

WE BENEFIT FROM THAT: A NOVEL IN STORIES

BY

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### We Benefit from That

My dad and new mom met sitting in a name-tagged round. Each person in the circle said the name already on their sticker tag. They talked about their parents. They each said they had been affected by alcoholism.

Dad heard Mom say, “Hi, my name is Elaine.” He heard it like, “Hi, my name is Elaine. I have hair like a mermaid.”

Dad said, “Hi,” too. He was wearing khaki pants and a teal zip-up jacket. His shirt had buttons down the front. Mom heard, “Hi, my name is Tony. I am okay admitting to problems,” and, “When there is a problem, I am the type of man who finds a solution.”

I was already two when they talked after the meeting, and I was in kindergarten when they got married. Mom told Dad not to buy her a ring, but he wanted to. As a compromise, he bought one from a quarter machine and used it to propose. He spent ten dollars to get the one he wanted. She said, “Why didn’t you listen? I don’t want a ring.”

That Halloween, Mom came to my kindergarten party dressed up. She was in the Air Force Reserves and wore her uniform. Everyone asked what she was and I said she was a G.I. Joe. Nobody knew you could have a mom who was also a G.I. Joe, so it was the coolest.

For the wedding, Mom made her own dress, and she put the beads on the lace herself. The sleeves were tall and made her look just like royalty. The wedding was at my aunt’s yard,

Mom's sister. The fountain in the front was fixed for the ceremony. My hair was put up into a French braid and I had on lace gloves we had added plastic gems to. We had done my shoes, too, in a matching pattern. My job was to drop dried flowers along the way to where Dad waited standing. It was important to do a good job, everyone said, because the flowers prepared the way for the bride herself. My brother, William, carried the silk pillow down the aisle, and since he was seven, he told me when we should leave to start walking. He was the ring bearer and his suit was grey, like a little man.

We all drove off in Dad's car afterward. Dad and Mom took one week to go down and around Mexico. During the entire cruise, Mom felt seasick. Dad bought a book and read the whole thing on the trip. It was about the legendary football team at his old high school. Ten years later, they made a television show by the same name, but they didn't keep any of the facts right.

On their way to their honeymoon, Dad and Mom dropped William and me off at our Mom-mom's house. For the week of the cruise, we would stay with her. She was our original Mom, the one who had had us. That was when Dad and her had been married and were both in college, but now we didn't really see her. We didn't talk on the phone either.

The drive there was short since we lived in the same area. The wedding had been just up the mountain. I brought her a marigold plant and she put it out on her apartment balcony with her other plants.

William and I stayed in the front room with the TV. I got to sleep in the reclining chair. Mom-mom slept naked in her bed. When it was bedtime, she came to the door in no pajamas and asked if we were ready for sleeping.

During the day we went to work with Mom-mom at her Burger King. We went to the thrift store across the parking lot and could get any books we wanted. Then, we could sit all day and read, or play in the play area. We could have any food that we wanted since Mom-mom was the manager. “What better could you two ask for?” Mom-mom said.

After I read the first book I got, I asked if there was a TV that I could watch. There was one with a VCR in a cabinet above a trashcan. Mom-mom unlocked it and started it up. The only tapes they had were Burger King training videos, so I watched those. In the videos, they talked about what temperatures to keep the meats at. They showed how to use the black wax pen to show the customer’s selections. The video said that the workers should not wear rings or watches. After the video, I sat in the back, not in the kitchen, but behind by the manager’s office, by tubes of empty cups. People were wearing watches, I saw. When Mom-mom came by, I pointed to them, and said, “Look.”

Mom-mom looked and said, “Isn’t it neat to see how they do it?”

I said, “They aren’t supposed to have on their watches.”

Mom-mom said, “Okay, thank you,” and she told them to remove their watches, but she didn’t really think it was as important as the video did.

I went up to the register and ordered a large vanilla shake. The face of the cash register guy said, “Is that okay?”

I said it was.

I went into the playground and sat in one of the tunnels and drank my shake and read a book. I was supposed to eat in the dining room, but I didn’t want Mom-mom to see the giant cup, bigger than anything about me. It was hard to crawl up to the top holding the shake and my book, but once I got there, I put my feet across from me and sucked up on the straw.

I heard a little kid coming up the side on the climbing platforms, plastic triangles with black safety nets all around. He was playing a game with his brother that started with him saying, “You’re it!” and would want to race through where I was reading. I thought about moving, but there was not really any other place to go. When he got to me, he asked if it was okay to eat in there. I showed him a card I made from the Burger King Kid’s Club flier, the sign-up sheet to send in for a free meal in your birthday month, and said, “If you are in the VIP club, you can.” This stopped him from yelling at his mom that people were eating in the playground. He had started to yell it already, so it only worked halfway.

The next day, William and I couldn’t order on our own, and when we wanted to have fries in the afternoon, we had to split a small one between the both of us. William didn’t even really want any, though, so he just read and I watched him read and ate them all.

Mom-mom said that maybe it wasn’t the best for us to go with her to work, since we didn’t stay at the playground the way she had expected. She said we could hang out for the day with Daddy-O and after he finished work we could go swimming at the complex pool.

Daddy-O was what we called our stepdad. He shared the apartment with Mom-mom, and they had the same bedroom. He drove cars called bugs. Dad asked later what his job was. “Daddy-O’s job?” I asked. Dad asked how we had come up with that name anyway. Daddy-O had said his job was in odd jobs. He said people called him up to fix things. Sometimes they needed help selling their old stuff, and he did it for them. When we went to work with him, it seemed like his job was driving around. His car went very fast. There had not been seatbelts.

Mom-mom told me that it wasn’t against the law to not wear a seatbelt as long as you were in the backseat and I felt okay about that, even though it didn’t seem to match with the



other things I knew. She said that the front seats served like a padding. She said school buses were like that. I told her William and I rode our bikes to school.

In Daddy-O's car, I chewed gum and somehow it got under my pant leg. It stuck my pant to the car. The seat wasn't fuzzy like Dad's car; it was white and smooth. Daddy-O was driving on the highway and William was in the backseat. Daddy-O looked down at my legs, then looked at the road. I rubbed the gum with my fingers, trying to stick it back together. Daddy-O's hands were on the steering wheel non-stop. I mostly got it off of the car, but none off of my pant. Daddy-O asked me, "How did that happen?" but I didn't have any answer. The gum had just appeared—there and stuck. He asked me the question more times, all the way back to the apartment. In the kitchen, we put ice on the pant and tried with a knife, but the gum still stayed.

At lunch, Daddy-O asked, "Is little bear hungry for bear food?" I asked what bear food was and he said, "Honey on toast, or a honey sandwich." He made one for me and I took it to the stairwell and ate, dripping the hot honey off the toast down the spaces between the stairs to where a person going into the lower-floor apartment would stand to adjust their shopping bags. They weren't ever there, but Daddy-O brought out a plate and a paper towel. At my parent's house, we had specific napkins.

Daddy-O's daughter, our stepsister, came for the weekend and William and I got to meet her. She was fourteen and had hair that looked unmovable. It looked gorgeous to me. She had her ears pierced, too. I didn't because Dad said I shouldn't mutilate my body like that. I told Mom-mom how I thought they were so pretty. She asked if I wanted them why didn't I have them yet? I told her how Dad didn't let me. We went to the mall right after I said that. They punched them through with a gun. Mom-mom threw away all my shoes, too, because she said

Dad had bought them way too small. I told her I got them from my friend, and she couldn't believe I was wearing second-hand shoes. "You should never wear used shoes," she said.

Daddy-O took us to the dollar store, where everything in the whole store was one dollar. I got a coloring book and crayons. Daddy-O drew in them so well. He showed me that if you outline the shape with dark and then color it in lightly, it looks so professional, like he really knew how to do it. I tried it, too, and our colors looked just like each other.

I said that where Dad and Mom and William and I were going to our new house after they got back from their honeymoon they didn't have stores like that. He didn't believe me.

"None at all?" he asked.

"I've never seen one or been in one, and I read all the store signs and all the names on the places when we drive."

"If that's the truth," he said, "I'm moving up there and starting a chain. It just doesn't make sense that they wouldn't have them."

At night, in Mom-mom's bedroom, Daddy-O told her about building all the dollar stores up north. He laid out a plan: they would be franchisees. "Forget the Sonic route," he said. "We'll be out of fast-food. Dollar stores in strip malls."

In the car again, I asked him if a dollar store was the same as a 98 Cent Store. He hadn't heard of a 98 Cent Store. "But why?" he asked. "So we can beat the competition?" he said. "Good idea."

"No," I said. "We have those already."

He had his hands on the steering wheel the same way as when I had spilt the gum to stick all over, grabbing on hard. “Why didn’t you tell me that before? Why did you say you didn’t have dollar stores when you did?” he asked.

“I didn’t think they were the same,” I said. I looked up at him and moved my small purse to my lap and held onto the clasp. “I hadn’t ever been in either store.”

I had put a big wrench in his plans, he said. What was he going to do now?

Before dinner that night, we went to a type of grocery store that was new to me. We met Mom-mom there. She was still wearing her uniform shirt and her black pants and black shoes for work. Dad always changed out of his uniform to go home. He said the Marines didn’t even let you get gas or go to the daycare center in your uniform. My mom changed into her jeans and walking shoes before doing anything else. She worked at an office and wore different colored pants every day.

Daddy-O lifted me up into the big part of the cart to sit and showed me that all the groceries at this store only came in one brand. “That way,” he said, “it is always the cheapest.” Dad’s grocery was on base, and you didn’t have to pay the taxes. I didn’t talk about that, or about anything.

When we got to the cookies section, Daddy-O asked if I liked gingersnaps. I hadn’t ever had them. He pulled a bag down and opened it. He told me to try it and see. They were spicy and very hard to bite. I said they were good. “Can you try things before you buy them here?” I asked. He said that you could try anything you want. He wheeled me up to the grapes sitting together and snapped one off.

Mom-mom grabbed a container of cheese from the center of the refrigerated coolers. The barcode had been scratched out and she said it was cheaper because some people are afraid to eat past the expiration date. “Those people,” she said, “aren’t educated enough to know when food is actually bad. For example, this cheese, the flavor comes in time. We benefit from that, cheaper prices for us.” We had the cheese in lasagna that night, and the gingersnaps sat on the counter.

That Christmas, Mom-mom sent me a check for thirty dollars. I didn’t cash it right away. I didn’t want to lose the check. It had her writing on it. It had her name, the way she wrote it, the name of her bank and her middle initial that showed my name is the same as her middle name. Everything was there, right were I could check on it. Daddy-O’s whole name right above hers. I didn’t want to trade it in. But then, after I had looked at all those things and nothing had changed, I asked Mom how I could cash a check without being a grown-up and without a bank account. She said that if I signed the back of the check, she could cash it.

“How will they know that they can give you the money?” I asked. She didn’t have my same name, any part of it. We lived at the same house, and she and Dad were married, but I didn’t think the bank knew that. A girl in my class at school got adopted by her stepdad, but Mom hadn’t adopted me. Mom had said once that if Dad died, she would have to send William and me back to Mom-mom. I took the check over to Mom with a pen and she said it would be fine just to write my name in good connected letters. Mom and I took it to the bank, but it didn’t work. The check was too old.

“Okay, bummer,” I said. I had two hundred dollars in savings already since my birthday came right before Christmas. I had cut out pictures of the options for the television I could buy from the Sunday ads and taped them to a sheet of paper with the prices. There were a lot that

were already in my range without the money from the check. Even then, on the way home from the bank I thought maybe Dad and Mom might give me the money from the check themselves.

Instead though, back at the house, Dad and Mom had me put the old check on the dining room table and we had to call Mom-mom up and ask for a new check. I was already giving up on the TV. Dad and Mom probably wouldn't put a cable box into my room and that missed the whole purpose of having my own TV. Dad went and got the address book from the study. It had loose papers sticking out all over and the binding cracked when he opened it. He looked through, sorting to find the most recent information. He found it, and gave me the number.

I dialed, long distance to where she lived closer to the beach. I wanted the number to be not hers any more. Then, I thought, maybe it would be a silly funny thing to her. Not a big problem, just a little time passing, each time forgetting to stop by the bank.

When she answered, I had to tell her that we went to cash the check, but it had been past the time when it was valid. She said she wondered why I hadn't cashed it. She thought my father had kept it from me. She said she wouldn't put it past the two of them.

Then she said this was going to be a vital thing, to pay close mind. "Whenever you get a check, you have to take it to the bank right away," she said. It was a lesson she thought I needed to know for the rest of my life.

It meant she had thought something of it. In her view, I wasn't doing things right, I hadn't handled the check correctly.

She said, "Okay, so I'm going to send you a new check. What are you going to do with it right when it arrives?"

I said, "I am going to sign my name on the back and take it straight to the bank." I hadn't wanted to have this talk, but now I was really having it. The phone was on a triangular shelf on the edge of a cabinet by the dinner table.

When I hung up, Dad and Mom asked what she had said. I said, "She will send a new check. When it gets here, can we please go to the bank right away?"

"Sure we can," they said. They said they hadn't realized I still had the check. They thought it had already gotten taken care of, with all the other gifts I'd gotten from family.

The next time I saw my mom-mom I was seventeen. Daddy-O wasn't in her picture any more. Mom-mom met me at the baggage pick-up area in the airport. She and I had the same type of blonde hair. We had both flown in to where her mom lived. Mom-mom's mom had organized everything. She had grey hair cut short, sharp and tight. We went straight to shopping and lunch with her in her car with heated seats.

Mom-mom and her mom shopped fast, piling things into my arms. I had never seen jeans that measured both down and around. The numbers on the sizes weren't even close to what the ones I was wearing said. Mom-mom guessed and we took a stack to the dressing room. They both pulled at the waistbands and told me to sit down and stand up again. "That's it!" they said when they had gotten it right. New clothes had seemed fun before we had gone to get them. They told me how it all made sense, that these same brands looked the best on them when they were in high school. Then they said that my old bras weren't holding up their end of the bargain. We'd have to get new ones.

We went to get bras with better support, and Mom-mom went all the way to the changing-room door with me. I put on the first bra-and-underwear set. Both parts were blue. The

bra was all lace. She knocked, asked how it fit. She wanted to see it, the whole thing. Just me in just the bra and underwear. I had even worn my best set for the plane. Mom-mom asked again if I was ready by opening the door some. She pulled the strap up and down, checking the bounce. There was a lot of bounce and she said we would have to try other styles, so we did. We found one. She changed the strap length and said it was so much better; the old one was trash.

“Just wear these out,” she said. “We’ll ring them up with the tags.” She snapped all the tags off and I pulled at the stickers. I held my old bra and underwear in a ball in my hand. I held onto them through the store and as we waited for an associate at the checkout counter.

Mom-mom picked up some chocolates from the display, and then some key chains to show me the quality of the leather, but I still had to hold my hands closed. Out the door of the department store there was a bronze trashcan and into it I dropped the bad bra, the underwear. I wore my new bra all week, for my entire visit, since it was the only one I had.

### Tony Builds a Wall

The smallest model home was used as the office. Inside, a saleswoman pointed her nice nails at a clear enclosure over a map. Each square was a future home where Tony and Elaine could envision their own pool. They could see how the roads would take them to the planned junior high and to the future park.

The square Elaine put her finger above was in Stage III of the development and would be done in the fall. The saleswoman tapped at a strange shape and said, “This is one of the last ones left that will be done before school starts.” She said, “This lot doesn’t have the premium that the ones in Stage III have.” She meant it was cheaper.

Tony said, “The backyard is small. The lot should be shaped instead like the forecast path of a tornado, in a wide ray.”

After, the woman took the parents, their son, daughter, and new baby, in a car around the roads, motioning with a two-fingered point to the things they had seen inside.

Elaine wanted to have a pool. She had grown up in this state, where all the friends she envied and all the girls she wanted to be had pools. She had taken accordion lessons because her sister had, but she would have rather done swimming than figure roller-skating. Tony wanted one, too. He had grown up in another state where the only pools he knew you either had to pay at the front gate, or were on top of the lawn, not in it. The children, William and Elizabeth, wanted



a pool because at their old apartment complex they had one and took their toys swimming. They both played with tanks, driving them along the floor of the pool. Elaine had already bought new baby James a swimsuit with built-in floaties.

At their rental house, in the big room with a TV and high ceilings, Tony and Elaine had discussions about what to do:

“There isn’t space for a pool in the backyard of the lots that will be ready when school starts.”

“The first day is soon.”

Elaine bounced William and Elizabeth’s new brother on her legs and said that a sturdy foundation is essential. Elizabeth could probably adjust mid-year since she was younger and talkative, but it would be best for William to be settled in before school started up.

School is important, starting on time is important, a pool is important, Tony tallied in his head. He ruled out waiting until October for the other houses down the hill. That only ruled in one thing.

Back in the model home, the saleswoman pulled her suit jacket more closed and said, “Unfortunately, due to the shape, only one unit design can fit.” Luckily, the one she indicated was the same one Tony and Elaine had been thinking of.

Their lot had initially been ordered by another family but could not be fully delivered. “As such,” the saleswoman said, her gold nametag shining, “some of the options have already been selected.” She showed Tony and Elaine the carpet they would have in their new home and then the entryway flooring, the color of the garage doors, the bathroom tile selections. It was all

at a discount for not getting to pick. She told them there was still the choice of the exterior paint, so Tony and Elaine picked one that worked well with the already-ordered brick.

“The backyard is not extensive,” the woman explained. “We will install a courtesy retaining wall, three feet high, eight feet out from the doorway.”

“What material will it be made with?” Tony asked.

“A strong maple,” she said. “The same as the backyard fencing.”

She pressed a business card onto the desk, suggesting a designer familiar with stylish ecological solutions for retaining-wall landscape.

Elaine and Tony asked to see the model home again and she said it was open, they could help themselves. If there were cookies baked in the kitchen they could help themselves to those, also. Inside there were bottled waters in the fridge. Tony and Elaine walked through thinking, “This is what we are going to get.”

Out the front door and down the walkway to the mailbox, their glasses fogged up from the transition out of the air conditioning. They switched into prescription sunglasses in the car, and snapped each case with a hard close. They drove back, past sidewalks leading to leveled-out dirt flats with tops of pipes sticking up out of the ground, on a long road with fresh trees, to the highway.

“The yard doesn’t seem like it will be enough,” one of them said. The other agreed. They said again all the reasons for getting this house on this court, a short road with only eight homes around a small circle, a layout ideal for kids.

“I can take another look at the plans,” Tony said. “I can move that dirt back further. I can move it to ten inches from the property line.”

Tony watched the house get built, took pictures of each stage of the development like uterus shots of babies. He came back to the rental with a set of developed film and the family looked at the foundation, then the next week they looked at the frame.

The family went to visit the house and saw the studs, walked through the first floor, saying the names of each room, picturing the walls and the windows. In the kitchen, Elaine patted down her hands where the center island would be.

Tony stuck his head, then arms, into the wall, looked at the electrical connections. He said they were not up to code. He told William and Elizabeth this wasn't a safe area without hard hats. The family went back out to the street and looked at the walls of their neighbor's houses, just covered with insulation.

Tony called the house people. They thanked him and assured him of their commitment to safe homes for great families.

The selected colors were throughout the house: beige carpet, blue-accent bathroom tiles, the cabinetry in the kitchen matching the wood railing up the stairs. Outside of the back door was only room to take one step out. On the ground was a piece of concrete as big as a welcome mat, then a sliding hill of dirt that started at the back fence.

Tony and Elaine knew that this was how the backyard would be, nothing, with no pool and no room to play. The next week, the builders came and pushed the dirt hill back a few feet, just room enough for a patio table and chairs.

Tony had said, "We can get the kids in school, move in, and I'll build a better wall to hold back that dirt. Then we can wrap the pool around the side of the house, put a swing set on

the other side.” He said that after all this, the backyard would be big enough for a football scrimmage.

“Retaining walls are ugly, though,” Elaine said.

“Not all of them.”

“They are giant concrete walls, like our backyard abuts a highway.”

Tony pointed at walls as they drove, asking Elaine if she liked that one, or that one. Some had designs built in: a pattern of bricks that looked sort of like the state’s bird in flight, or a field of the state’s flowers. He explained that in some areas they just pick a geometric pattern that reflects the theme of the area. “Like Navajo,” he said, “in New Mexico.” Other walls were plain grey panels and he pointed to those, and Elaine did the same things with her face each time, lifted her bangs up with a flat hand and looked at Tony through the top part of her sunglasses frames. To her, they all just still looked like they belonged on the highway.

Tony asked, “Is it the influence of the highway being there that makes you feel that?”

She said, “No, it is the influence of the large concrete wall that is usually on the highway that makes me think that.”

The guy at the do-it-yourself store recommended just stacking textured concrete blocks, woven like a braid. That was boring to Elaine. The man in the apron said that some people grow ivy or another rampant climber, which covers the wall to a certain extent.

Tony said he had heard of a new way to build a pattern into a wall. Before the forms go up, he could staple the wood planks with a pattern or a mural made of rope. It would work because the pattern would indent into the concrete. Then, the forms would go up, the concrete

would be poured in. They would wait, it would all set, and when the forms came down, the rope would be pulled off and the pattern would stay behind.

It sounded complicated and dangerous to Elaine, “Will it look like someone made a craft project out of concrete? How can you guarantee that the rope will come off and not be stuck in?”

Tony said that it would work. He had an idea, a narrative, for the design on the wall. He explained that on the one side, where the grassy play area and swing set would be, the design of the wall would be rolling hills. Gradually, as the backyard transitioned into stone deck, then pool, the theme would become mountainous with tall peaks and a flowing river. The river in the wall would meet the river rock of the pool’s waterfall and so the pool would look like it was being filled by the water from the wall’s river.

In the summer, William and Elizabeth started at the new school and the family was in the new house. On move-in day, Tony had backed the truck into the house. The gutter bent and dented. Tony said, “It’s ours now!” He said this while looking at where the top of the truck had hit.

Elaine looked at Tony and said, “Our new house.”

Tony drew the scenic landscape pattern for the wall on a piece of paper, and drew in bushes and mini trees along the top. He showed Elaine and for a while it sat on the kitchen table. The family ate dinner with a lit candle in the center. Windows on the wall behind William and Elizabeth’s chairs looked out to the backyard. Sometimes, Elaine reached over from her chair and pulled on the cord for the blinds hard, to let in some natural light. William and Elizabeth set

the table and washed the family placemats. Whatever the family ate got mashed up for James. Tony went and bought a lot of wood, nail guns and air-powered staple guns, and rope.

On more sheets of grid-lined engineer paper, Tony drew details of the rope layout for each panel. In the garage he drew a grid on the plank with pencil, drew the line for the rope and nail-gunned the rope down. He did this for each one, and stacked them in a pile. Both cars had to be parked outside the three-car garage.

At night during a big football game of his favorite team, Tony was in the driveway sawing rebar. Orange sparks came out from the standing saw, and the sound was loud and terrible. Extension cords wrapped the side of the house, powering everything.

Elizabeth was a helper and stood holding the next tools Tony might need. Flashlight and measuring tape, especially. When Tony put down his carpentry pencil, she made it her job to see it and pick it up, to hand to him.

Elizabeth went inside and Elaine asked if Tony was planning on going deaf, or if he was wearing the ear protectors that looked like red plastic noses. Elizabeth went back out with a pair and stood by him holding them out.

Tony went to pick up more rebar for the wall. He took Elaine's brown station wagon instead of his sedan. He came home and said that he hadn't tied the rebar very well. There had been some scraping up of the car.

"Along just the ski racks?" Elaine asked. "Where on the car?" she wanted to know.

"Light scrapes down the passenger side," Tony said.

Elaine walked to her car. It was parked in the street so Tony could pull out the table saw and work in the driveway. The long metal poles had fallen down from the roof onto the hood, by the radio antenna. It was pretty bad.

“How long did you drive with the rebar bouncing on the hood?” Elaine asked. She had seen that was how it happened. Tony was already pulling out tools to get to work. Elaine had gotten the same car in an accident years ago and one door had been smashed in. It hadn’t opened since and she hadn’t gotten it fixed.

Elaine walked up to the driveway next to Tony at the saw. “You should take your car to pick up materials,” she said.

“I need a truck,” he said.

Tony and his work friends put up the planks and set them in place, measuring the width. They made sure each rope section was in order. A mixing truck came and poured concrete down into the space. William and Elizabeth sat on the couch, their knees on the cushions, their chins on the back facing the window, and looked out at the backyard. James watched a tape for kids. Elaine got ice waters for the guys and took them to the garage. She said, “You all look like you are working hard.” She put heavy-duty soap and old towels in the downstairs bathroom. The bathroom was decorated silver and blue with a football theme.

When the forms came down, Tony watched to see the ropes come off clean. The first panel was plain on purpose. In the next panels, some of the rope came off just like planned. On some, it pulled out the concrete. The rolling hill was a blank splotch. Tony pulled each panel off looking over the edge to see. He said, “Steady, even, even,” and pulled the planks down.

When it was bad, he cursed and Elizabeth and William held their necks and heads still, then looked at each other. They were outside helping, but didn't have anything to do.

William mouthed to Elizabeth, "What are we doing out here?"

"Helping out," Elizabeth said, quietly, and pointed her eyes back at Tony.

They handed him the pliers to pull out the stuck rope from the wall. It snapped off concrete with it and the design got fuzzy. Some of the rope stayed with the forms how they were meant to, and the trees indented just right, looking like a small grove in the area of the wall aligned with the edge of the grass and the deck.

"Here the trees are starting to get heavier," Tony told them. "On the edge of the forest." They thought he had relaxed about it all.

Then he said, "Now the only things left for me to ruin are the mountain ranges, and the entire backyard."

When Elaine came out to see the wall, she said, "Looks like a failure to me." She said he had tried hard, and that it would have been worth it to wait for the other lots in the later phases of development. "We spent ten thousand dollars anyway, and there is still the pool to build."

Tony didn't answer. The wall was there. It would cost even more to take down.

He went into the garage and found an open soda on the top of a sawhorse and checked to see if it was empty or warm.

Most all the other neighbors got pools, too. The people on the left didn't get one, but it wasn't unexpected. They had ferrets for pets. The people on the right and the people on the corner got pools. The people in the one single-story house on the cul-de-sac were retirees and got



a big hot tub, and a cabana, and maybe even an outdoor sauna. Tony and Elaine looked out from their second story, but couldn't tell. It could have been a really nice shed.

When each of the neighbors ordered their pools, they just picked a day, whichever worked best for them. A company came out and put a sign in their front yard. Then, men drove in a couple of trucks to the neighborhood and parked along the street. They took down the panels of fence from one side of the family's yard and drove through in a digging machine. By the end of the week their fence was back up and they had a pool. The only scarring they had was the mud tracks from the equipment in their sod. That weekend, they bought bulk barbeque foods, sodas, and new coolers. They blew up float toys and tossed them in. They invited the neighbors to come over and swim, and cooked everyone food on a silver grill with big knobs.

Tony said it was a waste of money to build a pool like that. Tony and Elaine sat in bed when he said this, in their master bedroom, with windows on three sides, but only two that looked out to neighbors already swimming. The look that year was black-bottomed pools.

Instead, Tony and Elaine planned to call up a company called U-Build-It. Tony would draw the shape of the pool and then turn that into a design at work where he was an engineer for the state's highways and bridges. Tony and Elaine would be their own contractors. Each crew would do a section of the construction, would drive up in trucks, park on the street and go through the opening in the fence. One group would put a hole in the ground that would stay there until another day a different group would come and put concrete in it. Those guys wouldn't be the same as the guys who put the lights in the sides of the pool or put the ledges on around the top. Between groups, Tony would price the next and book them. On the day a group should come, some would call to cancel and it would make the process longer. Tony and Elaine would

be the ones to re-install the fence and string the garden hose to fill it up with water. By this method, the pool itself would take days to fill.

### Backyards with Pools

The bonus room was right above the garage and had one big square window that looked out onto the cul-de-sac. Elizabeth used to dress up and walk the window-seat like a balance beam with the light on at night, making the window a giant mirror. She didn't know real ballet moves because her parents took her out of ballet. Same for gymnastics. Elizabeth's mom and her instructors both had agreed she didn't have the build to be really good, and they could tell that early on. Her parents told her it wasn't good to walk the window at night, especially now that she was a middle-schooler.

Elizabeth stood in the bonus room doorway in a bathing suit, her arms crossed along her belly, palms flat to cover the round. Her dad turned from the drafting table newly blocking the window. He was gluing Velcro to the outside of a three-ring-binder, making himself an organizer where everything would be attached to everything else. He had just finished gluing the other side of the hook-and-loop closure to the back of his cell phone.

"See, it doesn't look bad," he said. "Just don't put your hands on your stomach like that at the pool party because that makes people think there's something about your body to hide."

"Could I buy a razor?" she asked.

"For when?"

Before she answered he said, "Maybe we can go to the grocery store later this week."

Then, "Have you asked Mom yet?"

“About the pool party or about the razor?” Elizabeth asked.

“Both.”

“No,” Elizabeth said, standing, hands still on the shiny blue suit.

“Okay,” he said and swiveled back, pulling the lid to the rubber cement from the pot and using the built-in brush to continue attaching Velcro. “We’ll probably need more milk before the weekend.”

The pool next door was nicer than Elizabeth and William’s. The bottom of it was dark instead of white, and it looked like a lagoon. Miniature pines lined their backyard fence on all sides. Around Elizabeth and William’s pool, where their dad had tried to grow mini-round shrubs, the only things that took were short weeds with sticky leaves. Elizabeth and William had to take them out.

Their pool didn’t have a built-in heater either, so instead they pulled a cover over it that looked like giant blue bubble-wrap. On William’s birthday, they had misjudged the temperature and left the cover on too long. To everyone who came for his barbeque, the pool felt like a giant bath.

Elizabeth’s mom didn’t like the way chlorine colored Elizabeth’s hair, and her dad installed a salt purification system for the pool. It worked great until Elizabeth’s mom pointed to where the safety fence began to show rust.

Elizabeth and William’s dad bought a special paint one weekend and called them out to the pool. He showed them how to cover it, and said since they were out of school, now was the time. They worked on the same post, Elizabeth on the lower half since she was the shorter and William getting the top parts. At first they stood on opposite sides of the fence, Elizabeth

painting near William's feet, but then, when she realized that most of the rusted parts were on the side of the fence facing the pool, she switched sides and sat on William's feet. She looked up and told him to be sure not to drop paint on her.

The week before was the start of the summer and William and Elizabeth had been home alone. Their mom was pregnant with another little brother, and their parents had decided that the two bigger kids were old enough this year to not need daycare. Their dad gave them chores to do during the day, so they wouldn't stay on the couch the whole time.

William and Elizabeth made a pact to wait until commercial breaks to weed. They watched TV, then one raced outside during the breaks and did as much weeding as they could. They team-worked it: one would stay inside and warn the other the show was coming back on.

After, they sat outside on the deck reading, Elizabeth under the umbrella that stuck up through the center of the patio table, both of them in bathing suits sitting on top of towels spread on white plastic lawn chairs. William stacked an entire series of books next to him in case he finished the big one he was working on or for reference. All of the covers had pictures of planets on them. Elizabeth said the sun was too hot, so William helped her rotate the umbrella to where she was just half under.

William asked, "Are you set now?" drank some, and went back to where he left off.

Elizabeth interrupted, reported on what she was reading, a chapter book about a kid who lived on another world. "My book is kind of asking if you didn't feel something before could you know about the way things feel." William read straight and focused.

"Do you ever wonder what things feel like?" Elizabeth asked.

William lowered his book to his lap, still open. “Like if I didn’t have sensory nerves?” he said to clarify.

“No, like things you don’t know how they feel because you never touched them. Like an atmosphere or something,” she said. “Like how do muscles feel?”

“Muscles without skin or muscles with skin over them?” William asked.

“If a tongue is muscle, is that how muscle feels?”

“A tongue?” William asked.

“Yeah,” said Elizabeth.

“We have tongues,” William said. “We can touch them together and see what it feels like.”

“An experiment, just to see,” Elizabeth said.

Elizabeth laid her towel along the ground and lay down on it, her legs straight together, her arms flat at her sides. William draped his towel over Elizabeth’s torso and her head.

“Now I can’t find your mouth,” he said.

He poked his index finger along her face. Elizabeth opened her mouth long, “It’s right here.” William’s finger poked the hole and pushed the towel down two inches. He knelt along her side, “Am I hurting your arm?”

“No,” she said.

He bent his head forward, and she couldn’t see what he was doing, but his head made a shadow over her face. William put his tongue down into the towel pouch, and pulled it out. “Did that hurt?”

“No, none.”

The shadow came down again, and Elizabeth touched the towel with her tongue this time and felt that the towel was old and tasted like t-shirt. The form of it was thick and strong. Elizabeth thought about the height of their backyard fence. It was two fences, one stacked on the other, and the back neighbors were up a level, but not on a hill. Altogether, the fence felt too tall. He asked again if it hurt.

“No, just funny,” Elizabeth said.

William lifted the top of the towel from her face and laughed. “Funny,” he said. He replaced the towel, holding its corners and, aligning them with the corners of the towel on the ground, re-found the hole with his finger.

The stone rock deck was indenting a repeating pattern onto Elizabeth’s legs. “Be careful of my eyes,” she said.

William lowered again, his chin and his forehead a level plane moving toward the red, orange and yellow triangles of the towel. He stuck his tongue down again and Elizabeth traced it. She felt it through and, embarrassed, bit it.

William sat up, “Did I hurt you?”

“No, but the deck is getting uncomfortable,” she said. They both got up and went back to their chairs under the sun umbrella. Elizabeth sat with the towel over her. William sat on his chair with his towel. After a few minutes, Elizabeth said she was getting hot and went inside.

The next weekend was the pool party, and Elizabeth wanted to go swimming and see what their pool was like, but she wasn’t sure. She was going to have to go over there with William. After Elizabeth waited on the couch for a while, Elizabeth’s mom came downstairs. “Have you eaten anything?” she asked.

Elizabeth was wearing her bathing suit and her towel, wrapped around her just under the armpits. “No. I think they will have hot dogs,” she said.

Her mother raised her eyebrows and got a purple cup from the cupboard, went to the freezer and filled it with ice. “Well,” she said, “you need to eat something before you go.”

Elizabeth was concerned. “But then I can’t swim for a half hour.”

“Sure you can,” her mom said. “Just nuke a quesadilla, or a frozen burrito. I just don’t want you going over there asking them for food.”

Elizabeth got a plastic plate from the dishwasher, a tortilla, and a slice of yellow cheese. She sat at the table, towel still wrapped, and ate.

Her mom said, “Quit being lazy, and get something to drink, too.”

Elizabeth got a small cup that had once had a toddler top and filled it with milk. Her mom said, “Come on now,” so Elizabeth got a bigger cup and dumped the milk in.

Thirty minutes later, Elizabeth sat on the shell-shaped velour couch in the family room and watched TV. William came downstairs in swim shorts.

“Did Mom say we could go yet?” Elizabeth asked as he walked to the kitchen, opened a cupboard and took out a plate. He scratched his hair fast, digging into the itch. He looked at his fingernails, pushing the pads of each one, pushing out the build-up, and wiping it on his trunks.

“I’m going to eat, that’s what I know,” he said.

“After that? Am I allowed to go without you?”

“Go ask,” he said. “It only takes me like three minutes to eat. Four if I have pudding.”

Elizabeth just waited for William to eat. They walked next door together.



At the party, someone's dad dropped neon-colored dive sticks into the black-bottomed pool, and blew a whistle. Boys lined up along the deep end with their backs to the water, jumped in and searched for sticks.

Elizabeth joined the next round. William lined up, too, and at the whistle they both jumped backward feet first into the pool. At the bottom, they grabbed for the same green stick. William had two sticks in his other hand. He dropped them and grabbed Elizabeth. He came up to the surface and Elizabeth's face was below his armpit. William held her hand, and pulled apart her fingers. Her head stayed underwater so long she needed new air. Elizabeth kicked and then was quiet. William held her under and, with both his hands around hers on the stick, he kept her still until he lifted each finger. When only his hand was on the tube, William let go and put the green stick together with his other sticks on the side of the pool.

Elizabeth could hear their mom's voice underneath the water, tight and deep. Their mom stood at the side of the pool, face close to William's, "You need to come home," she said, and left.

William said to Elizabeth, holding the lip of the pool, "You heard her." One of the adults said it was break time from swimming for everyone. The adults stood still as Elizabeth looked for her towel and goggles. Finally, she saw someone had draped it over the side fence.

Elizabeth toweled off as completely as she could in the garage. Inside, her dad was sitting on the couch, her mom was standing at the kitchen island. "What's wrong with this picture?" she asked.

"Okay," William answered.

“No. It’s not okay.” Their mom lifted her hands, one with a dish sponge, and looked over the counters, at the two standing beside each other. Her pregnant belly bumped against the island and the round shape pushed in some. “What’s wrong with this picture?” she said.

“William tried to drown me,” Elizabeth said.

“To be more clear,” their mom said, “who ate the quesadilla off this plate and left without cleaning it up? Who left out the cheese wrapper?” Her chin was pushed out, her eyelids up. She held up the plate in her hand. Crumbs came down and her sponge hand wiped them up.

William and Elizabeth, both, said, “Me.” They stepped more into the kitchen to take care of it. Their mom walked to the dishwasher, opened it, and put the plate in. She reached down and pulled the door up, gently closed. Elizabeth wanted their mom to know the real thing that was wrong, but that would mean telling her what had happened. Elizabeth wanted their mom to push the button to start the dishwasher so she would be able to hear only the loud sound of it starting, but their mom didn’t pull the lock and twist the knob. They were done at the pool party and after dinner had to do teeth brushing and, then, right to bed.

### The Same Amount of Bad

I put my two little brothers in the bath, then in their jammies. I read David and James a story each. Mom and Dad were at the kitchen table with police officers. It was not the first time they had been there. They had to send a helicopter with spotlights on it out to find William. A speaker on the helicopter announced his name and the way he looked in his last school picture. They found him after my bedtime. He had been hiding at the elementary school all along.

Our family ate bucket chicken at dinnertime the next day and tried to figure out how to know when things are really bad, not just the same amount of bad. In private Mom told Dad, “We need family therapy,” and Dad said, “Why don’t we just go to church like normal people?”

Our daycare lady, Debbie Mitchell, was very beautiful and Mormon, so we started there. She went to the gym with her whole family all the time. Her children had huge judo trophies and walls of wrestling medals. In the hallway between their two living rooms, both walls were full of picture frames. There were pictures of their family and pictures of Jesus. Their individual ones weren’t school pictures. They were taken in the woods with them each standing next to a tree. In the family shot, they all wore jeans and white shirts.

Two missionaries sat on straight-backed dinner chairs in one of Debbie’s living rooms and faced my mom and dad and me on the couch. They said they were Elder Stapley and Elder Behrns, they were glad to meet our family. They pulled plastic zip bags out of their backpacks. Inside were different teaching tools. One was a flip chart of pictures. One was a small fat book.

Elder Stapley said that there was a Father in heaven who loved us all immeasurably, no matter what.

When they were done we got in the van. David and James were transferred into their buckle seats. Dad said, "Well." Mom said, "Pretty interesting, huh?" William had his book open on his legs and his head down. I just said, "Yeah, it was."

We went to the store to buy appropriate church clothes. All my brothers got tie-and-shirt combos. My dad looked at the belts in the light, laying them all on the display rack and putting his face close to them, deciding finally that they were actually black. Debbie had said we needed to get me a long skirt, and I ended up with a grandma outfit, a loose blouse, a long flower skirt, and white flat shoes that felt foamy. My mom explained shoulder pads were designed for people like me with slope-y shoulders.

At church, we broke into smaller groups in classrooms around the church. I went with the other girls from my junior high. I realized all these girls were the ones at school whose hair was shiny and nice. I thought that our family doing the church plan could really work. I thought maybe we could all get more on board.

Each Tuesday two Mormon missionaries who were cute came to our house. They showed me laminate cutouts of the realms of heaven. There were three realms. Before we were on Earth, we had been in heaven with our Heavenly Father, they said. We had all chosen to come down to Earth. Grating carrots for salad on the cheese grater, I told my mom that we had all made the right choice. When the Elders prayed, I learned not to cross my fingers together, but to grab my elbows with my palms.

They said William should join the Boy Scout troop in our ward. They said he should do basketball at the church on Tuesday nights. James and David could look forward to when they

were seven to be baptized. The Mitchells suggested we could all help out with the fundraiser dinner theatre event coming up, nautical themed! Mom could be in the fashion show and Dad could help build the set.

Dad didn't come downstairs for the missionary lessons after a while. He walked around in his sleeping shorts, which were really short, and said, "Hi," and that he was tired. Mom said that he wasn't participating in the family plan. He said that this wasn't church. This wasn't what he had had in mind.

The next week we picked out another church from a phonebook. Methodist, like how my dad had grown up. After, I said I thought that a lot of the people inside were so old they might already have died in the few minutes since we left. Mom hit my arm and said not to say that at church. I said, "Well, if they are going to heaven what is the hold up." I meant the joke to show that church could be fun and normal. Dad said it had felt like being back at his mother's house and that he liked it the least of all of us.

"We can keep trying them out," Mom said. We picked them out by their names and locations. Dad thought finding one by latest start time was a good strategy.

One church we went to in July was singing Christmas carols. It didn't seem right to us. One church was so big they called the place a campus. The high-school boys were on West Campus. When we went to find William after the service, they had given him as many coffee drinks as he had wanted and he was moving his eyes around kind of wacky. That same place had parking attendants in orange vests and with orange wands.

During the van ride home, we would rate our experiences. Too many huggers was a downside for Mom. David and James judged if there was a playground. William was good at foosball, so if they had a table-games area, for him it meant fast friends. Dad preferred gold

offering plates to offering pouches with wooden handles. Places with banners hanging on the walls could be judged by their quality and message. I liked images of lambs and clouds. Vinyl screen-print banners beat felts.

Dad formed a routine. He would drop us off at the front and go park the car so he could miss as much singing as possible. We all wore our same church outfit every time. If we were ever to go somewhere more than once, I didn't know what I would do for clothes.

Parts of our family were getting tired of being welcomed and appreciated as visitors. Mom and I didn't want to raise our hands any more when they said aloud to everyone sitting, "Who here today hasn't been here before?" It wasn't us, I wanted to say. We have been going to church so long by now, I could explain, we should already fit in as regulars.

"Do we have any fresh faces? First timers?" Dad shot his hand straight up. "We are glad you and your family have chosen to join us," he liked to hear them say.

He would sit back in the pew and cross his leg at a right angle over his other leg and put his arm around Mom's shoulders to demonstrate proud husband, proud father. Mom looked at him suspiciously. He looked back to say, this is how a normal dad sits with his normal wife.

After church one Sunday, Mom said that we didn't have a picture of the family. "I've always told you," she said to Dad, "that I want pictures."

Dad nodded and said, "I am sorry that I didn't take care of you and listen to your needs." He said, "Why don't we just go get a picture of the family right now?"

"Right now?" Mom asked.

"Why not?" Dad said. "We're dressed up, we just had church. Afterwards, we'll have a family shot for the mantle and we'll go for lunch."

He drove us to where we had bought our church clothes originally and we walked over past the women's clothing to the photo studio. Dad combed my brothers' hair, and the employee pulled a backdrop screen down behind us. She arranged us all. She directed us to move this way: "Big Brother, lean your head in more. Dad and Mom, closer together."

She waved a stuffed animal in the air. She took a few like that, then switched the background. Mom and Dad looked at proofs on the computer and selected our best poses. In all of them, David floated alone in the foreground like he was added in by computer after-the-fact. I pointed out that my face looked puffy and round. Mom agreed that we were a family with fat heads. "Look at Dad's," she said. "He could have had a haircut."

Dad said, "Let's get the biggest package deal you've got."

We stepped up our search. We timed churches by where we could go to an early service and then a later one. Did any have night church? We checked. We heard about a church that met on Saturdays. They rented a warehouse slot in a large tin building from another church. The walls were painted blue and the name of the other church painted very big on the wall behind the pastor. The guitar player didn't wear shoes. It was just him and his wife and an electric drum set. The pastor was named Lance. He always looked like he might have just taken a shower. Lance said there was a box in the back of the room to put your tithe in. I could wear any of my clothes.

We sat as a family and took notes, then went out to eat after. I liked this church best. We all liked it best.

Lance told us the next step for all believers is to testify publicly to the change that has occurred. He talked from the front of the room about the way that Jesus had baptized all the

people in the river. He would like to take some people down to the river. He would like to do a whole slew of people. Mom suggested we use our pool instead of the river Jordan.

At the end of that month, we hosted a family baptism barbeque block party in our own backyard. We had a giant grill with all the food we wanted and coolers of sodas. The whole neighborhood came. Lance sat us down in the living room and asked us what we were doing for our relationship with Jesus. I cried and said, "Not enough." We all went around and said something, William, me, and Mom and Dad. David and James were still too young. Lance said that the dunk would be fast, to hold his forearm and plug our nose. I wore a big white t-shirt. When it was time to get started, everyone stopped swimming and got out of the pool. Lance got in the water and said, "We'll start with Dad."



### Friends Come Over After School

My friends and I had the idea that we should go to Christelle's house after school to work on our dance routine. We were learning Christelle's choreography she had made to one of our favorite songs. She had just gotten the CD for her birthday, and Renee's parents had said it was okay to not take the bus home that day. In school, with trendy handwriting that made our lowercase *a*'s look like hearts somehow, we wrote notes figuring all of it out.

I had to do laundry first since it was a Thursday. If I got the laundry started, then I could call my mom at work and check to see if I could go to Christelle's street or I could just leave a note and come home later, at five-thirty, for dinner. I asked if we could all go there first. The rule at my house was we couldn't have friends over without adults there, but I didn't tell them that part.

Christelle and Renee agreed. It was just like how Christelle had agreed to come over before school, after my parents left for work, to put on makeup. It was in the same way we all explained to Fiona how to use lotion to get mascara and eyeliner off in the eighth-grade quad bathroom, handing her more folded pieces of paper towel since she had a dentist appointment and her parents were already waiting outside the front office. She had a slip of paper that said so.

After school, we all walked home and at my house I explained to Christelle and Renee some fake rules. It made it seem more okay that we were there, like I was in control over this, and that the rules we had were fun rules. I said they could have sodas after school at my house,

but the rule was just one. They said thanks, but didn't want one. I showed them we also had juice, which they could have and wanted, so I poured it for them, getting them ice. I showed them where the snacks and treats were, if they wanted those, too. When I had shown them all the things that were cool about my house, I explained the parts of the laundry. They said, "Let's all help. That way, we can practice our dance sooner."

We got the baskets out from the laundry room and I set them all in a row in the formal living room. Christelle called her mom to check in and her mom said she had to come home first and practice for her piano lessons. Later, she could play. She asked how long we thought the laundry would take and I said not long, so Christelle left and I got serious into the sorting.

Renee stood and watched as I lined up the baskets straight along the center of the blue floor rug. The baskets were bold colors that had faded, now light maroon, used-to-be navy. "Then, we have to take all the baskets from the bedrooms and put them down here." I told her where all the dirty-clothes baskets were and she went with me to the downstairs bathroom where I got the first one. Then, in my room, right next to there, we had to pick all the clothes up off of the floor first. After that, we both lifted a tub of clothes and carried them between our legs over to the front living room, setting them down on the floor. In my mom and dad's room, we had to get both of their bins, but I showed her how Mom hardly had anything, so I just put her stuff on top of Dad's.

Renee had to go to the bathroom and went in my parent's bath. That was something no one did, ever. In their room, the shower and the tub were outside in a different area than the toilet. In the toilet area was a scale and Renee asked how much I weighed. I told her I didn't know, so we weighed ourselves. She was a lot less than me, which to me was shockingly less, below one hundred pounds. When Renee saw my number she thought the scale had messed up. I

said it must not have been right and tried again, holding onto the doorframe until I got a number that seemed reasonable. But then, I couldn't make it do it again, and I knew that Renee knew that the first number had been real.

In science class that same year, our teacher had asked me if Renee played sports, since he had never noticed how muscular her legs were. I said that she ran track I thought, but I didn't really know. I played soccer all year round but the teacher didn't say anything about my legs, which made me mad, and later made me not believe it when my parents said that my legs were big because they were made of muscle.

I sprayed pre-wash on the underwear and dirty things with them still inside the clothes baskets so Renee would not see. I told her I was usually really fast at this and then we would just have to start one load, that's it. I tried to unroll and empty out my brother's socks over other clothes, but the sound of the dirt inside them falling to the bottom of the hamper didn't go away. After each dirty basket, I slammed the lid down and the plastic smack sounded.

The front door handle made a sound, like someone was turning a key or pulling at the handle. Renee said, "What's that?" and I said, "Nothing, no one ever uses that door. We all always come in and out through the garage." The formal living room was right by the front door and had a two-story tall ceiling, one sitting chair, a rocking chair, and the nice glass table where we ate roasts a few times throughout the year.

The front door opened and my mom walked in. She came into the living room, and Renee, knowing that this was going to be the end, stood against the wall to disappear from what was coming. She was still and her head was straight up with a tucked chin and long neck.

Renee stood like the most scared lizard, and I was ready for my mom to yell and ask what I was thinking and reiterate the rules about no friends over and, then, why were there snacks out

in the kitchen? She would find those and tell me again the rules about them, Renee finding out all the lies I had told. Once when William had eaten pudding before dinner, before she got home, she opened the cabinet door under the sink and pulled out the empty crushed cup and shook it at him, close to his face. I thought that was coming for me in front of Renee. I went back over what we had done since we had been home and couldn't remember if the scale in my parent's bedroom was back or if we had ever turned on the TVs since we'd been home. If so, I hadn't changed the channel away from the one that we weren't supposed to watch because it was for high-school aged or later, and if she turned it on, she would see that channel first as evidence.

Mom walked through the formal living room and I almost said, "Sorry, I didn't hear the garage," as if all of this would be gone if I had. She didn't put her things down or take off her overcoat. It was teal, but the kind that normally comes in khaki. She didn't have my little brothers with her, who she always picked up on the way home. She didn't have any of her purses or her briefcase with her either. She went into the kitchen and opened the fridge. She stepped back through the doorway and looked at Renee and all the baskets. She nodded and said to me, "Good, you are getting the laundry going."

To Renee she said, "Are your parents going to come pick you up or do you need a ride home?"

Renee said that she was planning on going over to Christelle's, and Christelle's parents were going to take her home.

My mom asked, "Your parents know about this plan?"

Renee nodded, still with her hands against the wall flat.

My mom went back through the living room and walked up the stairs. “Did you already get my and Dad’s baskets?” she asked, her voice suggesting that if I hadn’t yet, she would bring them down herself, in the effort of helping out.

“Yes, I did.”

“Alright then,” she said. She climbed again, to the top stair, pushed the white plastic safe-child rail aside with her leg, and, standing in front of her door said, “I’ll be up here if you need anything.” She never said things like that. She went up the stairs and into her room and closed the door. She hadn’t yelled at all. At the end of that year, we moved away.

Once later, in my mom’s bedroom when I was supposed to be doing something else and when my mom wasn’t home, I saw there was a box of greeting cards on her bookshelf. Most were just cards from me and my brothers, either funny or sweet, but with just *To Mom, From Us* on the bottom, our handwriting changing in each one. I saw the one from when I was using circles on my *i*’s instead of plain dots.

The card from my dad was a triple foldout listing all the things that moms have to do because dads mess things up the first time around. Moms have to undo the things and then redo everything—like dinner, for instance. “Thanks, Mom, for cleaning the burnt attempts out of the pans and making us an edible meal!” the caption for it said as the cartoon smoke led way to a dinner table and happy family of squirrel-people. I remembered Mom had read it sitting at the dining-room table, reacting to the jokes, things that were supposed to poke fun at all of Dad’s mess-ups and all of her hard work. Below, Dad had written a note. Make way for number five, it said. She hadn’t read it aloud to everyone.

Dad’s writing meant that, at one time, Mom had been pregnant, and I had never heard.

I sat at the base of my parent's bookcase with the cards on my knees, not in the same order any more. If anyone checked the box again they'd know that I had moved them around and seen. The day Renee had crept against the wall doing laundry how we shouldn't have, my mom said she had come home early from an appointment. It was there, maybe, where she found out that four was all the kids our family would have. Dad's words on the card meant there was a real other sibling, maybe a sister, and the day I never got in trouble for breaking all the rules made more sense, explained why she had not said, "No friends over, you know that."

When I was still in elementary, my little brother was playing on the playground and wanted to go down the biggest slide, the entry accessible only by a set of stairs to the tallest platform. He wasn't sure, but I said he could do it, he'd be fine. I'd catch him at the bottom. He climbed up and looked down the red plastic to the ground. He didn't want to try, and turned back to me. "Okay, come on down," I said, standing at the bottom of the stairs, happy to show him support for any choice. Mom saw from her bench on the side of the wood-chipped area. She shouted not to let him do that. She saw what would be next, but I thought I was watching his safety. James kept walking down until he flipped forward and came down the stairs in a somersault. When he cried and bled, Mom grabbed him and rocked him as she jogged to the car. We took him in to the urgent care where they put a butterfly stitch on his head. All I could do was grab the water bottles and snack bag and sit next to him for the ride there and the one back.

### H.O.L.I.E.

In the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, not really many of the people were athletes. We met on Friday mornings before school and listened to a message. There was always food there. I had to get a ride to school and wake up very early, especially if I had to bring the snack.

One morning, we had a guest who came to give the lesson. She did a trick with some large nails. Her hair was blow-dried straight and hit just at the shoulder of her collared shirt. She worked for the regional office of FCA, and she visited a different meeting every week. “The one at Lake Braddock High School,” she said, “is really healthy. They meet in the gym, and there are usually two hundred students or more.” Our group was only twelve, sitting around the lab desks in the physics classroom. We passed the orange juice around again, then got started.

She dumped out a bag of six-inch-long nails and a board. The nails looked like they were meant for a very big project. I thought she was going to show us how Jesus was nailed to the cross, was going to ask us to hold the nails near our own wrists, and imagine his sacrifice, but to start she asked, “If I told you to make all of these nails balance on this board with only one nail touching the board, and your life depended on it, what would you say?”

We said we’d never make it. We would have to die.

I thought she was getting to the idea that it was a good thing we were saved, since if we had to hear that and weren’t saved, how scary would that be? It is lucky and good to know before you get to that point.

She said, instead, “With God all things are possible. With him we have a pillar of strength.” She put one nail standing on its head on the wood block. “This nail represents the strength of God. When we look around and can’t do all the things that are asked of us, we pull from the inside, the power of the Holy Spirit inside us.”

On the desk, she laid a nail down sideways and asked us, “What things are asked of you that are difficult to handle?”

We answered her: Social studies, dealing with brothers and sisters, staying in the Word, jealousy, being in the world but not of it, foul language, sexual purity. For each answer we gave, she nodded her head, and did something with the nails on the table. Then, she said, “Okay, good. When you are faced with all of these things, they seem impossible.”

She put her hands on the nails and lifted them all together as one. They looked like a roof on a house, hanging down in that triangle shape. She said, “When you trust in God, the pillar of strength, He is mighty.” When she said this, she balanced the roof of nails on the one nail sticking up out of the board. It balanced for a second, she released her hands, and the nails fell. She said, “That always happens to me!” and re-did the nails. It only took her a few seconds since she wasn’t asking us any questions about it. She lifted the roof again, all the nails woven together at the top, and balanced them on the nail. This time they stayed, and she said, “Anything is possible with God.”

We clapped for her, and thanked her for coming. We all went on to our first period.

At church youth group, they always told us that we had a special mission field. God had called us to be at work where we were. We were in the schools, which were busy outlawing prayer and telling us all we came out of sea creatures. This wasn’t right, they said. There were



things we could do, though: we could opt out of biology, we could wear t-shirts to school that said our beliefs. Pastors couldn't even enter school grounds much any more, though students could have an adult guest for lunch. They encouraged us to invite a pastor for lunch, and have all our friends sit with him. I said I took test prep classes at the career center during lunch when Pastor Stevens asked me why I hadn't asked him to join me and my school friends. Other kids from church who were at my school did it, but they had third lunch, so I never saw.

If we brought five friends to church by Easter, we got some money knocked off our bill for the mission trip to the Dominican Republic. I hadn't been keeping up with the fundraising, so I brought five visitors all on the last Sunday of the promotion, Easter. We filled up the van and my dad and I drove around picking them all up. Some of the girls I hadn't really ever talked to, but I didn't want to invite my most close friends. Since Easter was a big day, we had a special program scheduled and held it outside. The youth-group band draped a sheet over the side of the church they had painted with silver and black spray paint. He is Risen, it said, in graffiti style. The band did a few songs, then Pastor Stevens did a sermon on the story of how they went to roll away the stone but Jesus was gone. At the end of the story, he invited everyone to bow their heads to pray, but instead of praying right then, he asked us if we were to die today, where would we go? Then he said if we didn't know we should come to the front and we could talk it out. No one went to the front, so he prayed. After, he pulled up a chair and we got to throw pies at him. It was really cold outside and looked like it could rain any time. The whole time, the girls I brought just talked about how they wished they had coats.

After church, the five girls from my school and my dad went out for pizza at a sit-down place. The waiter brought us bread before the pizza and all the soda we wanted. We all went to the bathroom together when we were done, and Dad went and got the van.

In the car, one girl, Emily, said she had to pee. “We will stop when we see a place,” Dad said. We got on the parkway to take the first girl home. All of us girls looked for places where Emily could go to the bathroom, but none of the exits had any gas stations or restaurants. It was all just housing developments. We tried a church, but it was closed. When she came back to the car, Dad put the van into reverse, getting ready to go find another option. “Okay, where’s our next best bet?” he asked, but it turned out, she said, we didn’t really need to look anymore; she had just gone right in there by the flower beds.

After we dropped the last of the girls off, Dad and I laughed in the car. We shouldn’t be laughing, he said, and told the story again of what she looked like, so stressed, and how she had come back, buckled up, and had to tell us all she peed in a church courtyard. “I had no idea the situation had gotten to that point,” he said.

When we got home, we went inside to tell Mom that Emily had had to use the courtyard. Mom was mad; she had been home from service for hours already and we had missed the neighbor’s Easter-egg hunt, one that we hadn’t heard about. Mom hadn’t told Dad, she said, because why should she have to tell him not to be gone for hours after church has finished. “I shouldn’t have to say come spend Easter with your sons,” she said. Then she said it was terrible of us to put the girl through that trauma. Dad asked if the egg-hunt event was still going on, and it was.

Some of the kids from my youth group started a Christian after-school club at my high school that people could go to in addition to FCA. It was more inclusive, they said, because it wouldn't say anything about athletes in the name. It was called H.O.L.I.E. I worried that it looked like we didn't know how to spell, but it was spelt that way on purpose. It was an acronym. The "E" stood for edification. We made shirts with iron-on gold letters and wore them to school on days we had meetings. One of the guys who started it was very cute. Even though his girlfriend went to H.O.L.I.E. too, I thought of it as an opportunity to see him. He was tall and a senior. It was the best thing about church; no one cared that we were underclassmen, and the parents thought we were all good kids. That summer, when I saw him on a jog at church camp, I learned that he had very long armpit hair and cankles.

Once the original H.O.L.I.E. founders graduated, I took over the Wednesday afternoon Bible studies. I did whatever lesson I wanted. One week I decided to tell the Christmas story from the point of view of Mary. She was sixteen just like us. God told her to walk all the way to Jerusalem to be counted, because she was of the house and lineage of David, and all had been called to be accounted for. It was a big census, that's why. I looked up on the map how far she had to go. After all, she was pregnant and on a donkey. It was as far as from our high school to Boston. This was the fulcrum of my lesson. "That far!" I said. I pulled up the map on the computer and showed everyone. "Had Mary complained?" I asked. "Had she said, 'No, that's really far, I am only sixteen and pregnant?' Are we pregnant? No, we are not."

Before we prayed, I asked if anyone had any requests, or if there were any decisions made that they would like to be held accountable for. There were always some. After we talked about what God had asked of Mary, one girl, an honors student who always carried a very big backpack and a lunch box too, said, "I am addicted to manga and need strength to stop." None of

us knew what manga was, and weren't sure if we should ask. "Okay," I said, "how do you spell that?"

She said it letter by letter, and I wrote "Manga" down on my list of prayer requests.

"Do you guys know what that is?" she asked.

We all shook our heads.

"I have been struggling," she said. "I read anime, manga, and most of it is good, but there is a dark side to anime, and it is hentai. It is sexual and I was once addicted to it. With the help of prayer and fasting, I was able to break my addiction. But I still looked at manga, non-explicit animations, and hand-drawn comics. And, I feel myself just falling into that world more and more, getting lost for hours just immersed in the comic world. It isn't good, and I need to break this addiction, too."

When there were no more requests, I played a song on the computer speakers and asked someone to volunteer to begin the prayer.

The next week I had us do a kickboxing workout video and made it a lesson. I said that people might think we look crazy, doing punches and uppercuts, kicking our legs in the science classroom, but that was what Christianity was about. "It is important," I said, "as a Christian, to be different and to be able to withstand criticism." Out the windows, I could see the soccer team doing pre-season conditioning on the tennis courts, running from line to line. At tryouts when Coach would ask me why I didn't go to conditioning, I would feel good to have an opportunity to stand up for my faith. The instructor wore a bandana around his forehead and ended the video with a prayer. It turned out he was Christian, too, which was a bonus. I said, "What other workout video is able to do that? Consider the impact of how many people watch this video a year." I asked us to stand, join hands, and pray. We prayed for expanded circles of influence.

For our next project, we wanted to make it big; we wanted to have genuine outreach. Every person who comes to H.O.L.I.E. goes to church each week and has made a decision for Christ, we said. It is good work to grow and build that, but we should look to non-believers too. We decided to host a movie night at school. We wanted to show a Christian movie with a Christian message on school grounds. We wanted to put up fliers that were unabashedly evangelical.

Our sponsor, Mr. Kinnick, the physics teacher, said he knew someone with a giant printer. We could print out movie posters the size of actual movie posters, and they would be unmistakable in the hallways. Anything that was going to be posted on the walls had to be approved by a student-government representative. When we took the posters to get approval, we rolled them up and prayed over them. They okayed them without even looking at what they said.

We put the posters up, and we reserved the room where the blood drives were held. One of the girls in H.O.L.I.E. asked around at her church and someone had a popcorn stand like the kind at carnivals. We called the local pizza place and they donated fifteen large pizzas.

The plan was to offer an invitational prayer after the movie, a new one about the rapture that had played in the theaters. We modeled it off of how they did it at church. At the end, we would have one person go to the front and ask everyone to bow their heads in prayer. Instead of praying, though, first the person would ask questions that would lead the audience down the road to making a choice to give their hearts to Christ. We would have the other H.O.L.I.E. members down front, by the person offering the prayer, who would have a microphone, and they could be there to pray with anyone, to show them in the Bible the love that the microphone person had talked about. Everyone determined together that I should be the person with the microphone asking everyone to make a decision. I agreed.

On the night of the movie, I got there early to set up the screen and arrange all the chairs in rows. We had one hundred chairs to pull off of stacks and set out. Someone brought the popcorn machine and we read the instructions, pouring the oil, kernels and flavoring in the right area and turning the machine on. The pizzas came, and Mr. Kinnick brought soda and cups.

All the seats filled up and we had to ask the janitor to unlock the cafeteria to get more stacks of chairs. I hadn't seen most of the people before. It was a big crowd, and I tried to see each person as an opportunity, but there were so many it was difficult. As we unloaded the new set of chairs, all of us H.O.L.I.E. members nodded at each other that He had really done it.

We started the show right on time. I asked God to give me the words to say and to make me not afraid of how many people had come. I thanked Him for our increased influence. I went to the front of the room, held the microphone and said, "Hi." My voice came out of the speakers behind me and it was surprising. Everything I said repeated right after, louder than I thought it would, and squeakier. "Welcome, and we have pizza," my voice said. "Get a slice and we'll get started." We played the movie. I had never seen it before and it was worse than I had expected.

Right before the end of the movie, I went outside with my closest friend, the other girl in H.O.L.I.E. who could have easily been the main speaker. She was on my soccer team and was really outspoken. On the outside of her socks she used athletic tape to hold up her shin guards. On that tape she wrote a Bible-verse reference. She sneaked notes with verses and encouragement into the pockets of my soccer bag. We were both starters on Varsity even though we were still just sophomores. She had a ring that said she wouldn't have sex until after she got married and she didn't take it off until the last minute before games. In the hall, we held hands and she prayed for me. She asked God to give me the words. She said, "Lord, speak your voice through her mouth. Use her as your instrument. Thank you for our friendship."

When the credits came on, we left the lights off. I took the microphone and asked into it, “Is this on?” It was, I could tell. I took a breath, and said, “I hope you all enjoyed the movie. Now, if you would please bow your heads and join me in a final closing prayer.” When they said that at church, everyone did it. All the people in the pews closed their eyes and bent their heads down. If their eyes were open, they could see only the tops of their legs or the space of floor between their feet. This way, when the questions that came next were personal and hard to ask, it was safe since no one was looking. The pastors didn’t have to ask anyone anything to their face. But here, at the end of the movie, in the multipurpose room, only some of the people bent their heads. The rest of them, including one kid with a buzzed haircut in the chair right in front of me, didn’t. They kept their eyes open, their necks straight. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t figure out if I should ask them all the questions I had planned or just give a strong closing prayer.

This is my chance, I thought. God wants me to ask them if they know Him because He wants to know them. This is the greatest gift I can give, I repeated to myself. I said again, “Please join me for a prayer, by bowing your heads and closing your eyes.” Nothing changed.

“We just watched a movie about the rapture,” I started. “My question to you tonight, to think about, is, if the rapture came tonight, would you be one taken up to heaven or would you be left behind?” When I said this, most of the people who had their heads down lifted them up. They thought I was asking a question, maybe one they should answer, even though I had said we were praying. Some of the people in the back pulled the coats off of their chairs and put them on. They were loud, saying excuse me to the people in their row.

I watched the people leaving. That was all I could do with the questions. I skipped the section where I told them God’s answers. I went right into prayer. I prayed thank you for coming, there is more pizza. I said, “There are counselors here in the front if you would like to

talk to them about the questions you have,” and pointed to my classmates who everyone knew were not counselors. I said, “Amen,” then walked out the double doors on the side and down the hall, turning the corner to the science hallway. My friend followed me out and I was already crying. I said, “I tried my best, but couldn’t do it. I didn’t have the words.” “God didn’t give me the words,” I told her.

“Let’s pray,” she said. I didn’t want to, but how could I tell her that I thought I stopped believing right there in front of everyone, with the microphone in my hand.

My parents were already asleep when I got home. They didn’t stay up worried when I had church things.

For my birthday that year, I still asked my mom and dad for a ring to symbolize my purity. I wanted it to have a single, sparkling diamond in it. Something small. All the girls at youth group had similar rings by then. My parents gave me the ring at my birthday dinner at the salad-bar place along with a Christian keychain and a copy of both the key for the van and Dad’s truck. I put the ring on and it glinted in every color.

One night at college, I went to a church concert with the girls at the end of the hall. They were juniors and seniors and had the only two-room suite on the floor. They had one room set up with a couch, the other one with the beds. First there was a concert, by a guitar duo, two guys with the same first name. Then, the speaker talked about sexual purity, about how we should be pure even when we are by ourselves. He was saying don’t masturbate. I looked down my left to the rest of the girls in my row. I had carpooled there and would have to ride back to the dorms with the same hallmates.



In the car, it ended up being just two of us. Ashley was a journalism major and wrote a column for the student newspaper. It was dark and it took a while for her car to warm up. The entire way she said the car was almost warm enough. She asked me if I believed, if I had been saved. I started to tell her about my history, about the clubs in high school. She asked what my favorite conversion story was. I said Paul. He had been a Christian killer and was saved by a tower of light on the way to Damascus. She said that for her, and she hoped this was the truth for every Christian, that their own transformation was their favorite. She said she wanted to share with me some of her favorite scriptures. After, she asked, "What are yours?" She asked how my parents had raised me. I told her they didn't become believers until my second half of middle school, only really growing in their walks once I was in high school. To everything I said, she tried to explain me the path to salvation.

Back in my dorm room, I thought about taking off the ring. I didn't want a ring that said I promised to not touch anything on me, but my parents would see next time I went home. They would think it meant I had messed up, been overcome by desire. If I told them it was because it didn't work how it was meant to, they would hear that they should have concern. They would feel right that college is a dangerous place for young believers and my little brothers would be steered to evangelical colleges. I left the ring on and didn't have sex with my boyfriend.

I took the ring off when it got caught in the door to the art department on the way to my western civilization class. It attached itself to the handle and cut my hand. I flew home for the holidays right after. My dad looked down at my hand in the car when he picked me up. "My finger is bruised," I told him and Mom, "that's why I'm not wearing it." I explained to them both how I had tried to walk through the door, but my hand had stayed connected, stuck behind me because of the ring.

### Major Anderegg

Tony signed back up with the Marine Corps when they sent him a letter saying they needed him. He had been an engineer for the Department of Transportation since getting off active duty. He worked mostly in an office, but supervised on-site some, too. He felt he had missed out on the Gulf War because of it. He'd only gotten out because he didn't have anyone to take his two kids if he had to go on a foreign tour after he'd divorced their mom, his second wife.

He'd been in the reserves the whole time and when he got the letter about the shortage of officers, he thought it meant the Marines really wanted him. The whole family, his new wife Elaine and their two young sons plus the two older kids, would have to move. Tony went ahead and the family followed when school finished for the year. Elaine got priority spousal placement for government positions in the D.C. area. Neither Tony nor Elaine liked the idea of living on base, so they opted for the housing allowance and lived off base instead. When they were looking for houses, Elaine and Tony considered buying a retired general's former house, but the two-story backyard deck swayed when they stepped out on it.

Tony's job at the Headquarters of the Marine Corps, his first station of duty back in, was to take calls when something broke. He got a Marine cell phone for this and he Velcroed it to his organizer booklet. He had it with him all the time and it was his command central. When a lance corporal realized at night that his toilet didn't flush, he would take that information to the sergeant and then it would reach Tony, since he was the Facility and Maintenance Officer. When

this happened, Tony picked up the call to his cell phone in his bedroom where he sat up in bed. Elaine had in her in-ear moldable earplugs made of neon-colored wax to block the sound. She was a light sleeper, so she still woke up.

Tony's job also included picking out the colors to paint the old building that had just recently begun to house Budget. New paint was part of the deal for getting them to move into the building with bad air-conditioning.

Tony brought home color examples for Budget's interior. The colors were a booklet that fanned out, showing every possibility. He picked some combinations and set them next to each other. He asked his family before and after dinner what they thought. Did they support mauve with rose accents? Elaine didn't look at the samples before she said she wasn't any good at picking colors. Their two younger boys, both in elementary school, just looked at the options, moving the color tabs around. James sounded out the strange names of the paints, and David repeated them. Tony asked his daughter, Elizabeth, if she had learned anything about this type of thing in those shows she watched.

"Isn't there one where the neighbors paint each other's houses?" he asked.

Elaine asked, "Tony, how do you find time to know about a show like that?"

"It was playing one time when Elizabeth was watching it," he said. Then as if each word were its own sentence, he added, "I don't know."

Elizabeth put a serving spoon in each of the dishes on the table and said the mauve looked good.

During dinner the samples went onto the ledge by the fruit basket, and after dinner they all looked at some more options. Elizabeth tried to steer Tony to some braver colors. The family

looked instead at taupe. “Mauve is better,” Elaine said. “It looks like it could be the color of a doctor’s waiting area,” she reasoned. “It’s a color people expect for an office.”

Tony went to the base and ordered the mauve paint. When it came in, he told his guys to go over and paint the building’s walls. They started in the hallway by Relocation Services, where Marines new to the area went and talked about school districts, area attractions, things that the location had to offer them. When the paint went on pink in that area, the Marines didn’t think anything about it. It was supposed to be a light and friendly place; it was an office kids were in a lot. They even had toys sitting out in a corner.

Tony’s Marines taped off the edges of the wall down the hallway toward Budget. In each room off the hallway they took down the framed portraits of the President and the base’s Commanding Officer and Executive Officer. Each picture was a print of the same pose put into the same style frame. When the positions shifted, new photos were printed, but all the frames were re-used.

Tony wasn’t out around the base on that day, and didn’t see what was going on with the painting. He was in a meeting where they were showing him a PowerPoint about potential threats to the base, about what to do if or when there was an airborne terror threat. Tony would need to shut down all the air-conditioning and ventilation systems. Tony considered how he could create outward seals. He had over twenty-two buildings on the base alone, and that included the PX, where high-up officer’s wives bought perfumes and luggage and Elaine went to customer service to buy discounted movie tickets she and Tony and the kids couldn’t use on brand-new movies.

The PowerPoint was being administered in the presentation theatre. The walls were faux wood surrounded by navy-colored velvet and the seats were arranged stadium-style. Next to the screen, an American flag and the flag of the Marine Corps were on stands. This was the same

auditorium where the Commandant gave talks to his generals. The whole headquarters was just up a hill from the Pentagon, and there was a shuttle service that went between the two that let the men and women off right outside the gate. A young Military Police Officer checked badges and saluted them on.

Throughout the presentation, Tony got emails sent to his Blackberry. All the people in Budget were asking what was up with the paint. One email asked if it was an expensive practical joke. Tony couldn't check them fully because the people giving the presentation were adamant. "The threat level is high," they said, and put up a pyramid of colors with one near the top circled. "This high of a threat level means you don't need to be checking your phones."

Dinah worked in the budget office and she sent Tony an e-card that animated what looked like a nursery being painted. It said at the end, Congratulations! in letters that moved and sparkled. Dinah was his favorite in that office. She had severe wit and got on his department for overspending and for not spending enough, depending on the time of year. She wore business pants that had matching jackets she was never wearing, but were on the back of her office chair.

When he went over there, Dinah asked him, "Why did you paint the office, my office, any office at the headquarters of the Marine Corps pink with pink trim?"

Tony stood at Tracy's desk—another one of the budget people. Tracy had a candy dish out and had a crush on Tony. She was always good to agree with Tony when he stood up to Dinah's picks and bickers.

Tony made a joke, "It was on sale! We wanted to come in under budget."

"Looks more like leftover from your daughter's bedroom to me. Do you hate us over here this much?" Dinah asked, her forearm on the short wall of Tracy's desk area. She was smiling;

she knew Tony had meant to paint it a neutral, not-hideous color. “Did you forget this is the Marine Corps, where we like browns, tans, things the colors of sand and grass?”

Tony asked them all to lunch, and Dinah asked back if she was the only person on this base who had a job to do. “Oh, right,” she added, “Tony has to go pick out the curtain fabric for the window treatments at the gym.” Then Dinah said, “Next time.”

The next week, Tony went to get a haircut at the on-base barber and get his uniforms from the dry cleaners next door. He liked to do these errands, ones that made him fit more into how he was supposed to be: tight, clean hair and hard creases down the front of his pants. It felt simple in this way to do things right, something nice about the Marines that wasn't everywhere else, like in his marriage.

Budget was on the way back to his office, and he stopped in to see if Dinah was there. It was almost lunch, and maybe she would want to go get some food, maybe off base. She was there. He said hi, then stepped more into her office and told her some of the things he was dealing with at home. Elaine, he said, wanted him to have finished this project at the house faster than he could. She wanted the hole in the wall in the upstairs bedroom he tore open to be closed already. “But, can you believe the guy who had the house last?” Tony said. “None of the electrical wiring is up to code.”

Dinah couldn't believe the laziness and the stupidity of someone just half-assing around with electricity. Dinah said she'd just about kill to have someone around the house to do anything. She had her son to lift things, but since he was a teen, anything else was getting harder and harder to get him to do. Tony agreed. When he had been a kid he had helped his dad without question, but his own boys, they couldn't stay focused on a project. “I ask for them to hand me

the drill and I look up and see them sitting on the sawhorse picking at the bottoms of their shoes,” Tony said. They sat there, not looking, no tools, like they were waiting for a bus. Dinah talked more about her last issue with her plumbing, and the cost. “Per hour!” Dinah said.

It felt good to Tony to hear this. He decided he was just going to fix the electrical right and Elaine was going to have to wait. Walls with holes are better than walls with burning flames, he thought. Tony figured how long a fire would set the project back. He had worked with his dad in recovery carpentry as a kid, building back houses after fires for the insurance companies to resell. It was the hardest job he had ever had. The smell was too sad. Nobody should have to have that experience, Tony thought.

After work on the base on nights that Elaine didn't have Women's Bible Study at church, Tony stayed for a while at the Officer's Club. Going home, Elaine would need him to work on the house, or at least stay off the computer and not watch TV. At the O-Club, he could drink some beer and watch sports recaps with the other guys. He stayed, too, if he knew Elizabeth had early afternoon soccer instead of night soccer and could watch James and David. She knew their bath schedules better than he did anyway.

When he came home, he got into bed with Elaine and didn't tell her about his day. She was already in bed, with her earplugs in, and had her giant sleep shirt on. In the morning she woke up early and showered, got dressed. She got ready for work, a civilian job with the federal government, coordinating Army-base closures. She put her hair up halfway in a shiny big barrette, and rolled her bangs in a brush, then held the blow dryer to them. She woke the boys up, took them in to daycare, and ate toast from a plastic plate in the car. She wore her panty hose with tennis shoes for the commute in, then switched to flats in basic colors at her cube.

She told Tony she hated the smell of beer when he got into bed and breathed. She couldn't sleep with him like that, she said, and she had to wake up for work and be functioning. She didn't like the smell of garlic or onion either, and all those smells made her not want to kiss him when they were on him. Tony didn't order the onions on his sandwich at lunch, but when quitting time came and they had cheap onion rings at the O-club, he ate them. They were already sitting on the bar sometimes, and he was just sharing.

After Tony painted Budget pink, the Executive Officer, the XO, had called him in and asked the question "What exactly had your plan been, Major Anderegg?" Tony knew that it wasn't a question looking for an answer. Then the XO said, "We have decided to contract out base interiors." The XO paused after that, to show Tony what it meant: he had been removed from that responsibility.

The XO said, too, that the mausoleum on base, right out by where the young guys played football, was going to be dismantled. It still housed some bodies, but nobody knew whose. "The higher-ups want something to commemorate the building," the XO told Tony, "I've pictured a set of desk ornaments. There isn't any budget, which is why we are demolishing the thing to begin with, so you'll need to work that out." That was how the XO gave him his next project, one to get right.

Tony went out to the field where he had painted lines for the guys to play touch football and actually know when they got a first down. The mausoleum was already falling apart. There were marble pieces around the outside of the building that had flaked off and were sitting on the grass. Tony picked up some chunks. He figured he could use his table saw to cut them into



squares. He thought maybe he could etch in an image of the building's façade and the dates it had stood.

Elaine came into the dining room that night and saw Tony sitting in his chair at the table. She saw him take off his glasses and rub his hand over his eyes and up to his hair, buzzed short, but still thinning. She saw that he was using a food dish to hold some marble chunks. Tony told her about the people from the historical society who thought the mausoleum shouldn't be demolished because it was old. Elaine knew from her own job that the Environmental Protection Agency was involved in the project. "What a pain," she said.

Tony told her the saw blade wouldn't cut through the mausoleum marble for the paperweights he had to make.

"I think it looks good uneven," Elaine said.

"It looks like a mess," Tony said. "And it is impossible to etch into marble." He had the marble sitting on a kitchen towel. There were a few drawings of the front of the building stacked in front of him. One was cut out, and had been meant to work as a stencil.

Elaine brought over a set of permanent markers and handed them to Tony. "Here, keep it simple. Just deliver what they want," she said. He handwrote the date at the bottom. Finishing them all took him every night the whole week. When the building was completely razed, the Marines hosted a ceremony. The base paper sent a photographer out to the vacant field where they had hoisted a banner and he took a few pictures of the paperweights. The people from the historical society thought they were nice. When the XO saw them, he said they looked cheap and crappy. He told Tony, too, that he needed to shape up, he didn't look like a fit-enough Marine, and reminded him by saying, "Major, you are aware that while there is a minimum number of

physical fitness tests each year, there is no maximum.” Somehow, not all twenty-eight paperweights got taken, so Tony ended up with two at home and two at his office.

For the fitness test, Tony had to run three miles and do as many sit-ups possible in two minutes, do pull-ups without swinging or stopping, and he had to make weight.

To figure out his trajectory and map his plan to making weight, Tony made a chart to list what the scale said when he stood on it in the morning after peeing but before anything else. He had a chart for his run time, and his sit-ups, too. One line was blue, another was green, and there was also a red one. He sat at the kitchen table on the weekends and pulled out his charts and his chart-marking pens. He had them all inside his command-central organizer, together with the Velcro phone. He used a ruler with shape holes and marked his progress.

Looking at his goal, and the line to making it, Tony calculated he had to lose two pounds every three days if he was going to even pass. Each day, he measured all his calories and did two-a-days: weights in the basement in the morning and a run outside. When he came back in, he had Elizabeth hold down his legs for sit-ups and then use his watch to time him and count. She sat on his feet with her legs around his to hold him as firmly down as possible. The test had no regulations for how the feet should be held. This way, Tony could use his hip-flexors to catapult himself up. Elizabeth wished he would wear sweatpants and not just shorts. When he was ready, he breathed out really loudly a few times. She started his watch timer and threw it to the carpet to hold his calves with her hands. She counted each one for him aloud. He got up to eighty almost always, but needed to pass one hundred to get the full points. Then, he made himself a special lunch shake and checked his charts.

Elaine sat in the computer room, right off the front door when he did this and did tasks like entering the family bills into categories on a spreadsheet. Tony called to her how many sit-ups he did. She didn't answer. He said, "My run this morning was twenty seconds closer to making it."

Elaine thought that by now Tony shouldn't be needing to drop weight and exercise like this. She didn't understand why, in the six months since his last fitness test, he had forgotten that part of him keeping his job was making weight and running. If he cared about the family, about them living in a house, about them having doctors to go to, then he wouldn't have gotten back into this situation.

Tony sat down at the table and looked down at his charts. Elizabeth came up, held up her hand to Tony for a high five on the run time. She asked if he was on track for meeting his goals. Tony told her which vitamins he was taking, and explained the relationship between the numbers on the scale and his calorie deficit.

During the weekdays, Tony started out with a soda at breakfast or a diet shake, and had canned shakes for lunch, or sandwiches from the PX without chips. He saved up his calories sometimes for beer at the O-Club, but other days, after all the exercise, the beers didn't seem worth it. At night, when the family had dinner, Tony put chocolate powder into the blender with ice and milk. The blender made so much noise everything else in the house had to stop. James paused the TV and Elaine stopped what she was saying to Elizabeth, tilted her head and held still until the blending was done. Tony poured his dinner out of the blender into a diner milkshake glass and drank it with a straw.

As Tony was getting buff, his lines on his charts getting closer to the goal marks, he put on his tight t-shirts and flexed around the kitchen. He made jokes about being irresistible. Elaine laughed and pulled bread out of the toaster for a peanut-butter-and-cheese sandwich. Elizabeth asked Elaine to make him stop. “Mom, seriously,” she said. Elaine told her he had been making these jokes her entire life. Tony came up behind Elaine and grabbed her and kissed her ear and cheek and neck, huge and like he was eating her up.

“Stop it, Tony,” she said, and put down the bread.

“What?” Tony asked, “I am just being loving and strong.”

“I told you before, I don’t like it when you crush me to kiss me, it makes me feel scared. If you want to kiss me, why can’t you just do it nicely?”

Tony didn’t kiss her again that day. He went into the garage and practiced his pull-ups on the bar he had attached to the ceiling. He got two and needed to get up to at least three. After, he went to the home improvement store and got connectors for the wiring upstairs and looked at better insulation options for the attic, since, if they were going to rip it all out, why not give it an upgrade. He bought a bunch of things and brought them into the garage and set them on the tool bench, which was the set of original kitchen cabinets for the house that had been moved out to the garage when there was a kitchen remodel.

Tony donated blood on the day of his fitness test, took a salt bath, and made weight. He weighed in first thing that morning, stripped down to only his shorts, then went and ate some food. For the afternoon, he ran and did the rest. The course marked was short, so he made it easily. He went over to Budget and flexed his arms around the office and told Tracy and Dinah

that he, once again, was certifiable. He was fit enough to be a Marine. “USA approved,” he said. They went out for lunch and ordered extra appetizers to celebrate it.

When Tracy went to the bathroom, Dinah told Tony that she was worried about her son. She had smelt a burning smell in the house and thought something was going wrong in the wiring. She followed it to her son’s bedroom when she got really scared. She opened the door on him and he was naked on the bed, with candles lit everywhere. By the time she had gotten her bearings, she realized that his girlfriend was crouched in the closet naked. Tony listened and drank his soda. Dinah’s son didn’t have a father figure, he thought, and Dinah hadn’t ever been stern enough. Tony thought about his daughter, the same age as Dinah’s son, but Elizabeth was doing great. Tony thought about his eldest son, William, eighteen already and trying college. He thought about his two other boys, who were still young.

After he passed his fitness test, Tony started going back to the Officer’s Club at night, and, then, one night he also bought a six-pack of beers when he was at the grocery store and was sent to get caffeine-free soda for everyone. Elaine said she didn’t like it. “Doesn’t it make sense that at night after work, most people come home to their family? Most people don’t stay at work longer.”

Tony didn’t answer back. He stood in front of his laundry hamper and took off his button shirt and his pants. He folded the pants and draped them on the wooden pants rack by the dresser. His undershirt was tucked into his underwear and his socks were pulled up all the way.

Elaine said, “Most people don’t put on weight with alcohol if they know that they have to stay fit to keep their jobs.”

Tony and Elaine both knew he was supposed to be taking distance-learning courses through the Command and Staff College if he wanted to be on track for his next promotion. Tony, though, didn't think he had enough foreign tours of duty to make it matter even if he took the classes, even if he were the top student. Then, even if that were the case, this XO didn't like Tony and hadn't liked how Tony had painted Budget pink or how when Tony was making the base maps he had named the unnamed field by the mausoleum Anderegg Field. Tony had been the one who painted on the lines for the guys to play flag football out there and since everyone had been calling it Anderegg Field. The XO wouldn't forget at promotion time, Tony thought, that Tony had had to go with his daughter to take down the sign he had ordered and posted.

Tony thought about the other officers at the O-Club, about people who could come home to one beer on their couch with the football game playing. He thought that if he could do that, maybe he wouldn't stay on base after work.

Elaine checked off the qualities of an addiction in her head, and then told Tony. He was damaging his future, causing real consequences in his life. She said, "Addicts are people who harm themselves and the people around them. They damage their future to feed their addictions."

Tony sat on the edge of the bed. He had built it for them, but hadn't finished it. Under the mattress part was supposed to be pull-out drawers, but instead it was just empty, with exposed plywood sides.

"You have lied to me," she said. "You told me you were a family man, one who wanted a family."

After the fight, Elaine went downstairs and put a letter and a book at Tony's place at the table. The letter was in an envelope and the book title said, "Addiction-Free: How to Help an Alcoholic or Addict Get Started on Recovery." Tony saw it when he went down for some ice

cream later. Elizabeth saw the letter when she went down for breakfast. She listened for the sound of the showers still going, then held the envelope up to the light, but couldn't see into it. She opened the back flap that was unsealed and read through. She put the letter on top of the book, straight as it had been. When Tony came down, he sat at his place for breakfast and ate around the book and letter. He stirred his powdered coffee and poured canned peaches over his cereal without moving them any.

The entire school day, Elizabeth replayed what alcoholics were like. She could only remember from movies and from videos in health class about drunk driving. In the lunch line, she asked one of her friends what she thought. "If my dad were an alcoholic, I'd know, right?" Her friend said, "Obviously, yes." Elizabeth told her friend about the envelope, but told the story as if she weren't sure what Elaine's letter had said. They decided together she must have seen wrong, since they both knew her dad and it wasn't possible.

Elaine told Tony at the dining-room table that weekend that she had looked into treatment options and insurance would make it manageable. It was something he needed to do. She had looked up how much vacation time he had built up, too. He could start by taking that and not even need to tell the Corps exactly what his vacation was about. They could do it through the private doctors, not the military ones. "At least start with two weeks," she said.

When Elizabeth came home from soccer practice, Tony and Elaine were having the discussion and James and David were watching TV in the living room right there. She put her soccer bag on the stairs, then saw what was happening. She took a board game from the closet and called to James and David. She took them down to the basement to play. When they finished, they asked if they could play another. She said if they went and each picked one out,

they would have to do it as a race. That way, she figured, they wouldn't be upstairs long, hearing Dad and Mom talk.

Tony went in to work and he wondered, was he drinking too much? He thought about the family holidays. They didn't even have wine. He drank diet soda in his office, his chair leaned back and his one foot crossed over at his knee. He wore a uniform pulled straight from the cleaner's bag and measured out all of his uniform elements, his rank insignia and ribbons, as he pinned them back on. An alcoholic couldn't keep his stuff this sharp, Tony confirmed.

Tony went over to Budget and told Dinah that Elaine had lost all touch with reality. She was no longer in contact with the way the world was.

Dinah asked, "She thinks you are an alcoholic?"

Tony told her, "Yes." He told her about the letter, which had been typed out. The letter had names of actual rehab facilities. Elaine had already done the pricing, he said.

Dinah asked Tony how many drinks he had a week and if he drank at home, how often, and if he ever drank in secret.

Tony answered honestly, said, "I drink some, but not many and not in secret or at home." Tony unwrapped and ate a handful of small chocolate bars he had taken from Tracy's desk. "Elaine's expectations are outrageous," he said. "She wants the house to be perfect, for the walls to have no holes. She wants me to be a colonel next year, to never need a weight chart. She wants us to give the church ten percent of everything we make pre-taxes. She wants us to go and be at the church any time they open the door."

Dinah said, "Tony, she's crazy. You are fine, look at you. You made weight, you have a job, a family. Beer is just beer, millions of people drink."



The next weekend, Tony asked his daughter what she thought of the whole thing. “Did you see the letter at my place?” he asked. Elizabeth said she had unfolded it and read most of it.

“Do you think I need to go get help? Am I messing the family up?” he asked.

Elizabeth wasn’t sure what to think about it, or what her answer should be. Once, back at the house they had with a pool, he had asked her if it was worth it for him to keep trying with Mom. Elizabeth had said then that yes he had to, that it was worth their full effort, that he should keep trying, keep trying even harder. That time, Elizabeth had felt like the family glue, important in a good way. They had gone inside then and Tony had told William that all the groceries were ready to be unloaded, and Tony had helped, carrying some of the cases of soda inside himself.

This time, in the driveway, Elizabeth looked at the bottle sodas in the cup holders under the car’s clock. They had bought them at the snack bar outside the home-improvement store. Tony opened the box to a chocolate ice-cream bar. It had a short round stick coming out the bottom and nuts built into the outer coating. Elizabeth watched him crunch down it. At the snack bar, he’d offered to get her one, too, but Elizabeth knew Elaine would already be unhappy about the sodas and how Tony and Elizabeth had managed to spend hours running a simple errand.

“I don’t think you need to go anywhere for help,” she said. “Are you even drinking?”

“I’ve been going to the club on base after work. I’ve been staying out later and not coming home. But it isn’t for more beer that I’m doing it.”

“I don’t think you need help.” Elizabeth said. “I think Mom needs the help.”

“If I move out, do you want to stay here with Mom and the boys, or no?”

“Would I have to change schools?” Elizabeth asked.

“No, we could get an apartment right around here, maybe even closer, down by where Eva lives.”

Elizabeth had her feet up on the dash.

“Do you think I’d be messing James and David up if I did this?” Tony asked.

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth said. “Maybe they’re messed up either way.”

When Tony finished the last of the ice cream, he bit around the last part of the chocolate on the stick and put it back in its wrapper. He reached behind his seat and dropped it into the truck’s trash bin.

Elizabeth said, “I can understand if you can’t do it anymore, if you aren’t happy.” After all, she thought, he isn’t an alcoholic and he doesn’t need to go away to rehab. “I’d move out with you,” she said.

On Monday, Tony told his daughter he could give her a ride to school, so she wouldn’t have to take the bus. When they moved out of the house, it would be like that, too, he thought. Just him and her, it could be something nice.

They stopped at a convenience store on the way and Tony got a cinnamon roll that said it was “Texas-sized,” a coffee, and a diet soda, and he bought his daughter a hot chocolate and an egg sandwich. The drive between their house and her school was only a mile, but took twenty minutes or more because of the traffic. As they sat in the same place where the congestion started each day, Tony explained to Elizabeth the traffic was a problem of civil engineering. “The turn lane should start much further back,” he said.

Tony was extra late because of the traffic, so instead of pulling into the school parking lot, he said they could save some time and do a roll-through drop off. Tony said he would pull up to the curb of the corner of the school, and then it would be easy to hop out, using the running board of the truck, and make a quick jump to the sidewalk.

Tony pulled up to the corner and Elizabeth put on her backpack. She had to open the door, hold on to the handle along the edge of the door, and grab her clarinet for band class. Cars surrounded them front and back. Every lane was full of cars. Inside the cars were other kids who went to her high school; maybe they were even driving themselves into the parking lot by the tennis courts.

The light changed and Tony's daughter had her feet outside the car and her clarinet in her hand, her other hand on the handle still. Tony saw the light was different and drove. Elizabeth said, "Stop! I'm still attached," and she held on tighter for being scared. Her knee dragged on the ground, the knee on her jeans ripped, and her clarinet case bounced down to the concrete. The clarinet and case had been Elaine's in high school. The clarinet was made of nice wood instead of plastic. The case went up, then down, scuffing the leather along the road. Tony stopped the car, now in the intersection some, and his daughter said, "Dad, I wasn't ready." She let go of the car and stood up straight. Tony rolled down the windows and looked at her, his forehead pulled up into wrinkles and his mouth a smile knowing it should not smile. He shouted toward her, "Are you okay?" and looked ahead into the traffic signal. He rolled forward more and said laughing, "You were supposed to let go of the car."

In class, a person from the office brought Elizabeth a note. Tony had called in saying that he hoped she was doing okay. At work, all he could think was how he had dragged his daughter along the street before school. Tony drove right home afterward and when he came inside he called Elizabeth. He told her he had felt bad about it all day.

During dinner, Tony told Elizabeth he was sorry again. He explained how he had been looking at the light and all the traffic, not at her. Elaine asked him to rewind. "What exactly happened? You drove around with your daughter hanging out of the door?" she asked.

Tony said, "It didn't go how I had planned."

He had meant to drop her off, how parents do, but had, in front of all those cars, not even realized she was still attached to the truck. He had felt so bad, he said, he had swung back around to check on her. He had sat in the line of all the cars going toward the school and away from work, and waited the whole length, through all of the traffic both ways, to see if she was okay, but, he told them, by the time he was back to the front of the school, she had already gone inside as far as he could see.

## Outside

When my dad hit my brother, they sent a lady to my school and pulled me out of gym class to talk. On the way to the office in my teal shirt and rolled-up shorts, everyone knew I was supposed to be scooting over the gym floor on a wheelie board, or holding a yellow scoop facing a person with a ball.

Sitting in the room in the main office, I wasn't afraid of repercussions even though the lady looked at me like I was lying. My brother had talked to the police before when they came to our house and knocked. It was a sunny day and I had opened the door. In the downstairs bathroom, William pulled down his shorts, but didn't show them the backs of his legs, and they didn't take him away at all.

The answers I had to her questions sounded like I had been told what was safe to say:

“My parents never hit me.”

“I had been pushing one of my little brothers on the swing. I was giving him punch to drink. I pushed the swing up high and ran under it, appearing, as he swung down, magically before him.”

“When we went inside from the play set, I saw my mom hand my older brother a towel and take a red one away.”

“I thought there had been an accident and Dad was sitting next to William on the couch. It looked like Dad was in shock about how bad the accident was.”

“It was just like when James had smashed his hand in the back door, and we took him to the urgent-care center.”

I wanted to tell her what she was looking for, which was that Dad had asked William if he would say he fell. And Mom, from the kitchen said, “No, he won’t lie. William, you tell the truth.” Said to Dad, “You messed this up and are going to see what all you did looks like.”

I looked instead at the strange shape of the conference room. It was sort of octagonal, a brick pod jutting out from the building with big low windows like giant doggie doors all around. From the outside of the building it doesn’t look like this room would be here, I thought, or be this shape. Then I had to go back to gym.

Even before I sat down with the lady who had big bright fingernails, I knew my brother broke his glasses a lot, and his teachers said he didn’t turn things in or pay attention. That made my parents mad, made them organize a binder and check his assignments in it every night when they wanted us all to be swimming in the family pool.

I heard what his consequences were, saw my dad carry a cutting board into his room, and watched William in the TV room doing drills my dad knew from high school football practice. William had to put his hands on the ground, thrust his feet out into push-ups, then back and up. Or, jump like an exploding star. His face got red and every time he reached a ten, he had to shout it out. On fifty and one hundred, my dad said he wasn’t loud enough and that it didn’t count.

I sat in my room and did math problems out of William’s math textbook, two years ahead of mine. I read books and practiced spelling. The teacher said to have your parents quiz you and sign a form, but I covered the words with my hand and signed the form instead.

I wanted to do something outside of the house, but didn't know my options. From fliers, I found out that with soccer I could play all year if I signed up that way, playing on dirt at the fairgrounds in the winter. I could join multiple teams and practice every day. I could get a trainer, practice with them in special appointed sessions, and then when I was good, I could train other people as their coach. Before practice, I could show up and warm up with the guy who played my position on the boy's team. Once I did this regularly, the assistant coach came early to work the two of us out. We talked about how the other girls could use more training too, and stayed late with them to do that. Doing that, we found a drill that was extra fun and everyone begged just to do it for a while after everything, which meant I stayed after after.

The coach on the first day of school soccer try-outs freshman year asked who could play goalie. I said that I could, thinking I could be anything. I hadn't ever been goalie, but I got in front of the goal like he said and people kicked toward me. He asked if I had goalie pants, which I didn't and hadn't ever heard of, so he took off his sweatpants and I put them on. He stood in his running shorts on the side of the field and said to come out at the kickers, to put my legs up to block my stomach and my hands to block my face. Hands to ball, ball to stomach, legs to stomach in the dirt. All I thought then was, Ball don't hit my face, cleat can't get me.

I was on the list that hung outside the sports-medicine office and later, in a battle of drills for the starting spot, beat a senior and a sophomore. I made the varsity team.

I tried out for another team, a team that played on Sundays and was girls from all the high schools, and they asked if I could play goalie, too. I had only had a few weeks experience, but sure I could. I did the same things, falling big and getting up again. I went to my knees to scoop in a ball. The coach stood behind the goal and said each time I did something how to not do that for the next ball: Don't hit your knees to the ground. Move your feet behind the ball. Your whole

torso, too. Use your body like a puck in air-hockey. Make a “W” with your hands. Have solid thumbs! He laid out cones and put balls and balls in lines. Every time he told me what to do, I did it.

My trainer strung a rope between two trees on a diagonal, tied at the ground on one tree and three feet up the other tree. She told me to dive over the rope to catch a ball she threw without landing on my feet first. It seemed undoable and I asked her what a body would look like when it did it, parallel to the ground? How far away from the rope will that body land? She described what that body would do. It would be parallel, soaring, and would tuck the ball in, then spread the landing along the length of the whole body. We started at the bottom, where the rope was not high and moved up with each toss. I made it across the entire rope. She said, “One sec,” and called the other coaches over. She told them she had never seen a person cross the rope at these heights. We did the drill again to show them.

I went to soccer so much my mom got irritated with the number of practices and remembering which fields, when to come and get me, and when to not. I got rides with a teammate whose mom handed me a bagel sandwich in clear wrap after every practice. When we had to decide the carpool for away games, no one considered my parents as even an option. Soccer cost money and my parents thought something about the fees, so my coach nodded at me when they were due and I didn't have to pay them.

My mom said at the dinner table that she barely ever saw me. She passed me the spaghetti bake and told me that it was like I didn't want to be part of the family. She told a story about how it was too funny the other night when they were in the game room. It was when I was at practice, so to me the story made no sense.



My dad picked up the salt and the pepper and the napkin holder, told me he thought he had a grasp on the offside rule, and moved the shakers back and forth. I moved them parallel and showed him how the rule really worked. I showed him how it was in place to protect soccer from cheaters, and why the referees always had a hard time calling the foul.

Before games, my trainer stood a foot away from me and threw the ball at my face. I caught it and tossed it back. We went as fast as we could, so that the catch and the throw were the same. People watched us do this. The yearbook staff took rolls of pictures of all the drills, blew them up and put them with captions about determination and spirit in the opening pages of the yearbook, me horizontal in the air, intense face and flying hair.

My friends called the house and asked for me by my nickname from soccer, which we had to make out of my last name because there were already two Elizabeths on the team. They called one Liz and one Beth, and then I joined the team.

My mom said, "There is no Andy here."

My friend called once and when the phone line was just ringing and ringing, she called again, because I was for sure home. We were sixteen and had something vital to say, maybe a plan for going somewhere, like a restaurant. The phone rang on my friend's side, but for my mom a beep sounded, asking her to click over. It cut off what she was saying to the person on the other end, and what that person was saying to her. She wanted to ignore it, but the calling was not stopping. My friend really wanted me to come out, or wanted a copy of a handout from school, or didn't know the requirements for the lab write-up due soon.

My mom clicked over and said, “Hi,” to my friend. She said, “Hi, I’m in the middle of divorcing her Dad right now, can you call some other time?”

I hadn’t told anyone the divorce was happening, not even this friend who was one of the closest.

I read a book about a kid who used running to escape things. He ran through streets and streets, thinking only of very tiny things like his blood cells, and huge things like the way the universe is expanding every second, each atom moving away from all the others always. I wanted that to be me, so when I got home from school, and in the summer, I went outside to the frontage road behind our backyard, where my Dad spray-painted distances on the ground. I ran as fast as I could and then I jogged, again and again, down the road, following the round, sprayed lines that showed me the angle to turn around on and still reach a full mile. I borrowed one of my little brothers’ CD players to do this.

I decided to expand the run off the frontage road to the next suburb over. I wore small shorts our soccer team ordered that said EAGLE PRIDE across the butt. A man inside a car shouted something at me. I ignored him. I looked straight ahead. The tires of his car went across the gravel of the roadside where I was and he shouted more. I tried to run more and the car got back on the road. I didn’t want to be wearing those shorts. I thought, this is not at all the feeling in the book.

When my parent’s separation did happen, if I moved out with Dad into an apartment, I got a cell phone and a car. It made sense, so I did it. My older brother was in college, and my

little brothers stayed living at the house with Mom. Dad asked me when away games were and drove me, stopping at convenience stores for energy bars and half-time fruit.

Dad cheered so loud at games. Everyone could hear him, maybe blocks away. He said the vowels for half minutes. He asked me after a game if I could hear him cheering. I told him, “Yeah, people in their houses could.” I told him, because I was embarrassed, that he couldn’t say my name when he cheered. I gave him all sorts of rules. He couldn’t say anything negative, couldn’t complain about how the referee called a shot. No mentioning the other team, their violence, or their rude, unsportsmanlike play. He couldn’t make a disappointed sound after a missed shot. He agreed, but said he would not decrease his volume.

At the games, after everything I did he shouted, “Who is that goalie?” Everyone knew it was me and they sometimes shouted back, “It’s Andy!” lengthening every part.

At a tournament, I dove at the foot of a girl and her cleat hit my lip, her knee meeting my eyebrow. My coach ran on the field and looked at my face. I went to the hospital and Dad met me there. They glued my lip together and put stitches in my eyebrow. We described how it happened in slow motion over and over.

Dad took me to a diner restaurant and I ordered a milkshake. It seemed like a straw would work better, but the pressure and strain of sucking it was worse. I tried spooning and slurping the milkshake. My scab got frothy. Dad told the waitress how it happened, how I was so good I had started my very first varsity game as a freshman. One side of my mouth could smile, but then it hurt, so I put my hand up to my face, rounded out my lips to stop the smile and the pain, and leaned forward.

At school on Monday, I told people the story of the way I went down, my arms went up, the girl whiffed the ball and then the knee and cleat. I told them the funny parts, that at the

hospital they had asked right in front of my dad if I was pregnant, and he was nervous about hearing the answer. That overall it was a good deal because I got a milkshake and the doctor said I could be back to full speed after just a half-week of light practice.

By the period after lunch, I was tired of telling people what happened and my lip hurt. The physics teacher asked about it, nodding at my face, eyebrows up, and I said I didn't really want to talk about it. He told the class how to set up a lab simulation on the computer and explained which number to write on the worksheet chart.

Once we were started, clicking the run button on the experiment, he asked me to talk to him in the hall. He was tall with curly hair and his joints were all at extra-bent angles. He said I could tell him what really happened, that I didn't have to be afraid. He said he was my teacher, but could also be a resource.

I told him the way I went down for the ball and the way I had lain down in the hospital. I described the woman who put a blue towel with a hole over my face, and the way they used a glue to put my skin in place. I repeated that there should be a short period for healing, and minimal visible scarring. We waited in the hallway for me to tell him the truth. Finally, he said that I could always come to him.

I went back in the classroom, with a mural of the solar system painted throughout, each planet of relative size and distance, and copied the data from my lab partners. The chalkboard was surrounded by the sun, and solar flares reached down the classroom's side walls. I looked forward, which was straight into the sun, because our teacher thought the color yellow best stimulated the learning brain.

### There Are Things We Tried to Do Right

When Dad and Mom told my brothers and me about the divorce, they sat on dining-table chairs in front of us on the couch. Like that, we made a small tight circle. My legs touched my little brother's legs and I felt sad for not feeling sad at all. When Dad had asked if he thought this was what we should do, that he and I should move out of the house, into our own place, leaving Mom and the boys the way they had always wanted it, I didn't think about how I would sit with James and David to hear Dad and Mom say it aloud. I had remembered instead the time Mom told me that if anything happened to Dad she would have to send me back to my birth mom, wherever she was. I remembered mowing the backyard lawn and listening to my headset on the Christian radio station, trying to not be selfish, trying to be grateful. "Thank you Lord," I had said as I mowed and prayed, "for this large lawn where my family can run and play." It didn't work as well as I had hoped, and when I went inside and there was still laundry to fold, it didn't seem to work at all. When Dad had asked what I thought, I didn't think about James and David, or think that there would be a transition period, that holidays would be a question about what to do and eventually would have to be dinner at one place, holiday brunch in a hotel ballroom with the other.

Before my dad and I officially moved, he gave me the keys to the apartment. I imagined living there would be like college and I could go sit in the courtyard and read books in the

afternoons if I wanted to. I wouldn't have to mow the lawn and if there was laundry to do, it would just be mine and Dad's.

On New Year's Eve, one week before the last family meeting, I ate a cobbler dessert at midnight at the mall with one of my friends. It was just the two of us, biology lab partners, because our friends wanted to go to a big party with their older boyfriends. Their boyfriends were college-age but not in college. When we had eaten the ice cream and said all we could about how warm and gooey the dessert was, how it was just so good and a great idea, we went to me and my Dad's new apartment to see what it was like.

We opened the door and the carpets still had the lines in them from the shampooer. The whole place was as full of possibility as I had imagined. We walked across the floor, careful not to indent the carpet with our footprints, and lay down by the sliding glass door, looking out across the courtyard to see if we could spy any neighbors. We thought we might see some people having great parties, a glimpse of what it might be like when I lived there with my own room and two TVs between two people. We didn't see anyone. "This will be great," we said on our bellies, our fingers separating the long plastic slats in front of the sliding glass door.

The next week James and David and I sat on the couch. Then Mom went out shopping with the boys because she didn't want to see our boxes leaving the house.

After that, Mom just shrunk. She said she hated having to drive by Dad's new apartment complex on her commute, its always-out advertising banners, saying to her, Call Us Home! and, Great, Luxury Apartment Homes! She couldn't eat breakfast on the way to work anymore because of it. There were other apartment complexes everywhere that looked just like that one, and to see any of those was like looking at his actual place.

She went to get new clothes once all of her pants just wouldn't stay up, even with belts. She was shopping in stores for bright, small clothes meant for teens. She pulled out all of the bags of clothes and stacked the shoe-boxes at the bottom of her bed. She wanted us to work out the different combinations she could make and have me take pictures of her in the outfits. She was skinnier than I had ever seen her and even though the new clothes were her size, they draped down like curtains against a wall. For the pictures, she stood in the computer room in front of the largest window in the house. The blinds were pulled and gave us an off-white patterned backdrop.

She put on a top that was elaborately glittered and some pants, and we decided together which shoes would look best. We picked the tallest shoes she had gotten. She stood like in a swimsuit competition: her hips at an angle, one knee bent, one heel off the ground. We did this with a few outfits. She sent the pictures to our old daycare lady, Debbie Mitchell, who had been tall and athletic, pulling off those jumpsuits women on TV used to wear. Debbie had created her own kitchen wallpaper by rubber-stamping on cherries, then hand painting each one in and had always told Mom she should do more with her style. Mom sent the pictures to other people who knew what she looked like before, old co-workers and past bosses. From that, she found out that one of them had moved into our new area, same way she had. His wife had died from cancer a while back.

Mom invited my cousin Erin to come and live with her and James and David. Erin had been home-schooled, with her brother and sisters, all of them the whole way through. She had considered going into the ministry, but had not ever considered college. My mom thought maybe she could expand my cousin's perception some, give her a taste of what the world outside her

parent's home where she had babysat so much her brothers were like her own babies would be. She had blonde hair, but wore it partially covered with a bonnet. The rest was tied together at the base of her neck. She wore clothes that she had made herself. The first time we talked I learned she had never been inside an Old Navy.

James and David said they liked her, and that she was really good at cooking. She didn't mind doing any of the chores of the house, including their laundry and changing the bed sheets. Compared to the number of brothers and sisters she had, two was tiny.

I had a car and told her if she ever needed a ride to shopping or anything I could certainly take her. She called and asked if I could drive her to a friend's house. She had met these friends at a conference once before, and they lived in the country, not near our suburbs. "Want to take the top down?" I asked when we got in the car. She agreed, and I showed her where to pull on the black handle to help me unlock the top, then how to bang the handle back into place using her hand in a fist. My mom told me later that her friends were a successful Christian musician family and they had a recording studio in the basement where they all went down together to sing.

On a Saturday, I went to pick up James and David and take them out to the roller rink. They could bring a friend if they wanted, and I could give them their first convertible ride. I went into the house to get them. It had been an idea I had, inspired by what I had really wanted as a kid: an older sibling with a car who picked me up for fun days.

"Are you ready to ride in the car without a roof?" I asked David. James came into the room and he said, "Erin, have you seen my shoes?" I looked around for Erin, but she wasn't in the entryway or standing near the closet with the shoes and the vacuum cleaner. I looked to my



side, to the small bookcase by the door with library books to take back on it, and she wasn't there either.

"I'm almost ready to go, but can't find my shoes." James said, looking at me.

I wanted to tell him my name wasn't Erin. You can see all my hair, look at that car. I wanted to say to him, "Remember your sister," like it was a rule to keep, but he already remembered. He had said her name like a dad trying to call one of his kids, running through the list starting with the one on the top.

After roller-skating, I took James and David and their friends to get ice cream cones drive-thru. We ate and I dropped them back off. I changed inside into my work uniform, a checkered vest and black pants. At work I asked people, "How many in your party?" Walking past a table with a stack of menus, I tripped over a guy's broken leg sticking out and away, into the aisle where I wasn't looking. It really hurt him when I did that and when I said sorry he said, "Let's not keep thinking about it." He wrapped his hands around his thigh to lift the leg more under the table and start eating again, but he couldn't do any better; it was as far out of the way as it could get already.

I went over to Mom's house to talk about my future, my college plans. She had put together a giant binder that took two hands to open properly full of information about all the scholarship options I had. She had researched how to get soccer scholarships and academic scholarships. Together we filled out a table to help me pick.

Then she said she had something she wanted to show me, upstairs in her bedroom, where we didn't usually go. We got to the door and I stopped. "Come in, come in," she said. She pulled a shipping box up onto the bed. From the box she pulled out a binder bigger than my scholarship

organizer. It was black with gold letters on it. From inside, my mom pulled out samples of every kind of makeup and skin-care product. Each had a miniature applicator brush or wand. She had wanted to get a few samples of things to try, and once she looked into it, she said, it was worth it to just sign up to be a consultant. She explained the discount she got, the start-up cost, and pulled out the step-by-step booklets for doing great eyes, for picking out a person's colors. We tried them on together, both following the instructions, and she showed me how to do eyeliner my first time. She had never worn make-up before, and when I had, it had been against my parent's rules.

Mom said we should take a trip for my graduation. "Where do you want to go?" she asked. "You can even pick one friend to bring along."

"Let's go to Boston," I said. It was where I wanted to go to college, but we couldn't afford.

When we booked the trip, though, the Bahamas was right there as a destination, even before we scrolled to Boston. Same price, practically, and so much more exotic, so we went there instead. Mom bought me a tanning package and the lotion to build up my skin for the tropical sun. I had built up my minutes in the lower-level beds, and even my skin, usually either white or red, could last ten full minutes. She tanned for the trip, too. It was the first time either of us was tan.

On the day of the trip, my little brothers, Mom, my friend Eva, and I went to the ticket counter. All of us had our hats on and new batteries in our music players. After Eva had said yes, and the tickets were set, Mom had told me what Eva's portion of the cost was. When I said I didn't know she would have to pay, Mom said, "Of course, the trip isn't for free." At the ticket counter, after Eva had given my mom a check to make one of the payments by a spread-out plan we made, we got out our passports. The woman took them all and typed on her computer on the

other side of the counter. She asked for Eva's passport again, and Eva said she only had her driver's license. The woman said that wasn't enough.

Eva didn't know we needed passports or at least a birth certificate for the flight to the Bahamas. She called her mom, but no one could get her the paperwork in time for boarding, and there was only one flight down a day. Her mom came to get her, took her home and brought her back the next day with her birth certificate, so she could take a flight alone to meet us. We walked her over to the automatic doors but had to go board so she waited there alone.

My two little brothers only looked at the game screens in their hands. I put my hand on the top of their backpacks and steered them toward the line of security to fly out, just the two of them, Mom, and me.

The security at the airport was new, and everyone had gotten to the airport early, but it didn't seem anyone thought they were early enough. Mom and I didn't know where we were supposed to stand for our international departure. We asked all the people walking by in blue sweater vests and two-way radios. No one knew where we should go. "That line looks good," one said.

We joined the line they said and we stood there. The walls were all temporary construction walls with old designs painted on them. They weren't installed in order, so the design on each panel didn't meet up with the lines on the last. I put my headphones on and didn't say anything. My friend was gone even though she had paid and here I was with just my brothers and Mom.

Mom asked me to take off my music. "This is a time to be together, a vacation is," she said. I didn't say anything, nothing defiant, nothing accepting. I looked at her with my music still

coming out of the headphones, but in my hand, not over my head. She said, “Do you need a snack or anything before we go?”

I said that I wasn’t hungry. I was aware of going to the beach, of wearing a bikini all week. “I’m going to see if this line goes anywhere we can see,” I said. I walked down around the corner. All of the people in line looked at me like I was planning on cutting in. They were skeptical. I tried to ask what it was headed to, but the only answers I got were about where the line started, how to get into it way back at the beginning of the first hallway.

I came back and told Mom, “No one wants to tell us where it goes, so we just have to find out first-hand. It’s our own exploration.”

We were both mad about Eva, me because she wasn’t there, and Mom because I had a friend who didn’t understand that out-of-the-country travel requires a passport. Mom looked at me. She didn’t laugh to the level of the joke, but did some. She reached her hand around my shoulder to lift the strap of my purse more securely onto me. “That’s safer now,” she said. I pulled it up myself more, and hopped to settle my backpack better, too.

We were both looking ahead, at the line of people with their luggage, going along the small hallway and turning the corner. “Did I do an all right job with you guys?” she asked. “I tried really hard, but did it show?” There were people in line on each side of us, and her face melted, her glasses splashed with how hard it was to say.

“Of course you did,” I said.

“There are things I wish I had done better for you,” she said. I tried to stop her, put my hand flat on her shirt sleeve. “I could have had more patience, understood you guys were kids.”

I told her it was great, “Look at us now!” I was crying and trying to stop it with jokes. I looked to see if anyone was noticing us, but all the people in line were zipping back up their bags

or pulling at their ticket in its slip envelope. My little brothers looked up at us. They asked, “Did something happen? Are we all okay?”

Together Mom and I said everyone was fine. “We are saying things we haven’t said before,” she told them, “things that make us hurt because we are showing each other what we had all along.”

## June

In June my dad got his orders. He had always been a Marine, but the only things I knew about the Marines were:

1. That he looked good as one when he was younger and I was young.
2. They made him wear glasses he hated and I thought were goofy.
3. I now wear similar glasses.
4. That they told him what to do.
5. He didn't like them very much.
6. He loved them too much to ever quit.
7. A Marine never quits being a Marine; he dies.

His email said: I am getting orders to Baghdad. I will be working on the contracting of security projects. I'll be leaving Virginia on June 21<sup>st</sup>. He also said he loved me very much, and I was scared because my dad was too old to go to war, and had passed the point when you go. He was retiring the next October, getting out altogether. When people asked, I had told them that my dad wouldn't go because he was an engineering officer, and that he wouldn't even be on the front lines. He was a logistics man—chow halls, phone banks, where-the-bullets-are-when, walkie-talkie Marine.

My mom said, "What?" and she told him that he shouldn't have volunteered to do that. And I remembered something else about the Marines:

8. Volunteering is a one-time action, applicable without consent to all further decisions.

But that was partially my dad's fault in telling her the news because it sounded like volunteering. He said that he overheard the General say that orders had just come through for someone with skills exactly like his and my dad, knowing that he was the newest guy to this platoon and the only one left like him, figured he would be chosen, and he was going through a divorce and maybe this would help. In fact, he was going through a reconciliation from a temporary separation that I had tried to keep myself out of because I hadn't done that before and had been wedged, knowing it all from both sides.

Now I was grown and gone thousands of miles away and didn't need to hear the way he hated her one day and how indispensable she was on another and how he had had no sleep since early in the week because he was new and freshly born, staying up at night crying and begging the Lord to tell her that Jesus hates divorce.

He signed the orders and I got online and found cheap tickets home for two weeks to pack my dad's stuff and be supportive and see him again before he left and do the things that are all you can do when people are facing something huge—laugh and laugh and stay up all night and laugh.

My dad's dream was to pack all the stuff in his apartment, move it to a storage unit, go to war, survive, come back and move directly back into the house with Mom, who would have revalued his life, chosen to love him again and planned a vow renewal ceremony. So we packed everything and towed it down the longest street in Virginia to the storage unit and put it all perfectly on the shelves my dad built himself. We stacked the identical brown boxes that he labeled and some he had let me label. My older brother helped a lot in the loading and unloading.

Speed-walking with the boxes, he gave my dad and me something neutral and hilarious to talk about: my brother's first go at non-virtual dating.

Two weeks went fast and my dad and I stopped at 7-Eleven every day almost, for pick-me-ups and American treats foreign countries without freedom don't have. My dad always got a medium Coca-Cola Icee, which came in a blue cup, and I made myself remember that image. What an image, I thought, for the story of my dad going to war. The brown tube of the top part of the Icee coming out the clear rounded lid like a Play-Doh pasta-maker against the neon blue cup and my dad lifting it up, stooping down, doing both at the same time, to suck the extra Icee from the top. Looking young as he did it, saving every bit, not making a mess. The extra on top, he called it, was his favorite part. He was impressed when I taught him the counter-tapping trick—halfway up the cup, you have to tap it on the counter, let the bottom settle, creating a base for the rest of the Icee and ensuring maximum consumption for your eighty-nine cents.

On June 21<sup>st</sup> my three brothers and I piled into Dad's white F-150 from 1997 when, in the middle of our family falling apart, he had gotten a truck with poor mileage and thought the whole family would fit in it, all four kids plus Mom. Mom never liked it. She announced through the house the cost of Shell gasoline and that he had used the Super Unleaded again, how unextended the cab was, and how the four-foot bed was smaller than the trunk on her van. That day, we had all loaded up, got buckled in, and Mom came out of the house. She told us, "Aren't we taking the van?" We got out and got in the van and Dad moved all his gear. He was wearing his desert camis in tans and browns with small digital camouflage and digital eagle, globe and anchors throughout. We drove to the airport in the van and we were late, so Mom dropped us off and took the van around. She was wearing the red-stone gold ring dad had given her for some holiday since they had not been together, probably Valentine's Day, and he wore the gold band she



ordered a long time ago to replace the original ring he had broken in Norway moving a tank up an icy mountain.

Standing in line, checking his baggage, Dad had to unlock his pistol and show them and then do something else with it that he felt proud about. He kept asking everyone what he should do with the pistol, just so they all could know he was about to be a hero.

He worried where Mom was and if she was going to be able to find us. She was driving the car to the overflow parking lots and taking the shuttle back to us, but we just thought she was being slow. Dad said to my ear so my little brothers wouldn't hear that she looked beautiful and did I see the ring she was wearing, see it was on her wedding-ring finger? He said that he noticed and thought that God had His hand in this whole thing.

We went downstairs and stood by the security checkpoint and Mom called, then came, finally finding us. Dad complimented her on the ring, and she said, "I hadn't noticed." But it was clear that she had by her red top that was tight and shiny and kind of a sweater with short sleeves. Dad asked us if we wanted a picture and we all seemed to say yes, but Mom asked, "Why would we want a picture of us at the airport?"

Dad semi-ignored the question, asked my brother to hand him the camera and asked a woman walking past to take our picture in front of the American flag t-shirts in the souvenir shop. We huddled up. Dad put his shoulders down and back and his arm around Mom. We took three pictures, Mom explaining the camera's big silver button to the stranger who felt helpful.

Dad had to go and we all hugged, and my brother who was eleven cried and wasn't embarrassed. I didn't cry, just brimmed and hugged tight, not letting go too soon. Dad wanted to hug me quick; he hadn't hugged Mom yet. She let him hug her for a long time, and he kissed her on the lips. Her eyes went open big, they were awkward, and he looked bummed because he

wanted to dip-kiss her like I remember from the pictures of him when she had long red hair and a teal shiny top that was open in the back. Her hair fell towards the ground then, and he was uniformed and they were beautiful, romantic. He wanted that again now, had volunteered to go to get just that.

He walked through security and once he was on the other side he waved. She waved, we all waved and she said, louder than was comfortable, “Bye!” She said it without control, without knowing her volume, loud enough for people to look. Dad turned and headed further in and we watched him turn the corner down a hallway to the waiting area with rows of connected chairs. We walked away and after a few feet, Mom turned back and said it again “Bye!” She faced the checkpoint, all passengers and metal detectors—a too loud bye—and waved, arm straight up, fingers wide, it all saying how gone he really could be.

James and David and William and I and Mom walked outside where people pulled bags from cars and rolled them through the automatic doors, where she said it again, “Bye!”, and we waited for the shuttle to the overflow parking lot. She said one more bye facing toward the building, then another toward the airstrip, and one on the shuttle we took as we rode. Then too, when we looked for the van, each got in, one leaning forward looking up at the sky through the windshield as she started the car, and one as we drove away.

I fell asleep in the van on the way home and I slept through the next days. Slept at home and on the way back to the airport, to fly back to where I lived, and didn't wake up until my dad called from Florida before he shipped out finally to go to the war he had already left for. He was calling to tell me that there were some things I needed to know, just in case, that I needed to remember them, or write them down and that he would like some things to go a certain way if things ended up so that they needed to be done. I wrote it down and I'm not looking at it now,

not looking at it unless. He said the uniform, the medals, check the little book, the regulations and instructions, what goes on the left breast of which coat, the most up to date ones are in the wood box off the top of the dresser. And he said, like he does, that they will probably give him new ones, in case, if that's what happens. Of course, one will be the gold star, or maybe the bronze star, and that will of course go in its rightful place and I should look into that, should that happen, of course. And he didn't call my mom, didn't call to tell her what goes where, hadn't ever told her what he really wanted in terms as straightforward as those.

### Who I Will Have Always

The first time I brought my boyfriend to meet my family, my little brothers pulled out their video games with the dance pads. The two of them said we should all play the one where it is a dance-off. My mom came in and sat on the couch to watch us all in action. I had only played a few times before, and Esteban, just a few inches taller than me, about to go to his first year of film school in New York City, hadn't ever played.

He said to my little brothers, "You guys just go for it. You are better than I'll be."

They said, no, they'd show him how. They started up the game, moving through screens faster than my mom or I or Esteban, lined up along the couch, could begin to read any of the text.

They picked a level and a song, stood up and moved their feet fast on the arrows, keeping their upper bodies still, faces straight on to the screen. As they played, they said, "See the arrows scroll, that's where to put your feet." After the demonstration and lesson, they switched it to beginner. They sat on their knees in front of the TV and looked back at Esteban, heard him say he'd just watch. The game started the level without anyone on the dance pad. The arrows rolled up the screen. The voice of the game said upset things. Then, the music it was playing stopped. The voice, completely disappointed, said, "You lose!" I had thought Esteban would have liked trying.

My first date with the same guy, Dad had answered the door in a military-green outfit: super-short exercise shorts and a free t-shirt from a military potluck. The shirt looked serious like it was from a training mission. In his hand he had a cane and was walking with a limp. His other arm was wrapped up in splint, wrapped up so it hung bent in front of his ribs. He had just recently had a biking accident. He was getting ready for his Marine Corps physical-fitness test and had fallen off and skidded along a guardrail. He had driven me over to show me the damage. For many feet there was a dent the shape of a man and a bike. "Lucky for the helmet," he had said, and wrapped things up with cloth bandage all over.

When he opened the door for Esteban, my dad made a face like he was dealing with a lot of pain. This meant, to the guy in the collared shirt coming to pick up his daughter, he'd be willing to have more pain if he had to. His cane had a fake-metal finish that made it seem heavy and serious.

Esteban and I went out to dinner at a restaurant in the parking lot of the mall, and then went walking in Old Town, by the river, where all the little shops were. When it was time to drive me back home, we got on the wrong bridge and had to go over it and into the next state until we could turn around. Esteban looked at the numbers on the clock in his mom's car, and said this wasn't good. I said I'd call home and it'd be fine. I would miss curfew, but I didn't think it would be a problem. As I told my dad on the phone, Esteban looked at me like he knew how wrong I was.

I got grounded and couldn't go to homecoming. Not the original date, or the rescheduled one. The school board was afraid that the roaming sniper still on the loose, getting people at gas stations, would get us all dressed up. They thought that would make the national news too easily.

That fall, the field hockey team had to play an entire season in a single weekend in the south part of our state where it was safer. They left on Friday and came back to school the next week, District Champs and Regional Champs already.

Esteban went up to New York City to start school. I couldn't talk on the phone or go online for a few months, and so we chatted on the computer when I was in science class, when I was supposed to be running a lab. When he came home for winter break, I was finally off of restriction. In the backseat of my friend's car, all my girlfriends convinced me to call him, to ask him to come to the movies with us. They said that was the reason his emails said he was coming home for break. He didn't answer any of the times that I called, but when my friend called from her phone, he said hello on the first ring. The whole scene painted right in front of me on the back of the headrest. In spring semester, that friend told me she had been calling him, and they talked all the time in the middle of the night.

When I went to the prom, it was with a guy from church, who went to another high school. He wanted to be a P.E. teacher after college and wore his hair gelled up in the same way each day.

A couple of days before I went to college, my dad took me to the tire store and bought me all four new tires and lifetime everything. Anytime, forever, he said, they'd take the tires off and look at them, have them going straight and move them around so they wore evenly. "I'm setting you up," he said.

In the tire store, with stacks of tires and a few plain plastic chairs, I looked at how the coffee machine worked and tried it out while he paid up at the counter. It was going to be a while

for everything, so we went into the mall next door and walked around. We went to the yogurt place and got huge soft-serve cones.

Walking and eating, Dad said, “Your car needs a CD player.”

I said, “No, its okay. I have the radio.” We had already set up hotel reservations for our trip to drop me off. I didn’t know how long a CD player took to install, and didn’t want us to mess with our plan.

“You need a CD player. I’ll put it in for you.”

When we got home, I went inside and put clothes into boxes. He took a car CD deck out of a brown mailing box and tore out the cassette parts in my car. He had to rebuild the dash to fit the CD, so he put in a piece of wood and pulled it out, cut it down, came back inside for a drink, wiped his sawdust eyebrows, and refit it and cut some more. When it worked, he engraved the make of my car in the wood panel. “Custom,” he said. Like that, new tires, new stereo, the car was ready to go to college.

That night, as I was packing up my room and getting ready to go, Esteban and I said hi on chat. Esteban said he was back in New York City. I didn’t know he had ever left there. How neat, I typed. Hawaii, he said. Then he logged off.

A few minutes later, he called to tell me that the power had gone out. He was sorry if it had seemed like he was being rude. Turned out that the power stayed off in New York City for a couple of days. He called me each night to tell me about it. People were standing outside at trashcans lit on fire, drinking wine together, everywhere across the whole city. I told him about getting the hitch on my car, my new stereo and tires. Esteban said that if I needed anything along the way, I could call him. I told him I’d be with my Dad, so I probably wouldn’t.

The drive to college was days long. On the first day, the car started blowing out smoke from the hood. Out of nowhere the car felt hard to steer. Dad reached over from the passenger seat and helped me turn it. We rolled into a gas station where they gave us a new hose. The part was in a nearby town, so we waited in the lobby for the afternoon. To stay on schedule and not be late for college, we realized we'd have to drive straight through.

In the middle of one long state, Dad asked if I was good to go if he slept. I said yes, but the car kept finding the grooves on the side of the road, buzzing me back alert. I said, "Dad, I'm okay," each time, but he didn't move. His seat was pushed as far back from the dash as it could go, his head leaned toward the side window. "Dad," I said, "if there is an exit for a hotel, I'm going to pull over and stop." His breathing didn't change. I put on the radio, and scanned. Each station I found only stayed in range for a mile or two. All the CDs were in the back seat and I couldn't reach them. I rubbed the side of the road with the new tires a few more times. It was late at night, but I called Esteban until he answered, and said, "I'm driving and about to fall asleep, can you talk me through this." He said, "Sure," and did.

We made it to school just a half day late, and Dad unloaded my suitcases, met my suitemates, then flew back home. The next month, Dad called me at school and asked, "Does my truck dash light up green or blue?"

I said, "They are a kind of teal. It is in the middle."

"No, but if you had to choose would it be green or blue?"

I didn't think very long, or focus very hard. I needed to save my cell phone minutes. Esteban and I had been talking, and maybe he would come for fall break, or at the end of the semester before I went back home. "I haven't seen it lately," I said, "but I think it is green."



“I am getting a CD player for my truck and the web site to order it says the dash is either green or blue. I can’t return it if I get it wrong, so, what do you think? Final choice is green?”

Dad hadn’t wanted to switch from tapes to CDs before I had left for college. He had big zipper cases in the back of his truck. He had them arranged and would tell me to find a tape and I would open the container, as big as my whole lap, and pull one out, putting away the old one. “It is a lot of wasted foot space for a dying technology,” Mom had said.

“Green,” I said. He clicked to order.

He got the box a week later and installed the parts. He turned on the battery on the truck and the lights on the new CD player lit up green green, an unmistakable kindergarten green. The rest of the information lights sitting there asking the driver how cold he’d like to be were suddenly so blue. Dad’s football team has blue jerseys, and he liked things to follow their designs, to be the way they had been meant to be. He looked at his console and saw some knobs one color and the other buttons a different color. He called me up and said, “The stereo lit up blue before.”

I said, “No way,” and he said, “Just think, the air-conditioner color goes from red to blue, not red to green, and that’s the color of everything.”

“Well, used to be the color of everything,” I said and we laughed. I tried to say something supportive, come up with a good reason for different lights on different parts, “Safety!” I said, but we didn’t believe me. He had known he couldn’t return the CD player, and so there it was: only the CD player lit up green.

Esteban came during finals week to visit me. I told him he could fly into a nearby city to save money. Later, when I looked it up, it turned out that the city was three hours away. I left early in the morning and picked him up at his afternoon flight. My roommates called worried about me. “What is taking you so long to get to the airport and back?” they asked. “Is your car okay?”

“Yes,” I told them. “It was the other airport.” It was an airport in an entire other state, they said later. What had I been thinking, going there alone like that?

He stayed at the dorms with me, and since it was so close to finals, the RAs didn’t come by or pay attention. He brought a wine bottle to share, but I didn’t have an opener. We used a fork from the dining hall. It took so long to open and, when it did, most of the cork split into tiny floating pieces, enough for ten in every cup.

That spring break, I flew out to New York City to visit him. I forgot my wallet on the floorboard of my roommate’s car when she gave me a ride to the airport. Esteban said not to worry about it, took me over to the machine that sold metro cards, pushed his credit card in and out and gave me my pass. When the bills came, he bought every meal. We went to the museums on the days they were free, and when he had to go to work, I stayed at his apartment, sat outside on the balcony and looked at the other buildings. One, he pointed to later, was a hospital.

When spring semester ended, Esteban flew out to my college, helped me pack up my dorm and use the last of my meal points. We split turns driving the whole way home to Virginia. My dad had gotten me a summer job at his old work, the Headquarters of the Marine Corps in D.C., where I was going to help enroll Marines in community-college classes and enter their grades into a computer. I was going to live with my dad for the summer in the little apartment we had since he separated from Mom when I was still in high school. The job didn’t have to start

until the last week in May, so I went with Esteban up to New York for the time in between. Esteban said there was a bus that went between the D.C. area and New York for only thirty dollars round-trip. It picked up and dropped off in Chinatown both places.

Esteban and I had planned the trip tight, so we had to leave on the bus right away to get him back to his job on time. The next bus to New York left late that night, so I asked my dad if he could drop us off. He said okay, and took us to the cross streets in Chinatown we had written down, where there was nothing to show a bus was going to come. We waited in Dad's truck, Esteban in the backseat, and Dad asked if we had to go. He didn't think it was a good idea. Couldn't we wait until daylight? he asked. Esteban said he had taken the bus before and it was actually reliable. I took Esteban's advice over my dad's. My dad looked at me, sitting with one foot on the seat, my back to the door. His face showed all of the facts hitting him at the same time, right then: his daughter was catching a bus from a Chinese food restaurant, at night, in the District, with a boy, who she drove across the country with, so they could go to New York City, to his apartment, and he was the one dropping her off to do it.

When I came back, I started work at the Headquarters and Dad and I ate dinner together on weeknights on the couch. Dad played on the computer in the front corner of the living room, and I faced toward the TV. At nine, when my cell-phone plan kicked on free minutes, I went into my room and talked on the phone to Esteban. We switched off visiting each other. When I went to see him, I left for the bus right after work, and came back late on Sunday. Once, I came back early on Monday. When Esteban was visiting for the weekend, Dad said it was okay for him to stay the night.

One weekend, Esteban and Dad worked all afternoon installing surround-sound speakers in the living room of the apartment. They used white wire and lined all the seams in the room with it, it seemed. When they had strung the wires, they went to test it out, but it didn't work. They both got on their computers to try to figure out why not. While they did that, I got the mail. There was a package to pick up at the apartment office, so I got it, too. I had ordered new jeans and a new purse. I tried them on with different looks and my dad and Esteban were still troubleshooting.

That night, Esteban knew that it wasn't a good idea to come into the bedroom and stay the night. He knew he should sleep out in the living room on the blue leather couch. I didn't know that my dad was paying any attention to that. We had, after all, spent the night in hotels the whole way back from college and Dad knew that. I said, "It's okay, we'll just lie down for a little bit."

The box from the jeans I ordered was on the couch. In the morning, Dad saw it. He called me out of my room. When Esteban came out, too, Dad told him he would kill him if he ever saw him again. Dad was ten inches taller than Esteban and rounder than Esteban. Esteban knew, too, that my dad had a sword in the bedroom that was only for show but was still three feet long.

My dad, who to me was not scary, told him, "Leave and do not come back," after he asked him if he knew whose daughter I was, what time does the bus come and good luck walking there because my daughter will not drop you off at the station, and if you need a taxi you can walk to a payphone to see if they take a collect call.

He made his jaw pull back toward his ears. When he did this, I thought of his story of how he broke his jaw because he was fighting a person in a bar barn in Texas. In the story, the barn has two floors and someone falls from one of them onto the other. If there had not been hay

everywhere, people could have died. Esteban maybe thought of all the guys who lose it in war movies. Dad lowered down his shoulders so his chest opened up and, using his shoulders, pulled his arms to hang behind his body. This is the very first step of a punch, our insides said, a very slow punch that could start to be faster and more real any time. Now? Or now?

After Esteban left the apartment, I said, “Dad, he didn’t sleep in my room. He didn’t stay in there. Nothing happened. He was on the couch.”

He said to me, “Nobody sleeps on shipping packages.”

When Esteban came to visit next, that same summer, we walked up to the counters of the hotels on the streets by my house. They said unless we were twenty-five, there wasn’t a room there. I called and asked my older brother, William, if Esteban could stay at his apartment for the weekend. He said that Dad didn’t want Esteban to be around. Dad didn’t approve of Esteban and my relationship. I didn’t understand, and said, “I’m not asking to stay too, just Esteban.” William refused. He said that he didn’t want to let him stay in the living room. Instead, Esteban and I went camping.

I borrowed the tent from my mom and my friend Eva, and her boyfriend went, too. We tried to make it fun, but the traffic to the campsite was backed up, and we were hours late. It was already dark before we got there.

When I brought the tent home, I put it in the shed. At the end of the summer, my brothers and I were at the kitchen table at Mom’s house eating pork chops and ranch salad. Erin was with some friends at a church conference for the week. Mom said, as part of a conversation about the Boy Scouts, “Yeah, the tent Elizabeth brought home that was all full of sand.”

I had thought that tents were always dirty unless they were brand new. I asked what she did, said that we had tried to sweep all the debris out. She said that when she gets home from a trip, she vacuums the tent out.

In the front lawn after dinner, I pulled out the tent sticks and the nylon cover and built the three-room tent on the front lawn of our house. Once it was up, I pulled the garage vacuum out, strung an extension cord and vacuumed the inside. I went inside for a drink and my mom said that she also usually runs the vacuum along the outside too, since it all ends up in the same zip bag where the dirt combines together. I went back out and, after I did the inside, I ran the black tube and spout along the grey dome and the tent's rain hat and I put the nozzle inside the bag to suck, then turned it outside the bag to clean. I rolled the tent and used a duster on the poles, and put the tent in the shed. That was the last summer I came home.

When I graduated from college, I was still dating Esteban. My parents had reconciled their marriage since I'd been at school, and they and my little brothers flew out for my graduation. William was busy at work. Eva came, too, on a separate flight. I picked out different dresses for each of the events. Each time out of the dressing room, Esteban said, "You just look so good in dresses."

My family arrived and I didn't talk to Esteban on the phone in front of them. Sometimes I sent him updates through text message. My family wanted to go out to dinner, but I had forgotten that they aren't adventure eaters. We went to a sandwich shop, which seemed normal, but everything was served with gourmet potato chips, and my littlest brother said, "What's gor-met about these?"

We had many events to go to, one each morning and each afternoon: an honors breakfast, a photo session, walking across for my college, then the next day a different lunch and walking across for the whole of everyone, then, fireworks. Esteban was at all of the big events, everything but breakfast. He spotted me in the crowd. He met up with me before I met back up with my family. We kept it short so I would be alone again when my parents and brothers found me.

After a few of these, my mom was in my second-floor apartment changing her outfit in front of Eva and me. My mom turned without her bra to say something. Her everything was all out, and facing us, but Eva turned to look in her suitcase, or at the schedule of things we had to do. Like this, my mom said, "So what ever happened to old Esteban?"

I said, "He's here. He's been going to the events."

My mom looked at herself in the mirror standing against the wall, near my TV set. The apartment was a studio, and the fridge didn't work too well. She said, "Man, I have a huge butt. Don't I?"

I tried to say she didn't, but she did. She had been skinny, but said she was on a new medication that was ballooning her up.

She said, "I really do. I look just like my mom now. It's really terrible." She laughed to say this.

Then, back to Esteban, she said, "You know, if you are serious about this guy, he needs to get serious with your family. He can't just hide away from us."

"You've been kept separate for a reason," I said.

"This is no way to start a future," she said. She said, "It might not seem like it now, but family is important above all other things." She decided to change her pantyhose. She decided maybe she didn't need them, then maybe she needed new ones. Dad was downstairs because he

was on crutches from a hip surgery and couldn't get up to the second story so easily. The boys were in the car, since it was a studio and we were all changing. Eva sat on a chair, her face covered all the way by the campus map unfolded.

My dad had said, before flying out, that I was the decider of what everyone did when they got here, that I got to pick what events we went to, what places we ate at. "This is your deal," he had said.

My mom had said, "The first of your generation to graduate from college! You even beat all your older cousins, and your older brother."

"Can't wait for you to get here," I said.

They got there, and Mom said, "Wow, how beautiful the campus is. I hadn't expected this."

I had said, "They put these flowers in this week just for this. Next week, they will pull them back out."

My mom swapped out the pantyhose. Her skirt folded up around her waist, new pantyhose coming on her feet, then on her legs, coming over her underwear.

My mom said, "Seems like what you want, since that's what is happening."

"You don't think I'd like it if you guys got along?" I said. "You don't think that's a dream of mine?" My eyes cried up.

"You need to talk to Dad about this. Ask him why this is happening."

"No, I am not going to ask him. This is your boyfriend, your family, your future that you are playing with, acting like none of us need to know each other."

I hadn't begun to change from my dress yet. I pulled at drawers for jeans.



“Mom,” I said. “Dad said he’d kill Esteban if he ever saw him again.”

“Elizabeth,” she said, “don’t say that about your dad. You are dealing in real life.”

“Esteban is afraid to see him because he believes him. Dad did say it. He said he would kill him.”

“If that is the case, I need to talk to your dad about this.”

“That’s what I said,” I told her.

Mom told Eva and me to stay upstairs, that she would go down to the car and ask Dad about it. Eva and I looked out the blinds, flicked just a slat each and saw my mom get in the car, saw my dad close his car door, heard the car go on, watched them reach to adjust the air vents. My little brothers got out of the car and stood on the sidewalk. They messed with the mailbox, then sat on the ground.

My mom called from her cell phone and said, “Where is Esteban?” I was still at the window, looking down at the car in front of the house. She wasn’t looking up at my window. “Is he around, in the vicinity? Your dad would like to speak with him.”

“His house is just the next block over. I’ll call him,” I said.

Esteban didn’t want to come, but I told him that I was the one making decisions this weekend, that this was my future we were talking about. He pulled up two spaces away from my parents, his hatchback making big exhaust sounds. He had bought the car used, and it came that way. Now it seemed like a very bad choice.

My dad got out of the car, opened the door and Esteban tried to help him not fall. Esteban put his hand on the car door so it wouldn’t sway, and my dad reached out and shook his hand. He said Esteban’s name deliberately. He said, “I’m sorry, Esteban, for what I have said to you. My daughter really cares about you and I would like to get to know you better.”

Esteban said he was sorry for the difficulty that was between them, he had not meant any disrespect.

They hugged, Esteban holding onto the door, Dad twice his size in every way. “We should all go get dinner and ice cream together,” Dad said. The family had heard that frozen custard was big here, and had never had it before. Dad said, “Esteban will lead the way, we’ll all eat together.”

Esteban drove along. He was sweating. He pushed lightly on the accelerator, but the car still made its racing noise. We had never been to this custard place either. It had a giant cone of custard on the front and was brand new. It looked easy to get to from the highway, but wasn’t really.

I asked Esteban if he was hungry at all. He wasn’t. He was too overwhelmed to eat. I said, “Please order a big meat sandwich. Something like a burger or a cheesesteak, or any kind of melt. How about a patty melt, you like those.”

He said okay, but wasn’t sure if he could eat it.

I said, “This matters as much as anything so far.” Eating didn’t seem very hard to me. For sure not compared to everything else.

Inside, the decorations were chrome and red, with records on the walls. The workers wore paper hats. Esteban got the patty melt. Everyone got food in baskets. We ate, and my little brothers pointed out the window to a classic car parked outside. Esteban and the two of them watched as the owner went out to his car. Together they were worried that the sound of it starting wasn’t the right sound, maybe it was broken.

“Can they get it started?” they asked each other. Then the car worked and the driver waved. We all waved back and watched it go out of the parking lot, to the road that confusingly got to the highway.

For dessert, Esteban was full. He’d just share mine. “No, you can’t just share,” I said, “You have to get one.” In front of my parents he had wanted us to eat the same sundae.

Two years later, my older brother asked a girl to marry him. They planned the wedding for his birthday, and our family flew out to be there. It was in Colorado, near where her family lived, in a mountain town at a community center across from a shopping complex. The whole thing was very cabin-style, earth-town. The theme for the wedding was Christmas, and it worked out for us all to go since it was over Thanksgiving break.

My brother and his fiancée stood together in front of a giant reusable Christmas tree that we had all assembled while they got dressed and made sure the catering was right. They looked at each other and repeated back what the official said. My sister-in-law’s gown had skinny straps that had slipped down her arms. She moved them up onto her shoulders again when she and William turned to come back down the aisle.

During the dancing, Dad asked me, “Could you at least have your wedding in a church?”

“How about outside?” I said.

After the wedding, we were still dressed up and drove back to the hotel. Dad asked how long I had been dating Esteban by then.

“Five years, or six,” I said.

“You two aren’t living together, right?” he said.

“Nope,” I said, looking at him in the rear-view mirror.

He asked, "When are you going to get married, or even engaged?" It was not the first time he had asked it that weekend.

Mom stopped him, said, "That question shouldn't be addressed to the woman."

"But when you finally do," she said, "Can your dress at least have sleeves? Big sleeves look good on shoulders like yours. Plus, I love the lace arms."

"That is out of fashion," I answered. "The look today is to have nothing at all in the way of sleeves or lace."