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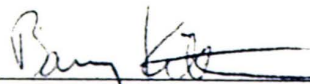
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DANICA WRIGHT



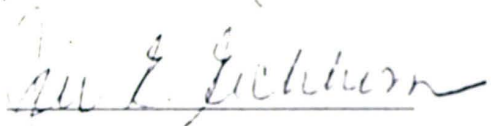
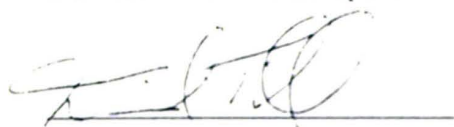
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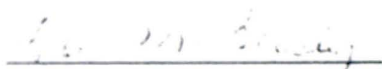


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# **Trail**

By Danica Wright



“The senses created river beds of responses formed in part from the sediments, the waste, the overflow from the original experience. A partial resemblance could stir what remained of the imperfectly rooted out love which had not died a natural death.”

Anais Nin

*A Spy in the House of Love*

There were three of them down by the pool, and I don't remember any of their names. For the sake of distinction, I christened them after the Holy Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The tan deities sat absorbing the sun with their well-trained bodies as I made my way down from my second story hotel room that overlooked the green, central courtyard.

I saw them first and was thankful I had chosen to wear my new bikini. I'd spent my summer alternating between the gym and the tanning bed, so my flat stomach stretched perfectly from one pink strand to another. I was staying alone and was ready for a nice banter session, but I kept my wedding ring on. I didn't want to take it beyond flirting.

Father spoke to me first. He was the obvious leader and the biggest of the three. Sitting across the water from me, his broad, muscular shoulders covered the back of the lounge chair. He had wonderfully tan legs, and his thigh muscles bulged even when relaxed. He wore mirrored sunglasses and Army issued running shorts. He was beautiful, and though I was the only other person there, I was proud he noticed me.

"Why don't you come sit with us?" he asked, knowing I wanted to.

I stood up with my towel and sun oil, flexed my abs, and made my way to a chair beside him.

We talked, the normal game of who can be wittier. I found out they were in Special Forces, were in town for the weekend, and were looking for something to do that night. I told him I was leaving for Spain the next day and was staying in the hotel alone.

"What would your husband say if he knew you were talking to me right now?" His narrow lips smirked as he nodded at my ring.

"What would your wife say?" I said, nodding at the tan line on his left finger.



Son had the same pair of Oakley sunglasses as Father. He was fully dressed in a gray polo shirt, jean shorts, and the standard athletic sandals of a hard core military man who can only deviate so far from his normal uniform. I could see his sleeves tighten around his biceps. If there was one I wanted, then I wanted him. I could tell that Father was accustomed to having his way, and I enjoyed denting a man's arrogance.

Son disappeared during my initial conversation with Father. He returned with a trashcan filled with ice and canned beer. Father opened one for me, and I drank slowly. I had a rule about never taking an open drink from anyone, but I couldn't reach the beer myself, and I saw him open it. Besides, I had danced naked on tables. I had given cowboys body shots of tequila from between my breasts. I knew the routine.

The third one swam by us in the pool. I call him Holy Spirit because he was just a presence around us. He was scared. He was stockier than the other two but still solid. He floated through the water and refused to make eye contact with me. He left his wedding band on. It flashed at me when he came to rest at the side of the pool, arms crossed on the concrete, looking up toward his friends, but not to me.

"You're not getting very far with that drink," Father said. "I hope we're not wasting ourselves on a light weight."

"I'm just getting started," I said, tilting back the half-full can and trying not to choke on the remains. I knew that my 115 pound body could only hold so much, but the challenge had been extended, and I was too cocky to back down.

"I think she's ready for another," Son said as he passed me one more open can. "Cheers!"

We clinked our cans together. Turning theirs upside down, they finished all twelve ounces in three gulps each. I tried to keep pace. I swallowed half of mine on the first try, and I began to

notice how hot the sun was and how quickly the alcohol was hitting, but they were far from finished.

We polished the rest of the case off like that. By the final round, Holy Spirit was finished swimming. I remember him rising out of the pool, body glistening with water, my vision blurring the flashes together into illustrious light. He left without a goodbye to his friends, but the other two didn't notice.

At the time, it seemed like the whole conversation only lasted a few minutes, never long enough to make introductions. Now, I wonder if they deliberately steered clear of names. In reality, we must have been there for hours. Long enough for Spirit to swim and leave. Long enough for Son to bring the beer and for us to finish it. Long enough for us to discuss rank, a favorite topic in my military town. Rank equals money and respect near an Army post, and they were obviously accustomed to being admired. They were rough, but their lines were polished, and this was a routine they had performed many times for many women.

I listened to their banter, but I don't remember what they said to convince me to leave the pool with them. I wish I could recall the magic, cocky words Father spit out that wooed me in my drunkenness, but my memory fails me on how we eventually cleared our mess and headed back to the rooms.

I do remember stubbing my toe on the rough concrete sidewalk. I told Father and Son that I couldn't, and that I had to choose. Father assured me that I could and that I didn't have to choose anything.

The room we went to was on the side of the hotel facing the parking lot. I believe it was Father's, but no one ever said. It was smaller than the one I had been staying in all week. The bed



was only a Queen as opposed to my King upstairs, but the covers were the same and had that familiar stiffness.

When we reached the bed, Father laid me down across it. My bikini was easily removed, and they even took out the tampon that was blocking their way. Son said to Father that I had a pad in. I wanted to correct his terminology, but I lay there listlessly, eyes closed, attempting to make a decision. I had not agreed to this, I thought slowly, but my mind was not working fast enough to control my body, or my mouth.

Father entered me while Son sat at my head. He watched as his mentor entered me. I closed my eyes to both of them, and they turned me from lying across the bed to lying the right way with my head on the pillows. As the blood from my menstruation became the lubricant my body was not producing, Father called the third. The conversation was quick, and I soon realized I could taste my own blood on my lips as Father entered my mouth. Maybe he was still choking me while he was on the phone? I remember him saying something to Spirit about having to get in on this.

Spirit came eventually, although he wasn't ready to be there. The other two graciously stepped away from me for a moment, and he plunged his softness against me until it hurt more than the other two combined. I wanted him to stop, and strangely, once he was hard enough, he did. Maybe he was hiding inside me until he could stand tall with his brothers. I was not looking at any of them by that point though, so the strength or lack of erections was really no concern to me. I just wanted to leave.

They all came on me. Standing over me in a strange prayer circle, they ejaculated ceremoniously in time with one another.

Father washed me off after they were finished. He led me to a shower while the dripping remnants slid down from their pools and into little streams on my stomach and thighs. He lovingly cleaned up their mess and tried to enter me again while the other two watched us bathe.

The water sobered me a bit, and I was embarrassed. Not because of the previous activity or because they all knew from the strands of blood on their lower extremities that I was at my time. No, I was embarrassed because my hair was stringy in the water, and my make up was running down my face. Why I still wanted them to think me beautiful, I'll never understand.

I don't remember getting dressed or leaving. In fact, there are still many black spots from the afternoon, but I do remember being amazed that it was still light outside. I went back to my room and back in the shower.

I shampooed and washed and scrubbed. I wanted to believe that I was pure, that I could wash their sin off me. Re-baptize myself in the hot, hotel shower. I leaned against the tile wall and knew that I wouldn't be able to cry. It was a long journey to that moment, and I let the water steam over me as the memories of what brought me there swept into the mixture of water, blood, and semen, and funneled down the drain.



## II.

The first time I truly explored a man was in the summer of 1989. It was the picturesque, American summer fling of pool dips and late nights, a perfect twenty years after the summer of love. There was only one problem: I was eight. My sisters were thirteen and eleven, and oddly enough, we met three brothers of the exact same ages.

We spent the summers at my father's place, a dank, one-room apartment in East Nashville. We lived above one of those negative old women who have given up on being happy and who are determined to make everyone else miserable.

What we called an apartment was really her converted attic space. We navigated the narrow staircase, covered in worn green and orange carpeting, that opened into a meager kitchen which barely had room for the four miscellaneous chairs and the aluminum table that was a garage sale reject. To the left of this room, separated by a broken sliding door, was the space that served as the living room as well as the bedroom for all four of us. Debra, who was thirteen and the oldest, slept with Dad in the big, double bed, and Mara and I slept on the floor beside it.

On the other side of the staircase was the miniscule bathroom, covered in tile that may have once been white. The air conditioner in this luxurious abode did its best to produce more heat than the stifling Tennessee summer, so we spent most of our time outside.

We were woefully un-chaperoned. Dad left before sunrise every morning to drive the more important people of Nashville around in his rented, smoky taxi. There was always a twenty-dollar bill left on the kitchen table for us to walk to the Save a Lot and buy ourselves lunch and dinner. My two sisters and I managed to live entire summers on Cheez Puffs, fruit punch, and Fun Dip. We were those latchkey kids that all the studies are done on, and we spent the majority of our time raiding liquor cabinets and playing Spin the Bottle with the dried out, glass remains. We had a

rule: if the bottle landed on the same people three times, then the two of us had to go into the closet for five minutes.

The first day, I spun and landed on Caleb, the other eight-year-old. We made three gallons of Kool-Aid and proceeded to pour the sticky liquid all over each other in a water balloon fight gone awry. He was covered in the mess, and I remember staring at his red and purple stained shirt as I moved across the narrow, concrete porch for my first kiss. It was as sticky as his clothes, and his tongue was hard as it throbbed in my mouth. I used to kiss the shower wall, wet and unresponsive, to practice for this moment, but this was completely different. He was hot, but still shaking. His tongue drew perfect, forceful circles over and over with mine, like two fleshy swords dueling to see who could do this better.

The bottle landed on Caleb every time I spun it, and we eventually found ourselves locked in the narrow closet off the bedroom. I giggled a little, but I let him undress me and sat in the darkness, nearly naked in my baby fat body. Our siblings found our antics amusing and opened the door to watch us grope. Now we had an audience, and my sisters watched as their less than preteen sister got felt up under her hot pink, cotton panties. Rather than have the notorious talk with her three daughters, my reserved mother had bought us a pop-up book to teach about the mysteries of sex, but here was the live version, and I was suddenly another sex tool, teaching my sisters and his brothers what they weren't ready to learn on their own.

I returned to school the next year, trying desperately to determine what I could and could not put into my essay on my summer vacation. I was eight years old, and I wanted to tell someone what had happened, but none of my friends could comprehend kissing someone, much less rolling naked together after too many margaritas. That's when I first learned to lie. I stood in front of the



class and told a cute tale of bike rides and fireworks and wondered why my panties moistened every time I thought of the truth.

I ran into Caleb one weekend a month and every summer for the next three years. Our bodies started changing, but our activity remained the same. We would undress each other and fool around. Then I would find a reason to stop the progression, but by the time I was eleven, I was tired of stopping just before the finish line.

I told my oldest sister that I was going to have sex with Caleb. I figured since I hadn't started my period, it was the perfect time to experiment without consequences. She never said anything. Luckily, my dad was evicted before I went through with my plan, and we moved our summers to a run-down motel room a little deeper into the slums.

My mother and biological father were polar opposites. My dad was the aging hippy, still determined not to conform, losing jobs over dress codes and company policies. He had a college degree in history, and he spent a few years living as an archivist on an Indian reservation in South Dakota. Our summers there consisted of running around with the olive-skinned girls, braiding each other's hair and comparing beliefs.

Life was bright there. Dad actually owned a house and lived peacefully among the cornfields and beaded medicine men, but his dusty, horse-riding freedom never freed him from himself, and he lost his job because of some yuppie, in some office, somewhere, who understood the way things were, and not the way things could be. That's how Dad told the story anyway.

Dad tried church and occasionally felt obligated to take us on Christmas. For the most part, he was a lost soul and only claimed Christianity when he needed a place to belong or, after one too many evictions, a place to stay.

My mom was a naïve college girl who managed not to evolve during the sexual revolution. She grew up a Catholic schoolgirl, but not the fun type. She wore her plaid skirt to her knees and counted her beads to Mary as often as she could. She eventually converted my Episcopalian father from his psuedo-religion to our proud faith. I was convinced for most of my childhood that she had bonus points with St. Peter for that conversion, unless, of course, she lost them in the divorce.

I slept in Mom's old room, pastel blue and pure white, when I went to visit my grandparents. Mom had a Virgin Mary nightlight that was still plugged in on her old, wooden dresser, with the Velveteen rabbit painted on the side. The glowing Virgin kept her steadfast watch over me in the darkness.

One night, when I was thirteen, and visiting the grandparents for my summer vacation because Dad was in jail for unpaid child support, and Mom and Bob had to find some way to get rid of us for a few weeks, I stretched out on top of the covers. I listened to the traffic that was rushing by on the one-way street running outside my window. The heat became too much, and I slid out of my T-shirt and boxers. My hand traced my warm skin, and I could feel the blood rushing to my extremities as the excitement of getting caught by one of my family members became an erotic fantasy. I slid my hand down to my newly matured mound and touched myself underneath Mary's pure radiance. I justified to myself that I was simply cutting out the middleman of needing to confess. This way she could watch my sin and report to dear old Dad if she wanted. Hell, she could join in, if she wanted.

My grandmother taught at my mother's school, one of the few civilians more at home in the convent than some of the nuns. Grandma never failed to remind her students, her daughter, and her granddaughters:

“You know Moses did not say, “Follow these commandments until the twentieth century.””

She wanted to remind the world that generations before had gone unsatisfied.

Grandma grew up in a house with ten siblings in the coal mines in Pennsylvania. She shared a queen-size bed with four of her sisters who would pinch her legs if she touched any of them throughout the night. After leaving Pottsville, Grandma vowed to never share a bed with another human being. It was not a problem while she served in the Waves in World War II or during her years in the Catholic student dorms at George Washington University. When she met Grandpa, the tone shifted. He was more than a little perturbed at the notion that his new wife wanted to sleep in another bed, but Grandma won.

All my life, she and Grandpa slept in identical twin beds separated by an antique nightstand. I used to imagine my grandfather having to proposition his wife from across the room. I could hear him yelling, “Hey! My place or yours, Sweetheart?”

Because of our refusal of birth control, Catholics have the products of their sinfulness trailing around behind them. Eight children, nine. Grandpa was probably ashamed at his meager three. Somehow the religion tries to remain quiet about the issue of sex. We didn’t discuss such things, especially us girls, whose sole purpose in life is to guard the morality of boys by denying them what we crave, too. My grandmother was afraid to talk to my mother about sex.

Occasionally, Grandma would come into my mother’s room and read to her from a book that referred to the great act as “the marital embrace.” My mom had herself convinced that she could become pregnant by hugging a boy.

Mom once told me proudly she was virgin when she married my father. I was twelve years old when she said it. I had contemplated having sex, had almost gone through with it, and had to ask what the word “virgin” meant.



Life with my mother and stepfather was drastically different than at Dad's. We struggled financially, but we narrowly held onto middle class. We were constantly reminded of how much things cost and how rare Dad's child support payments were. But, somehow, my noble parents managed to conserve enough for us to maintain a two-story house in the suburbs. Our diet consisted of cheap granola bars and natural peanut butter. We were not allowed to touch the adult food in the fridge or turn on the upstairs television. We were an annoyance, an expensive annoyance, and I spent the majority of my youth afraid of my stepfather and his backlash, which had a trend toward the violent, until my Dad brought Bob to court over extensive bruises on my legs. I must have eaten some of his sacred deli meats. Twenty lashes for a slice of roast beef. We could have been living in Saudi Arabia.

Like my grandparents, we were strict Catholics who had chore charts and mandatory, monthly confessions. We weren't allowed outside when our parents were not home, and there was a rule regarding every aspect of life. No makeup until high school. No playing on Saturdays before the laundry was done. No eating dinner at the same time as the adults. No loud noise. No kids from the neighborhood in the house. The only time we were allowed to admit anger was when it was directed at my biological father. Other than that, no yelling, no crying, no feeling, no breathing. My sisters and I had a lot to confess when the time came around every month.

### III.

The only way I know how to relate to people is sexually. I could meet someone on the street and have the most intelligent, spiritual, and emotional conversation I have ever encountered, and I would not feel connected with that person until I felt him sweat in the most intense of heats. Chances are, five minutes into the conversation, I would wonder what his favorite position was or how he looked while he was reaching a climax. In fact, I've never been able to sit through Mass without at least attempting to picture my priest mid-coitus. I always wanted to know which one of my bosses was kinky enough to take me on his desk or which one of my drill sergeants had a hard time walking while he was yelling at me to do more pushups.

The funny thing is, even after the overbearing stepfather incident, discipline has always turned me on. I used to give myself little assignments after I'd finished my real homework. I'd mess it up on purpose and get aroused at the thought of being reprimanded or my bad grades earning me a paddling.

When I was eleven, I remember playing school with my friend Heather. She let me be the teacher. We were in her bedroom, and I stared over her shoulder as she worked at her pink desk. I quizzed her on silly vocabulary words, much too elementary for our fourth grade level, but she intentionally misspelled them and then let me spank her for her mistakes. I wondered if she enjoyed it as much as I did.

A good Freudian would have some theory on how discipline was the only early attention I received from males. Maybe my strict Catholic morality got me excited at the idea of punishment. After all, God punished those he loved, and the worse the suffering, the better the afterlife. The majority of my childhood sexual energy came from thoughts of being chastised, and the notions carried over into my adulthood.

My mother and stepfather had another rule. We weren't allowed to date until we were sixteen. They knew nothing about my previous experience, but it was obvious how much I enjoyed male attention. They thought their rule would numb my curiosity.

In sixth grade, I made out with boys on the bus, and my mother was called to deal with my antics. By seventh, I was tired of junior high immaturity. I stole my fifteen-year-old sister's dates. Flirting came naturally to me, and I flirted all I could when they called for her. Eventually, they just called for me. I used to tell people that boys began by dating her but then saw how much better they could do in the family.

I stole Chris, Jake, and Tommy. He was the first to tell me he loved me, and I wanted to believe him. Tommy was also the first reason I was drawn to church. He came on Wednesday nights in his silver Mercury Cougar, and we skipped Bible study to lie together in the clover field and grope. For what a twelve year old knows of love, I loved him. I loved the way my stomach and nether regions awakened around him. I was only his second girlfriend, though he was four years my elder, and I felt it necessary to open him up to as much experience as possible.

Unfortunately, my sister had fallen in love with him, too. She had a thing for chasing after the absentee ones. She did all she could to break us up and then wouldn't speak to him when he came back to her. She and I didn't talk much after that.

Our parents divorced the year I was born, and my mother remarried before I turned two. Neither man was a good father. They were both easily angered and bitterly temperamental, and we hated them, alternating between the two, but I learned early the delicacies of male egos. I spent most of my young life trying to convince both men that I loved each of them best.



My sister's reaction to our two fathers differed greatly from mine. Mara grew to be afraid of sex, confessing once that she didn't like kissing boys. I liked it. I liked it and wanted more. I craved male attention. I wanted their cocks hard, their eyes blurry, and their voices husky. I wanted them, and I wanted them to want me. It was the only emotion I knew how to obtain from men, and it became my selling point.

By Junior year in high school, I was known primarily for my brains, but the rumors about my sexual escapades flew. Apparently, I had slept with nearly every male student in Mt. Juliet High School and had begun working my way through the teachers as well, but I was a faceless legend. Not knowing who I was, I once had a girl tell me a story about me.

"Ohmigod! Did you hear about that girl Danica?"

I hadn't heard, so I listened and laughed. That crazy Danica.

I dated boys in phases. Eventually, I developed a thing for military Joes, but first, there was the Ford Ranger epic in which I dated three boys in a row who drove identical red trucks. This was followed closely by the Michael period: Michael Gregory, Michael Hartlien, and Michael Thompson. Boys would phone the house and say, "Tell Danica Michael called." My mother would then inform them that a first name was not sufficient:

"Michael who?" or "Travis what?"

My stepfather hated them all, but Mom enjoyed the chaos. She never dated when she was young, a self-admitted nerd, and she lived vicariously through my games. Her eyes lit up when the boys joked with her before asking for me on the phone, or when their muscular, late teen arms wrapped around her round body in a goodbye hug. Everyone called her Mom, and very few could resist giving her a quick squeeze before we left. Sure, there was the occasional annoyance on her part when a date ran later than planned, but I'll never forget the way she blushed when Greg

Branson, self-nicknamed “Mr. Impressive,” came to our door one night. He had two bundles of flowers and planted one bouquet in each of our hands and one kiss on each of our cheeks. Mom reddened and rolled her eyes, but it was feigned annoyance at best.

My stepfather hated boys like Greg. His imagination would drive him to insanity as soon as I set foot out the door. Mental pictures of his Little Princess in the backseat of someone’s dented car, legs wrapped around waists, lips locked around vital parts...His nightmares were never far from true.

In Bob’s eyes, Greg’s two redeeming factors were the fact that he was a Packers fan and was raised Catholic. My stepfather’s only consolation from his horrid fantasies of what Greg and I might do was that we would both feel the need to confess our sins. Surely the guilt would save us.

Greg was the first to finish in my mouth, and after I did it to him, I was addicted, or so I told them. I said I loved the smell and the taste. I said I loved to hear him breathe heavy and feel him twitch against my tongue before he finished. He was older than I was, and I convinced myself that I could only keep him if I was different than the girls his age.

I always did it in the car. We’d be driving around town in Greg’s 1979, Smurf-blue Mustang, and I would get a craving for him. It was amazing that we never wrecked.

“Sorry, Officer. You see, my girlfriend was...”

Greg was voted “Worst Driver” by his Senior class. I could not imagine that having to switch gears over my shoulders while my head bobbed in his lap, sucking like a starved infant, helped much. He swerved through the lanes on the interstate and could point out every bridge on I40 under which he’d had an orgasm. After three months, Greg broke up with me, but I’d been cheating on him for the past two. My mom was more upset than I was.

#### IV.

Paul came directly after Greg, literally. They both had military haircuts, glasses, and broad shoulders, and there was so little time between the two relationships, Paul and I picked up physically where Greg and I left off.

Paul was Catholic, too, but he made the extra effort to press a pair of jeans and show up next to my family in Mass on Saturdays. He would smile his bashful smile and shake my stepfather's hand firmly during the sign of peace. His extra effort earned me an extended curfew. I grew to love Paul.

We dated for a few weeks before Paul asked not "if" but "what kind" of condoms he should buy. I didn't want to sleep with him yet, but he never asked. He was good friends with Greg, and Paul must have heard the stories and assumed I would.

I tried to sound experienced on the topic, but I had no idea. What kind? Did they come with bows? Designer labels? Flavored? And what precisely did the ribs do for my pleasure?

I was terrified at the prospect of actually going through with the deed, but I was amazed at the doors it opened. I could picture this little room, off in the middle of nowhere. It was decorated with black leather couches and mood lighting. I could see the people drinking martinis, women in heels and red dresses, muscular men, sorting through baskets and baskets of different types of condoms. They'd pick their scent, their color, their flavor for the night. I wanted to be in that room. I knew I wasn't ready, but I wanted my membership card.

We lost our virginity to each other at the end of my Junior year of high school. It could not have been more clichéd. He was eighteen. I was sixteen. It was Prom night, and we were upstairs in his parents' den, trying not to wake them up. It would have taken more than just those three seconds of careless fumbling to waken them. I shaved myself for the occasion, and the sight was



too much for him. The sex was so quick that my hymen didn't actually break until the next time we tried it. We almost doubled our duration time with our second attempt, and the six seconds was enough finally to penetrate me.

I was actually proud that I bled at all. With all the fingers and hands, my own and others, that had searched through me, I figured I would be lucky to convince him that the rumors about me weren't true. But Paul pulled out that morning before school with three drops of blood covering the condom. I said a quick prayer of thanks and vowed to God that I would marry Paul for that simple blessing.

I stayed with Paul for a year and a half, writing every day while he was at Basic Training, and fondling my best friend to numb the loneliness. Paul asked me to marry him in the middle of my twelfth grade year, and I graduated high school planning a wedding and wishing I'd said no.

Paul was stationed twelve hours away, and I drove down every other weekend to see him and to make arrangements. Number seven out of over six hundred graduating seniors, and I was about to marry what the Marine Corps referred to as a Buck Private, the lowest of the low. One weekend, Paul's Gunnery Sergeant's daughter looked at me and said, "You are going to make a great Marine Corps wife." I drove home after that, called Paul, and broke it off.

I arrived at college, freshly single and lonely. My first night there, I went to a fraternity party and met Clay. He was an Infantry soldier, stationed at the Army post that was located near my school of choice. People in town had already warned me against such guys, which made them more enticing.

My suitemate, Melody, was engaged to a friend of Clay's, so the fact that Clay slept over that first night was relayed throughout the dorms as well as the barracks with impeccable speed. We hadn't had sex yet, but I've always believed that if you have to deal with the negative repercussions of rumors, you may as well have the fun everyone says you are having. We consummated the relationship six days later.

I remember being amazed that Clay had been with seven girls prior to me. He told me once that by the time I was his age, twenty-three, I would have at least one one-night-stand under my belt.

Melody and I bonded when we realized we had the same decorating tastes. We were amused by the fact that we brought the same bedspreads to school with us. She found me a job at the coffee shop where she worked, and we became inseparable. Two weeks after meeting, Clay and I wound up being the best man and the maid of honor at Mel and Andy's wedding. She was only eighteen and had been home-schooled all her life. I knew she shouldn't get married, but Clay and I listened as the Justice of the Peace, Joe Creek, rambled and as Melody giggled nervously. Vows said, Melody and Andy were united. To celebrate, the four of us went to dinner together. I sat beside Clay and flirted with Andy throughout the whole meal. That was early September.

Later in the month, Andy threw a birthday party for Melody, in their new, student apartment. She and I were all set to get truly drunk for the first time in our lives. Andy had the

foresight to tell all of his friends that they were not allowed to touch any of us as we explored the joys of drunkenness. It sounded like a good idea, especially since Clay was out of town, but apparently tequila made me feisty. When I realized that none of the guys would touch us, for fear of the repercussions, I turned to Christina, a girl who lived in our dorms and who seemed as determined to live as I wanted to be.

She was more petite than I was, but her breasts were fuller. She had straight hair all the way to her tailbone, and I stroked it and told her it was beautiful. She returned the compliment, and we became the hit of the party as we made out on the floor of Mel and Andy's cinderblock bedroom.

Christina was dating another guy in the squad. She and I hung out in the barracks and entertained the fellows. Shouts of encouragement would ring through the hallway when we slipped away from our beaus' rooms. I pinned her up against the wall with its gray, peeling paint. She giggled, and I pretended to be playing around telling myself I didn't actually want this. I just wanted to add some spice to the guys' lives, give them stories to tell when they were in their tents at night. We kissed, and I longed for the moment to touch all of her.

I never locked my dorm room door, and one day, when I came out of the shower in my dorm, Christina and her boyfriend were on my bed. She was straddling him, and her legs were showing to mid thigh through the high slits of her purple velvet skirt. She was topless, and I was only in a towel. I sat down with her and ignored the fact that there was a man underneath us. I kissed her breasts timidly. I tried to do it the way I wanted it done, but I was shaking. I stood up before it went any further, wrapped my towel back around myself, and walked away. That was the last time I touched Christina. I wanted her, but I didn't want to, and I was terrified that I was crossing some line between being a cute coed and being that girl that everyone talks about. I didn't want to be a lesbian. I could hear all the words people would call me, and they taunted me as I



kissed her. I walked away, and I pretended not to care that I had seen her face grow even more beautiful when I was touching her.

I don't know when Mel and Andy started arguing, but I had a feeling it was more a continuation from their dating life than a new addition by marriage. Every night for two months, one or the other of them was in my dorm room, telling me how horrible the other one was. Instead of being Melody's sidekick, I was the awkward third wheel of a bad marriage. I was pretty certain Andy liked me, and after the Christina incident, I got the feeling that Melody liked me, too.

Andy came over the most. We talked about his bad marriage, and I loved being his sanctuary. We talked about having sex, and I could not believe he wanted to. I knew I was naïve, but I thought that regardless of other desires, people remained faithful to their vows. I remember feeling arrogant the first time I thought he wanted me. He was lying on my dorm room bed with Melody in his arms, and he looked over her shoulder briefly and smiled. It was a half smile that looked hungry, but I had cast it aside as me being cocky.

Andy used to come pick me up when he was going out to run errands. I thought we were actually innocent friends, at first. We started playing "Padiddle" one night. It's a driving game where you see who can spot the most cars that only have one headlight. I can't remember what the original bet was, but I wound up telling him that he could exchange the ante for clothing, my clothing. He took the bet, and that was the night I showed him the Altoid trick.

We drove through what is known as the Back Forty, the training grounds on post, miles and miles of pretend battlefields through forests and cornfields. I went down on him with an Altoid in my mouth as he navigated the narrow roads.

One night after I had broken up with Clay, Andy called me from a hotel room down on Exit Four in Clarksville, Tennessee. I was deliberately casual when I dressed to go over there: a white tank top, olive shorts, and a khaki windbreaker. I didn't want to look sexy. I thought I could go there and tell him no, that it didn't need to happen.

It was a nice enough room, one of those business suites with a king-sized bed and a table for quick conferences. It had the standard maroon color scheme and the hotel-room smell of people in a hurry.

He had requested a room around back, and I found his car on the side of the building not facing the interstate. He was watching wrestling on TV, and I wondered why I was even attracted to him.

We ate take out Chinese cross-legged on the bed. It felt like the girl time that Melody and I had. She and I talked about everything. I told her about my dates, and she told me about their sex life. She told me the exact positions he used. Supposedly, Andy started with her on top and always finished in the missionary. I was about to learn for myself.

After I finished my spicy tofu, he reached over and kissed me. I wondered when I would tell him to stop. I didn't consider myself Catholic anymore, but this lack of morality was still beyond my level of understanding. I didn't feel a part of things. I could control the flirty game, but this was bigger than any game I'd ever played.

He flipped me over with me still deciding when I would back out, and when he finished on top of me, I knew I had just crossed an imaginary line between the world I tried to believe in and the world I was to live in.

After I slept with Andy, I had a one-night encounter with another married man. He worked at the coffee shop with Melody and me, and I let him strip down to his black bikini briefs in my

dorm room. He thrust in and out of me as I planned my wardrobe over his shoulder, staring into my open closet. He disgusted me, a fact I realized somewhere in the midst of things, but I didn't have to worry. The owners fired him after they heard about our little endeavor. They thought I was the victim. They never asked.

When Melody found out, she realized what I was capable of. She began to question my friendship with Andy. Her suspicions were correct, but I would not admit to them.

"Are you sleeping with my husband?" Melody said over the phone receiver that I had stumbled to locate in the darkness. I was asleep when she called, and I had a feeling Andy was, too. I could picture her sneaking into the kitchen to whisper her suspicions over the wire to me in the middle of the night.

I thought about the question for a moment. Andy and I never slept. We always had too much else to occupy our time. I didn't think my answer was a lie.

"We're friends. No, Melody, we didn't sleep together." I said lazily, hoping I sounded bored with the conversation.

I wanted to believe that I was open to anything. I tried to convince myself conventions didn't faze me, so there was no sanctity to marriage. Especially with people like this involved.

I told Andy about the whole situation, and I never realized how much it probably hurt him. On some strange level, I think he cared for me, but what was sacrificing his marriage to him was just a series of one-nighters to me.



## VI.

I met Ryan in November of 1999 at the tail end of my first rambunctious semester at college. Ryan was a soldier in Special Forces. He was another Catholic boy from up North, but his spiritual side had nothing to do with altars and Communion. He practiced Tantra and was my first climactic experience. Five lovers into my sexual career and I finally discovered that “orgasm” was not a word Cosmo invented to sell magazines.

He never wore underwear and shaved his vital areas. After two months of being with him, I was just as naked and clean-shaven underneath my jeans.

He lit candles around his barracks room that night, played his own mixed CD, and performed his normal sexual acrobatics. He had layered three cashmere blankets on his bed, and I sank into the softness. I could smell the incense drifting over us from the candles. The scent mixed with his cologne and the smell of his sweat, and I felt my entire body shudder. We ended with me on top, and I felt the rhythm of the music as I watched my shadow dance on the wall. My body’s first true explosion made me weep. Ryan referred to it as a “Cry-gasm” when he held me proudly afterward.

I became addicted to Ryan and his arrogance. He was beautiful and wonderful. He knew it, and he’d tell you as much. Twice if you’d listen.

Ryan and I survived a tumultuous six-month relationship that Ike and Tina would bow to. We broke up for the first time in February when he decided he needed his space, and we reunited on Valentine’s Day when he saw me out with my new lover.

Ryan and I made eye contact across the booths of the tacky restaurant that we used to go to for a late night snack after our sexual adventures. He and his petite blond date were gazing at photographs when I sat down, and he turned the album around to show me. It was a picture of the

two of us at Christmas, walking around to see the lights and telling people it was our honeymoon so they would take pictures for us.

“No esta mi novia.” he said with a smile pointing at the girl beside him, as my date glared at me. The phrase translates to “This isn’t my girlfriend,” and he said it before even saying hello. My date and I barely made it through our meal. Ryan was at my dorm later to question me about the new beau and to “pick up some things he’d left at my place.”

There was a stain on my dark blue sheets when he came to retrieve his belongings. He smirked when he saw another man’s whiteness as if to accept the challenge of my moving on as he moved toward me. He knew he could have me for he had been my true gateway. Paul had taken my virginity, Clay my timidity, and Andy my naivete, but Ryan ripped me from my purity and made me enjoy it.

I yearned for the hungriness of our encounters that we only sometimes felt the need to mask with words of love. His sultry, arrogant eyes could stare into mine and convince me, through my frustration, that I wanted him. He could punish me, paddling his little girl, pulling my hair and giving my body over to the menacing pleasures of his pain. He was angry at something the world had done to him, but he was intelligent enough to only admit his anger in certain scenarios, namely his brutal sexual impulses that I bowed to in my eighteen years.

He was opinionated, and I hated him, but I wanted to please him, to break him. I wanted to make him feel soft like I felt when I was near him, but he made me hard instead. I was his in the darkness of December and through the New Year. When he moved toward me on that February night, he made me understand, on top of another man’s discarded pleasure, that I was his, and to a certain extent, I always would be.

Ryan changed me, and it was during the semester after I met him that I began to dance. I danced on a stage with a phallic pole in the middle of it and with a little string running up the middle of me. I used to joke about wanting to be a dancer. A high school friend of mine even bought me a pink, feather boa for my eighteenth birthday with a note attached saying "See ya' on stage!" In fact, it was because of my joking that I wound up auditioning.

When Christina and another friend saw that a local strip club was hiring, they cut out the ad and taped it to my door. I was too arrogant to say I was bluffing. So the three of us piled into my blue Toyota, and drove the forty minutes to the audition.

I packed a number of outfits, and the various fabrics shone at me from my open duffle bag. The sparkly outfits contrasted against the dirty, yellow dressing room that had an open toilet where all the girls did their business in everyone's sight. I flipped through the lace and the sequins and finally settled on a white button down shirt, unbuttoned to show cleavage from a black pushup bra. I wore a black plaid miniskirt with a matching thong underneath, and my heels were so tall that I had to do a few laps around the dressing room to scuff the bottoms. I watched myself in the mirrors that covered every wall. My nervous reflection stared back.

"Is this your audition?"

I turned around to see a thin, muscular woman standing in the doorway. She was virtually naked except for the shimmering sports bra she had pushed over her breasts to force her nipples to peak out below the fabric.

"Yeah, I've never done this before." I said.

She raised her eyebrows at me and smiled.

"Of course you haven't, honey. I know." she said, pointing at my outfit. "In a few months you'll know all the tricks, but for now, just dance like you're in your bedroom at home, and you're



dancing for your boyfriend. I've been doing this for years, so I know all the different kinds of customers and what turns who on. You'll learn. Oh, I almost forgot. Get a change purse, and keep an eye on your money. These girls aren't your friends."

I didn't know if I should thank her or not. It was advice. I didn't know if it was good yet, but I wanted to at least appear interested.

"How long have you been doing this?" I asked, trying to keep the conversation going as she changed into her next costume. I could hear the music pumping through the thin door, and I knew it would be my turn soon. I thought about school and my mom. *What if she found out? What if Dad walked in?*

"Eight years," she said checking her hair in the mirror. Satisfied with her makeup, she looked at me in the reflection. "Look, I don't have time to talk. I need to call my mom to check on the kids before my next set. You need to get out there."

I walked out the door that led right onto the side of the stage.

"Well, if we can ever get her out here. We've got a new one for you, gentlemen. I guess she's a little nervous." The voice of the DJ mocked me as I tried to breathe.

*As long as I didn't fall down. As long as I didn't trip on my thong.* I had to be topless by the end of the first song and fully undressed by the end of the second. I hoped I remembered how all the straps worked.

I walked out onto the black and white tile and smiled seductively, keeping my eyes on the wall behind the audience. My two friends sat on the edge of the stage, waving dollars and screaming, "That's our girl!" while I flung my teased hair around. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and smirked at the reflection. I looked down somewhere in the middle of the second

song and saw Christina staring at me. She was quiet now, and I wondered what she thought about seeing me fully naked for the first time.

The other girls taught me to move my body in circles when I danced. I had to learn to flow from one movement to the next. They told me not to flirt with the cute boys that come in. They were accustomed to it. They wouldn't pay for it. Stick to the ugly ones. That's where the money was.

And like the woman in the dressing room, they tell you when you start out to just pretend you're in your bedroom, dancing for your lover. I took the advice, but I danced for all of them. I turned the faceless men in the audience into every faceless man that I'd ever encountered. I could feel their breath and smell their desire. I was in control. They were there because they wanted me.

As a tribute to my upbringing, my outfit on my first true night of work was a makeshift version of a Catholic school uniform. I put my hair in pigtails, tied my button-down shirt between my breasts, and rolled up the waist of my plaid skirt just enough to let my thong peek out of the bottom. By the end of the dance, I was left with nothing on but knee-high black boots. Father forgive me... for I knew exactly what I was doing.

The dancing led to modeling. I figured the art department could use someone as unabashed as I was, and they were paying \$10/hour, tax free for me to just lie there. I got to the point where clothes made me uncomfortable. I was dancing naked to Godsmack's VooDoo for six hours a night and lying nude in front of dozens of eager painters for a few hours every day. Add to that all the time I spent pursuing the opposite sex, and clothes all but disappeared from the equation. Clothing was a nuisance, and the few items I did wear changed drastically.

I managed to keep a real job at Ruby Tuesdays in order to keep my parents from finding out about my alternate life. Ryan and other boys came in at various times to sit and wait while I waited tables. Ryan and I had promised to just be friends with privileges, but when he saw that I fully intended to keep privileges with others, he asked me to be his again, but our time was up.

I was leaving for Spain for the first time that summer, and he had accepted an ROTC scholarship at the University of New Hampshire. We agreed that distance would only destroy great memories, and we attempted to walk away peacefully. Ryan, however, was not the peaceful sort, and I left knowing that he no longer wanted anything to do with me.

I spent my nineteenth birthday in Madrid un-wrapping a cute Canadian. I saw him in the Plaza Mayor and flirted unabashedly for an hour while my friends rolled their eyes at my antics. It worked though, and by dawn we were lying on one of the beds in a two-bed hotel room, trying not to make noise while his friend pretended to sleep beside us. The two of them left the next night, and I was extremely content not to have the tie to break.

I thought I would spend my time out of the country getting away from all things American, including the military, but I was sadly mistaken. My group wound up touring with a group of male students from the Citadel, and my hormones raged every time I encountered any of them. I picked out a cute redhead among them, and he and I danced until daybreak the last week I was there. We had the ROTC thing to relate on, and he promised to write to me while I was at Basic for the rest of the summer. He kept his promise, writing at least twice a week. I repaid his loyalty by sneaking into the boys' barracks every night to play with one of the other cadets.

More than half of the students in our ROTC program were married, and most of them were in the process of getting divorced, or should have been. The system of evaluations was fairly easy to manipulate, and I decided to sleep my way to Cadet of the Year. I slept with my married



evaluator, his best friend, who was also the company commander, and my professor, for good measure. I had just recently obtained my first apartment, and my new best friend, Breezy, and I would have all the deranged spouses over for drinks, and for play. That is until she found God, and I was left to my own musings.

That was also the semester of my jet setting. I flew to Atlantic City for a week with the Citadel boy, and I spent nine days in Maine over the holidays. Ryan had no idea about any of it, but I wanted to be close to anything involving him.

That was Christmas, and when I came back to Tennessee I came back to my job at Ruby Tuesdays. The bartender told me there were two men who wanted to meet me. I told her to tell them I was joining a convent. I had spent the holidays trying not to think about how close I finally was to Ryan geographically. I failed, and I didn't want to fight through anyone else at that point, but I softened when I saw him.

## VII.

He sat at the bar, one of those nondescript men who blend into the scene around him until he feels it necessary to make himself apparent. He wore a leather Florida State jacket and jeans. I hated those jeans. They were tapered leg, and they never covered his hiking boots with the oversized tongue. His shoulders shrugged over his beer, but his eyes danced when he laughed, and I gave him my number without him having to ask.

He took me back to his place the first night we went out. It was one of those 1940s neighborhoods put up after the War and forgotten after the first generation of heroes moved on. It was more recently the cheap side of town, and the government decided the ghetto should be built behind it. The duplex house had less of a driveway and more of two gravel slots. Two right next to each other, separated only by a narrow cinder block path to the front door. The lot was deceptively wooded, but we could still hear the traffic rushing by on the local main drag. The door and shutters were dark blue, and the vinyl on the outside was only a shade lighter underneath the green mold and spattered dirt hiding its dents. Two of these units sat next to each other facing this dead end street, and four more in the backyard, facing the other direction. Power lines ran too close to the top of the one-story roofs. Grass broke up the gravel, and a rusty Speed Limit sign hid behind an equally rusted fence with the honeysuckles, whose brightness made this place even more dismal. This was Plum Street, and this was where he took me that first night.

Everything about it reminded me of all the one-room places, dilapidated duplexes, and shoddy housing my father would find for us. He even reminded me of Dad, always walking around, unshaven, in his tighty-whites. I thought he must be lonely. I realized Dad must have been, too.

We slept together that first night, after a few hours of coffee and moderate conversation, and when he actually showed up for the second date, I was amazed. He was a nice man with pleading blue eyes that spoke volumes. He wanted to be loved, and I needed someone to hold. I used to leave love notes in his mailbox. Cute cards. Pages ripped out of spiral notebooks. Just a little letter to say I was thinking about him. I hate remembering that we were happy, or at least really good at pretending.

He always came home after dark, and we ignored the dinner I'd put together as he lifted me onto the countertops, kissing me and caring nothing for the burned fajitas.

His furniture was rented, just a beat-up, blue recliner that we curled in together and watched our stolen cable. He made me feel important. Needed. I reorganized, decorated, and cleaned. I made it feel like a home, and he let me stay.

He cooked me eggs and cheese at three o'clock in the morning, and I decided that I would stay a lot longer. He needed me, and while he was below what I expected, I was tired of trying, and I knew he'd try to fit my description.

There was an old card table that we later used for lawn furniture in his kitchen. Breezy saw it one day, saw him, and said he was white trash. I hated her for saying it. I was scared she was right, and if this place reminded me of my youth, then what did that make me? I did love him. I did, but the idea of marriage was more about finances. We could do well together. We could move up.

A month into us, he rolled over in bed and just blurted out, "Hey wanna get married?" I was tempted, but I had something to work out first.



Unfortunately, physical distance only did so much to separate us, and a year since I'd seen him, I still thought of Ryan daily, not to mention the almost nightly role he had established in my dreams. I wanted to see him, to touch him, to taste him again.

I told my future husband that I would be going to Boston to visit family for Spring Break. I didn't have any family in Boston. In fact, I was going much further north, but he didn't need to know that. We weren't married yet.

Ryan met me at the airport. He was so polished in his tailored pea coat and pressed khakis that it hurt to look at him. He kissed me the same way, smiled that same arrogant smile, and still attempted to smoke his Camel like James Dean. I was nauseated. My perfect memory was shattered when I saw him again.

I didn't sleep with Ryan. He tried, and his tongue nearly convinced my mind to shut up, but I didn't sleep with him. I honestly thought we were more than bodies just crashing gloriously together, but Ryan didn't take rejection well, especially when it came from a formerly willing partner. I was supposed to stay a week, but after one night of "no"s, Ryan sent me away. I went home. Devastated. I went back and said yes.

My soon to be husband and I moved into our new townhouse in early May. I had taken him home for Easter and made him sit through four hours of Easter Vigil, but the way he fumbled through the service annoyed me. He played with the wax of his candle, fidgeted his fingers, and looked genuinely perplexed at the parts he did pay attention to. I wanted him to be Catholic but not for the grace of sharing my spirituality with another human being. My faith had died long ago. Somewhere between the married lovers and Ryan's dismissal, I'd become an aggressive flirt and an emotionally passive lover. I just wanted the understanding of all those recovering Catholics who

had shared my bed. That man up there was a part of my culture, my heritage, and my fiancé was melting wax over his fingers and ignoring him.

We'd only known each other for six months when we decided it was time to solidify the relationship. The day we were to be married, my husband had to take off from work. A free day for a military man is a rarity, so he thought he could accomplish many things with his time. I came downstairs in our town house, dressed to go in a new spring skirt, ready to commit my life to another. We were only going to the Justice of the Peace, so I hadn't bought a dress for the occasion. My soon to be husband was sprawled on the couch in his underwear, waiting for the cable man to come install a new box. Our wedding day, and he decided we needed forty different sports channels more than we needed wedding bands.

I left, alone, and drove twenty miles to the Kentucky border. I drank a cup of coffee and tried to cry. I knew we weren't in love, but I still went back. I was somehow convinced that no one else would want me.

I married him in a little country house without finding a priest or telling anyone. Ironically, we were married by Joe Creek, who gave word-for-word the same service as he had done for Mel and Andy two years before.

The tension from the earlier argument hung over our bed that night, and our marriage sheets remained clean. I woke up the next morning and told him it had been a mistake. Remarkably, he agreed, but we both wanted to believe that it could work.

Three weeks later, I received my twenty-dollar silver wedding band. I knew it was my fault. I hated that ring when he bought it. I said I didn't like gold or diamonds. I know me. I don't deserve such frills. Besides, it was nice that it wasn't too fancy. That way, I could switch it to my

right hand when I waited tables. It was easier to flirt with the customers when I didn't have a golden leash on my finger.

Between meeting and marrying my husband, I changed waitress jobs from the family restaurant I was in to a nightclub where the local soldiers dressed themselves up as cowboys and rode a mechanical bull to impress the women. I flirted with them all and took their money with little regret even though I knew they were wasting the few dollars the Army allotted them on a narrow chance with me. I was married. I was off limits.

My husband knew I was playing around. He saw the numbers scrawled with drunken hands on dirty napkins. He saw the Stetson hat that one of the bouncers left in my back seat. He felt the distance every time I lay down next to him in bed, turned my back to him, curled into a ball, and waited for daylight.

I didn't think I was cheating. I wasn't Andy. I wasn't sleeping with any of them. I was twenty years old, and I was just having the fun I had been denied.

I started taking showers as soon as I came home to avoid detection of other colognes or, God forbid, another man's sweat. My husband was suspicious, but for some reason, he only pursued the issue so far. He made a few snide comments and threw one into a yelling match occasionally, but for the most part, he avoided the subject. He didn't want to hear about his inadequacies.

The funny thing was, none of the boys were all that great. True, my husband didn't turn me on anymore, but neither did any of the men I saw on a nightly basis. They were just a crowd of faceless beings to make me feel mildly important through their own pleasures. I had a purpose.



In a lot of ways, I was a better wife when I was still playing on the weekends. I had this picture perfect idea of how our life was supposed to be, and the guiltier I felt, the prettier I made the picture and the wider the grin was when I asked my husband about his day. After an hour or two of his dissertation, he obliged me by returning the question to me, but my answers always bored him. Eventually, we both stopped responding.

In October of 2001, my husband went for a month to a field exercise in Louisiana. We had been bickering every other day since August, but we were getting along the morning I dropped him off at his unit. I kissed him passionately when we said goodbye and promised I'd be there when he returned. I was, sort of.

I met Eric at Kickers, too. He was twenty, my age, a nice change from my thirty-year-old, tired husband. Eric was enthusiastic, still too young to have the belief that life was nothing more than survived monotony. We hung out together, ran together, and had sex that was incredible only in its newness. We spent virtually every day together for the thirty days that my husband was gone. I let him spend the night in our bed. My husband called while Eric was there. I told him I wanted a divorce. He called more.

That same month, I went to Washington DC for a family reunion. My uncle and I spoke about my current relationship. I told him I wasn't happy. I told him I wanted color and that if I had to sit in one more bar watching my husband devour another beer and more hot wings.... My family still didn't know that I was married. I didn't feel married, so I didn't feel any real need to tell them.

The morning I picked my husband up from his trip, I wore a trench coat and stilettos. That's all. I didn't want to be his wife anymore, but I didn't want to give up the role of being his fantasy. I saw him when he walked off the bus, and my heart dropped. I don't know if it was guilt

or love or both, but I wanted to make up, or at least have fun trying. We cried and held each other on the drive home. In that moment, I thought I loved him. The problem was those moments never really connected with each other. Eric stayed around for a while longer, but I quit working at that little country club. I never admitted to my husband that I'd slept with Eric, even after he found the pictures.

We took them the day of Homecoming. I told my husband I would be spending the day studying. Instead, Eric and I spent the entire afternoon climbing trees and rolling through the fallen leaves. There was one picture that I took. We were lying on the ground together, and we were surrounded by beautiful, golden leaves. I took it with my hands outstretched in front of us. We were laughing. My husband said he never saw that look in my eyes until he saw that picture.

I was loyal to my husband for six months after that. From November on, I didn't see Eric. In fact, I even wrote to him in January to tell him that I loved my husband, and that we needed to stop seeing each other. Eric and I did stop, but my husband and I didn't stop arguing.

My husband is not educated. He says, ain't, and he chews tobacco. He thinks NASA only fooled the country into believing they went to the moon. He doesn't know how to say the word façade. I'm a book junkie, a college snob. It's taken me four and a half years to finish a Bachelor's and a Master's.

In one of our many fights, my husband yelled that my biggest accomplishment in life was having slept with twenty people. Two weeks later, he got drunk and told me that he used to masturbate with a rolled up sleeping bag. Then he told me about the time he slept with his sister. It was only a year before we were married. My biggest accomplishment was looking her in the eye when I went to meet his family.

In February of 2002, I found God. I was in my closet sobbing during another battle, and there He was. God. I talked to him a little and decided I wanted to be a good wife, a nice wife, a faithful wife. I'd had three months of practice. I was ready.

My husband left for Afghanistan on March 4, 2002. I started going to church with Breezy again. I wanted to believe that I could be like her. Her husband had been gone for six months, and she was faithful. She went to church every day that the doors were open. She learned how to cook, called his mom on the weekends, and read her Bible every night. She bored me, but I couldn't find a way to prove that she was doing it wrong.

Every time I went to service with her, I wore flowered dresses, short dresses that flowed and were only held up by two itty-bitty spaghetti straps. I always wore heels. When I danced, they taught us to wear heels to make our butts look perkier. I never wore underwear under those breezy dresses, and I loved the way the old Baptist men stared. I found God all right.

For the first two months, I wrote to my husband every day. Then I met Rick. It was the week of finals, and I had moved in with Breezy to await the end of school and the beginning of my summer travels. I was annoyed with her public righteousness, so I was hiding and studying at a local coffee shop when there he was: my first redhead, no wait, my second. We talked for two hours. I deftly avoided the topic of marriage. I was twenty and a student. Everything on me was still in the right places, and none of my stories involved domestication. No one thought to ask. No one wanted to know.

Two months after my husband left and two hours after I met Rick, I was in the bed of his white Dodge, which was stationed in the well-lit parking lot of the local fairgrounds. My legs were over my head, and my toes curled around the sides of the bed liner.



He dropped me off that night and asked for my number. I was surprised. We had not said anything to each other since leaving the bookstore, and I thought it would be a one-time thing. I could justify a one-night slip in my new attempts at faithfulness.

I had packed our house into a storage unit. Since my husband would be gone to war for at least six months, I figured it was a good time to do some traveling of my own, so I only had a cell phone, but I gave Rick the number. I told him I was leaving the next day. I was, and I did.

My first excursion was a 2,700-mile road trip. I was going to see my grandmother in DC again, then to meet my in-laws in the panhandle of Florida. I'd never been to Florida. My in-laws had never been out.

I had to stop in Nashville on the way. I told my mother in March that I was married, but I still needed to tell my stepfather. It was a year later. We all hide things we hate about ourselves.

I could not figure out how I was going to broach the subject, but it wound up not even being an issue. My stepdad asked.

"Are you engaged to Bruce or married?" he said, standing at the foot of my bed in my basement bedroom. It was late in the evening, and I was about to leave to go out for the night. I was sitting on my broken bed, zipping up my black, high-heeled boots. When I looked over I was disgusted. He stood there with a glass of beer in his hand. He was obviously drunk, and the beer was sloshing around the top of the glass and onto the floor. I was amazed he was still standing. Normally, by ten at night, he was passed out in his recliner upstairs.

"We're married," I said, feigning sympathy. "We got married on June 6<sup>th</sup> of last year."

"Are you pregnant?" he asked.

*It's been a year you prick*, I thought to myself, as I watched him totter along my floor. Parents were supposed to be overjoyed when their children found a life partner. Moms were

supposed to start dress shopping before a date is set. Dads were supposed to tear up as they handed over their white-clad daughters, and there I was, breaking the news.

“We’ve been married for a year. I think we would have seen results by now, were that the case.” I hated him, and I wanted him to leave. I knew I had no justifications for my actions, but I did not want to explain myself to him.

It was storming the next morning as I repacked my husband’s SUV to head to Virginia. I ran between the house and the car, loading my things in between the moments when I knew my stepdad was in the kitchen beside the front door. I left without saying goodbye.

I planned to stay with my grandmother for three days. I was going to tell her the news as well, but she and my grandfather spent most of the weekend showering me with gifts for my recent college graduation and my upcoming twenty-first birthday.

“Tea?” Grandma asked after returning late from a birthday dinner the night before I was to leave.

“Sure,” I said. This was our time. Late nights in that lime green kitchen with the faded linoleum. We drank tea and talked. I told her about my stepfather’s drinking, and she cried for my mother.

“She should leave him. No marriage is worth that,” she said, tears flowing silently.

“I’m married, Grandma,” I blurted out as she wiped her cheeks.

“Of course you are, Danica,” she said like I had told her I was human or breathing. “That’s why you wear that silly little ring.”

I laughed and look down at the sad, dented ring. I’d only owned it for a year at that point, but it was already deteriorating. I knew the feeling.

“I wished you had waited until you saved a little money, but I’m not mad. Good luck.”

I was speechless. I'd spent a year preparing to tell her, and that's what I received in return. The conversation moved on after that. There was entirely too much gossip to catch up on to be worried about my mother's unhappiness and my marriage. Or was it the other way around?

The next morning, I began my drive down the Atlantic coast to Florida, attempting to make "daughter-in-law of the year" by making the fifteen-hour trek, alone. Somewhere between the Carolinas, I called Rick. It's nice to have someone waiting.

I stopped in Savannah, Georgia, for the night. Walking the boardwalk, in the summer, I missed my husband, and I think at least for a moment, I loved him again.

My Florida family was waiting for me. All of them. Dozens of them. Dozens of happy people in their stagnant world who bred like rabbits on Viagra and waited for the mailman to bring their miniscule checks from the factory. Then they ran to the Dollar Store and indulged themselves in cheap clothing and scented soaps that only smelled like the packaging. I stayed with these people for two days before leaving, running, fleeing back to my elitist bubble of a world that I like to call home.

I don't know if I loved my husband then, but I did understand him for the first time. He had left, too. He hadn't been back. I guess it was the first time I could relate to him.

I was back in Clarksville and was returning to Spain in a week. All of my belongings were in storage. My stepfather was not speaking to me, and I could take no more of my best friend's Christianity. I'd started to see that I'd "been saved" for her. I wanted to believe in the life she did. I wanted to have faith, but I didn't.



So my last week in the States for the summer, and I rented a hotel room at a discount because of my husband's military service. I gave the extra key to Rick. He didn't mind the marriage thing. He'd done that once too.

## VIII.

That's what brought me to that moment. Standing in the shower, letting the water burn me, and not feeling it. There had been three of them, on top of me, inside me, laughing at me to hide their own discomfort, and I could hear the echoes between the dripping water.

I washed everything, again. Then Rick came in, and while I was still wet from the shower and dirty from the blood and their juices, Rick pushed himself inside me, and everything inside me died.

I left for Spain the next day and spent a month swimming in tequila and pretending to be whole. I wrote to Rick and my husband simultaneously, not sure if I missed either of them.

My far too innocent roommate watched as I fell in lust with an Italian med student. We never slept together because I thought I was eroding. I could see myself as an apple that looks tempting on the outside but is filled with brown mush. I dressed in my pretty outfits, spoke up in class, and danced until sunlight, but I was filled with the mush of three men, no Rick--four--and so, so many more, and I knew I was fading.

I was a camp counselor at a local summer camp when I returned. The year before, my husband spent a night or two with me there. This year, I organized flag ceremonies for the deployed soldiers by day and slept with a sixteen-year-old counselor at night. His name was Michael, and he was the first I'd told about the rape. He listened, and I destroyed his innocence. I hated myself for Michael, but I'd hated myself for so long, at that point it made no difference. It was like Roseanne gaining another five pounds. In the long run, it just didn't matter.

My husband came back in August, and I was faithful. Faithful and miserable. I went to school, cooked three meals a day, and cried every night. I tried to swallow a bottle of Ephedrine,

again, but I was too addicted to the stuff for it to make any difference. I thought about razor blades, but pain terrified me. I even bought my husband a gun for his birthday. I dreamed about that gun.

I could still see the three of them. I wondered if they laughed about me during their morning runs. I wanted to tell my husband. I wanted him to say that it was okay, that he wanted to kill them, that he would protect me, that he was sorry for leaving me alone in the first place. I said nothing. I knew what he would think of his wife, the whore, the woman he himself could only fuck and never make love to.

The last months I spent with my husband, his body became an extension of those three, dirty men. Every time we slept together, I had to force myself not to cry. It didn't always work. There was no love there, only hunger, bitter hunger, and it was a hunger that I was finished feeding. I would scream, face buried in a pillow, screams of frustration and fear and pain. My body was dry, and he would force himself inside, telling me tales of how his first ex-wife never slept with him, guiltig me into opening my legs. He grunted in my ear and sweated on top of me, wanting to be my fantasy and believing he was as I screamed my painful screams that he mistook for extreme pleasure.

I had already doled so much of myself into the troughs of so many men...He thought he was coming back to the sex-craved nineteen year old I once had been, but that braless, free mind was gone. I was an icehouse of sexual expectation. The more frozen, the dirtier I was on the inside, the more perfect I forced my coating to be, perfectly polished ice cubes, and I was more polished than ever.

I told him afterwards, in the darkness, that he was fabulous, that I loved him. His moisture dripped from my otherwise dry thighs, and I lied and realized, alone, how often those lies, in the



exact same words, had sprung from my lips. I was like the three men, with my polished routine, and the thought nauseated me.

My husband used to say that his god was a vengeful god. I never wanted to believe him completely, but I found myself justifying my actions through his theory. He was repeatedly unfaithful to his first wife, and I was his punishment. That made it easy. It wasn't my fault that way.

Then came the rape, and suddenly, my god became vengeful too. For one summer afternoon, on a day hot enough for shivering, the aggression of all those I'd bruised and left behind was taken out vicariously through the orgasmic release of those three beasts.

The thing is, prior to that event, it hadn't all been bad. People want me to say that it had, that I regret it. People want me to forget myself and numb my loins. They want me to see the rape as my punishment and turn it into my redemption. Women want me to deny what they've denied in themselves. They want me to dry my passions and live in their arid world, but even after the trauma, I cannot.

I love sex, when it's real, and I shun the idea that it can only be real between two people who are latched together for eternity. I like the game of sex. I love the energy and the smell of combined sweat. I'm hungry, and I'm exhausted from attempting to starve myself because the world says I would be a better person were I a nicely adapted machine of monogamy.

As I write this, I reflect on the fact that I lost my virginity nearly five years ago to the day. I have a picture of myself from that night. I remember deliberately framing it afterwards. It was the last picture taken of me, the pure, the virgin. I put it up on my desk as if I were my own idol. Sex had tainted me, or so I let myself believe, and I spent the next half of a decade distancing myself from that image with every man that slipped between us: me the real vs. me the ideal. All the while

struggled to return to that place. That's what I was, but I never fully was. It was an illusion, and I  
prayed to it.

## IX.

I met Don in November. I fell in love during our first four-hour meeting. We talked. He noticed my ring and asked if I was engaged. I told him to try again. He was a Christian, a real one, but he didn't leave.

We had this wonderful conversation about things that were better about being children. We took turns, back and forth.

"Snack time with stale graham crackers and grape juice."

"Being able to call anything a treat."

"When holding hands meant something."

"Falling in love without logic or fear of wedding bands."

When we said goodbye in the parking lot, it started to rain. We hugged so tightly it hurt, but he refused to kiss me. I was married, and he was a Christian.

I gave him my number, just in case, knowing he wouldn't call. Then I went home to my husband. Four days later, I went to Don's house. He hadn't called, but he told me during our meeting where he lived. 714 Robb Avenue, right by my school.

I wrote him a letter, telling myself I would just drop it into his mailbox and leave. When I pulled up, I saw his truck outside, and my plan vanished. I rang the doorbell, rehearsed my speech, and tried to breathe. *Could I tell someone I loved him after only one day?*

He opened the door, and I saw his expression change through the stages of recognition: first of who I was and then of what it meant that I was there. He let me in, and we sat on different couches in the immaculate living room, running through the pleasantries. I tried to find out if he was happy to see me. He never asked me to leave, and when we finally touched, his body asked me to stay.



We touched, for hours, but he never broke his vow. Don wanted the ideal me, and I did my best to provide. Lips and loins were off limits, but every other part that could meet did. We talked some more. I think I cried that night. I wore a pink sweater. He said he liked girls who wore pink.

We spent many more nights like that. Little blips of time, three-four hour blocks that we relished in each other, laughed a little, and touched a lot, but never enough. He never took what everyone else had taken for granted, and I had to learn to be more than a body.

Don showed me what Breezy and her false congregation, what Grandma and her pretentious priests could not. Don had a spiritual connection to something in the world. Don didn't have a void that he tried to fill by pumping himself into me.

Sadly, the first night I spent in the bookstore with Don was the only night of ours I fully enjoyed. He would chastise me, mocking me, rolling his eyes at his little girl, calling me kid and meaning it. He didn't want me, but he loved the energy I created. He was smitten with the girl who wanted him, who wanted someone to make things better, but he made things worse. He would let me perform orally on him, but he would never sleep with me, never kiss me.

I stayed with my husband through the holidays so his children could see their dad at Christmas. I didn't talk to Don at all during the season, but I wanted to see him. He had left for Michigan and was vague about when he was returning. I wanted him to call to let me know he was back in town. I drove by his house and waited for his car, for a sign, waited. Then I just stopped. I forced myself to stop. I knew he didn't want me with all my complications.

On New Year's Day, I made a resolution, and in January, I left my husband and finally was able to talk to Don the week after I moved in to my new place. He told me that I didn't sound like someone who needed to prove something. I didn't know if I did or not, but I still wanted him.

I started pursuing him. I baked him cupcakes, wrote him poetry, and generally obsessed about him. He was reluctant. I was still married, and he was such a good boy who could only push himself into my mouth and not fully into my body. Don made me feel just like all the rest of these men. He didn't want me. He would never admit he cared about my heart, yet he didn't want my body. He made me feel used up. I didn't have anything to offer. The apple was back, but it was cored now, not even brown mush left.

He finally invited me into his bed. We hadn't slept together, and that night, he slept. I watched. I rolled him over in the middle of the night and woke him up with my mouth on his lower body. We still never kissed. I always felt like he was afraid of me, and he made me afraid of myself.

I started to read my Bible again. I knew Don would be deploying soon, and I wanted to spend the time he was away bettering myself. I wanted to be a good, Christian woman. I wanted to be chaste and submissive. I wanted to change myself like Breezy had managed to. The problem was, I was changing myself. My answer didn't lie in those ancient pages. I was more than mystical answers, more than legends and strange rituals. There was meaning in the world, and I slowly began to realize that while Breezy put me down for my incessant need for lovers, she found her own high in the tales that she could preach to others, looking down her wealthy nose at those truly above her who did not need to believe.

I told my husband about the rape a month after I left him. He looked at me with cold eyes and called me a slut, told me I knew how I was when I drank. My fears were realized as he yelled across the O'Charley's parking lot that I wanted it, that I deserved it. He said that I was not traumatized enough. He asked why I hadn't told him before. He still talks about it as that thing I call a rape, the incident. He still does not believe me, but I have since learned to believe myself.

Don and my husband are both gone now, off to continue in the war. I hate to say it, but I am relieved. The saddest thing is that I didn't know which one to cry for when they left, or maybe it's even sadder that I don't know if I'll cry if anything happens to either one of them. They left. I feel like I can finally shut the door on the last two years. I can truly start over. Bible closed. Loins healed, heart recovering. I can forget what the world has called me and find my own name.



In March of 2003, I began dating a man named Charles who was in my creative writing program in school. He spoke of hypocrisy in his Catholic church. He talked of the Beat Generation, new levels of thought, and orgies with friends, but he was innocent. His numbers were in single digits.

Charles asked me once whether or not I knew how many men I'd been with. I thought about it for a while and realized I do not. I have a general idea, but no firm list. By most standards, that makes me a slut. I'm a bad person, unless I make myself a victim. It was my dad's fault, my stepdad's. I didn't want to do any of it. That makes it easier for the world to take. I didn't like any of the sex. It was bad, and it was done to me. I once heard someone say to be careful of abnormal pleasures because they take the taste out of the normal ones. I knew what they meant, but I didn't believe it.

Every time I kissed Charles, I could feel him rise through his jeans. I was used to having that effect on men, but he was beautiful and innocent. I was tainted. I thought he understood, but for a time, he didn't seem to care. He was not afraid to hold my hand on campus. He kissed me in public and winked at me during class. We were the perfect combination. He had the ideas on how sex should be, and I had the appetite to practice until we got it right, and he held me after I told him, everything. I'd never told anyone the whole truth before, and he held me? He used to just be that boy across the table in class. We played footsies for two months before we talked to each other. I avoided my normal command and conquer routine.

He asked me to a play one afternoon, and we spent every day together for five months after that. We talked, believed in many similar things, and were content to disagree when we didn't. He told me I was beautiful. I told him he was blind, and he repeated the compliment until I accepted it.

I packed him a picnic one night during the first of the Spring. We hiked out to the woods and fed each other the shrimp and grapes from the basket. There was still a chill in the wind, and I used the excuse to press next to him, closely under the blanket of darkness. He kissed me there, sweet wine on our lips, and I looked at him with eyes filled with fear. I wanted him, and I wanted him to love me, to need me. We pushed our sweaters up. Soft skin pressing against soft skin, making the night warmer than it was.

We pushed our jeans down, but never removed anything completely, trying to keep the heat between us. He slowly entered me, making love to me with eyes connected for the entire encounter, on a blanket amidst the shrimp tails and spilled wine. It was my first time. No one I truly loved had ever thought to make love to me before. We were under the moonlight, and I could feel every inch of him slide into every inch of me. I had never experienced someone's eyes finding mine, someone loving me enough to press against me and not simply enter me from behind. I had a face with him. I was more. I thanked a god that I could no longer name as I looked into his sad, hopeful eyes. I'd finally found my religion.

Nearly a year later, during the early Fall, we spent the evening watching *Henry and June*, a movie about the erotic life of Henry Miller and his wife. We stared at the screen during scene after scene of intense, passionate sex between the spouses and their friends, never the same couple twice, but each twosome in love in a way that could not be explained by conventions.

Charles and I sat on his faded brown couch as the blue lights radiating from the television screen danced around us. We made love in time with the movie scenes, and the people that understood us, though they were no longer on this Earth.

Walking back to the car that night, Charles made a quick, whispery noise as he directed my attention wordlessly to the sky, dark grey but still bright with stars and the promise of winter's blackness. The love we had made that night sent countless pulses of hunger between us, and we said nothing after smiling at the sky and climbing into the front seat.

"I feel good," he said, exasperated, after two miles of silence.

"Me, too," I said then turned back to the darkness.

I wanted to write that moment, and I didn't want words to interrupt the narrative in my head. I wanted to capture that moment of pure energy and pure love, where my breasts still burned from his teeth, and I could feel him in every part of my being.

Our car raced the yellow line back to my apartment where I knew I would enter, lie on the lonely couch and begin the count down until I was with him again.

We had this loving energy and this painful sex. We were pushing our pains deeper inside in hopes of hiding it well within each other. I could handle all his hurt, if he could only handle mine.

We listened to the radio in the green glow of his new Ford. I still hadn't spoken, and I thought he was worried, but when our eyes met, he smiled. That sad, nervous smile, under his rumpled hair. I loved him, and knew in that moment that I could never find the words to describe us and why he was different. There are none, and I don't want there to be. I was left with nothing more than the exasperated moan he had learned to draw from my body. I bit it back behind lips chapped from his beard.

He pulled into my parking lot, careful to turn the headlights out to avoid nosy neighbors. His brown eyes questioned me, but I gathered my things from the littered floorboard. I opened the door and glanced over my shoulder. My eyes danced, and my lips parted in a grateful smile.

"Bye."



"Bye," he said, giving me my silence, and I knew he understood.

I shut the door, running barefoot, shoes in hand, up the metal staircase to my door. I needed to write that moment, even if there were no words. It was simple bliss. It was an energy I'd never felt before. It was love, pure, childlike, love. It was.

After almost a year of passion, of encounters on table tops and moving vehicles, of finding the true meaning of Tantra and attempting to heal each other through it, Charles left me.

"I just want to live." He said one night in November, each of us as close to our respective doors of the car, not looking at one another. The windows were fogged over, but from too much time without air not from too much passion, and the fog danced between us as we experienced the ten-second journey of going from intimate lovers to near strangers in five words time.

He said he wanted to live, to see things, to play. He had been engaged for five years, and what was my first true love, my first desire to be committed, was yet another entrapment for him.

Two months after Charles and I started, a girl we both knew and respected asked him, "Are you and Danica still together?" When Charles answered that yes, we were, she rolled her eyes.

"Well, be careful. She likes men."

As I write this, I can glance around my room and see the faces of many of the boys I've left behind. There's a black and white photograph of Travis and me taken by one of those machines in the mall, a deliberately yellowed picture of Paul dressed as a Civil War soldier and me in a barmaid's costume with my leg hiked up on him, and a shot of Bruce--my husband and me standing in front of an American flag from the banquet his unit threw when they came back from Afghanistan. I'm beaming, my arm around my returned soldier. He's smiling, but his eyes aren't.

When we were still dating, he looked around my apartment and told me that he'd never seen anyone decorate with exes. I guess he was afraid of me eventually decorating with him.

The pictures are strange to some, but I have to keep them. I keep them up as a reminder of love, brown and tainted, lying in the files of a divorce lawyer and in the stained sheets of an old lover. I keep them up as a reminder of roads taken on journeys that never lead where I mapped them out to go. I keep them up as a reminder, not of numbers, or escapades, but of people, who are still searching, and who found me on their trail.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Danica Renee Wright was born in West Allis, Wisconsin. She received her Bachelor's degree in Foreign Languages in December of 2002 and her Master's degree in English in December 2003, both from Austin Peay State University. She has written and produced two plays: *I Kissed a Killer* in April of 1998 and *Fly by Night* in April of 2002, and this work represents her first attempt at Creative Nonfiction.