

TILTED: LIFE AFTER BRAIN SURGERY

BY

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Abstract: This dissertation is a combination of a creative work and a scholarly component. The creative work is a memoir about my life during the recent years after my brain surgery. The essays feature myself in the third person as I deal with topics such as wedding photographers, nosy neighbors, hearing aids, and nanny cams. The scholarly component is a long book review in which I compare the structures of three memoirs.

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Introduction

In 2006, I had two craniotomies at age 22 to remove a cavernous angioma from my brainstem. A cavernous angioma is a mass of malformed blood vessels, and mine looked like a raspberry. The surgeries removed the possibility of the angioma's traumatic bleeding, but also changed me as I knew myself. Because of the damage the surgeries caused to various cranial nerves, my left eye turned permanently towards my nose, causing double vision, and the left side of my face was paralyzed, making it difficult to speak and eat. The right side of my body lost some feeling and coordination, making acts such as walking, bathing — really, doing anything physical difficult — for a while. I had to learn a new way of living, and I am still doing that. Instead of living in Southern California, dating a Frenchman, and pursuing a career in tabloid journalism, I moved to Kansas, went to graduate school, married a Missouri guy, and had a baby. I didn't "get better" so much as I adjusted. This book is about that. I tell my stories in the third person because it comes easiest to me, maybe because I really do *see* differently now. I will make no claim that I wouldn't trade my body now for the one I had pre-surgery because I've *learned* so much. I will, admit, though, that because of the course my life has taken, I may have become a different person than I might have been — more grateful, perhaps, more thankful for the health I now enjoy — and in Kansas, no less, the very place I hoped to never return to again when I left it for California. My life now is tilted: changed from what it had been, a bit skewed, but still mine. I see, say, two cups of coffee where there is only really one, and they seem to bounce up and down (the Nystagmus, a vision disorder caused by the surgeries). But I have learned to only reach for that one cup, and I understand it is sitting still on the table. By now, I know things are not what they look like.

What Do You Want to Remember?

Louise didn't want a wedding photographer. She wanted all the rest of getting married: the sparkly ring, the lacy dress that rustled and had a train. She wanted Pachelbel's Canon in D, Rilke poems, champagne toasts and a towering buttercream-frosted cake. She wanted a gauzy veil and a honeymoon on an island, a bachelorette party complete with ten girlfriends all making drunken confessions in a limousine. If she didn't look at herself, she could imagine she was any other woman getting married. It was her turn. But photos would ruin it.

She told Nick as much in the car on their way to meet a potential photographer, because of course they had to get one. They had been to a wedding where the DJ never showed and the groom had to hook his phone up to the speakers for some music. They had been to weddings with plastic flowers, ones with no alcohol, one in a sweltering wheat field, and one in a courthouse basement with fluorescent lighting. But there had always been a photographer.

"It'll be fine, trust me," said Nick, as they pulled up to the photographer's house. Being a photographer himself, he was familiar with Louise's neuroses with photos. It pained him to see how much she disliked looking at herself. He understood it, sort of, except that he had only known Louise after her surgeries, had fallen in love with her face lopsided and all, however far from perfect it was. They had met two years ago, and at first she never let him take photos of her, not that he asked much, knowing she hated it. Now she was better, but wedding photos seemed to be on a different level.

"I'll be the ugly bride," she'd say when he brought it up. All he could ever do was shake his head.

*

A lot about the wedding experience had been hard for Louise. Finding a dress, for instance. It was complicated, because she loved the idea of going shopping for one with her mother, Janet. They would go into a bridal store and scour the aisles of giant white garment bags. Ball gowns, mermaids, and slip-like sheaths, some with tiny details like gold thread or seed pearls, some just seemingly endless yards of buttery satin. Janet handed Louise dress after dress over the changing room curtain, and when Louise slowly emerged, her shoulders always caved in.

“You look perfect!” Janet said each time, always followed by a “What, what is it?”

Louise would stand on a little carpeted pedestal every store provided in front of the three-way mirror so that the skirt could be seen at full glory.

“I just never look how I think I will. I just...” and then Louise would trail off and look at the girl in the next dressing booth, smiling at her reflection.

“Oh sweetie, I know,” Janet would say, but she didn’t.

*

Louise finally found a dress, and a veil, and shoes. She found a wish jar (a giant glass vase for guests to put hopes for the newlyweds on scraps of paper) and had Nick make table-seating card-holders out of wine corks with a razor blade. She found a birdcage for the gift cards and had her father draw and photocopy a custom map for all the guests. She had meeting after meeting with the flower people, the cake lady, and the caterer. And she loved it all, except thinking about the photographer.

*

Louise had been a bridesmaid in four girlfriend’s weddings since her surgeries. One of the weddings was in an old opera house in a small town in central Kansas, two quite close to

Lake Michigan, and one on a golf course — well, until it rained at the last minute, and then it was at the clubhouse next to the golf course. The picture-taking was always uncomfortable — the wedding party standing in unnatural formations around the bride and groom, and Louise could feel the photographer single her out as strange looking, then mentally shrugging and getting on with the required shots — but Janet’s wedding to her second husband, the doctor, a few years ago had been the worst. After the ceremony, everybody was at the front of the church by the altar for a big family portrait, and Louise was standing next to Janet, holding a bouquet of white tulips and wearing a mushroom-colored bridesmaid’s dress. Louise’s grandmother kept going to the photographer and shouting things to the group, telling Louise’s brothers to smooth their hair and Janet to put on more lipstick.

“Oh, mother,” Janet kept saying. She wore a knee-length ivory skirt-suit that Louise had said was “very Jackie O.”

“Something just doesn’t look right,” Louise’s grandmother kept saying when she would look at the photographer’s camera for a digital proof of what she had just taken.

“Louise just needs to smile more, or maybe tilt her head?” she went on. “She just doesn’t look natural. Weezy, can you look at the camera more straight on?” Louise’s grandmother called out, using her hands as a megaphone.

Of course Louise cried, and it caused a scene. Janet had to comfort Louise in the church bathroom, and the guests had to wait an extra half hour for them to show up at the reception hall. The final result that hung on Janet and the doctor’s living-room wall showed Louise standing, bleary, feet just a bit too spaced for balance, with white knuckles around her bouquet. Louise wished Janet would take it down.

*

This could have all been avoided. What if there was no big wedding? What if Louise and Nick got married in, say, their back yard on a Tuesday and then went out for martinis? What if they got married at a barbeque in matching white T-shirts, or on an Alaskan cruise? Why did Louise feel it had to be a certain way?

She really wanted that wedding album, damn it. She wanted a picture on her living-room wall, too.

*

In her conversation with the wedding photographer, Louise requested that he shoot only her good side. That was the one that moved.

“I’m sensitive about my face,” Louise said. The photographer said no problem, easy peasy. But on the wedding day Louise was still dreading him showing up.

In the end, though, it wasn’t that bad. This time, it was Louise in the center of the cheesy wedding party poses, her bridesmaids in yellow tulle that they would never wear again. The photographer shot Louise, Nick, and the wedding party walking across the street from the hotel where they got married, everyone acting relaxed and attempting candid motions, like actors when they’re offstage.

After it was all over, was Louise happy with how the photos turned out? Well, she liked the pictures that made her look thin, the ones where her eyes looked aligned and her mouth was a straight line. But there were others, too, that pleased her. There was a shot of Nick, laughing at some slipup she made during her vows. She liked that one. She liked one of she and Nick arm in arm, walking down the aisle of the hotel ballroom after the ceremony, almost running, really. They looked relieved, and they were looking at someone out of the frame, someone they recognized. Nick was waving. They looked like they knew, even then, that this would not be the

best day of their lives. They look like they were saying goodbye to the whole wedding experience, like they were heading outside to their car, and then they were going to drive all the way to Mexico. There, on their honeymoon, was where the best days would start. Start, and stop. Start, and stop. All the days of their lives.

Rambler Is Fancy for Ranch

One was listed as a fifties designer style. The ceilings were low popcorn, the floors all linoleum, and the bathrooms were totally pink. Louise had thought they could make it work until Nick gleefully came upon a collapsed retaining wall in the backyard.

“One hard rain would wash us all away,” he said. The other house they saw was across the street from a cemetery.

Inside the newest pick, a rambler (fancy for ranch, Nick said) they pictured themselves there with the things they had already, as well as the many things they would have to get.

“Like a real kitchen table,” Nick said. “No more eating dinner on the couch.”

“Or a chandelier.” Louise said. Nick looked at the realtor. They laughed. Nick and Louise were living in a rental that had a washing machine on the porch. Their landlady did things like show up on Saturday mornings and rip ivy off the side of the house because it was a parasite. They wanted a house with walls they could paint celery green, with no upstairs neighbors who wore boots and stomped around or cooked dinners that had fishy smells. They wanted to own a place where they could say “our house” and mean it. Louise was still in gradate school, studying creative writing, so they couldn’t afford much, but something was better than nothing.

The seller appeared in the kitchen. He had a red pointy beard and crazy jeans, the kind that make men look like they have hips. He was not supposed to be there, the realtor said.

“I’ve been working in my wood shop in the basement,” he said. “Gotta make a living, right?” He laughed loud.

“Okay,” the realtor said.

The seller looked angry. “Listen,” he said, “I don't know. Do you people even know how to care for wood counter-tops? These can't be sprayed with some shitty cleanser, they need a special kind you have to order on the Internet.”

The realtor held up her hand.

Louise was opening the kitchen cabinets. They were white and wooden with little chrome pulls. She was opening each and every one.

“I made them,” the seller said.

He said he had gutted the kitchen and all of this was his. “I have pictures,” he said, pulling a photo album off a shelf. The realtor took the album from the seller and set it on the counter. Louise tried to pull a bottom drawer open and it wouldn't budge. She planted both feet on the floor and Nick held her waist and she strained and grunted, but the drawer still did nothing.

“Hey,” she said to the realtor, “make a note of this.”

“No!” the seller said, shooing Louise out of the way. “You just have to give it a good tug.”

They watched as he pulled, purple in the face.

They moved on to the bedroom. “The only issue here is that this bedroom is not really a bedroom,” the realtor said.

“What are you talking about, there's a bed right here,” the seller said, and flopped down on his belly. The quilt was covered in roses.

“No closets,” Louise said, remembering something she had learned from *House Buying 101*. “So it doesn't really count.”

“That doesn't actually matter, does it?” Nick said, looking at Louise with his chin pointing up. The realtor shrugged.

“I don't make the rules,” she said.

“Let's see the basement,” Nick said. He had been saying during the whole house-hunting process that the basement was the key. “If the basement is good, we're golden,” he always said. It had to be dry. No cracks in the walls. He kept talking about all the things he could put in one, like shelves that store Christmas lights.

As they trudged down the wooden basement stairs, they left the seller walking around the kitchen, opening little drawers and making a snack.

“Have a good look,” he said. “It will have more room than you ever need.”

*

Nick and Louise were in a huge hurry about this house thing, especially Louise — so much so that they went to meet their realtor pretty late at night, long after they had gotten home from work and eaten sandwiches and when they would normally be watching a T.V. show. The way Louise understood it, once you had a house, you were somewhere. And she needed to feel somewhere permanent. She had met Nick after she had moved back to Kansas again, after her brain surgeries. She looked different, walked different, and knew that everyone saw her differently too. Nick was her guy, she had no doubt: he ate her burned tofu, unclogged the toilet in the same bathroom where he killed all the spiders, and spooned her all night long. But it wasn't enough. She wanted to feel like she was where she was supposed to be. She wanted to feel home. So they bought one.

*

People on their new street were friendly, so far. There were Renée and Fran, the lesbian couple who had an adopted daughter and a meticulous yard. There was Mrs. Shepard, across the street, who was very old and came out once a day to get the mail. And there was Mike from two houses down, who lived with his elderly, legally-blind father and two big, black dogs. The first time they met Mike was a week after they moved in. It was a Sunday, mid-afternoon, and they were working hard, hanging up pictures and stacking books into shelves. Louise answered the door and there stood Mike, 50 years old, gas-station sunglasses, a loose mouth of wild teeth, and a head that was mostly shaved with a long ponytail on top. He was standing in the doorway with his legs wide apart, holding a paper plate covered in foil, which he thrust toward Louise.

“Perogies,” he said. “I made them myself. Just stuffed them with cabbage and cooked them in the Fry Daddy.”

This was exactly the sort of thing that Louise had hoped would happen after moving into their house. She made meaningful eye contact with Nick, who went to the fridge for beer for them all, and invited Mike in to sit down. They found out a lot about Mike: he had to been to jail for theft and was a mechanic. His garage was his “sanctuary” and he had a couple of ex-wives. His dad annoyed the shit out of him and shouldn’t drive, but did, using a monocle.

“Oh, I’ve seen him,” Nick said.

Mike saw himself as the neighborhood watchdog. After about an hour, he stood up and said,

“You have any problems with anyone, you come to me.”

Then he was gone.

Mike’s visits started to become a regular thing, usually on Sundays in the late afternoon when Louise and Nick were raking leaves in the front yard or unloading the car from a trip to the

grocery store. Mike brought over vegetables from his garden in plastic bags: three heads of cabbage, onions, carrots. Louise was touched, and when she made a big pot of spaghetti sauce she sent Nick to his house with a container.

They got used to hearing Mike blasting country music out of his garage, working on his car with his shirt off even in cold weather, and if they were driving home from a movie late at night, seeing him and his dad walk their dogs on the side of the road holding flashlights, those big black dogs silent, never barking, not once.

One Sunday afternoon, Nick had run to the hardware store and Mike knocked on the door. Louise made a point of making them both cups of tea. By now she could tell that Mike had a drinking problem by his belches and smell — Vodka *did* have a smell, she thought

“Hey, I have to ask you something,” Mike said, pushing the cup of tea away before he tried it.

“Sure,” Louise said. She thought maybe he would confide in her about women problems, and that made her nervous. She couldn’t imagine that she would have any advice to give.

“What happened to your eye?” he said, and Louise felt like she’d been tricked. She said, “Oh,” and told Mike about the brain surgeries, the term “cavernous angioma,” and talked about her special glasses, which he asked to see.

“Wow, these are pretty nuts,” he said, trying on her thick glasses with the special prism lens, his oily, melon-like head stretching the frames. Louise winced. He handed the glasses back, yawned.

“Your situation kind of reminds me about these dental problems I had a few years back,” he said, scooching back his chair and heading for the door. “Endless trips to Kansas City. Horrible doctors. Hang in there, my friend.” He shut the door.

Louise felt like he'd caught her undressing or going to the bathroom. She was always taken by surprise when someone asked her about her eye or face. There would be months of nothing, and then the cashier at the grocery store would ask if she had Bells Palsy, or a fellow campus bus passenger if it was Parkinson's. Louise would be going along, living her life, thinking about what she was going to cook with that chicken in the fridge or if she could make herself do a yoga DVD before dinner and then, bam, someone would remind her that she was different. But why was it so bad to be different? Louise didn't know. She suspected it has something to do with her traditional ideal of beauty, and the way that she didn't fit into it anymore. But she had Nick, and he loved her, and told her she was beautiful all the time. Why wasn't that enough?

Things did change with Mike after that. Louise didn't eat his perogies anymore, just put them in the trash when he left. Nick started talking to him on the porch instead of inviting him in. Mike's visits became more and more infrequent, probably because he sensed their coldness. Louise had been excited to make all the neighbors Christmas cookies, had bought special tins at the Dollar Store and had a recipe picked out, but squashed the idea as the holiday got closer.

Louise realized she may have overreacted a little to Mike's questioning. Mike didn't mean any abuse. But, still, the fact that she had reacted the way she did, and did so every time anyone, even a child, commented on her differences, told her something: she wasn't really comfortable with herself, even after what she felt a long time had passed since the surgeries. Even after meeting Nick, falling in love, and getting married. Even after making good friends, going to graduate school, and buying a house. None of it mattered, she might as well have had the brain surgeries yesterday, that's how ill-fitting this new face felt sometimes. She wanted to know when. When would people's questions stop being upsetting? When would she be able to

explain, in a genial tone, what happened to her eye or face, and not give it a second thought after the person nodded, smiled quickly, and went away. When would that be?

One night she and Nick were sitting on their couch, drinking wine and getting ready to watch a documentary Louise had heard about. Louise stretched. "I don't care about being neighborly anymore, knowing anyone on our street, smiling and waving or anything. We have our house, it's enough," she said.

"O.K." Nick said. "But just because some of our neighbors are weird doesn't mean we can't be friends with any of them." He drank the last of his wine. "Like what about Renée and Fran? They're so nice to us."

Louise made a snorting noise. "All right. Maybe I'll make them some cookies. But that's it." She pulled a kitchen chair over to the couch and set up her computer so they could watch the film on it.

The documentary was about dolphin poaching in Japan, which the film said was unneeded and hateful. Louise and Nick also had seen ones about:

Expensive, elite preschools in New York City.

Chinese parents who left their homes to work far away in factories and never saw their children.

A wealthy time-share king, his sexy, dumb wife, their six kids, and how they lost it all.

An autistic artist.

A woman who said she was a child-painter prodigy.

A big-time country singer who came out as a lesbian.

A sexual-abuse scandal in the suburbs.

A chef.

All the documentaries told stories about lives destroyed. All told stories about loss, and some showed hope. All included emotions as mild as disappointment, embarrassment, of wishing life was different. All showed a moving on.

Janet's Clothes

Janet, Louise's mother, had started wearing her own mother's old clothes. They all called Janet's mother Grammy.

"See, she was the same height as me, but much wider," she said to Louise, bunching the back of a plaid wool jacket in her fist, or maybe a mink coat. Janet wore Grammy's blazers with shoulder pads and gold-braid detail to work, and had even gotten into the costume jewelry, like coral necklaces or rings with big black stones. Janet and Grammy had the same shoe size, too, so in the winter Janet went around in some white fur boots with brass toes. In the springtime she started appearing in some dirty cork sandals.

Grammy had died unexpectedly. She fell to the floor in front of her closet early one morning, had been getting ready to mow the lawn. She had the tractor kind.

Janet and Louise saw each other often because they lived close by, Janet's small town about an hour away from Louise's college hub. Once a week or so, they would be together in a car, going to an outlet mall in search of new sandals, when a certain type of talk would start. Janet would be remembering Grammy, and Louise would sit up straighter.

"She used to write checks for five dollars instead of using cash, how stupid was that? And she always had to be at the church the day after Christmas, picking up trash in the parking lot. Once, she cleaned the pews with furniture polish, remember?"

Louise tried to say nothing. She had read somewhere that this was one of the stages of grief. Anger. But it wasn't really that. It was more like criticism. Louise didn't remember that being a stage at all. Louise reminded Janet of all of the good parts about Grammy.

“Remember her St. Patrick’s Day parties?” Louise said. “That one year, when I had my eye patch, how she made me put on a green plastic bowler hat and serve Irish coffee to her friends? And what about the way she killed snakes? With a hoe.”

It was true. When Louise had been waiting to hear where she would have brain surgery she stayed at Janet’s, and Grammy often kept her company.

Janet didn’t want to hear it. She said, “What do you think about these earrings? They were hers, too.”

One day, Janet and Louise sat at a tiny table in a mezzanine and tried not to spill coffee. It was a Saturday, and they were at a trade show, looking for possible choices for Janet’s kitchen counters. Louise liked helping with those things. She and Nick were fixing up their new house. They painted walls colors like Crème Brûlée, or Russian Blue. They bought furniture off of Craigslist, and they had to meet sellers in parking lots because no one wanted a stranger to know where they lived.

“I have a surprise for you,” Janet said, and gave Louise a heavy paper sack. “Wait until you get home to look.”

Janet had on a baggy red silk blouse with a ruffled collar and putty-colored pants, both had been Grammy’s. The pants sagged in the bottom and were of a thick cloth that was somehow spongy. Her brown bob was shiny, her olive skin still smooth. Louise looked like Janet, people said. They had the same round face, the same quick smile. The same small hands and feet, long legs and arms. But Louise’s hair was lighter in color, and further highlighted blonde. She had blue eyes where Janet had hazel, and Janet was much more petite than Louise, who was on the tall side and wore a size 8.

“I have to get going,” Janet said, rooting around in her purse for her keys. “Duty calls.” Janet was going to cook a special dinner tonight for her father, the Grandfather. He had lived with Janet and the Doctor since the day after Grammy died. It was he who had advised Janet to wear her mother’s clothes. “For goodness sake, no sense in letting them go to waste.” he’d said. “Those are very fine items. Perfectly good.”

When she got home, Louise emptied the bag on her bed. It was nothing but stretched-out sports bras in colors like hot pink and purple and long, loose nightgowns with eyelet lace on the sleeves. Grammy’s. Louise thought about wearing them, tried them on. Louise remembered her grandmother in those nightgowns, entering the kitchen in late morning during Louise’s visits, frowzy with sleep. Grammy usually slept late because she had trouble sleeping at night, and she would lie in bed and listen to satellite public radio shows on headphones at 3 a.m. Subsequently, Grammy was constantly spouting off stories she had heard the night before. One morning, over coffee and cinnamon rolls, she might inform Louise on the right way to wash raw chicken, the history of tortellini (the dumpling inspired by Venus’ navel), and the latest outbreak of the Dengue fever in Florida. Grammy had silver hair, pink skin, and eyes like water. Neither Janet nor Louise looked like her.

*

Sometimes, Janet would talk about words she had said to Grammy that she wished she could take back.

“About once a week,” she said to Louise, “Mom would come over to the house without calling first, just to say hi. I would get so annoyed. I’d be busy! She didn’t work. She had nowhere to be.”

Louise and Janet were at a clothing store, the kind that sold endless varieties of blue jeans. Janet had a weakness for finding the perfect pair, and when Louise went on the hunt with her, Janet always said, “My treat.”

Louise considered it a positive sign that Janet was interested in buying new clothes for herself, so she kept encouraging Janet to try things on. “You’ll need a white-button down with those, and a belt,” Louise would say, and come back with an armload of garments to throw over the dressing-room door.

Louise had heard Janet tell this story of regret before, or a version of it, anyway. As Janet tried on outfits, Louise would sit on a bench outside her dressing room, listening to Janet.

“I should have spent more time with Mom. Now she’s gone, and I miss her. It makes me so glad that we see each other as much as we do, honey,” Janet said, emerging from the dressing room in her old clothes. She had worn at least something of her own that day, some old chinos and one of her mother’s old turtlenecks with beading around the neck. She squeezed Louise with her wiry arms

“But Grammy understood, Mom,” Louise said. “She knows you had a lot going on. And she wouldn’t want you to go around in her clothes for the rest of your life, either. You don’t need to. She’d be fine with you giving things away.”

Janet fiddled with her earrings before gathering up what she was going to buy. “We should go. I’m sure you have things you need to do,” she said.

But Louise didn’t. She wanted to tell Janet that she had never been too swamped, never not wanted Janet around, wished Janet would take her home or hadn’t stopped by. She loved to be with Janet, and it wasn’t just because Janet was generous, buying Louise whatever she needed, from shoes to food to face wash. No, it was something else. Being with Janet was like

drinking a potion, a tonic that left her feeling loved differently than even by Nick. It wasn't better, just different. Janet had a total acceptance of Louise, even when she was being a huge brat, like how Louise tended to complain of hunger even after just eating, or made Janet stop at gas stations for gum even when they were in a hurry. Or how, when she visited Janet for a weekend, she didn't lift a finger, left all the lights on downstairs when she went to bed, and dropped wet towels on the floor. Louise, almost thirty, had never learned to properly clean a bathtub or iron a shirt, and she didn't keep up with current events, so could rarely discuss Janet's newspaper work with her. But Janet still adored Louise, and Louise could feel it, basked in it every day, and never wanted that to disappear.

Louise was all done with the surgeries to try and make her crooked eye straight, done with the operations to make the paralyzed half of her face move, too. She didn't go to the plastic surgeon to get the Botox injections anymore, didn't talk about seeing a specialist in Philadelphia. She had moved on. Almost.

"This is the last thing I need to do before I'm done with doctors completely," she told Nick. "This is the very last thing." She knew one ear worked better than the other. She always tilted her head with her good ear up and forward when speaking to someone so she would be sure to hear them best. It looked like she was posing for a picture. She was getting tired of saying "I know!" (the safest answer) to somebody she couldn't understand, of settling back in her chair and letting the others at a restaurant table wind the conversation where they wanted to, not able to distinguish all the voices from the background music, the din of dishes, the argument at the next table. There were the mumblers, the quiet talkers, the fast talkers — she never understood much any of them said. She loved loudmouths. She wanted to give herself a chance.

"If you think you need this, then we'll do it," Nick said. He was used to Louise's sudden obsessions, but this was more of a surprise to him than most. Usually, Louise was convinced she needed something — fish oil supplements, a denim vest, to eat a grapefruit each morning — for a few days, and then the idea would cool and pass. But this hearing aid idea, something he thought of only for the elderly or severely hearing impaired, had stuck with her for weeks. She and Nick were on a walk in their new neighborhood the day before her appointment. They had bought a house in the old part of town, where some people had tidy, ornamented lawns and metal carports, and some houses were soggy, with yards full of rusting car parts.

“I don’t think I need it, I know it,” she said, resolutely zipping up her jacket.

Louise always walked too fast for Nick. Sometimes he would ask her to slow down, first jokingly, then pleading. She would for a while, but she always sped back up.

*

When Louise went in for her appointment with the audiologist, Nick sat outside the padded chamber where she took a hearing test. A large part of the test was waiting until the first moment when she could hear a sound, a knocking or a beep, and then raising her index finger to indicate that she had heard it. Louise could see Nick through the window. He looked very serious.

The audiologist wore a white coat, but she had many things about her that were un-doctor-like. She had long hair that she had curled and pulled pieces back with tiny clips. She had charm bracelets, and ears that were pierced all the way up. Long fuchsia nails. She had four children, she told Nick and Louise, and did not become an audiologist until they were all out of diapers. This all concerned Louise. She was used to dealing with doctors who were tight-lipped, short haired, with cufflinks.

After the test, the audiologist said, “Your life is going to be a lot better with a hearing aid,” and Louise started to cry. She had never heard a doctor make promise like that. She and the audiologist hugged.

The audiologist recommended a model with optional Zen sound effects when a knob was turned. A fountain trickling or a thunderstorm would happen. It was called the Mind 440.

“They can be very soothing. One of my daughters has the same one,” she said.

She told Louise how to care for it, to swab it with alcohol every night and place it in a portable dehumidifier. Threading a needle was what cleaning the tubing with a tiny rod looked like.

“These things are virtually indestructible. We find my daughter’s in her pocket in the laundry hamper, the dog’s food bowl, wherever,” the audiologist said, flipping her hair.

Louise held it in her hand and she and Nick gazed at it. It was golden and curved, like a seashell. The audiologist put it in Louise’s left ear. Her voice sounded electronic to Louise. “That’s the way it’s supposed to sound,” the audiologist said. “You’ll get used to it.” She ran their credit card through a machine she pulled out of a desk drawer, and Louise signed something. The hearing aid cost as much as a semester of school.

The audiologist stood up. “Bye-bye,” she said to Nick and Louise. “Enjoy your new life.”

*

As Louise and Nick drove home, she heard creaking in the car that she had never heard before, the swinging of the seatbelts and rattle of something plastic. In town, passing houses with iron eagles over doors and windows with striped rubber awnings, it all was beautiful.

She went to a coffee shop to do some grading, and could hear people tapping at keyboards and having whispered conversations with themselves. Outside, she heard birds caw, and the wind created an effect like someone speaking too close to a microphone. At school she kept taking her hearing aid out to wonder at it, and showed it to her friends.

There was a YouTube video of a baby with a cochlear implant hearing his mother’s voice for the first time as a one-year old. He grinned and cooed. His life was so much better now. Louise watched it over and over.

After a couple of weeks, Louise noticed that the plastic tube that went into her ear became clogged with wax. Even the cleaning materials, the miniature plastic brush and rod, did no good, the brown goo stayed coated in there, blocking the way for the amplified sound to get through. She discovered she could not wear winter hats, or go on the treadmill at the gym, because tucking her hair behind her ear or pulling fabric over the hearing aid knocked it out of place. She started taking it out when she sat on the couch to read, and forgot to put it back in, only to find the cats batting it around in the middle of the night.

“You wanted this, remember?” Nick said to Louise one cold and dark Saturday afternoon. He had found it in the junk drawer, among the odd sizes of batteries and twisty ties.

“You talked about making the appointment with that audiologist for months. You were so excited. Why don’t you get it repaired? Heck, we can send it back and get a new one.” He poured himself a mug of that morning’s cold coffee, shut the door to the microwave harder than was necessary. He saw Louise’s bottom lip begin to wobble.

Louise sat at the kitchen table and was fiddling with the hearing aid again, trying to get it to fit in her ear how she wanted.

“You don’t understand,” she said, crying. “Instead of making things better this thing just makes things worse.”

Nick set his jaw and did not look at her.

“You have to go back to that audiologist and get it fixed. You need to see this through,” he said. “You can’t just stop doing things all the time.”

(Other things Louise had started but abandoned:

The 30-Day Shred

Drawing comics

Crocheting

Swann's Way

a Blackberry

the vegetable garden

raking leaves)

*

Her mother, Janet, took Louise to the audiologist the next time. Nick had to work. When Louise had told Janet she was getting a hearing aid, Janet said, "Your grandfather has one and says they're not all they're cracked up to be," but now here she was.

When Louise's name was called she left Janet sitting in the waiting room. She told the audiologist how her hearing aid was clogged with wax, and the audiologist ushered her into a room with a reclining chair, like a dentist's. Janet heard Louise cry out. She couldn't help it, she rushed past the doors and into the exam room, where Louise was lying in the chair, covering her ear. The audiologist stood there, holding a metal tool, smiling.

"I know it hurts, but we have to get that sticky wax off of the inner ear," she said. "You'll be fine, it's just a sensitive area. Our mentally impaired patients have an especially hard time with this," she added.

*

Janet and Louise were silent during the drive home. They didn't speak of the hearing aid after that.

*

"Maybe you should try a different doctor," Nick said.

"Yes. I should," Louise said. "But an audiologist isn't really a doctor, anyway."

*

One day, during a slow afternoon in the tutoring center where she worked a few days a week, Louise accidentally snapped a piece of the hearing aid off and it disappeared onto the dirty linoleum. She had been trying to clean it with a bent paper clip.

*

Louise and Nick went to Minnesota for her brother Michael's college graduation in the spring. The town's main industry was a Malt-O-Meal plant, and the air smelled of cereal. Michael's roommates and their families had a barbeque after the ceremony, and it poured. Everyone gathered under the park's shelter to eat.

Nick had the hearing aid in his shirt pocket because Louise said it was tickling her ear and couldn't stand it. Even though she had broken off part of the hearing aid, it still worked, for the most part. Later, as she and Nick were driving back to their hotel, Nick couldn't find it in his pocket. He turned the car around.

Louise called Janet, who called Tom, who called Warner, who called Michael. They combed the site of the cookout, but no hearing aid. Michael started to make calls to his roommates. Maybe one of them had seen it?

"Bingo!" he said. "My friend's mom has it! She found it in her cooler, the one that held all the beer. She thought it was her dad's, but now looking she sees it's not. I'll get her address."

"Dude, it must have fallen out of your pocket when you leaned over to get a cold one," Tom said to Nick.

They went to the woman's house. She gave it back in a plastic baggie.

The hearing aid finally stopped working altogether, and Louise didn't know if it was from dirt, the broken piece, or a dead battery.

Nick vowed not to ask Louise about it anymore. He pretended it never happened. But doesn't she want it to work? he wondered. Didn't it make things better for a while? But the way she looked at him when he told her she needed to get it fixed. She looked scared.

For a while, the hearing aid sat in the portable dehumidifier, the size of a can of nuts, on the bathroom counter. It was there to serve as a visual reminder for Louise to call another audiologist, maybe one in town, so she could drive herself. Maybe she could get a recommendation from somebody, but who did she know who wore a hearing aid?

Then Louise moved the hearing aid to a shelf in the bedroom, where she could still see it. A couple of times she tried it on again, to see if it worked, but nothing. She needed to buy new batteries, but didn't.

*

Then she didn't know where it was. It could be in the middle dresser drawer where they kept things like pregnancy tests and old birthday cards. Or maybe somewhere in her car, in the storage compartment with old parking tickets? Maybe she had brought it out there to make taking it somewhere to get it fixed even easier, the way she kept dirty sweaters in her backseat for the cleaners. Maybe Nick had it. Maybe he was planning to surprise her with a new one, the best on the market. It would be comfortable, fitting in her ear perfectly so that she couldn't even feel it. It would pick up the quiet talkers but turn background noise down. It would be waterproof, sweat-proof, and she would never hear that splitting feedback whine when too close to a speaker or stereo. It would be like a real ear, but better.

Imagine a Mother

By the third month of trying to get pregnant, Louise had restricted Nick to sex only on the days the calendar deemed super fertile, days 15, 16, and 17 of her menstrual cycle. During those days she thought of driving to his office in nothing but snow boots and a sundress and pulling down the back seat all the way, but didn't. Sex had to be in the early morning anyway — the time of day was important because a woman's body temperature fluctuated and that affected her eggs, a website said.

Nick began to roll his eyes when she mentioned babies after those first few months of trying. It was all she talked about. Louise had ruined it, and it didn't even take her very long.

She knew she was going about this in the wrong way — this was a special time for couples, all the books said. They were supposed to have fun trying, focus on each other and the miracle of life. But she had had brain surgeries. When she was in physical rehabilitation afterwards, she learned all sorts of ways to strengthen her body quickly, to get her weakened right side and loss of balance back to the way it used to be. She didn't let nature take its course. Rubber resistance bands, small hand weights, and heavy jump ropes were used every day. Playing jacks increased dexterity, word searches trained the eye. There was nothing better than walking in sand to help balance, and the game Connect Four helped with depth-perception. Aqua aerobics, Bikram yoga, acupuncture. Zinc. Hypnosis. Meditation. Low doses of electric shocks. Whatever the doctors suggested, Louise did. She scoured chat rooms and message boards for ideas, too. Bought every tool, took every pill. This was no different.

*

They didn't want anyone to know they were trying for a baby. It had to be a secret, otherwise the pressure would stress them out, Louise and Nick told each other. The same week

they were supposed to have sex as much as possible they had to be at a family reunion. It was at the YMCA in the Colorado Rockies, and everyone was staying together in a big lodge, all of them with metal bunk beds and dirty carpet.

They had a room to themselves, but next door were Janet and her husband, the Doctor. They left their door open and kept bags of snacks on the bedside table. Cousins were always going in and out with fistfuls of chips and dried fruit. At night, Janet walked around the halls in wet hair and a sleep-shirt talking to everyone. Louise was glad to be with Janet, she had missed her. She always did.

On the drive out to Colorado, Louise and Nick stopped at a truck stop and Louise, looking for a bathroom, passed doors with locks that looked like dial pads on pay phones. She could feel heat from steam and smell green, and was very close to a naked stranger, probably a man.

Of course, Louise couldn't decide to have a baby without considering all of the reasons for not having one. There was an off-center eye, the immobile half of her face, problems with balance. She had answered questions about her appearance to small children before, explaining that she had a boo-boo, and she wondered how she would explain it to her own child someday. She wondered if they would feel ashamed of her. Or if she would feel ashamed of herself.

The big kitchen in the lodge was for everybody, and so Louise hid her special fertility juice behind the condiments. She was supposed to drink it in the morning on an empty stomach when she took her prenatal vitamins, which she hid in an outer pocket of her suitcase. They were big yellow capsules that smelled like sardines. Alone in her room, she got online and looked at pregnancy message boards. Posts were titled: WHY CAN'T I GET PREGNANT and WHEN CAN I PEE AFTER SEX? She learned what angel babies were. They were babies that had died.

When she and Nick were supposed to have sex, they told the rest of the family that they were going on a solo hike. Afterwards, Louise got into the candle position for twenty minutes. It was like a headstand, and she had learned that on the Internet, too.

Louise's cousins and brothers got up at 3 a.m. to climb the tallest mountain in the park, which required ropes and watching for falling rocks. A rule was that they had to put used toilet paper in their backpacks and hike it down. They didn't want to leave a footprint.

Her father should be the last to know, Louise had heard. She had heard not to tell even her husband right away if she was pregnant. To let that secret be hers for a while. But that was wrong, she thought. She and Nick should share everything as a couple. After all, they will be a family.

One morning, a bunch of people drove to a trailhead where there was a hike to a waterfall. In the backseat, a cousin's boyfriend alternated between talking about how sugar was just as addictive as cocaine and his graduate dissertation on constructing an office building out of plants. His apartment was crammed with them, he said, and so he got more oxygen and felt better than most people.

Louise turned to her cousin. "Do you ever think about having kids?" Louise asked her. She couldn't help it, maybe it was the hormones, stronger during fertile days.

The cousin worked at a running shoe store, made her own almond butter and ate raw garlic. She looked at Louise like her question was a trick.

"Maybe someday," the cousin said, "but we have so much we want to do. Travel, for instance. At least we got to check India off our list, right honey?"

The cousin looked at her boyfriend, not at Louise.

Louise nodded. She wanted to travel, too, but she and Nick never had the money to go anywhere but St. Louis, where his mother lived. She wondered about taking what she had heard called a Babymoon, which was the last vacation a couple took alone before a baby was born. Maybe they would take a Babymoon to St. Louis, or if they waited, maybe they could save up to go somewhere better.

Louise remembered when they said that they wanted to have a baby for sure. They were in a lake, treading water. She had just lost her sunglasses to the deep water, but had a spare in the car. It had been so easy to make that decision to have a baby, deceptively so. To decide to do it, that is. She didn't realize at the time that deciding to do something did not equal doing it.

If asked, Louise would have said she wanted to be a mother because — well, she didn't know why, exactly. Maybe it was something about getting a chance. She had once heard someone describe one's children as “the most interesting people in the world” to their parents. She wanted to know her own.

While some people at the reunion hiked, others went to the Crafts Room to tie-dye T-shirts. Some others went horseback riding where the horses were old and hosts for flies. Some sat in the Commons Room and drank soda. Before dinner, Louise stared at herself in the mirror and tried to imagine herself as a mother. The turned-in eye, half-frozen face. She had never seen a mother like her before.

During happy hour, she watched Nick from across the room, fending for himself with three of her uncles who all stood with their short legs spread far apart, hands in their pockets, comfortable forever.

She sat next to Janet. Janet was wearing one of her sons' college sweatshirts and her face shined with lotion. When she laughed, Louise noticed how much people were liking Janet.

Louise reached for Janet and squeezed her hand, then received the squeeze back.

Louise and Nick drove back home at the end of the week and she began buying things. Just a book, at first, *The Conception Chronicles*, a fake-diary of one woman who was TTC (Trying To Conceive). It was terrible but Louise read it twice, even highlighted parts. Her period came. The next month she bought the pregnancy tests, the ovulation kits, the membership to an online calendar that kept track of basal body temperature, for which she had to buy a special thermometer that she had to stick in her mouth the moment she awoke. She got a special pillow to wedge under her butt to help the sperm travel.

She looked at one website for parents with disabilities, but it seemed to be directed at women in wheelchairs or those who were blind, and she didn't look again. Nothing happened that month. Nothing happened the next one, either.

One night, Nick turned off her favorite show, the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, just minutes before it was over. Her favorite character was Kyle, a beautiful mother of five who was married to an Italian realtor. During a commercial break, Louise had been telling Nick her favorite baby girl names. Her top pick right now was Laurel. "Like the tree," she said.

"Hey!" she said when Nick turned off her show. The bronzed women on the screen were drinking cocktails and yelling insults at each other, their diamond jewelry flashing.

"Weezy," he said, looking at her in such a way that Louise couldn't tell if he was joking or serious. "You've got to chill out with this baby stuff. You are obsessed. You get like this sometimes, I know. But it's stressing me out."

He was serious, Louise decided. He had taken his glasses off and there were red marks on the bridge of his nose. Was he growing a beard?

*

So Louise scaled back. It was Christmas, and she told Nick she didn't care about babies anymore. They went to the grocery store parking lot and bought a real tree. She spent too much money on his present of an electronic map and baked him his favorite, a Dump Cake. The cake was made of canned pineapple, canned cherries, a box of yellow cake mix and two sticks of butter. When the two of them pulled the wishbone after dinner, she had no idea what he wished for with his victory. She didn't know what to ask for herself.

There were many friends Louise wanted to talk about this whole thing with, but she only chose one, who already had a child. Louise told her about trying while in her friend's kitchen, helping decorate an Elmo cake for her son's first birthday. The icing flavor was Black Licorice for the inside of the puppet's mouth.

"Well, we may get pregnant at the same time," the friend said with a wink. "We're going for baby number two."

In college, Louise and this friend went to a party in a barn and the friend leaned back on a standing space heater, smoking a cigarette. After a while she ran her fingers through her hair and removed a fistful. She had burned the back of her bob off. Louise, for her share, wore the wrong coat home and puked all over it.

The friend called a week after her son's birthday party and said she was pregnant.

"Sorry, I'm a Fertile Myrtle," the friend said.

*

When it did happen, and it did happen just a few months later, Louise wanted to call Janet right away, but hesitated. She was sure Janet was in bed, or thought that she might be

reading an interesting book or writing in her journal, or having some sort of important conversation with her husband the Doctor, something to do with her recent knee surgery, or his high cholesterol. The Doctor also had sleep apnea; they could have been talking about that. Janet could be doing any number of things and not want to be disturbed, Louise thought.

When Louise was little, Janet took up tennis, and one year for her birthday her first husband, Louise's dad, gave her a nylon warm-up suit of black and pink geometric designs. She started watching tennis on TV while she was ironing, bought a bunch of short pleated skirts, and joined the city's team. The next year she stopped playing, just like that, and started cleaning the house fervently each night after the kids were in bed, wearing kneepads when she stripped and re-waxed the kitchen linoleum. The next year she started running, and did half-marathons soon after. By the time Louise's parents got divorced Janet had earned her Master's in Library Science by driving into the city three nights a week. She didn't stick with that, though, but did other things, like moving across the country and buying a business in cash. In high school, friends' parents would always ask, "How's your mom?" with an interested, amused look.

Until Louise got sick, that is, and then Janet's life became that. She moved Louise into her house, where the two of them watched movie marathons during the day when Janet should have been working. She helped Louise shower. Read aloud by her bed every night.

Louise remembered Janet's wedding reception a few years ago, when she had remarried, finally. She and Louise had held hands at the head table as everyone started to leave for the night. Louise was dating Nick, and life was getting better. Janet looked at her new sparkling ring and said, "May you be this happy someday."

Baby Class

The baby class was from 6 to 9 p.m., so lots of couples brought dinner in bags. It met in the hospital's basement auditorium, and there were giant rubber balls for the women to sit on, the kind used in gyms, only here they were called "birth balls" and encouraged all the way to the delivery room. Sometimes the class would watch videos on the big projector screen: *Natural Childbirth*, *All About C-sections*; or, *How to Swaddle*. The new parents in the videos were real, the teacher told them. These were not simulations. The new mothers had large pores and were puffy. The men were in need of haircuts and looked like teenagers. There were a lot of tattoos.

"They must have gotten money to have been taped at a time like that," Nick whispered to Louise. "Talk about desperate."

*

Some of the women were the kind who seemed uncomfortable in their pregnant bodies, wearing extra-large T-shirts and stiff khakis with stretchy panels over the belly. Other women looked sexy, with capri-length leggings that showed tanned, shapely calves and tunics that hugged what swelled. Louise was in between — her favorite outfit was a sweater dress that made the bump seem to pop, to be "all belly." Her least favorite item was a pair of too-tight jean shorts.

*

After a few classes, Louise and Nick realized they knew one couple that sat at the table next to theirs — vaguely, through friends of friends. The husband was slouched, playing Angry Birds on his phone, and they could hear the sound effects as he shot another bird flying through the sky. His wife looked straight ahead, prettier than Louise remembered, like Snow White.

The teacher began talking about the benefits of breastfeeding, and kept grabbing her own pair to demonstrate positions: the Cradle Hold, or the Football. Louise looked at Nick so he would laugh at this with her, but he was busy scribbling down notes.

“Be supportive, even if it means just sitting there.” Also, “paper towels, bananas.”

During the break Louise and Nick ran into the Angry Birds husband and wife at the vending machines. The women talked about swollen feet (flip-flops, ice baths) and the husbands stood together but separate, the Angry Birds husband playing the game some more.

The Angry Birds wife reached across Louise and poked Nick in the bicep. “I’m sorry my husband can’t talk to you,” she said, her husband acting like he couldn’t hear, pressing the keys on his phone hard. “You see, he’s doing something very important. Being a father is stressing him out.”

She said the last part in a baby-talk voice.

*

After class was over Louise stood by the hospital’s front entrance, waiting for Nick to bring the car around. She was past the point of walking much, it wouldn’t be long now. She saw the Angry Birds wife waddling toward the parking lot, keys in hand. Her husband drove a motorcycle, she had said.

*

The next class, they got a tour of the Labor & Delivery wing of the hospital. The teacher pointed out the best features of a birthing room: a wall-mounted television, jacuzzi tub, and a fold-out couch for the fathers. “The cafeteria is on the third floor, it’s quite yummy,” she said. “Oh, and surround-sound!”

A man in a plain white T-shirt and baggy jeans raised his hand. The woman he was with looked very young, with her hair tightly pulled back so it slanted her eyes.

“Can we listen to any music we want?” he said. “What about volume? Can we play it loud?”

Other questions: does the hospital practice Hypnobirth? Where do we find castor oil? How much did doulas cost?

Everyone got a newborn doll to practice putting on diapers. The teacher passed around nursing bras so they could all see the different styles and how they worked. One husband put one on over his shirt and laughed. Louise couldn't help but notice that the Angry Birds husband didn't take a doll, nor examine a nursing bra. If he was not playing his game, he was staring at the ground, or his eyes were closed. Louise thought the other women in the class saw the Angry Birds husband too and scooted their chairs away.

After class, Louise and Nick would go out for ice cream, eating it in the car. Usually they had a lot to talk about. But sometimes they were quiet.

Birth Plan

More than anything, Louise was worried about her right leg during labor. The reflex was ultra-sensitive since the surgeries, and during all of her examinations during her pregnancy, the leg had a mind of its own, sometimes springing out of the stirrup and kicking the doctor lightly. The rest of the birth process seemed darkly unpleasant, but scary? No.

*

Janet and the Doctor waited with Nick's mother, Veronica, in the waiting room.

"I can't believe I'm going to be a grandmother!" Janet kept saying. "Oh, yes I can, yes I can. What should I be called, Grammy? Nana? How about Mimi?"

Janet had bought a present for the baby, whom Louise and Nick had said they were going to name Olive, a little pink hair bow. She clutched it in her lap.

What She Saw

When Olive's eyes started staying open for more than a few seconds at a time, after a week or so, Louise started getting unnerved. Her baby kept looking at her, just gazing. Olive's eyes were long-lashed and she rarely blinked, and everyone said they would stay sky blue like Louise's. Olive saw Louise's naked face, the large pores on her cheeks, the blackheads on her small, upturned nose, and her chapped, red lips. They saw the way the moving side of Louise's mouth pulled over the paralyzed side when Louise spoke, saying "Olive, are you hungry?" and the way her adept left fingers helped her stiff, weak right ones with her nursing bra. They saw Louise's smudged glasses with the dark-green frames. It made Louise uncomfortable, that stare, but she was also impressed by its intensity. This baby was going to watch all she pleased. Louise did not like being looked at, but she was beginning to see she would have to get used to it.

The Nanny Cams

The couple had a nanny cam, Louise heard. Actually, they had three, one in their baby's room, one in the master bedroom, and one in the living area. The hidden cameras were in what looked like desk lamps, black and plastic.

Louise heard about the hidden cameras from her nanny, who was also the nanny-cam people's nanny.

Louise didn't see how the nanny could tolerate such treatment.

"But you're being spied on," Louise said to the nanny. "That's so awful."

"Oh, I know," said the nanny, on her way out the door after an afternoon with Olive, who was now nine months old. The nanny had taken her on a walk in the stroller, fed her Cheerios and yogurt, and now they were all sitting on the kitchen floor while Olive rolled a metal mixing bowl around.

"Who knows what they've seen me do. I go to the bathroom with the door open so that their baby can see me."

Louise shook her head.

"That's nuts," she said. She wondered how much the cameras were.

*

Louise and Nick had had several babysitters by now. Their first was named Tiffany, and she began to watch Olive when she was just four months old so Louise could go back to work teaching two days a week. When Tiffany started, they noticed she kept drinking water out of their wine glasses, but they didn't say anything. Once, when Tiffany saw Louise pour water into a green cup, she said, "Oh, I thought these fancy glasses were for water. Sorry."

Tiffany was taking college courses online to become a radiology assistant. She didn't like taking Olive for walks, even though Louise and Nick set the stroller right by the door and mentioned how they wanted Olive to spend some time outside every day. Tiffany usually said the weather had been too hot or too cold. She wore short shorts and little tank tops and had a spray tan, but Olive seemed to like her, smiling and clapping whenever Tiffany came in the door, and all her references had raved about her.

One woman lauded Tiffany's attention to sunscreen, never letting her children out of the house un-slathered.

"There isn't a cell in my body that tells me not to trust her with my children," another woman told Louise over the phone.

*

Louise and Nick's current nanny had Googled the lamps that she suspected were nanny cams and, right-o, the same ones came up on-screen with an arrow showing where to find the hidden camera. The nanny said she had begun to guess she was being watched when the nanny-cam husband and wife started knowing things that were indiscernible without watching her — the wife humming a song that the nanny only sang to their baby when they were alone, for example, or the husband saying, "good job on getting her down for a nap so quickly yesterday."

The nanny and Louise got into the habit of gossiping about the nanny-cam couple when Louise came home from teaching. Olive would play nearby, gleefully shredding back-issues of magazines on the living room rug or picking through her toy basket, looking each item over carefully before tossing it. The nanny told Louise that the nanny-cam husband's dream was to quit his job and stay home with their baby, or to become a nurse, and the wife wrote breastfeeding instructions into her will. On Fridays, the nanny and Louise would add alcohol into

the mix, calling it Happy Hour. Sometimes they would drink 100-calorie lime-flavored beer, sometimes a Skinnygirl margarita.

When Nick got home from work, Louise would tell him what the nanny had told her that day about the nanny-cam couple. He had a more difficult time laughing about it than Louise.

Once, he suggested the nanny take matters into her own hands.

“Why doesn’t the nanny just quit? That kind of mistrust is just wrong,” he said

“It’s not our business,” Louise said. They were making dinner, she was frying chicken sausage and Nick was cutting broccoli. “Everyone has to make money, right?” she said.

On the other hand, Louise said later, as they were loading the dishwasher after they had put Olive to bed, she wouldn’t mind having a nanny cam.

“Are you serious?” said Nick, rearranging everything Louise put into the dishwasher rack, just like he always did.

“Oh, come on, don’t tell me you’ve never thought of it,” she said, running a spoon covered in peanut butter under the faucet, from one of her snacks.

“Yeah, O.K., I guess I would like to see what goes on when I’m not home. It’s my daughter we’re talking about. But there’s a fine line between what you think about doing and what you actually do,” he said, shutting the dishwasher door with finality. “At a certain point, you just have to trust people.”

Or just try not to think about things too much, Louise thought.

*

When Louise and Nick’s babysitter Tiffany quit to take care of her aging grandparents, they tried out Haley, Tiffany’s friend. Haley only lasted one evening, because when Nick

stopped at home after work to grab a tie, she and Olive were watching cartoons, and when he and Louise came home from dinner two hours later, they were watching T.V. again, or still.

“For God’s sake, she just has to play with Olive. How hard is this job?” Nick said to Louise. They posted an ad for a nanny the next day.

*

This nanny-cam issue was all the more complicated because Louise and Nick knew the nanny-cam husband and wife. When their babies were very little the mothers had met each other at a breastfeeding Q&A at the hospital and these days, sometimes they would sit by each other at the city wading pool while their babies splashed. Louise thought the nanny-cam wife seemed sweet.

*

Louise and Nick’s mothers had babysat many times. Janet drove from her town an hour away to watch Olive every Thursday while Louise taught. Nick’s mom lived farther away, but came to visit every month or so. Both of the grandmothers did a pretty good job, Louise and Nick thought. True, Janet gave Olive spoonfuls of soymilk and took her on walks in very cold weather, and Nick’s mom put her coffee where Olive could grab it and tended to only be woken by very loud crying, but all in all they had little to worry about. Louise had heard stories of grandmothers who complained of their own grandbabies crying too much, and she had one friend whose mother-in-law said, “What should I *do* with it all day?”

*

The nanny-cam wife sent Louise an email that asked if she and Nick would like to come over for dinner.

“We can scout for the cameras,” Louise said to Nick. They sat side by side on the couch, each on their computers. It was their nightly routine after putting Olive to bed.

“Isn’t that snooping? It seems a little creepy,” Nick said.

“Fine. I’ll look around by myself,” Louise said. She emailed the woman back. “Yes!”

They bought a cherry pie on their way over. They drove around the new-construction subdivision for a bit so they wouldn’t arrive right on time, singing off-key nursery rhymes to Olive. The nanny-cam house smelled like spices, and Olive and their baby squealed and crawled around while the parents talked first birthday parties, coming up soon. The nanny-cam wife was doing a polka-dot party, while Louise was thinking luau.

“We’ll get some grass skirts for the babies, non-toxic, of course,” Louise said.

“And leis. Or are those a choking hazard?” Nick said. Everyone laughed.

The nanny-cam husband was quite a cook, and served bean burgers, cous cous and a salad. The babies ate in high chairs and happily smashed food in their hair. Louise and Nick learned that the nanny-cam couple were high-school sweethearts, and that their baby had twenty-two food allergies.

After dinner, the nanny-cam couple took their baby into the nursery to put her to bed, and Louise and Nick sat on the floor with Olive. She had started to “read” to herself, quietly looking at a board book, often upside down, while she babbled.

“I don’t think they have any hidden cameras,” Nick said in a whisper. “When I changed Olive’s diaper in the nursery there weren’t any lamps, just a ceiling light.”

“What about that light there, over the piano?” Louise said, chin-to-chest. If there was a camera somewhere she didn’t want to get caught.

“I think that nanny’s full of shit,” Nick said. “They seem like pretty normal parents to me.”

Louise could hear a white-noise machine whirring from the nursery. They had one of those too, and loved it.

*

The next day, Louise told the nanny that they hadn't seen any hidden-camera devices when they had been over at the nanny-cam house.

"Maybe they took them down," the nanny said. "Did you ever think of that?"

"No," Louise said. She had not.

The Root

After she ran into the neighbor's fence, Louise developed this fear that her foot would not find the brake on her car, and it consumed her. She had gone through the chain-link because she had pressed the gas instead of the brake while trying to veer around Nick's car. It had been early in the morning, 6:30 or so. Scarf weather, a navy sky. Her peanut butter toast breakfast sat on a napkin in the passenger's seat.

She had read about old women doing this sort of thing.

The fence was ruined, and she had even put a divot into the neighbor's house, hit it hard enough that the neighbor, Vicki, later said she felt the house shake. Louise had had to knock on her own front door because she had locked it when she left, and had to do it pretty loud because Nick was asleep with the white-noise machine on. He had come to the door, worried and in his boxers, and she had to spill the story to him right there, while the car, still on, lights blazing, was caught up in the metal fence just out of view.

"It's these damn shoes," she had said.

They were flats.

Ever since then, every time she was at a stoplight, she thought she could feel her right foot slowly slipping off the brake pedal, and she would clamp her foot down, leg aching, until the light turned green. She imagined her foot missing the brake, the car careening off a bridge, into a store window, a passer-by. The screaming. She contemplated getting a car that had a hand brake, like one that a paraplegic would drive.

She searched, "fear of driving" on the Internet. Came up with \$137 Home-Study programs and downloadable hypnosis recordings. Bought a \$5 meditation podcast and listened to it once.

She looked to see that her foot was really on the pedal, had to see it with her own eyes, before starting the car, every time.

Her therapist said it went back to a fear of losing control over her life. Again.

“That’s the root of this whole problem,” the therapist said. “It’s purely psychological. Now get out and enjoy your day!”

Louise tried.

*

In high school, Louise was driving home after an orchestra concert, wearing a long black satin dress. She played violin. It was late, snowing, and her family lived very close to Lake Michigan, a five-minute walk, so they were way out there. She saw a deer run in front of her car a ways away so she slowed to a stop. There was no one else on the road. Something slammed into the side of her car, a Jeep, and then she saw a second deer run in front of her and away. She got out and looked, and there was a dent in the passenger’s side from the deer. She had heard of deer running into other people’s cars before — a girl in her class had it happen to her, actually. When Louise got home, Janet and Louise’s brothers came into the garage and they all assessed the damage. It had become a big joke that Louise made it all up, that a deer hit her, to cover some fender-bender. But it really did happen.

*

LAWRENCE — University of Kansas Chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little issued the following statement today regarding the death of student Kara Louise Morgan, a junior from Lawrence. “It is with a heavy heart that we offer deepest sympathies to the family and friends of Kara Morgan,” said Gray-Little. “On behalf of the entire university

community, I send our thoughts and prayers.” Morgan died Sept. 12 as the result of a car accident.

“Kara was a delight to have in class,” said Louise Krug, who taught Morgan in English 102 last semester, in a statement. “She was a happy, helpful, bright woman who saw the best in people. She was excited about her future and was working very hard to achieve her goals.”

*

Louise had passed a special driving test after her brain surgeries. It was in Michigan, where she lived with her father and stepmother for a few months afterward. Officially, it was a Driving Rehabilitation Program through a hospital, but it seemed just like the test Louise had taken as a teen. The point was to see if Louise was competent to drive with her new, altered vision. When she drove, Louise put Scotch or masking tape over the left lens of her glasses so she would not see double. This helped.

*

Louise wore shoes only with thin soles so that she could feel if her foot was resting lightly on top of the pedal. Blue Keds with the laces taken out. Made sure never to come close to tailing another car so there would be no sudden stops. Plenty of time. She had certain routes around town, streets with the least traffic, and she never drove during rush hour. But there were always a few seconds when she would be going down, say, Elm Street, past Woodlawn Elementary, a two-story brick building that little kids would flee at three in the afternoon, and a darting little boy in a red coat would cause her to slam her foot down in a panic.

*

For a while Louise stopped driving completely. It just seemed easier. If Nick was going out of town to shoot a basketball game, he would drive her to the grocery store before he left. She'd stock up on cans of soup, frozen burritos. She tried taking the city bus up to campus to teach or take classes, but a ten-minute trip by car took an hour or longer on the bus. She got some awkward rides home from classmates. Conversations with people who gave one-word answers. The main thing was she felt like such a loser. "Loser. Loser." That would replay in her head as she walked through her day. She felt like she couldn't do anything. Everyone could drive, it couldn't be that hard. What was wrong with her?

*

In a way, this not-driving was lonelier than the brain surgeries, because the cavernous angioma was a serious condition that had to be fixed by surgeons. It warranted surgeries, two, in fact, and her medical insurance paid for it. Real doctors at one of the best medical clinics in the world spoke to her and her family in kind tones.

She told few people about it. What she said usually went something like, "I don't like to drive, it kind of freaks me out."

She was especially embarrassed about wearing the tape on her glasses. On the rare occasion that she gave someone a ride (Nick always drove when they were together) she always went into a long justification of the square of tape. Once, she did this when giving a friend a ride home.

"Oh well. Whatever it takes to keep us safe," the friend said with a nervous laugh.

*

One winter she got rides to weight-lifting class from a woman named Lisa, who worked in accounting at the college. Louise's yoga teacher told her that weight lifting would be better for

her balance, so she signed up. Louise would change from her teaching clothes into workout wear in the third floor bathroom at the college, which always stank and had water on the floor. Then she would trudge, head down against the wind, across campus to Lisa's building. Her office was always very hot and had dishes of chocolate candies in foil. Lisa was an older woman with large legs and an old car. She told Louise stories about when she was a young mother in Paris. She would take her little baby on cheap flights to Scotland or Italy, slept in a bunk with her in hostels, smoked and drank wine.

"I didn't know any better," Lisa said. "None of us did." Her baby girl grew up and went to Brown but didn't like it, and now she was living at home.

During the weight-lifting class picnic that summer, Louise said how delicious the food was, and Lisa said, "Well, you're sure eating enough of it to know." Louise had stopped getting rides from Lisa at that point.

She went to class with a woman named Chris. Chris worked part time at a power plant where she was a drafter, and her husband was a cobbler out of their garage. She and her husband got married and pregnant when they were seventeen and it was the best thing for both of them. Chris would ask Louise personal questions with such skill that Louise would answer before she thought about if she should or not. Chris asked how much she had paid for her house, what her paycheck was, lots of things to do with money.

Most of all, though, she rode with Eileen, a woman with a buzz cut and hot pink lips. Often, Eileen would need to go by the grocery store after class, which worked for Louise, because it was one more errand she could do without driving. Sometimes they would go to the small co-op that had delicious deli food, organic beauty products, and wild flowers. Eileen would insist on buying Louise an ice-cream sandwich or something, and Louise would happily protest.

Sometimes they would stop by Eileen's daughter's apartment on the way home to see her latest kitten or sewing project. Louise was about the same age as her daughter, but felt much older.

*

Accidents:

Rear ending a lawn-care truck on Kentucky Street, outside St. John's Church. Car: Oldsmobile Alero, 2001. Red. Four door. Damage: Small dent in front bumper.

Totaling by another car at a two-way stop the other driver thought was a four way. Louise was following Nick to the mechanics to get new tires. Car: 1998 Volvo Cross Country. Dark Green. Four door. Total loss.

Minor parking lot scrape. Social Security Office parking lot, where Louise was getting Stauffer changed to Krug. No damage to speak of. Car: Subaru Impreza, 2001. Silver. Four Door.

Single-car incident at gas station. Olive was in the car, and Louise was getting gas. When she drove away she heard a crunch and thought she had forgotten to take the pump out. Instead, she had turned too tightly and was scraping the metal pole that was protecting the pump. Car: Subaru Impreza, 2001. Silver. Four door. Slight dent in Olive's door and red gash from pole.

The windshield of the Subaru needed to be replaced from a pheasant smacking into it at 73 mph on Highway 80, near Colby, Kansas.

*

It wasn't right after the surgeries that her driving-phobia started. At first, Louise drove everywhere, at all hours of the day or night, in any weather. On the highway even. Well, once. That had been too scary to ever do again. She would drive to the other side of town at 9 p.m. to the good grocery store, the car lights in the opposite lane shining into her eye that couldn't

squint, her Nystagmus making the lights bounce and blur together, dance in jagged patterns. She didn't care. Louise was still smoking then, and sometimes would miss the cracked window to flick her ash through and singed the car's ceiling instead.

Maybe it had something to do with meeting Nick, who always suggested that he drive, at first, and after a while it just became assumed — an unspoken agreement between them that he could do it better. It probably also had to do with the accident Louise got in her Volvo, the one where she was following Nick. The car had been pretty banged up, even though Louise was fine. However it happened, that confidence she had shortly after her surgeries had faded, and now she just felt vulnerable, unfixable, and beat.

*

When Olive came, Louise's driving got better instead of worse. She and Olive went to the library, the pool, grocery shopping — anywhere in town. It was like she had gotten over it. Sometimes Louise would say to Nick, as they were putting their laundry away, "Remember when I didn't drive?" like it was so long ago. But then, slowly, she started getting scared again, tapping the brake pedal every few seconds just to see if it was still there, forgetting to breathe, imaging her and Olive crashing into the car in front of them, airbags blowing up, glass breaking, someone calling Nick.

*

Maybe they should move to a city, that would solve a lot of things, Louise had thought. She and Nick could take the subway or train to work, and Olive would learn, too. But Louise didn't really want to live in a city, or more accurately, hadn't ever imagined it. She had always thought she would have a house with a yard, and Olive would live in a neighborhood with lots of other kids in it, and play with them in the street after dinner. Louise had thought she would be

the one to drive Olive around — to music lessons, friends' houses, the grocery store. She had thought they would live that kind of life. But then, Louise had thought a lot of things. Thinking things didn't mean jack.

Therapist

Louise went to see her therapist after a long hiatus. It had been since before she was pregnant that she had last been in her office. Louise couldn't remember exactly why she had stopped seeing her, but now she wanted to give the therapist an update. Things were hard between her and Nick sometimes. Olive was still little, and Louise and Nick got a scant amount of sleep. They both thought they each did more chores than the other — they kept score. Louise felt like she weighed a million pounds. There were money worries, and sex ones, or the lack of both. Louise thought maybe her therapist could help her out.

“I can tell you're breastfeeding!” the therapist said when Louise sat down on the couch.

“And I like your new glasses,” the therapist added.

The therapist was a very handsome woman, one whom Louise wanted to look like one day. Her gray hair was short, a cap, and she usually had interesting earrings and scarves. She occupied her chair in a way that looked graceful, with her neck stretched and hands moving.

“So, I found this recipe for a farro and tomato salad that you have got to try,” the therapist said, and Louise remembered this was one reason she had stopped seeing her — they ended up talking about cooking and yoga (they had the same teacher for a while) instead of doing what they were supposed to, and Louise hadn't felt very good about that.

The therapist also talked about her daughter a lot, and after she finished telling Louise about the farro and tomato salad, she began filling Louise in on her daughter's living situation in London. Apparently, she had a very important job in science, a baby, and her husband was a lout.

Louise remembered the first recipe the therapist gave her, that dark winter she moved to Kansas seven years ago. Her days were lonely, and she did things like put her clothes in trash

bags and haul them to a Laundromat across town. It really wasn't a recipe at all the therapist had told her, more like a tip. There was a dehydrated lentil soup mix that was available at the health food store. The therapist told her to add boiling water to some of the soup mix and have a hunk of brown bread with it. An easy meal, she had called it. But nourishing. The first winter Louise was her patient she had eaten that many times.

“So, what brings you here?” the therapist said. “Why today? Why did you come in?”

“Well, you know, it's hard at home, sometimes. Being married and everything. Babies make things hard...” and Louise trailed off. This was the trouble with her and therapy, she could never bring herself to be honest, to tell the therapist anything specific for fear of sounding ridiculous, such as, If my parents got divorced, and my grandparents did too, does that mean I will?

The therapist just looked at her and smiled, and that was all it took for Louise to start to cry. “Of course it's hard. It's okay,” the therapist said. “You just need to take it one day at a time.”

Louise nodded. She remembered now why she had stopped seeing the therapist. The last session they had had was awkward. Louise was trying to tell the therapist a story about Janet, or rather, a story Janet had told her recently that had made her sad.

“My mom said that one Halloween, when Michael was still pretty little, she was so depressed she couldn't get up the energy to make sure we had costumes,” Louise had said. “Isn't that horrible? That just makes me want to cry.”

“I'm sorry, I don't understand,” the therapist had said. “Why? Why does that seem so sad to you?”

“I don’t know, it just does,” Louise said. “It is sad. It’s a sad thing to be depressed, and little kids don’t know that their mom feels that way. I don’t remember that time. I wish I did. Then I could have helped her.”

“But it wasn’t about you,” the therapist said. “It was just something she was going through. Not everything has to do with you, you know.”

Louise didn’t know about that. Didn’t her memories have to do with her? If it affected her, didn’t that count? But she couldn’t share any of this with the therapist. She needed someone she could really talk to.

No Plastics

The invitation to the baby's birthday party said that the parents preferred no plastics. The attendee's presence was enough of a present, but if one still wanted to get a gift, they preferred natural materials.

Wooden toys were popular, Louise had noticed. She saw them in the small, costly children's shops downtown. Child-sized maracas with the label "1+" so the buyer would know the toy was for one-year olds and older. Wooden fake-food, such as bacon or a mound of mashed potatoes for a play-kitchen that a father would build out of logs.

She was not sure if the request for no plastic toys was for aesthetic reasons, environmental, or for health — she thought she remembered certain kinds of chemicals found in plastic that could be released if children were to chew on them, but was not sure. Or, there were two kinds of plastic toys, right? The good and not-good kind. That sounded correct. It was easy to tell between the two because there were so many labels on everything, letting you know you were doing the right thing.

When Louise had opened the birthday party invitation, Olive was playing on a blanket in the middle of the living room floor with a plastic drum and hammer. She was banging the hammer on the drum with all her might and lifting her chin gleefully.

Since Louise had a baby she had been meeting lots of conscientious mothers. These mothers did not want their babies to swim in pools cleaned with chlorine, or wear disposable diapers, or to be vaccinated. They did not want fluoride in the city water. They wanted to take their children on field trips to farms that let the children drink only raw milk that had not been pasteurized. They switched to Traditional Eating, which touted gravy, kombucha, and meat.

Louise could not keep straight why each thing was wrong, which chemicals were in fluoridated water and which were in vaccines, and what chlorine caused. A popular discussion topic for the mothers of the town was Baby-Led Weaning, which involved letting one's baby feed herself from the very start — for example, letting her gum an apple core or suck on a hunk of red bell pepper instead of spooning pureed peas into her mouth. Baby-Led Weaning was said to prevent obesity later in life, but one had to watch the babies at all times because of choking.

The most desirable preschool was on the edge of town, and the children all wore identical gray smocks and had the same metal lunch pail. The teachers called them “friends” and the children did things like make soap. This was a very expensive school that Louise could not afford.

*

Louise told Nick about the No Plastics birthday party invitation as they ate dinner that night. They were eating Toad-in-a-Hole. Louise looked at Olive, who watched an educational children's show from the floor of the living room, grinning at the puppet, a dog with his tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth, on the screen.

“What are these women even afraid of?” Nick said. He cut the yolk with the side of his fork and swirled a piece of toast in it.

“I don't know,” Louise said. “Maybe they are doing the right thing, though. Maybe we should read more, be more educated about Olive's well being.”

Nick checked his email but kept eating. “You don't always have to do what everyone else is doing, Louise. If we think Olive is healthy, we're fine.”

“I know that,” she said, taking a big bite, yolk running down her chin. But she didn't know that, either. It was always better to be more cautious than less, right? Always better to be

safe? She looked at her daughter, so happy, but this T.V. show was almost surely bad for her in some way. Their doctor had said Olive was supposed to sit in her high chair at the table with them so they could show her that families ate dinner together, but Olive screamed and squirmed until they let her free.

*

The next morning, Louise and Olive went to the public swimming pool. The No Plastics mother was there, a no-nonsense black tank-style swimsuit on. Louise and Olive joined the other mothers in the water who were pulling their babies around, making noises like motorboats. After a while they sat on the grass and fed their babies pieces of strawberries and banana. They talked about real estate. Everyone wanted a bigger house. The No Plastics mother said, “I just want someplace where I have enough land to have a real garden, to get out and hoe a row before breakfast.” She had eaten pieces of her placenta on hummus with pita chips the day after she gave birth in her bathtub. She said it was a miracle food.

Louise hadn't done anything like that. She had given birth to Olive in the hospital and had an epidural. Two, actually, because the first one had worn off. She remembered being numb below the waist and eating Jell-O and popsicles and laughing at some movie while her contractions spiked. Maybe she should have been doing something else instead.

The No Plastics mother got up to leave, and slipped her baby in a pouch on her hip. She made it look so easy.

“Nice toy,” she said, looking Louise and then at the toy in Olive's hands, a set of plastic wind-up chattering teeth. Louise had got them at a joke shop.

*

Or that would have made it better, Louise told Janet. “Really, all that happened was that she smiled at me before she walked home from the pool. She and her husband share one car. You know, to conserve.”

Janet babysat Olive on Thursdays while Louise taught, and now they were in Louise’s kitchen, making dinner. Or rather, putting grocery store sushi on plates and while Olive sat in her highchair, picking at macaroni.

“You mean because if the mother was mean you could have disliked her?” Janet said.

“Right,” Louise said. “As it was, she seemed like a good mom and a kind person. Or fine, at least. As nice as me, for sure.”

ESFJ

Sometimes Louise worried that she and Nick fought too much. She remembered how Janet would go out for a walk after an argument with Louise's dad and sometimes be gone for a while. Louise had never done that. She had cried in the bathroom, or at the kitchen table, or their bed, and she had gotten in her car, even started it, but she had never driven away.

*

Louise was happy she was an ESFJ. She had taken the Myers-Briggs personality test on her computer. The Caregiver was the title of the ESFJ's profile, and ESFJ stood for Extroverted, Sensing, Feeling, Judging. Nick found out he was an ISFJ when she made him take the test after breakfast one day, standing up at the kitchen counter because that was the only place he could use his computer while it charged. The I in his ISFJ stood for Introverted, and his title was The Nurturer

"This is exactly right on," Louise hooted, reading the description over his shoulder. One sentence read, "ISFJs have a very clear idea of the way things should be, which they strive to attain."

"Like when you thought my idea of hanging stained glass with fishing line in the kitchen window looked country," she said. "And how you like bacon but won't eat ham."

"Well, that's how I feel," Nick said, pouring more coffee and putting his mug in the microwave. "What's the difference between a caregiver and a nurturer, anyway?"

*

Louise remembered getting ESFP, The Entertainer, as the result a long time ago. She had changed since after the surgeries, she guessed, become more reserved, maybe — but still. Maybe

her changing was just part of growing older. Also, an entertainer was nothing like a caregiver. What had happened? What had been the cause of this shift?

Louise also liked to read about the compatibility of her and Nick's astrological signs. She was a Gemini and he was a Sagittarius. One website said the two signs would attend lots of wild parties together and make each other shine brighter. Gemini, Louise's sign, were natural intellectuals, charmers, gifted with talk. A few other sites said that Gemini was generally two-faced and selfish, indecisive and flighty. Sagittarius, Nick's sign, were Steady Eddies. They were truth-seekers and wanted to know things like the meaning of life. Their worst trait was tactlessness.

*

Louise stopped reading her teaching evaluations from students for a while, after seven students used the adjectives "scatterbrained" and "flighty" to describe her. She thinks this is because she sometimes does go on tangents when she is talking to students, and doesn't always know their names. But she never forgets papers, or doesn't update the online gradebook. Maybe it is because of her blond hair. Or because she laughs at things that's aren't funny? Or did it have something to do with how she looked, her trouble holding eye contact, or hearing soft-spoken students?

*

Louise and Nick were both oldest children. That did not bode well for their union, said a birth-order book Louise had checked out from the library. They had problems sharing things, from a bowl of ice cream to the bathroom sink during teeth brushing. They had the Last Word Syndrome, and would endure the silent treatment for only a few minutes before picking the scab of an argument.

*

Their last serious fight had been about Louise buying things that Nick said were unnecessary. In a three-day period that Nick had been in Texas photographing basketball games, Louise had bought the following items online: a four-pack of toothbrushes for Olive called Surround (because they cleaned three surfaces of the teeth at once); a sea-salt grinder; a pair of khaki shorts for herself; a portion-control plate called Meal Measure, which had three circles for protein, vegetables, and starch; and a 1 oz. bottle of Moroccan Oil for her hair.

Louise's defense was that she was lonely when Nick was gone.

"It's 6 a.m., Olive's sleeping, and I'm sitting around with my computer," she said, smiling, hoping Nick would meet her eyes. But Nick was pretty pissed. Olive was eating a snack in her high chair, toast and hummus, and Nick cut it for her in small, precise squares.

"I'll go to the post office right now and send the plate back," Louise said. "O.K.?"

After ten minutes she came back to the kitchen empty handed. "I can't find it," she said. "I know I put it in there. It's just such a mess in that room, all those clothes and shoes." There was a silence, and then Nick said what he had to say. He had said it many times.

"It's O.K., Louise. It didn't cost that much anyway. Have some toast"

In that way, he was a Nurturer.

Colorado

Every summer since her brain surgeries, Louise wished she hadn't gone. But every summer, she went. This would be the sixth. Being around all those family members who oozed health, their talk about miles hiked, cliffs climbed, blisters, belay ropes, sore shins — all with grins — it made her sad. Usually she didn't feel sorry for herself anymore. She was used to her body and its limitations. But when she went to Colorado, she got angry again, and she felt sheepish when her heart got dark, but it did. It made her think, "Silly me, I actually thought I was over this."

*

This cabin wasn't just somewhere in Colorado, it was in Rocky Mountain National Park, entered through the town of Estes Park. The mountains were unavoidable. The town was a prepackaged family vacation, chock-full of fudge and ice-cream shops, mini golf, and old-time photo studios. It had stores that sold only rocks, or T-shirts, or saltwater taffy, or Christmas ornaments. Tourists could pay to ride an ancient, exhausted horse on a dusty trail or drive up high on Trail Ridge Road to see snow and little blue flowers. As a kid, Louise's favorite place had been the Lazy B Ranch, a place that served everyone the same tin plate of beans, corn bread and gray beef on a long bench while a group sang onstage.

Her family's cabin was inside the national park, had been in the family for more than one hundred years, so it was there before the park was established. Every summer, the whole gang went. Her uncles, shirtless in Levis, always talking about their younger years on Trail Crew: scrambling up mountains in lightning storms, carving footpaths out of mountain sides, lifting boulders. Her aunts, who talked a good game about disliking hiking, saying they wanted nothing more than to get a pedicure and see a movie on their vacation, thank you, but when it came down

to it they were behind their husbands on almost every climb. Her cousins, young, beautiful women with muscle-y stomachs and long-haired boyfriends, they all stayed up late by the fire, slept for three hours and were gone up a peak before breakfast each day.

*

But Louise had once been like that, sort of. She had grown up doing this. She had done Mount McHenry's when just a teen, starting up the trail and 3 a.m. and not getting back until dinner. She had walked switchbacks until her legs throbbed, sang Peter, Paul & Mary while carefully positioning her feet on scree, ate PB&J while in a boulderfield, waiting out a hailstorm. She had always complained more than other people, and identified more with her father, Warner, who had a quieter love of the outdoors (think bird-watching and bee-keeping). She liked to read and eat cookies, but she could hike if she had to, which on family vacations, she did. Maybe that was another angle to the depression that set in while in Colorado. When she went there, she was reminded of who she used to be and what she used to be able to do, and she wasn't ready to accept that she'd changed.

*

The feeling crept up on Louise each time she went, this dread of Colorado, of how it made her feel. Olive was almost one year old, so this would be her first time at the cabin. At first, as Louise, Nick, and Olive drove out from Kansas, Louise was excited. She had packed pretzels and grapes in snack bags, bought cooking magazines — Olive had Elmo and Nick had the radio — they were on vacation. There was that thrill of staring at flat yellow fields for six hours and then seeing the outline of a purple mountain range, the rolling down of windows after Boulder, the sweet, green air they sucked in, the passing of avalanche signs, stocked trout streams, and suddenly, finally, the dipping down into the valley of Estes Park and the way the car seemed to be pushed into the arms of the town.

Louise started to feel just a prick of regret as she got out of the car, across the uneven ground up to the cabin into the arms of cousins, aunts, uncles, her own brothers and Janet. She took in the log cabin, the kitchen with its ugly brick-like linoleum and antique iron stove, at the long dinner table with the blue-and-white checked oilcloth. At the front porch with its million-dollar view. She loved it all. But then, later, after she'd put Olive to bed and sat in the dark on the porch with everybody, someone asked about tomorrow. What should the hike be tomorrow? Chapin? Chiquita? What about Flattop? Who wants to run the whole way?

“Let's do something that Louise can do,” Janet said. “What about Emerald Lake? Or Cub? We'll all go,” Janet said. “It's about being together.”

“Yeah, great idea,” Nick said, and Louise's brothers and cousins echoed him.

“What do you feel like doing, Weezy? Let's do whatever you want,” a cousin said.

They decided on Emerald Lake, an easy three miles on a clear path, and everyone moved on to talking about the tree disease that was killing all the pines in the park. Louise had trouble following. She was thinking that now tomorrow was taken care of, but what about the next day, and the day after that? She couldn't relax.

Louise was hopeful as they started up the trail the next morning, Olive in a pack on Nick's back. She had two walking sticks, the lightweight aluminum kind, one in each hand. The trail was cement, like a sidewalk. They walked for a while, then reached the lake. They ate some turkey sandwiches while standing up. Drank water even though they weren't thirsty. They hiked back down to the car in twenty minutes.

It was only mid-morning as they pulled up to the cabin, and the rest of her family kept seated as Louise, Nick, and Olive got out.

“You guys go on in and relax,” an uncle said. “We’re going to do another hike since it’s so early in the day and all. Nothing big. See you for dinner!” And the van rattled down the long gravel driveway again, leaving a cloud.

Well, what did she want? Louise asked herself, sitting on the steps while Nick put Olive down for a nap inside. Easy hikes were short, there was no way around it, and doing too much was disastrous, as she had learned.

Take last year, for example. Someone had suggested doing Ouzel Falls, which was a short, shady hike, but everyone had forgotten how rocky the trail was. At first, it was fine. Louise and Janet held hands and talked. After a quarter mile or so, the trail sloped dramatically and got jagged, and Louise started to slip each step she took. “These damn things,” she said, and threw the walking sticks in the woods, which Janet ran after. By the time they had been hiking for almost an hour, Louise had one arm linked through Nick’s and one through Janet’s, and they were pulling her up the trail and Louise’s feet slid after. The river rushed parallel to their path, and the woods were dark and soft with trees. Louise was crying.

Louise almost didn’t go back to Colorado after that summer. “Why?” she would say to Nick, when they would discuss it. It would be late, Olive asleep for hours, and they would be sitting on the couch with their respective computers, trolling their nightly websites. “Why put myself through that kind of frustration when I don’t have to? It’s a vacation, for Pete’s sake. Let’s go visit my dad, or your mom, or go somewhere we’ve never been before. We don’t need Colorado.” She shut her computer, then opened it. She didn’t know what to do.

Nick took off his glasses and rubbed his face. “We don’t have to go there. But it’s there, Louise. Colorado will always be there, and you can’t just ignore it. Your family’s there. And it’s gorgeous. We just have to make it work. It will, but it may take a while to feel normal.”

She knew he was right, but she didn't know if it was possible. How could sitting out feel normal? How could it feel O.K.?

*

They went out to Colorado again the next summer, when Olive was almost two years old. Nick, Louise and Olive did a few short hikes, with days in between spent walking through the grassy meadows, and going into town buying Olive trinkets like plastic ponies and little tom-tom drums. It was a bit easier this time, being different from the rest of the clan, getting back to the cabin hours before the serious hikers did, and the lack of an "adventure of the day" story to tell at dinner (Janet saw a moose one day, a cousin almost got blown off a rock face the next). But for the most part, Louise felt content. The air smelled like sage, they made S'mores each night, and one of her aunts made amazing dirty martinis. Near the end of their week, Louise, Nick and Olive went on a hike to Dream Lake, two miles up. They walked up pretty easily, and were walking around looking for a spot to eat lunch when Louise slipped on some gravel, caught one foot on a tree root, and fell down hard. She was wearing shorts, the ground was all rocks, and the scrape on the back of her left thigh was bad. A stranger patched Louise up as best she could (Louise and Nick had no first aid), but when they started to head down, Louise took a few steps and started crying.

"Never again," she said to Nick. "I don't want to hike ever again."

Olive was screaming in Nick's backpack. Bloody bandages were hanging off Louise's leg. Two more strangers stopped Louise at various points on the trail and offered fresh gauze, painkillers, and ointments. They made it back to the car.

They didn't hike the next day, but on their last day there, they did. A small one, so short that Louise said "This is it?" when she saw the waterfalls. She felt a little mad, a little bored.

"Now what?" she asked Nick. "It's only 9:00 in the morning."

"I don't know," Nick said. "We'll think of something."

Short Hair

Louise couldn't decide whether or not to get short hair. The cut she was thinking about was called a "pixie," and when she looked at photos of celebrities with such a style, they looked like they had just woken up, run their fingers through their gamine cut, and thrown on a gown. On the one hand, short hair would feel good in the summertime, Louise thought, her neck able to breathe, no more searching for a ponytail holder or feeling thousands of strands stuck to her. She had gone with Janet last week to get Janet's cut. Janet had dark, wavy hair that had been long since Louise was a teenager. Janet wanted it short so she could swim during her lunch hour, and she also wanted to grow out her gray hair, to stop coloring it every month. She read blogs like Rock the Silver to prepare for the chop.

At the salon, the hairstylist gathered Janet's thick ponytail in one hand and cut with the scissors, just like Louise thought she would. Janet looked at Louise with her teeth clenched and her hands between her knees.

"It's so liberating!" Janet said over the phone a week after the cut. "I just get out of the shower, run some goop through it, and I'm done!"

Louise was jealous.

On the other hand, though, Louise thought about her face. "How do you know if short hair is for you?" a website said. "Do you have a perfectly symmetrical face? If not, short hair can bring out your flaws. Remember, there's nowhere to hide with short hair!" The site also said, "A pixie cut is not for those who have extra weight. Who wants a big bottom and a small top? You don't want to look like a pinhead!" Louise didn't feel good about that, either. She wasn't big, but

she certainly wasn't little. Also, someone at school had once told her she had a small head. Was that bad?

Louise did it anyway, and it looked pretty good. But she did wonder, in the weeks and months that followed, if she had made a mistake. Did the haircut magnify her asymmetrical face? Did it make her butt look bigger? Was this how she was going to spend her life, trying to minimize the obvious? Always scheming about how to look less — less like how she really was? Maybe she should have kept her bob.

Four or five months after she got her short haircut, Louise had a dream that she was smiling. It was a perfect, toothpaste-commercial smile, with both ends of the lips moving away from the teeth, both cheeks swelling into little apples. During the dream, Louise thought, "I knew it. I knew my facial movement would come back. It was only a matter of time. Thank God." And that was it, the dream ended.

It was the kind of dream that felt so real Louise took a few minutes to realize it hadn't actually happened when she woke up. She spent the morning, really the whole day, feeling depressed, and knowing exactly why. There was nothing left to do except wait for the feeling to pass, she knew that, too. It had caught her by surprise, that dream, because she had thought she was long past wishing for the impossible, for what had happened to her face, eyes, and body to reverse itself. It had been almost nine years since her brain surgeries, after all, Louise said to herself as she rubbed some hair paste between her palms and then through her hair. She was going for that not-thought-about look her hairstylist had taught her.

This was the same hairstylist she'd had since she was 18 and had first moved to Lawrence, Kansas. Louise remembered the shock on the hairstylist's face when she came into the salon after she moved back to Kansas after her brain surgeries, looking very different than

when she had last been there a year ago. Recently, at an appointment, her hairstylist had said that she had been nervous around Louise at first when she returned.

“I wasn’t sure how you would be as a person, you know? You looked different, had been through so much, I just didn’t know,” she trailed off. “But then we started talking again, just like old times, and I was like, ‘Oh, it’s still Louise.’”

Louise thought she knew what her hairstylist was saying, that what was on her inside was still the same, even if her outside was different. She looked at her new, short hair, the dyed blond growing out and the brown coming in. She was going to leave it, going natural. “Striking,” Janet had called it, this new, darker color. Louise liked that.

Trike

Depending on whom you talked to, it was either a recumbent bicycle or an adult tricycle. There was a big difference between the two terms. “Recumbent bicycle” sounded like a serious piece of machinery, and called to Louise’s mind old men who wore spandex shorts and sucked packets of energy gel. “Adult tricycle,” though, sounded too special, something for people who could not ride a two-wheeled bicycle, and well, who couldn’t do that? It was like saying “Adult crib” or “Adult diaper” — something for the very old, the almost gone from this world.

*

Louise got one, though. A trike. Silver, with fenders and a big basket in the back, screaming farmer’s market. Louise took it for a ride around the block the first night she got it, wobbling the handlebars, gripping the rubber handles so hard her forearms ached. But the trike itself stayed steady.

*

The next weekend, Nick proposed going for a family ride. His bike had a child seat in the back, the same kind from when he and Louise were little. Olive tolerated it. Louise bought three helmets: black for Nick, grey for herself, and a pink one with ladybugs for Olive.

“Don’t go fast,” Louise said, getting on slowly, double-checking her feet position on the pedals. She didn’t like following Nick when he drove a car. He always sped up at yellow lights. She had a feeling this would be similar.

“Well, I’m going to go faster than that snail’s pace you’ve been going,” Nick said. He had seen Louise practicing the last few nights after Olive was in bed. “I’m joking,” he said, seeing Louise scowl, but Louise knew she went slow. Before she had any more time to get anxious, Nick strapped Olive in and they set off. Through the neighborhood, over the train

tracks, down a road headed to the county line. Every so often Louise felt herself get off balance a little bit, and she found that she couldn't steer with just one hand, not even for a second, like if she had to scratch her neck or push her helmet back. But still. They were moving fast, and they were quiet.

Afterword

The theme for the party was “birthday party,” Louise kept telling people. She had vowed to keep it simple for Olive’s second one. No big meal for the guests. No special music. No party favors. She made sure to put “no gifts please” on the invitation, one that even wasn’t a paper invite, but on Facebook. This was not going to be like last year’s. She and Nick had gone with a luau theme and driven themselves crazy. Louise had made a pineapple-coconut layer cake with a pineapple-curd filling from a magazine, and she had to make two because they had invited so many people. The day of the party, she had gotten up so early it was still dark out. The living-room lights were at their max so she could tape life-sized paper cutouts of hula dancers to the walls.

This time, things would be different, Louise and Nick agreed. The party was at a nearby park, and they set up underneath a shelter in the shade with picnic tables. There was no mini slow-cooker of melted chocolate to hand-dip strawberries, no Chi-Chi punch, ukulele music via ipod dock, no leis. Instead, there was a glass vat of iced-coffee, fruit and vegetable trays, and donuts. Louise’s dad and stepmother, Elizabeth, as well as Nick’s mother had all come in from out-of-town to help, and Janet and the Doctor were also there. Pink balloons floated on ribbons tied to the shelter’s posts, a felt banner with “Olive Krug” stitched on it waved in the breeze.

Louise and Nick stood by a large galvanized metal tub that held gourmet sodas in flavors like cucumber and pomegranate that floated in rapidly melting ice. A gang of ragtag boys poked the contents with sticks. Olive was sitting with a few of her babysitters in the grass, trying on their sunglasses and posing for their cameras.

“Isn’t this better than last year?” Louise said. “So much less stressful. Just a regular birthday party.”

“Maybe now other people will see that you don’t have to go all out, snapping photos of “ Nick said, snapping photos of the guests, who sat at the picnic tables munching cake. “You can just be low-key about it.”

Louise nodded, but she was thinking about the expensive coffee beans from Panama they had bought, brewed them in an overnight-drip method with a cold-press, and then stored at a certain temperature. She saw the low-sugar juice boxes, the Mylar Elmo balloons tied around the tables. She thought of the birthday presents that Olive had received from the grandparents, including a necklace, bracelet and ring set, a plastic crown, and tutu. Was that all really keeping it simple? She didn’t think so.

Maybe not much with her had changed since last year, or the year before that, and so on, Louise thought. Maybe things just stayed the same. Maybe always, despite one’s best efforts to evolve, to focus on what was important, you were who you were. There were times since having Olive that Louise was sure she had matured, become enlightened, even, like when she endured a half-hour tantrum stoically, cleaned spilled blueberry smoothie on the couch for the third time in one week, or got one hour of sleep for an entire night. Life would proceed, as always, and it would all be fine. But for every moment where Louise thought she had it all figured out, there was one that showed Louise that she was exactly the same as the night she met Nick, almost nine years ago when she was 22, fresh out of the hospital.

She had been on the steps of an apartment building with her cane in one hand and a beer in the other, smoking, one lens of her glasses covered with tape so she didn’t see double. Nick had just arrived, and he shook her hand when a friend introduced them. And that was all, that night. Nick went inside, and Louise stayed on the steps, waiting for her ex-boyfriend to come outside after his band finished playing in the apartment’s living room. She was trying to get back

together with this guy. They had dated a couple of years before her brain surgeries, and she dumped him for a Frenchman and a plan to move to California. But now she wanted him back. She wanted her old life back, actually, and she was going to get it, somehow.

It never happened, of course. Her ex had moved on, he told her gently later that night, and what Louise didn't even realize that night was that she was beginning her new life. But she was still looking back at who she used to be, and how she could become that girl again. She was looking backwards so fixedly that she didn't even see the gift that she had shaken hands with. She had let him walk on by. Good thing she and Nick had run into each other again a week later, and a week later after that. Good thing Nick was who he was, and he had been patient, understanding, and had a keen sense of perspective. Good thing people got more than one chance. Sometimes Louise still felt exactly like that 22-year-old girl, waiting on the steps for something that would never come. She wondered when that feeling would stop.

Form Matter: Reviews of three books where structure makes all the difference

include an opening paragraph about why you chose these books to look at and the importance of form and focus in autobiography. And then maybe a final paragraph about form in your own work.

Why did I choose these three books ---

As a student in creative nonfiction writing, I am interested in exploring how structure contributes to life writing. I chose these three books for this article because they each have very different and distinct forms. The first book I discuss, Kate Christensen's *Blue Plate Special: An Autobiography of My Appetites*, is written in a chronological format: we begin at Christensen's earliest memory, and end at Christensen's present situation. The second book, Susannah Cahalan's *Brain On Fire: My Month of Madness*, a narrative about a sudden, short, mysterious autoimmune disease that struck Cahalan when she was twenty-four. The chapters are short, information about Cahalan the person is kept to a minimum, and the time span covered is approximately one year. For the last book, I discussed Dinty W. Moore's *Between Panic and Desire*. This memoir is unconventional in form because it is as much about American contemporary culture as it is about Moore himself. With short chapters that blend narratives and quizzes, numerology and television analysis, this memoir explores what it's like to write about oneself in relation to the postmodern world.

By choosing these three very different examples of life writing, my hope was to learn each one's pros and cons. As I had expected, there was no winner or loser, but this exercise did teach me a lot about how much form matters in writing.

Kate Christensen's *Blue Plate Special: An Autobiography of My Appetites*, is not what you'd think. For one, although the title and various features of the text might lead one to think

this is a food memoir, it's not. In the title, Christensen is alluding to her various appetites: food, sex, and writing. This multiplicity could be an asset, but for *Blue Plate Special* it proves problematic. The autobiography suffers from the common problem in the genre of too much information. Christensen's life has interesting periods, no doubt about it: She grew up in 1960's Berkeley with a violent father and hippie mother, spent part of high school in Spring Valley, New York among a Rudolph Steiner (Austrian philosopher, social reformer, and esotericist) community, was a nanny in France, abused alcohol for twenty years, and has an ill-fated marriage. But, there is a lot of writing in between these dramatic periods that is full of banal happenings. This could be prevented, perhaps, by changing the form and tightening the manuscript as a whole.

What form there is in *Blue Plate Special* serves little purpose. Parts One through Ten each contain several chapters. Each part is named after where Christensen lived at the time (e.g. "Part One: Berkeley, Part Two: Wildermuth...Part Ten: New England"); however, there is very little break in time between parts, so the whole method seems pointless. It is almost as if Christensen knew that there needed to be some sort of form applied to the memoir, but this doesn't seem like the right one.

A similar problem can be seen in Part Three: San Miguel, where Christensen details her adolescent life in suburban Tucson, Arizona. Part Three has six chapters, and while there are some interesting events (Christensen's stepfather loses his job and becomes an alcoholic) there is a lot of talk about disliking household chores, paper routes, and generic first-date kisses gone wrong. Here, it seems as if Christensen is trying to fill up pages, and to document this period of her life just for the sake of doing it.. Why not skip, or at least shorten, the uneventful? Why not distill the teenage years, and record one event, one night, one weekend, or a long conversation?

This is not to say that Christensen's memoir is not worth reading or uninteresting. Sometimes the wrong form can make the story awkward, but some of the events in Christensen's life are very riveting. The opening of Chapter One for example, draws the reader in incredibly quickly with a scene that shows two-year-old Christensen having breakfast with her family:

The table was littered with cups and plates and bowls, eggshells and toast crumbs. The sun shone in the windows of the kitchen of our small bungalow on McGee Avenue in Berkeley. My father was about to walk out the front door to go somewhere, work probably.

My mother said in a high, plaintive voice, "Please stay and help me, Ralph. I just need some help. Don't leave yet."

My father paused in the kitchen doorway, looking back at us all at the table. Something seemed to snap in his head. Instead of either walking out or staying to help my mother, he leaped at her and began punching her in a silent knot of rage. It went on for a while.

The rest of Part One is equally captivating, telling how Christensen's mother escapes the abusive relationship with her husband and begins to provide a safe life on her own for her daughters. But this narrative is broken into four short chapters that each end abruptly when it seems it would work better as one long piece. Here, too, it's almost as if Christensen wanted the book to have some structure, but just picked one and forced her book to conform.

Let's turn to two memoirs that avoid Christensen's pitfalls in very different ways, showing that there's not a formula to structuring successful life writing, just an importance in finding the best form for the subject matter.

In Susannah Cahalan's *Brain On Fire: My Month of Madness*, Cahalan, a twenty-four-year-old, is at the brink of starting her adult life — she's in a serious relationship and a reporter

at a New York newspaper. Then, suddenly, she is psychotic, violent, and restrained to a hospital bed for a month. This memoir tells the story of what happened, and it is a story that happened during a specific, short period of time. It focuses on her month-long stay in the hospital, the weeks leading up to that, and the months of healing after her release.

Besides the short time period, there is also one specific storyline. It has one story to tell that must be told all at once. Cahalan's own personal background is not filled in much — we know that she went to Washington University in St. Louis for college and has worked at the *New York Post* ever since, but that's about it. Her parents' divorce, which ups the tension of the storyline after they are forced to temporarily work together as a family again, is never detailed upon. For the most part, we are in the present moment, watching the events unfold.

The memoir begins with a preface that is a memory Cahalan has of waking up alone in an unknown hospital, wires attached to her scalp and a band on her arm that reads "flight risk." Then we jump to Part One: Crazy, Chapter One: Bedbug Blues, where Cahalan traces the paranoia that began about one month before her admittance to a hospital. It began, hence the title of the chapter, with her fixated worries about bedbugs in her New York City apartment. The chapters themselves are short, seven, eight pages each. Chapter Two: The Girl in the Black Lace Bra, begins with the sentence, "A few days later, the migraine, the pitch meeting, and the bedbugs all seemed like a distant memory as I awoke, relaxed and content, in my boyfriend's bed." Clearly, this chapter needs the previous chapter to build the story, it can't stand alone. We need to know what just happened to make sense of what she is telling us.

In Part Three: Recovering Lost Time, Chapter 39: Within Normal Limits, details Cahalan's visits with a particular psychologist during her recovery. When the chapter, this one only five pages, ends, Cahalan does not continue treatment as the psychologist recommends, and

ends the section ominously, “I didn’t yet have the nerve to face how bad off I really was.” This ending practically requires the reader to turn the page immediately.

We do deviate from the immediate story at-hand to absorb scientific information on autoimmune diseases, or a bit of a doctor’s background, which can be a daunting task for a writer. For example, when Cahalan’s Dr. Najar solves the mystery and finds that she has a rare autoimmune disease called anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis, Cahalan has to spend a few pages explaining not only basics of the disease, but how it was discovered, how she was tested, and so on. There are also a few points in the memoir that discuss famous medical stories or other trivia that is crucial to understanding her own situation. For example, when her short-term memory is obliterated, we learn that is a problem usually located in the hippocampus part of the brain. To understand how important the hippocampus is, Cahalan then tells the famous story of the patient known as H.M., who, after a doctor removed a small part of his hippocampus that was thought to be causing seizures, lost his ability to make memories. But each tangent is not touched on for long, and soon enough we are right back in the story of Cahalan’s whirlwind hospital stay and miraculous recovery. At the ending the book takes an uplifting turn, as the reader is cheered by Cahalan’s recovery. Still, though, we are sobered by how she has changed (she has a sort of “survivor’s syndrome” because of many cases of her illness do not recover as well as she did) and how seriously she takes her role as an advocate and spokesperson for those with the disease.

A very different approach to narrative is in Dinty W. Moore’s *Between Panic and Desire* (2010), a book that he calls a “cultural memoir.” It is comprised of three parts, Part One: Panic, Part Two: Paranoia, and Part Three: Desire. Each of these three sections also has an introduction, and then parts one and two end with a chapter called “Questions and Activities Before Continuing.” There are also various epigraphs, an index (containing entries like, “chickens, with

black bean and garlic, 137; caged, 29; kickboxing for corn pellets, 29, 63”). The function of all this white space, all these different styles of formatting, all these *parts*, to Moore’s book are a big part of the book itself. My experience while reading was one of constant reorientation, nonstop change, and feeling like I was introduced to a different aspect of the author each time a new part of the memoir began.

Moore uses certain facts about himself to accomplish several different goals. His double vision is used as a take-off point for Moore to discuss why he is the way he is (confused, a late-bloomer, erratic — in short, his double-vision has attributed to his unique persona), but this idea is also communicated by the book’s form is as such.

The first line of the Introduction to Part One: Panic is, “Human beings, truth be told, are inept narrators of their own lives.” Moore writes, “We have double vision: what we see and what we expect to see.” He goes back and forth about how the book is, then isn’t, a memoir, at once about his life and the lives of his generation.

In Part One, the second piece, “Son of Mr. Green Jeans,” is an examination of fathers — Moore’s own father, often absent and an alcoholic; popular television icons in the 1950s-60s and 1990s such as the fathers on *Leave It to Beaver* or *Home Improvement*; fatherhood in nature (penguins, for example); and Moore’s own bumpy journey to fatherhood. Blocks of text have headings, such as “Allen, Tim” “Emperor Penguins” or “Green Genes,” and the paragraphs below them are short, un-indented, and separated by white space.

The pieces, mostly separately, deal with topics such as (but not limited to): Moore’s double vision, the assassination of President Kennedy, his parents’ divorce, Richard Nixon, drug experiences, cars, inebriation, family, Aldous Huxley, The Beatles, the number nine, the author’s

various bleak early career-paths, the name “Dinty,” Buddhist lessons, presidents, terrorism, death, and popular culture.

The introduction to Part Two is formatted like a conversation between the author and a psychic, as a way to discuss Moore’s past — the gist of which is that even though he has had a lot of highs and lows, more is yet to come, “ ‘You’re not done screwing up’ the psychic says.”

Moore’s memoir represents an attempt to structure personal writings that have commonalities but do not easily make a memoir. *Between Panic and Desire* makes up how Moore sees himself, and the complicated construction of the text is as important as what the words themselves are saying. Dinty W. Moore, when asked what he found when he chose an experimental form for *Between Panic and Desire* said, “[Playing with form] recasts the existing content and inevitably suggests new content. It is the best form of art as play, as far as I’m concerned, the sort of fiddling with writing that takes the writer into places he didn’t know he was going or didn’t intend to go.”

I have wondered whether this essay is really an argument against the form of autobiography. Christensen uses “Autobiography” in her title for *Blue Plate Special*, and Moore and Cahalan are upfront about their texts being “Memoir,” for what it’s worth. But I don’t think the words matters much. I don’t think this discussion is about terminology. In the traditional sense, yes, “Autobiography” is about one’s whole life, while “Memoir” is episodic. However, in modern usage, the terms are pretty interchangeable. Also, Moore’s text could be considered an autobiography, since events from his childhood up to his current age are recorded. Maybe it’s time to do away with the distinction between the two words once and for all

What makes a memoir or autobiography succeed seems to really be about how to decide what to take out and what to leave in. Traditionally, mundane days of adolescence have been

considered pretty fascinating if you're reading about the life of a president or celebrity. The entertainment factor is whom the autobiography is about. But autobiographies would probably be better served to amplify the interesting episodes and speed through the "blah." That's just good writing. Think about other memoirs that cover whole childhoods, adolescences, and young adulthoods: Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle*, Haven Kimmel's *A Girl Named Zippy*, Steve Martin's *Born Standing Up*, Anne Patchett's *Truth and Beauty*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, heck, even Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books.

Instead of being focusing on terminology, or applying certain structures for fuzzy reasons, let's make a deal. If you're writing about your life, leave the humdrum stuff out. Now, that may mean focusing on one month of your entire existence, a la Cahalan's all-at-once, in-one-breath method, or picking bits and pieces out of a five-decade-long journey, like Moore's pieced-together ragtag text. The structure of each memoir will be different, it depends on the substance of the story itself, and it's not easy to find. But once discovered, the way a memoir is put together will clear the way for the meaning to come through.

This exploration has taught me a lot about how to approach structure in my own work, as well. In my memoir, *Louise: Amended*, the first-person narrative was interspersed with fictional interludes from my mom, dad, brother, and boyfriend.

Between Panic and Desire

Dinty W. Moore

Bison Books

168 pages

Blue Plate Special: An Autobiography of My Appetites

Kate Christensen

Doubleday

368 pages

Brain On Fire: My Month of Madness

Susannah Cahalan

Simon & Schuster

288 pages

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