A fais do-do is a Cajun dance party, held, according to Merriam Webster, in Southern Louisiana usually on a Saturday night. Do-do is a shortening of the French *dormir* (to sleep); the name probably comes from the instruction mothers gave to their children—get to sleep—so they could get to dancing.

Watermelon Man got really sick a few years back—most of the people I ask think cancer. He was thin and frail and had already given Hunter a long emotional speech about how he would have to carry on the tradition of the watermelon. And then Hunt ran into him the weekend before the festival and asked if he would be there on Thursday. Watermelon puffed up his chest and got right in Hunt’s face—Hunt is a big guy, over six feet—and poked his finger in his chest and said, “I aint missed a day since 1971.”

After the watermelon it is time for the run. The year that Hunter’s dad smuggled in a bottle rocket, after the firework failed to deploy properly and blew up in his hand, the runners took off to a series of “Fuck! Fuck! You motherfucker!” Halfway into the race, the athletes were greeted by four police officers, one with his hand on his hip, pistol ready. As Spitz tells it:

We try to explain, finally get a sympathetic ear, bargain for them to allow us to finish. We didn’t realize it was illegal to run on the track. Or that fireworks were illegal in Jazz Fest. We pitched these as honest mistakes. We agreed to have them let us finish it by walking the rest of the track. We all started walking. But within 10 yards, the Harris brothers took off in a complete sprint and the competitive nature of all of us took over and we all started sprinting. The cops were yelling and screaming and that was the last time we ever started on the grandstand side.

Aside from altercations with law enforcement, there are occasional nasty confrontations with spectators during the run. The chair issue has become increasingly problematic in the past few years; those who bring in camping chairs take up space and prevent others from seeing, and there are territory disputes as the festival becomes more crowded.

This year, the race goes off without a hitch. Everyone is weaving in and out of the throngs of people swaying and imbibing. All the true runners disappear within a matter of seconds.

While I am running, it is nothing but love. People are cheering from all sides. Spitz says of the running portion, “At the very least, we make that group of Tri-Delts by the Gentilly Stage laugh for 37 seconds.” One of the employees in a booze stand hands me a Jungle Juice daiquiri and I feel like a marathon runner. But it is hot, and all the booze is making my legs feel like noodles, like I am trying to run through sand. Jacques says to me, right before the race, “The run is the dues. That’s where you pay.” I look around and there are no runners in sight; the best are ahead of me and the rest are far behind, wandering along the track in no hurry. I think about giving up.

Just then Steve Gleason—who is on this year’s jersey, who met his wife at JFT and who got married on the bridge where spectators watch the last event—rolls up in a wheelchair. Steve was a professional football player and when he first started JFT, he was sensitive about participating in the race. He would run the first 100 yards and then walk. His body was his livelihood, strong and muscled, and he was making the league minimum. Even a pulled hamstring could jeopardize his job. Steve was one of the wings on the special team, whose job it is to sprint past the guy blocking them and take out the receiver. They are sometimes called snipers, or bullets. Or guided missiles. The degenerative muscle disease that has taken his ability to stand has been linked to head trauma common in full contact sports, perhaps is responsible for his physical decline, but he doesn’t comment on that publicly. He is a real life hero, cruising along the track with his feisty wife in his lap. As they pass by me, they tease. “Come onnnnn. Can’t you run any faster?” Their smiles are big and genuine and they seem very much in love.

“You assholes,” I say, and we all laugh.

When I finally reach the end, sweat coming off in sheets, there is a long tunnel made up of those who have already completed the race, making sure everyone finishes strong.

The last event is the swim across the bayou. People get weird about swimming across the bayou. For one thing, there are gators in the bayou. That's a fact. While walking one day my dog almost leapt at one who was sunning itself, the body completely submerged except for those ominous eyes. Also, it's dirty, the filthy kind of water that produces disgusted horror when you admit you have immersed yourself in it. One of Spitz's best friends, who for years avoided the final event but finally took the plunge this year, says that at the thought of jumping in the bayou, his "heart would get really racy and vomit really present." This is why I think it is also the most beautiful event. A huge crowd gathers to watch this swim because it is so unorthodox, and it is empowering to participate in it and awe-inspiring to watch a bunch of drunken buffoons jump into a dirty channel of water and cross to the other side.

The group gathers for final beers courtesy of Cabrini Dad's Club, who get around the liquor distribution laws and exploit their proximity to the fairgrounds by offering keg beer and chili and hot dogs for "recommended donations" as a fundraiser for the school. There is a picture of one of the early JFTs, hanging in the club house of these booster parents, which makes me smile because it is a picture of a bunch of drunk guys in tiny Speedos and women's bathing suits hanging in the booster club for a Catholic girls' high school.

Steve will make the last event as well, albeit with assistance. The start of the last event is delayed as friends and family tape his plastic feeding tube in preparation and dress him in a life jacket and floaties.

I sprint to the edge of the water and I leap. My feet touch the slimy ground for just a second, and reflexively I yank them up close to my chest and start swimming freestyle, hard. I beat Michelle and everyone who started with me; swimming is my event, and I feel confident in the water. As a kid, I was always the last to exit the pool or the lake, staying until my fingers pruned, and later in high school, I was a lifeguard. When I reach the other side, I do ten push-ups with everyone else, the final lagniappe of the day, and I watch as Steve is pulled through the water by his brother in law and two close friends. On the bridge where he got married, people stand. The applause and voices are like a wall of sound.

I think of a phrase Hunter always quotes, attributed to Jim Valvano, who coached basketball for a decade at North Carolina State:

There are three things we all should do every day. Number one is laugh. You should laugh every day. Number two is think. You should spend some time in thought. And number three is, you should have your emotions moved to tears, could be happiness or joy. But think about it. If you laugh, you think, and you cry, that's a full day. That's a heck of a day. You do that seven days a week, you're going to have something special.

The award ceremony is last, competing with the mosquitoes and the falling night and everyone's general drunkenness. Hunter gives the awards, which come in many forms—old trophies, vinyl records, ties—but each is delivered with a poignant speech intended to both skewer and lionize the receiver. His coaching abilities are evident in these tributes—just the right balance between push and pull. One year Jonathan, the guy who never swims because he claims to be afraid of becoming “a statistical anomaly,” the one guy to get eaten by an alligator during JFT, received the soundtrack to the film *Born Free* because he was “free to participate in any manner in which he chose, on his level.” There are awards for swimming costumes and speed demons and most spirited cheers. Jacques once called JFT a race with no winner and then

added, “Except that I won Best Male Vocalist one year.” Spitz won the women’s division three years in a row, before they were able to convince any women to participate.

The award for best female goes to the Steve’s wife, who “represented the spirit of JFT and who won’t be quiet already about never winning.” It is a recycled trophy from a track meet, and immediately after accepting, she lofts the trophy up in the air as if she’s won a gold medal. “It’s about time,” she says, grabbing the trophy from Hunter. Then suddenly, she spikes it down against the pavement of the Cabrini parking lot. The plastic figurine atop the columns shatters, the pieces scattering into the dark. The act is violent, surprising, and while there is lots of cheering and laughter, those who know she is watching the man she loves die, observe with apprehension, are humbled by the strength of her spirit.

Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation

I ask Luke to please control the monkey.

The monkey is a puppet on Luke's hand—a floppy fabric imitation of the animal with bits of pink silk for the insides of the ears—and he is ambushing the other children. Luke sneaks up behind a girl who is coloring, and grabs her face with the monkey. She screams.

Luke is five and quick to hit; the impact of his sweaty palm always surprises me even though I should expect it. He is small enough, though, that if he gets too out of control I can reign him in, pick him up, bring his face level with mine. I try to reason with him, hold his gaze, but his blue eyes roll backwards into his head; he flails and slaps, arching his back and then collapsing, trying to free himself from my grasp by whip-lashing his body. Eventually, he exhausts himself and goes limp. The other kids don't like it when you hit them. It's not nice...ok? Ok. And then he starts to screech. Sometimes he spits.

Even if he is nodding in agreement, his chin bobbing furiously—yes I am going to stop—as soon as I set him down, he sprints to the table and overturns a Monopoly board. As the metal tokens fly through the air, he laughs. The sound of his laughter is pure.

After school, the kids are wired and my job is crisis control. In addition to Luke, there are sometimes twenty-five students, ranging in age from four to twelve, and it's not hard to lose control. I dole out Cheez-Its for snacks, notice the small group of children huddled in the back of the classroom and realize someone has stolen a package of Oreos. I go outside to coach a toddler off the highest part of the jungle gym, then come back inside to find four girls covered in thick Tempera paint. They know I am outnumbered. And I am a sucker for imaginative excuses. We needed the paint because we wanted to be invisible, because we are doing this play about invisible underwater mermaids, so we needed to be blue, the girls insist.

The monkey is getting out of hand. The girl who had been coloring a fairy princess dog is now sobbing, pleading with me to make him stop.

I decide on a new approach. Luke, I say, If the monkey does not behave, I am going to call the cops.

Every kid in the room is alert. Some hold their breath. They continue playing and building silently, but they are waiting for the officers with shiny badges and handcuffs to knock down the door. Luke looks at the monkey and then back at me. His eyes widen. He runs toward me shaking the puppet the way a priest shakes a crucifix to ward off a demon. One curled hand and one monkey fist alternately pound on my thighs. I dial the invisible phone in my hand. Hello. Police? I need help. I need you to arrest the monkey.

I run over to the box of puppets and find a suitable law enforcement representative. Doing my best siren, I march over to Luke with my makeshift cop and apprehend the monkey puppet, removing it from his small hand.

Luke begins to wail. Salted water coats his fat cheeks. He is not crying in the way that he usually cries when I take a toy away or put him in time out. The crying is desperate, vulnerable, the wail of a bereft mother. He is saying, He's dead, he's dead. The monkey is dead. You killed him.

Luke is always one of the last kids to be picked up. Every afternoon, with thirty minutes of aftercare left, I sit down on the floor cross-legged and read a story, hoping the kids will calm down. While it's not immediate, the stories send a calm throughout the room. Eventually even the die-hard Lego kids wander over and give into gravity, flopping on the floor, the exhaustion of

the day finally setting in. Even some of the fifth graders drag chairs near, pretending not to listen.

Luke is the most adamant instigator of story time. He tugs on my shorts every day, always toting the same book, *Tyrone the Horrible*. Read this. When I frown, he asks, Miss Josie will you please read this. I sit down on the carpet and Luke climbs into my lap. He squeezes the skin on my legs. He curls up against me, rests his blonde head against my chest, and digs his clammy fingers into my arms. Luke just can't get close enough.

The book is about a dinosaur named Boland who is terrorized by Tyrone, the world's first bully. Tyrone has sharp white triangles for teeth and yellow eyes, and his awful smile reminds me of the expression Luke wears right before he upends a chessboard or empties a bucket of water on another kid. The story doesn't follow the usual 'Do the Right Thing and Everything Will Be OK' formula found in children's books. When Boland stands up to Tyrone, Tyrone beats the shit out of him.

One of the other little boys, Ritchie, always says, That's a baby story. I would have beat up Tyrone like a ninja. He loves to karate-kick the air. HIIIIII-YA. Ritchie's dad is a jazz musician, making Ritchie way too cool to be only seven. He can do the moonwalk and always wants to know why Luke acts so crazy. Ritchie's eyes bug out when Luke writhes on the ground. Man what is wrong with Luke? He's not right.

Kids yell at you. They say horrible things, like I HATE YOU AND I HOPE YOU DIE. But they're also fast forgivers. Luke is howling, pointing at the monkey, and I am afraid this will not pass quickly. You killed him, he keeps saying, his chin rolling back and forth on his chest. I

know he is not lying. I killed the monkey. I tried to arrest the monkey and instead I killed it. I panic.

Luke it's ok. Gently, I make the monkey's arm wave. See? The monkey's not dead.

YES. HE. IS. Violently, Luke slams the monkey on the ground.

Inspiration. Luke it's okay because I know monkey CPR. I happen to be a very skilled veterinarian.

I gingerly scoop up the puppet and set him on the table. Sitting in one of the child-sized chairs, I lean over and place my lips on the felt primate and pretend to blow air into his nonexistent lungs. Performing CPR on a monkey, I think, is probably similar to performing CPR on an infant. Cover the mouth and nose with your own mouth. Use two or three fingers in the center of the chest to perform gentle chest compressions. In lifeguard training I had been terrified by the thought of pressing into the tiny fragile chest; I was sure their ribcage would be crushed even if I only used my index and middle finger. Press harder, the instructor would urge me. You need to jumpstart the heart. Keep it beating with your force.

Behind me, Luke deals a flurry of slaps to my waist. HE'S DEAD. HE'S NOT MOVING.

THERE IS BLOOD ALL OVER HIS FACE. I stop.

Luke goes limp and slumps against my leg, his cheeks hot and flushed. He is mumbling, It's dead it's dead it doesn't matter. One of the little girls, a frequent victim of Luke's, looks up, purple crayon in hand and points. Is he really dead? My stomach drops. I remember precisely the moment when I knew death in the way that you cannot un-know it. My sister called me up and I was twenty-two and abroad and she said your best friend died. And I said what, because I didn't believe her, and she said he drowned. And I thought, fuck rivers, and fuck you Jay because you weren't wearing a lifejacket. You fucking asshole. I clung to facts: in water that

cold—it was a glacially fed stream—and in water that cold he would have been dead in minutes. The current was so fast. His boss said he just slipped and then disappeared, was swept away, vanished. They found him miles downstream, and all I could think about was the body, blue and grey, waterlogged, swollen fingers and face.

The monkey's bloody face. A silence settles at the coloring table, the soft drag of crayons coming to a halt. The girls are thinking about the dead monkey. They are wondering about the things they see through their moms' fingers on the TV screen. They are wondering if that cat in the road was really sleeping. They are wondering about the red that's leaking from the man's ears on the television after the boom. Or maybe they have blocked it out. Maybe death is still a concept they do not understand. They don't believe, as Luke does, that the monkey has been stabbed over and over in the face. They don't see the blood.

Vodou. I think. Or magic. I will resurrect the monkey. I want to bring it back to life, but to do so would be to sugarcoat a concept that for whatever reason, Luke already understands: living things die and they don't come back, except in our memories. Kids like coloring books because there are clear boundaries: in the lines and out. The facts of Jay's death bleed like watercolors on notebook paper into my imagined recollection of the event; at times, it is too blurry to make out which parts are which.

My sister is an archaeologist and she tells me, when you find a hard white bit of something in the sand, and you need to know if it is bone or rock, you put it in your mouth. If it's bone, it sticks to your tongue. How do you know if something was real, alive? It sticks.

I don't want Luke to know, yet, that you can't choose which parts stick. I don't want Luke to know yet about the permanence, about the fact that you will remember the worst things too, not just the best days when you would ride your bikes together across the Stone Arch

Bridge, across the frozen Mississippi, your hot fast breath twin puffs of white in the night sky, when you would bike so fast you didn't dare turn your handle bars for fear of skidding out on the black ice, racing one another like deities tearing through the city. You will remember all the blood pouring out, too, the things you didn't even see, existing only in your imagination. The fat fingers, puckered and pruney hands like those of a kid who stayed too long in the bathtub.

But Luke already knows. There is no miracle.

I pick him up and we go sit in a chair in the corner. We leave the monkey on the table, crumpled, lifeless. We read stories. For him, or for me, I am not sure.

Fraser Fir

Three days before Christmas and the air is sharp. I step out of the bar and gasp; the cold stings.

It takes a few blinks to adjust to the snow-filtered light, the big flakes falling, obscuring the streetlight. I love the hours after the snow, when the grime of the city is blanketed in white.

Everything looks pure before the dirt hanging in the air has time to settle.

The wind whipping off the Mississippi sears my cheeks and throttles the noise of the bar. I answer my phone.

“Jos? It’s me, Mom.” She draws out the ‘o’ in Jos, so it sounds like J-O-Z. “Where are you?”

I look down at the half-full tumbler in my hand, smuggled outside in the too-long sleeve of my parka. I am not sure if I should say I am at Palmer’s. “Uh, I am, well...I’m out.” Liquor laws are strict in Minnesota—stores close at nine, bars at two. Palmer’s is the sort of dive where service industry folks, fresh off the red eye shift, pace nervously in the dark, waiting for the six a.m. opening. Various attempts have been made to shut down Palmer’s, but it keeps on, maintaining the sort of charm you would expect from a place that has to post a “no smoking crack” sign above its patio: unpretentious and lovable, despite—the sort of bar that to me, feels like home.

I tilt the glass, looking at the ice in the bottom. My raw, gloveless hands are a source of perverse satisfaction. They make me feel invincible. “With friends,” I add, as if this clarifies something.

“Well, I need your help.”

This does not sound promising. “Um, Mom, it’s like midnight.”

She cuts me off. “I got my hands on a tree, a real nice one—a Fraser fir. Ten feet, good color.”

As she speaks I drain the glass of whiskey in order to free up my hands. I fumble, losing her for a second while I place the glass on the ground. Finally I pin the phone against my shoulder and clasp my stiff fingers in front of my mouth to warm them. “What? A tree?”

“A Fraser fir, Jos. That’s a real nice tree. These things go for like two hundred bucks on the lot. I need you to help me smuggle it out of here. I’m at work. It’s a big tree, beautiful tree, but we hafta get it now.” I can almost hear her pulse racing, a gleam in her eyes unique to a woman who knows the market value of Christmas trees.

I start laughing. “I’m all the way in Cedar Riverside. I’m really sorry, Mom,” and I am.

Stealing a tree sounds like an adventure worth walking out on my jukebox picks. I reconsider. I could run back into the bar, grab my friends, and jump in a cab. Fifteen minutes from Cedar Riverside to the downtown hotel where my mom works as a banquet captain. But my whiskey-addled brain is clicking too slowly for her.

“Never mind,” she says brusquely. “It’s alright, I think I can get it out of here myself. See you at home later.”

For my mom, it’s not Christmas without a tree. She loves the smell of pine, and the ritual of buying a tree, pausing at each one on the lot to assess its character. The Colorado Blue Spruce belongs more in the woods than in a tree-stand: wild, the bluish-gray tint making it almost glow against the snow. The pungent Scots pine is regal and fresh. We never bought the Nordman fir—too expensive, priced for its fetching green color—but often stopped to admire its soft-focus beauty. The Fraser fir, though, is the queen of Christmas trees. A high altitude tree, its needles are two-toned: dark green, so dark the color is almost blue on the tops, and silvery on the

bottoms. The strong branches of a Fraser jut upward toward the sky; they would never sag, no matter how many layers of lights or glass balls we hung on it. The branches of our cheap Christmas trees always droop like a weary shopper weighed down by too many bags.

Although each year we debate the placement of the tree in our living room, it always ends up beside a window. I love turning down our street at night and seeing the strands of lights, their colors distorted through the frozen windowpane.

As a kid I loved watering the tree, scooting under the branches and imagining them stiffen up with drink right before my eyes. The tree always stayed well into January. But eventually, when there were more needles on the floor than on the branches, we would drag it into the backyard and burn it. Crackling and popping, the smell of Christmas would hiss back into the house again.

One year, the last week in December—I was twelve, old enough to understand—I caught my mom crying in her room. She was worried about how she would pay for Christmas. I wanted to lie to her and say, it's just a tree. Why spend money on something that will stand in our living room for four weeks and then die. But I didn't know the words to make her feel better, so I just gave her a hug. The next day I found her wielding an ax, hacking at the pine in our yard, a tree I had planted as a little girl. Although I was horrified to see her whacking down my tree, I had to admire her gusto. The tree had grown from a skinny little stick in a coffee tin to a full seven feet, and my mother is a small woman. I wondered if she had designs on that tree since the day I planted it, or if she had just looked out the window that day and decided to make Christmas happen.

There is a story my mother's father used to read to me as a child. As the story goes, in Lebanon, my Christian grandfather's homeland, the trees kneel at Christmas. The trees bow to

honor the birth of Jesus, because people believe. But here, in America, people do not have enough faith and so the trees do not kneel. I am not sure if I believe in God, but sometimes, before midnight Mass, I run ahead to try to catch the trees in the act.

When she brought up the subject of a Christmas tree this year, I told my mother it wasn't worth it. Though this year, more than any other, we probably need the tree. She is broke; the recession has emptied the hotel. My dad is in rehab. Again. But it's almost Christmas. The tree seems like another thing to do, a big time commitment in an already crowded week.

Uneasy on my feet, I get home from Palmer's in the early hours of the morning. Preoccupied with navigating the un-shoveled sidewalk, I fail to notice at first. When I look up and see it, I stop. A giant Fraser Fir, half hanging down the stairs leading to my house, as if my mom had coaxed it all the way home, stepped through the porch door and quit. I imagine her dragging the tree from the Hotel's executive suite, pretending to take it down to the loading dock in the freight elevator, slipping off a floor early at the parking garage. I am impressed that she managed to hoist it onto her car, navigating the icy streets home with the fir tied to the roof.

The next morning, my brother and I pull the base while my sisters push the branches inward, toward the trunk, trying to squeeze the tree through a too-small doorway. We strain and then suddenly, the thickest part of the tree pops through, needles raining on the floor.

My brother drags the boxes down from the attic. I peel delicate red tissue paper from the ornaments—each a story in its own right. My sister strings the lights and checks each bulb, replacing the duds.

Mom was right. It is a magnificent tree.

Christmas day, the car is snowed in. I plant my black peep-toe heels in slush and drop my shoulder like a linebacker. My brother and sisters do the same. My mom yells out the car window, “Alright everyone. One, two, three.” She shifts the car into gear. The wheels are spraying fine white powder in an arc. The car does not budge. My mom owns the most impractical vehicle in the state, a fuel-efficient Scion. It doesn’t weigh enough to have traction on the snow, so in order to visit my dad, we have to push.

Located fifty miles north of the Twin Cities, Hazelden is a two-hour drive through the flurries. The drug and alcohol rehabilitation center was founded in a lakeside farmhouse, and now sprawls over 500 acres. Set against the frozen lake, it feels like a terribly lonely place to endure sobriety.

In the foyer, there are two pleasant, bland-looking women in bad sweaters. Welcome to Hazelden, they chime. Please fill out a nametag—as if we are at an insurance convention. Fake garlands festoon the paneled walls. I spot my dad from a distance, padding down the carpeted hallway. He looks sheepish and shorter than his six feet. His face is puffy, and I wonder how bad he looked when he came in. All varieties of rock bottom show up at the admissions door—drunk, drunk in wheelchairs, bloody, bloody drunk. One time a man showed up in a hearse. When my dad showed up, he was so far gone they put him on medical watch for four days.

Not quite ready to see him, I look around the room at the other families talking in hushed voices. A woman touches her husband’s face. I love you, she says. I’m sorry, he says. Gifts are slid across the table in a pantomime of normal holiday rituals. Let’s pretend we’re not in a cafeteria. Let’s pretend this relationship is different than it is, is the way it should be. I watch a

little boy, maybe twelve, hug his mom awkwardly after his dad nudges him. I have the urge to call out to them, all of them: *Don't get your hopes up. Don't hold your fucking breath.* But when my dad is sober, he is different. It is easier to have faith. Maybe this time is different. Maybe the trees will kneel.

“Um, hey Dad. Merry Christmas.” We take turns hugging him.

“Nice sweater,” my sister says. Dad’s sweater is red and lumpy. A green collar pokes out from underneath it, and I swallow hard and look up. He is trying.

Seated around the table, we bring out a few packages: a book about ancient Mayan cities and an olive-colored sweater. My dad gives us a tour of the facilities and when we run into a guy from his unit in the library, he introduces us.

“These are my daughters, and my son, and—” he pauses when he gets to my mom. They haven’t been married in a decade, so he just says, “this is Ann,” and I am humbled by my mom’s capacity for love. And yet all the faith in the world, all of her love and understanding and sitting through Al-Anon meetings and conceptualizing alcoholism as a progressive and deadly illness—like cancer, I remember a counselor telling us—all of that couldn’t save my dad. He gestures to his friend, “This is Jim.” There is this awkward moment of acknowledgement; Jim knows all about us. My dad has spent the last month—his first sober month in years—talking with Jim, eating with him, attending meetings with him. Jim probably knows more about my dad than I do.

“Nice to meet you.” I smile at him. I am trying, too.

Instead of talking about other things, my dad goes into historical tour mode. This is the original farmhouse, and this wing was built with Eric Clapton’s money, and here is the smokers’ patio, and then I finally ask: “Are you going to go back to her?”

The question I am really asking is, how long will this last?

The first time I met my dad's girlfriend Lisa, a few years before this latest holiday stint in rehab, I was full of hope. My dad had moved in with her, to a trailer park tucked behind a Denny Hecker automobile dealership just off the freeway, adjacent to a little lake that was big enough to boat on. The trailer itself was like a circus tent in its unassuming exterior, disguising a cavern of unperceivable depth. The living room was an explosion of white-elephant garage-sale vintage antique Salvation Army clutter. Every exposed space had been filled with giraffe lamps, Oriental rugs, cheap paintings of the Virgin Mary and "Home Is Where the Heart Is" signs hung so abundantly in the archway it was impossible to see the structure of the room. There was a beauty-parlor chair for Lisa's clients. (Later my uncle would inform me that haircuts were not the only service she provided.)

Lisa had endured unimaginable pain, evident even in her physical appearance. She looked like Farrah Fawcett twenty years into meth addiction, with caved-in cheeks, cheap bright make-up and fried, over-processed hair. She appeared shrunken next to my dad, who had put on at least thirty pounds since the last time I had seen him.

Lisa had been to rehab fourteen times.

But I tried to be happy for my dad. They met in Alcoholics Anonymous. They appeared sober, and my dad had been so lonely. They seemed okay.

But they were not.

They drank themselves blind.

Lisa would call our house multiple times a day, asking why my sister hated her, why

my brother would not see her. “Your dad hit me last night, I’m the one that is keeping him sober,” she would lie to me over the phone.

It was difficult to get the truth from either of them because they both believed what they said was true. They constructed a reality in which they were okay. A lot of the time they simply did not remember what they had said or done. Entire conversations, days even, were black to them. My dad would show up at my brother’s hockey meetings, and my mom would get a phone call from another parent: “My son cannot ride with your son to the tournament this weekend.” The idea of Lisa showing up somewhere caused my brother to burst into tears he was so afraid she would humiliate him. One time she told him that my mom was a bitch. Fighting back tears, he pushed out his lip and said, “No. She’s not.”

My dad's AA sponsor said he had been lucky for a long time, but if he kept relapsing, eventually there would be no more luck. When my mom threw him out of the house, I thought that was it. When he got his first DUI, I thought that might be it. When he went to rehab for the first time, he cried. It was the only time I have ever seen him cry, and he said, "I'm sorry. I am sorry for all the time that I missed with my oldest daughter." And I thought, maybe this time.

One day Lisa called the cops on my dad in the middle of a heated argument and claimed he had assaulted her. The cops found my dad swimming in the lake. He was arrested for public nudity and public intoxication. The cops said they would take him to detox if he could not provide an address. He gave them ours. My brother answered the door. The cops asked him my brother if he knew this man, gesturing at my father, who was struggling to stand, his eyes far away. When I came home that night, I stopped just before I opened my bedroom door. The ripe stench of booze and sweat hung stale in the air. As I pushed open the wooden door, I saw my dad slumped face down on the bed. His skin was swollen and puffy. He wore nothing but a tee

shirt. I wanted to slam the door, but I shut it quietly, afraid of waking him.

My father has a terrific imagination. I remember the best days, when I would come home from school and there would be a rainbow drawn in black ink, next to instructions for a Post-It treasure hunt. My siblings and I would confetti our backpacks, jackets and books in the front hall and bolt up the stairs to search for the next clue on a tiny yellow square stuck under a table or on the ceiling of a closet. The treasure hunts were intricate, carefully planned, drawing on knowledge of our lives. The cat used to hide her kittens here meant in the upstairs closet, behind my great-grandmother's fur coat and my mom's work shoes.

When he read stories, he did the voices. He would read Jane Eyre in a British accent, distinguishing each character with the pitch, tone, and speed of his voice. My sisters and I were uniformly terrified of Mr. Rochester. "Why does Jane like someone who is soooooo old?" my sister Susie would demand. Sometimes while reading he would insert us into the stories, making us squirm—Dad that is NOT how the story goes—as if he were testing us to see if we were listening. This gift for storytelling made Christmas especially magical.

Santa had a hell of a time landing in our front yard because someone neglected to shovel, the letter would begin—but the plate of cheese was gratefully received, as was the cold beer in the refrigerator. Even though it had happened in the summer, Santa knew about the time I had taken a plastic orange sled down the back stairs and through the screen door. And could we please stop climbing up into the attic by pressing our backs and feet against either side of the wall, wriggling our bodies while we walked up the wall with our bare feet. Our filthy footprints were an offense deserving of stockings filled with lumps of coal. My dad's letters, written as

Santa, were longer than the ones that we had addressed to the North Pole. He made Christmas a production, leaving evidence of Santa rifling through the fridge, writing witty nicknames on gifts, tracking snowy footprints through the house, complaining about our poorly behaved pet: Bad Dog Oppie.

When we were little, my siblings and I would fight over who got to crown the tree. My dad would lift the lucky winner up so she could place the wax heart ornament--which held the distinction of being the last ornament hung--on the very top point of the evergreen. Most Christmas trees are topped by angels, but we had our own sacred object, a white heart with the image of a candle imprinted on it, a delicate shape that couldn't sit too close to the lights for fear that it might melt. When I was chosen, I loved seeing the top half of the tree up close. Pinned between my dad's massive hands, I could look down on the splayed branches, catching only a brief glimpse of the tree from his perspective.

I once watched an interview with a long time movie star fuck-up. Hookers in hotels, domestic violence charges, DUI, possession—a laundry list from a lifetime of addiction. And he said, “I got sober for five years, a long time ago and was just bored out of my tree.”

Sometimes I am afraid that I understand this statement. I think of how it feels to step out of a dive bar at seven in the morning, when that dank wall of humid air hits, the light enveloping you, embracing you like a warm bath, and you feel truly alive, like you have defeated the night, outlasted it, and you are the only person who can truly appreciate the dawn of a new day. How it feels to stumble out into the streets in a hot cocktail dress and feel like royalty dancing on the tar, to sit with strippers and doctors, writers and cabdrivers, talking as old friends, bonded by the

shared fate of being one of the damned, one of the last, who won't go home, who will have just one more thank you very much.

But then I think of my dad, shuffling from halfway house to apartment. A mattress on the floor in a corner, all his life in boxes, empty bottles in the closet. I wonder why a family wasn't enough.

It is late when we get home from Hazelden, only a few hours of Christmas left. As we round the corner, the lights of the Fraser fir blaze in the window. My mom pulls the car to a stop and I know for her, the trees should kneel.

Bad Dog Oppie

My dad brings the dog over to our house on Christmas, a pathetic and terrified golden retriever. She is small for her breed with dark, almost red fur, like an Irish setter. My mom is less than pleased, the anger visible in her jaw. She knows she will be the one to chip frozen pieces of shit out of the yard in the bitterest of Januaries, the one to drive to the store after hours on her feet to pick up dog food, to make sure the dog is fed, to keep it alive. My parents are divorced.

For the first two weeks, my sisters and I will only feel her soft fur in snatches, when we can corner her. The Christmas dog, we call her, and we love her in the way most young people love pets: intensely, too physically, but also superficially and intermittently. I am the oldest and so I bond the least with the dog because I am gone often and because at the end of that year, I leave for school. The dog spends most of the time cowering under pieces of furniture; her high-pitched whine a true expression of misery. She is scared of everything. The house I grew up was purchased from a Sears' catalogue and erected in 1914. Wooden doors connect each room. If the wind is right, a draft funnels through the house, causing doors to slam shut without anyone shutting them. One evening, the door slams on her tail and she lets out a howl so loud I think she has been shot. She spends the rest of the night hiding under a bed.

The first few years of her life were spent in the cab of a pick-up truck, the wife of her previous owner having banished her from the house. When she is kenneled in our kitchen, she cries for hours on end. If you attempt to discipline her, raise your voice or a rolled up newspaper, she crouches like she is wounded and scoots across the floor with her tail tucked under her, a trail of piss pooling behind her. The capacity to fear is innate, hardwired for survival, but Oppie's fear is learned, her experience with cruelty firsthand.

Eventually though, she starts to come around. She loves my mother, who didn't want her, best of all. She follows her around the house, sits outside of the shower while my mother washes her hair and laps at the curtain. Her whimpering is a constant when my mom shuts her out of her bedroom, and eventually, my mom relents and lets her sleep next to the bed. She tries always to climb into the bed, sneakily, putting just her wet nose first on the bedspread then inching in, until my mom notices and shoves her off. The more my mom pushes the dog away, it seems, the more ferociously the dog loves her. When the dog finally sleeps, she contorts her body as if she is trying to take up as little space as possible, curling up and tucking her head in against her back leg on the floor right beside my mom.

The dog's previous owner called her Annie, the same nickname my mom was given as a child and so my mom insists we give the dog a new name. Because scientists fascinate us, because my dad is a chemist, and because my sister is particularly interested in nuclear fission and the Manhattan Project, we name the dog Oppenheimer after Robert J., who developed the atomic bomb and later decried its destructive power. Eventually, the name is shortened to Oppie, which I am pretty sure to a dog sounds just like Annie, since they don't really comprehend words as much as tone. We point this out to my mom when she whines at the dog in a high-pitched voice, "Oppie please, please stop, please stop doing that," as the dog tries to crawl into her lap again and again.

"She will never listen to you unless you use a stern voice," we insist, yet our own attempts to discipline her are half-hearted.

Oppie, like most childhood pets, becomes a legend in her own right. She earns her moniker Bad Dog Oppie by digging holes in the crumbling parts of our cement basement and leaving deep nail width gashes at the bottom of the kitchen door; my mom curses the dog as she

putties the wood, carefully using the scraper in a graceful motion to leave the surface smooth. When my mom enters a room, Oppie sheepishly jumps off whatever piece of furniture she is occupying; her tiny hairs float in a cloud above having been pushed into the air when she departed. My mom takes a vacuum directly to her fur, holding her collar as she sucks up tufts before they become hairballs under the refrigerator and in the corner of the living room. The sound of a vacuum cleaner for a dog, with their keen sense of hearing, is, I imagine, what it might sound like if I found myself pinned in between the subway tracks as a train passed above my head.

When we go to my grandmother's house on Christmas, we bring Oppie, even though she occasionally growls at my cousins and trots around like she owns the place and even though sometimes, it feels like our family is the black sheep in my mom's extended family and our misbehaving dog only cements that status. One year Oppie wolfs down an entire plate of Christmas cookies, carefully frosted Christmas trees and bells with pearlescent candied borders and glittering sugar sprinkles. I am amused but I keep it to myself because my uncle, who baked the cookies, is less than pleased. He likes things orderly and believes that even if you leave a plate of cookies at dog level, the dog should probably know better. But even he comes around eventually, recounting a story about how one Christmas Eve when he was a boy, my grandmother, a devoutly Catholic woman, stood up in the middle of church and said, "THE TURKEY" and ran out the door. She ran all the way home to find the bird, which had been cooling on the stove, half-devoured by her dog.

Oppie is a terrible walker and a worse runner. She cannot for the life of her trot in a straight line, and after pulling and pulling on the leash for blocks, choking herself on her own collar, she will come to a sudden stop that nearly yanks her keeper's arm out of the socket.

When she gets to the edge of the lake, she barks and barks. If my mom runs in, she will run in after her, but becomes terrified when the wind blows the water over, leaping out of the way as if the wave were a wall coming to crush her. She will swim until she drowns herself in order to stay near us, her family. She is loyal to the point of being suicidal, once leaping off the dock in an attempt to board the boat my dad was piloting and nearly drowning herself. The image of her, scrambling with her hind legs as her paws slipped against the smooth vessel, eventually losing her balance and falling backwards into the water both speaks to her devotion and stupidity. My dad is her first savior and even though he doesn't feed her every day, she remembers. People say dogs are incapable of processing emotions like love, but I always think of Oppie, fur wet and matted to her slender body, jumping into the water to catch my dad like a desperate and deprived orphan.

The basement under our old red brick house is unfinished, a dank cement cave that leaks when it thunderstorms in the summer and when the snow melts in spring (until my mom seals the windows years later). Before they were split up, and for a long time after, my dad kept all his tools in the basement, and a collection of cardboard boxes filled with fishing tackles and beakers and graduated cylinders, heavy plastic lab goggles and a First Aid book with gruesome photos of finger avulsions and blackened and dying tissue. When we were very young, he used to volunteer at the neighborhood Catholic school, giving demonstrations with liquid nitrogen during which he would freeze a banana and then use it to hammer a rubber nail (also frozen) into a two by four, pretty epic stuff for a Kindergartener. He used to bring the stuff home as well, let us pour it onto our kitchen floor and watch it turn to smoke as it left the container, a white waterfall that mushroomed out onto the floor and then evaporated in a matter of seconds. But as we got older, he seemed to slip further out of reach, lost to a disease—alcoholism—that seems to defy

his identity as a scientist in its progression and persistence despite all logical appeals. We tried to learn about him through the things he owned and read, bicycle wrenches and Raymond Carver, secondary sources. In the basement, among the remnants of my dad's possessions, Oppie almost inadvertently committed suicide by eating a mousetrap.

Upon discovering the missing trap, my mom called the manufacturer of the poison, who assured her the dog would be fine, would simply regurgitate the poison. Then, a few days later, Oppie started vomiting blood. My sisters and I were all far away, in college and abroad, and only my brother was home to witness the dog's body heave in pain, her brown eyes wild and wide, find the dark red stains on the blue rag rug beside the stove. Oppie only got worse, despondent, and after receiving a lot of bad advice, my mom finally brought her to the veterinary hospital at the University of Minnesota, a renowned animal hospital used to dealing with valuable livestock from Minnesota farms. Oppie, they said, would need a blood transfusion and this is when my mom thought, the dog is going to die. The blood transfusion would cost two thousand dollars, a fee that seemed unreasonable for a dog my mom never even wanted. A sum that would buy at least twelve weeks of groceries, cover the mortgage for two months. And then she looked at Oppie on the table and imagined calling my sister and me at college to break the news, having to tell my brother who was at home. She already had bad news to relay; my dad was in rehab again. My mom looked at Oppie, a dog so scared of check-ups she has to be sedated multiple times, who once leapt off the metal examination table after a vet assured me that she was drugged to the point that I would need to carry her back to the car, strapped down and totally at her mercy. "I couldn't do it," she says to me. "I couldn't be the one to say I killed the dog." And so she saved Oppie.

When I am twenty-five my sister comes to live with me in New Orleans, and at Thanksgiving, my mom follows the Mississippi River across the country and leaves Oppie with us. My brother is headed off to Wyoming to play junior league hockey and she doesn't feel like watching the dog anymore, she says. For a few days, the whole family, except my dad, is crowded into our narrow shotgun house. My mom and I share a bed in the front room, and Oppie sleeps dutifully on the floor beside us, refusing to leave my mom. As long as they are together, Oppie doesn't mind the strange surroundings, the obscene humidity and the scent of feral cats that stalk my neighborhood. Then my mom leaves.

Oppie spends two days staring at the bed where my mother slept; the way my mom smells, fresh like line-dried laundry, lingers on the sheets. Perhaps it is just in my imagination, but I swear even a faint outline of my mother's body, pressed into the memory foam, remains.

At some point, for Oppie, I become my mom. My sister rises early in the morning; I wake up to the soft avalanche of dog food against metal like rain against a roof and the frantic shuffling of nails against wood floors. Even though my sister feeds Oppie and assumes the role of primary pet owner, Oppie is obsessed with me. She attempts to sleep in my bed, the bed where my mom stayed, each night. I shove her out. Oppie follows me everywhere. When I am at home and my sister attempts to walk her, she strains against the canvas rope—she's broken two—toward the house, getting up on her hind legs and flailing her front paws while her body weight pulls the line taut.

Despite her apparent pathetic nature, she is an excellent guard dog. Her bark is deep, aggressive, her growl coming from somewhere deep in her past. From the porch, it sounds as if there is a terrible beast on the other side of the door, an animal that might rip you limb to limb. Our neighborhood is plagued by crime. Tennis shoes dangle from the power lines. There are

several shootings on the block, two homicides. When I hear the sharp pops cut the air, I listen for a pattern and hope its firecrackers. A little boy is shot as well, diving in front of his little sister at the sound of gunshots, and he lives and becomes a hero. People openly deal drugs and I see them counting bills in the harsh sunlight of day, brazenly exchanging tiny packages through clasped hands. A few times, crackheads knock on our door, asking for money. But we are never robbed. After Oppie leaves, my mom's house is robbed three times.

Sometimes, when Oppie wakes me in the middle of the night with her terrible bark, because she smelled one of the urban chickens walking by the door, or heard a car pass, I curse her. When I get up suddenly out of bed and she shoots up, tripping me in the process, I feel sometimes like kicking her. Or when she wakes me up in the morning, pacing beside my bed, her panting insistent, eye-twitchingly irritating. I feel my own capacity for cruelty. "Would you just shut up," I yell, and her eyes go wide. She doesn't understand why I am angry, why I would betray her loyalty with a harsh tone, and so I get up and shuffle to the back door to let her out, to tend to her needs. Some days, I do not feel like getting out of bed. I am pathetic and terrified. "GO away," I say to her. "Just get the fuck away from me." And then she circles around several times and then lies down next to the bed, lowers her head onto her front legs and waits.

And then she trots again, softly to the bed, with her leash in her mouth. And then I get up.

Many days we walk together, long ambling walks on amber-lit afternoons and dank evenings. We spot a baby alligator basking serenely in the four o'clock sun and Oppie goes nuts, lunging at the reptile whose beady eyes are like two yellow marbles resting on the surface of the bayou. On walks when my muscles strain, occupied with wrangling Oppie, I find the words I

could not find before and I think of one of the passages that Robert J. Oppenheimer claimed flashed in his head on the day he watched the bomb explode, from the Bhagavad-Gita: “If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst into the sky, that would be the splendor of the mighty one.” I think of Oppie’s sheer bliss when she is experiencing the city at thirty miles an hour, the wind blowing her ears back like sheets drying on a line in the yard, flopping and dancing in the wind.

I am driving my boyfriend to work and our voices are competing against the scream of the morning commuters. We are having a familiar and mean argument, about how I think he is still taking out his previous relationships on me, about how he thinks I cannot see the scope of things and have limited perspective. I am slamming my fists against the steering wheel, a horrible tick I learned from him. It would be funny if it weren’t so awful; I am trying to hurt him by hurting myself. “SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP” we are both yelling and then I hear muted crying from the back, and I see Oppie trying to wiggle her body out of the car window. Her front paws are already out and she is snaking her body back and forth, inching toward certain death. She once jumped out of my mom’s car in the middle of rush hour traffic. When her paws hit the pavement, the horn honks started, drivers angered by the sight of the dog. She looked back at my mom with this expression, how could you let this happen to me, frozen in the middle of the street. I imagine how hard a car on the freeway would smack her and how she would crumble underneath it, flattened, her ginger coat bloodied and I think of the other passage Oppenheimer cited from the same scripture: “I am become death, the shatterer of worlds.”

“Stop it, stop you are scaring her,” I yell. The tears come in sheets now, my eyes straining to see the road. But it’s me. I am the one still yelling. “Shhh, Oppie it’s ok,” I say in a calm

voice. “It’s ok.” I choke back sobs. “We can’t go on like this,” I say to my boyfriend. “We have to find a better way.”

How could Robert J. Oppenheimer know how he felt that day—to discover the technology to both light the world and destroy it seven times over? He must have reconstructed the narrative of his feelings many times over, with each new development. How terribly magnificent the first mushroom cloud must have appeared above the desert, and then, the images of women with burned-off mouths, lifeless babies, men with mysterious symptoms surviving the explosion only to drop dead months after. All of them individuals, who had lived, had dreamed at night. In elementary school we made paper cranes, set out to make a crane for each life lost, the death toll a chain of folded shapes, abstract. How could anyone properly comprehend the horror? And yet, to understand even just a little is to have one’s own insignificant problems dissipate, like tissue paper dissolving in a pool of water, the color bleeding out.

Oppie sleeps on the rug in our front room when I am working, and I watch her chest rise and fall the way I often hold my hand up in front of an infant’s mouth when I am watching someone’s baby, because I am so terrified of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome—or more specifically, the thought of having to tell someone that their baby has passed—the way addicts sometimes hold mirrors in front of other addicts, just to check. Sometimes Oppie twitches in her sleep and I wonder what she dreams of—the thick yolk and egg white running over her dry dog food, or the blow drier after a bath. She loves the eggs that keep her coat shiny, the feeling of hot air ruffling her fur. I try to tell her to sleep on the floor, know that I should be stern, but sometimes in the middle of the night when she is startled by a truck taking the potholed street too fast, or the yells

of my neighbors in the throes of a passionate argument, I relent, and let her crawl into the bed. She circles for a moment and then curls up next to me, rests her head on my leg as if to claim me. When I bring her to barbeques and she cowers in between my legs, or goes nuts when I leave her tethered to fetch a beer, I become defensive when people comment on her poor manners. She is a bad dog, but she has a good heart. I imagine it is not unlike how a mother feels when she has a child, except that I think is instinctual—hormones released at birth bond mother to child. There is no evolutionary reason for me to love a dog, and yet, it is a profound thing to be wholly responsible for her happiness, for her belief that I am coming back, when I leave her in the morning. If I could tell anyone anything, aside from the scientific facts, I would tell about how it is to love a dog.

Epilogue

No one can possibly know what is about to happen. It is happening each time, for the first time, for the only time. –James Baldwin

There are times when the paint is thick and varied and overlapping and overwhelming.

But there are other times, when I feel sure, when the feeling is of driving down an empty highway along the coast, past the sand dunes in melting light, rolling up on the beach, sleeping in the sand, exposed, and waking to the searing of my cheeks at the first light, seeing the ocean again, but for the first time.

VITA

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