

GENE

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Renée M. Ramsey

GENE

A Thesis Presented for the Master of Arts Degree

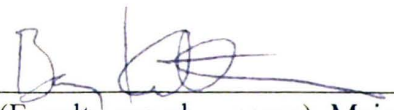
Austin Peay State University

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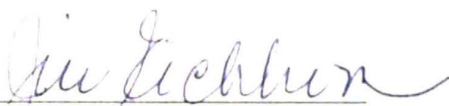


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Introduction and Acknowledgements

This book you hold is a collection of three short fiction stories collectively called, “Gene.” Loving your parents, especially when you look back at your past and think they could have done something better, can be a difficult emotion to embrace. Parents, either the mother or father, often carry the burden of scapegoat—the frequent answer when an adult reflects on her own decisions and regrets and asks, “Why?” In each of these stories, the common denominator is a parent. Most often the parent is a background character, and when upon reflection, can be seen as the protagonist’s foundation, the roots that fed her and solidified her to this earth. I love my parents. I think my characters love theirs too.

Thank you to my instructors, my husband, and my parents. And my dog, Lucy, too. You might just see her in here as well.

Table of Contents

TITLE	PAGE
#54	1
Shaved Legs	20
Bull Mastiff	36

Back in Nashville, the locals call the baskets on wheels buggies, but in the town where I was raised, they were shopping carts. The day before Thanksgiving several of them sprinkled the Randy's Supermarket parking lot, occupying spaces meant for sport utility vehicles and small Hondas. My mother insisted I drive her new truck to pick up a six pack. She said I'd love it. That I would love the CD player and the small cab. She said it sat up high and that I could see the road better. I bumped into a light pole to avoid a cart to my left.

I hesitated just inside the sliding door of the local grocery chain. Randy's had changed. The owners had remodeled the outdated green signs and speckled tile floor. The new hardwood flooring was placed in such a way to guide shoppers right, past the registers, like the blinking neon arrows directing pedestrians into the basement bars back in Nashville. The floor would say, "This way. Buy our junk food," while the arrows down south screamed, "Down here. Drink our liquor." I was more enticed by junk food.

Tan signs hung from the ceiling swinging with the influx of pre-winter air. The first sign read PRODUCE in a fancy script. It should have read BAKERY with faded clipart of generic white bread. I stood, observing the changes. The managers had removed several registers and built a coffee bar in their place, preventing me from cutting to the left of the bananas. A bagboy noticed my frustration. He was young, a few years younger than me, with curly brown hair just past his ears and the signature Randy's tie, skinny and burgundy, hanging loose from his neck. I thought of the various ways I could use it later in the bedroom, if I were so inclined.

“Can I help you?” he said. No *ma’ams* here.

“Beer?”

His left cheek lifted and a dimple squeezed a small brown freckle. I loved dimples. “Going out tonight?” he asked, waving me to follow him.

“Not sure,” I said. Instead of stepping ahead of me, he walked next to me so I kept stuttering in my strides, unsure of where to go. When we reached the frozen food section, he leaned against a freezer full of frozen pizzas. The next aisle over shelved beer, and he tossed his right thumb up indicating that was where I should go.

I thanked him, a signal for dismissal. He followed, asking if I was looking for the Budweiser. I don’t drink that shit.

“Weren’t you on the volleyball team that went to state?”

“Didn’t win,” I said. “Wine here too?”

He stared, assessing my lack of enthusiasm. Most folks from my old high school celebrated state wins and losses as though they were life’s own precious moments. Screw success and independence because, at eighteen, I won a second place trophy. My life was complete.

“Next aisle past this one,” he said.

“Thanks.” I didn’t hate Caperfield, but I found it difficult to smile at a kid who remembered the way my ass looked in tiny black shorts rather than my name. He was remembering those tiny shorts instead of helping Randy’s customers make it home with their Thanksgiving ingredients.

He kept talking. “Going to the club tonight?” He wasn’t referring to the kind of club where you danced and sweat, such places that were popular in big cities. Caperfield

didn't have those. No, Caperfield had clubs that you belong to, clubs with paying members, and swollen billfolds.

"Maybe. Quite a walk after these." I pointed to the aisle and that pacified him. "Don't drink and walk at the same time," I joked, but he thought I was serious, nodding his head like the excited thumping tail of my dog. He was cute, but if I slept with the kid, my mom would hear about it. She didn't need to know about that sort of thing.

I scanned over the columns of Budweiser and grabbed the darkest beer under ten bucks. Megan wanted white wine. I didn't know much about the sour beverage, but that didn't matter. She was cheap too, which was why we became friends in the first place. Friends united over cheap alcohol.

Three women stood at the end of the next aisle with their carts pointed away from their bodies. One woman's cart overflowed with red and white cardboard cases carrying twenty-four cans of Caperfield's best. These women had mothered my former classmates. They were mothers of the school's current students. Mothers of good Catholic children.

"Jamie told me it was Tramell's doing. He stuck a pipe in her locker," said a tall woman. Her hair was a strange thing. It was dark on top, but blonde pieces hung out from the bottom. Some parts looked white in between. She wore a red turtleneck sweater with a small cat inscribed on the left breast. Go Tigers.

"Tramell?" another mother said. "I don't know him." She placed a hand on her hip and leaned against the cart's handrail.

"He's one of the new voucher kids," the tall one said. Her hair seriously bothered me. The skunk-like design made it difficult to focus on anything else. After I had

graduated, the state of Ohio passed a law where parents could apply for passes or waivers or whatever it was that allowed their underprivileged kid to attend private schools.

“Damn vouchers,” said the final mother. I knew her—Brooke Guagenti. She was swollen in her midsection, pregnant with another Italian legacy. I babysat for her before I left town. Her three kids were spoiled. The oldest child once told me I was chubby while swiveling her tiny hips to a teen rock song, but I quit after the youngest child poured maple syrup on the kitchen floor and blamed it on the cat. They didn’t own pets.

Brooke saw me then, her tiny frame moving away from the brown cart to embrace me. I hated hugs. There was something false in most of my affections and sometimes I didn’t shower for a few days—not a hugging combination. Her belly pressed against mine. I hoped pregnancy wasn’t contagious.

“I haven’t seen you in years,” Brooke said. “Still down south?”

“Just home for the holidays.” I shifted the beer from one hand to the other.

“Been to Megan’s yet? Sal’s there.” Her high brows pinched together and her crackling lipstick tightened. She looked constipated, worried over Sal’s behavior. Megan and Sal were siblings and Brooke’s niece and nephew. Sal was the shining star of the McFarland family, until war and sand stole his smile and his long, black hair. Before watching over Brooke’s kids, Megan once warned me about her crazy cousin’s behavior, but the money was good. Brooke married a Guagenti and that meant half a week’s pay for me in four hours.

“I’m on my way there.” I showed her my beer, lifting it from my side.

It was no surprise we’d imbibe, but Brooke gasped anyway. “You’re not drinking that garbage.” Her husband distributed Anheuser-Busch products to the county bars,

restaurants, and golf clubs. Drinking other products insulted the family, but the South taught me beer was enjoyed in many colors. The darker the better, I thought.

“I like it. How are the kids?” The middle one interested me. When I watched him, he was a quiet five-year-old. His mouth always hung open and he possessed a serious addiction to pink lemonade. I was on the receiving end of several missed attempts rushing to the bathroom.

Brooke waved her frail hands, as though her kids could be brushed aside. “Busy and smart. Emily is so pretty now.” I wondered if Emily was growing through a chubby phase. I was still in mine. Brooke’s thin figure endured, even when carrying a child, and I doubted she allowed Emily to fatten up. Brooke’s weight made her hands skeletal and aged. They reminded me of my grandmother’s—long and white with manicured nails tipped in a glossy, red shine. A large, bright diamond on her left hand sparkled in the store’s fluorescent lights. She was a strange arrangement of bones and belly.

“Emily at the high school yet?” I asked. Emily wanted to grow up. She wore bras around the house and when I babysat, I made her take them off and put on a t-shirt. She slid on her bikini top instead, flaunting her adolescent figure. One particular Saturday, I think the week before the syrup disaster, I found her on top of her brother kissing him. I pulled her off of the scrawny thing and reminded her that this wasn’t *Deliverance* and nobody squealed like pigs here. Her brother oinked.

“Not yet. She has another year, but she can’t wait,” Brooke said. Brooke liked Emily young and pretty. She liked dressing her daughter in tight jeans, and I often watched her boys while she and Emily went to the big city malls on Saturday afternoons.

Brooke pulled her sweater at the hem, tightening the fabric over her protruding bellybutton and looked everywhere but at my eyes.

I checked out the clock on the back wall of the deli, which sat in the far corner of the store. I needed to get out of here. I wasn't late, but not much longer and the other mothers would want to chat. They could earn their gossip some other way, and when it concerned my own life, the gossip came from my mom. My mom once said she wanted to tell everyone she was proud of me. I was her greatest accomplishment, successful and independent—unlike half of my class, who celebrated their unplanned pregnancies. These babies were celebrated because they'd eventually become Tiger alum, not because they were hoped for and wanted. They were an accessory, a mistake. Mom thought the best of everybody and embraced all of their thoughtless acts. She failed to realize that bored women and their children judge you no matter your achievements.

"Brooke, it was great seeing you." I squeezed Brooke's upper arm. I once saw an elderly woman do it to my coworker. It seemed like an acceptable form of affection without me opening up my armpits again. "I've got girl time with your favorite niece. I better head out." Girl time with Megan meant a bowl, beers, and lamenting our pathetic lives.

"You're Gene Stolly's daughter?" said the tall mother. "You went to state?"

Christ, that fucking hair. I wanted to shave it off and tell her natural was the new skunk.

"Go Tigers," I said. I wished these people thought about something other than high school athletics.

She chuckled and shook her head. “Won’t have any Tiger programs left with the voucher monkeys coming in.” Her hair flopped over her shoulders.

“Marissa,” said the other woman, whose name I never learned. It was a subtle warning to her friend that dirty words were a taboo kept behind closed doors and not openly spoken in Caperfield’s only store still open before the holiday. The woman now knew Tramell was black. At least she was embarrassed—either for herself or her friend, I wasn’t sure.

I turned to Brooke. “I’m going to go.” My attempt at polite passive behavior was useless now.

Marissa showed no sign of discomfort. She lifted her shoulders and faced me, looking into my eyes. “You don’t know about the vouchers? You don’t care about your school anymore?” She was goading me. She knew who I was and what I wasn’t—a disc jockey several hours away in Nashville who revealed the week’s celebrity dirt—not an activist or a dedicated alumna. “You have a voice—use it.”

“For what?”

Her provocation wasn’t working. I was more insulted by her hair.

“For your people.”

“My people?” I said. “As in my Catholic people? Or my white brethren?”

She jerked her head back and that damn hair fell over her eyes. “Hey—”

“Brooke, I’ll tell Megan you send your love.” I wasn’t going to let her finish.

She nodded, confused by the entire exchange. Leave it to a Guagenti to mistake racism for friendly banter. Leave it to me to avoid using my voice.

Megan's apartment smelled. It wasn't the usual fermented scent of weed, but of sweet treats she pulled together for my visit. When we last spoke, she was making life changes. Big life changes she told me, sniffing into the phone. Megan, laid off from her construction job, scared me. I didn't think she was dangerous, but when she became sad and angry, she transformed into a poison of drugs and alcohol. She called and whispered to me about Caperfield. She claimed she stayed for her family. I thought she stayed in town because she was a coward.

The last time I was there, her brother Sal was home from Germany. He invited all of his old Tiger friends to Megan's and supplied them with whiskey and bud. Sal liked to pour shots for the whole room, stand on the coffee table, and scream, "Fuck the Japs." Everyone would raise their shots and repeat it, either clueless to what he was talking about or too scared of Sal to let him know he was sixty years late on that one. Whenever we went to the club, Sal purchased buckets of beer and handed them out to the members. He said his income was the people's income.

Sal was home for good and he refused to live anywhere but with his sister. He knew Megan would never kick him out. I wanted to tell him to get the hell out, but who was I to force a trained killer into homelessness?

Megan's and Sal's dad had broken into a convenience store years ago and was out on parole. While their parents divorced during that time, their father stayed at their mother's home and took advantage of her old, wounded heart. Sal feared he'd kill the man. I couldn't see that in the boy who sat in Megan's beat up recliner, staring at her warm pan of doughy snacks.

"What are you guys doing tonight?" Sal asked.

“I don’t know—hanging out here,” Megan said. “We have wine and cookies.”

Curling into Megan’s worn couch and watching old shows on the flat screen Sal bought for his older sister sounded better than a visit to the club. I didn’t speak to Sal anymore, but when Megan and I were seniors and he was a sophomore, I’d rub his hair and tell him he was a looker, and all the girls would love him some day. Two Christmas breaks ago, I slept with his friend, and he never forgave me. It wasn’t until the next day I heard he wanted me, which would have made sense if we had spoken or spent time together. He had been overseas, and I didn’t call Caperfield home anymore. He just wanted to be pissed about something.

“I ran into Brooke at Randy’s. She called my beer ‘garbage’ and gave me a hug.” I’m not sure why I brought that up. It was on my mind, but instigating serious conversation seemed pointless. I never heard anything worth grasping onto. Most people my age had opinions they read on the internet.

“Sounds like her.” Megan laughed a low assuming sound. “They actually have a cat now.”

Shit, I thought. Those people did not need a pet. “At least Leo has something he can blame for everything.” I examined my bitten down nails. The quick was exposed on my left pinky. “So this woman, Marissa, was there. She has some fucked up hair.” I pointed to my short blond cut, as though that illustrated how the skunk look was crazy enough to distract me during the entire exchange at Randy’s. “She was going on about the vouchers.”

“Marissa Ellis. They won’t shut up about it,” Megan said. “The Kriegers are taking a group to Columbus. They call it the ‘fight for education.’” She used two hands to

quote the fight. The fingers demonstrated how Megan thought it was silly. I thought it was finger quote-worthy as well.

“I don’t understand why they’re threatened by it. We had five black kids in our class—nobody cared then,” I said.

“Four. Jasmine moved to Perry senior year.” She glanced at Sal. “The vouchers bring down the expectations and influence the other kids.” Megan smoothed the front of her long skirt and draped it over her two feet. She was uncomfortable. “It’s not about race. They’re coming from Central, and that place is scary.”

“She called them monkeys.” I looked to my nails again, picking at what was left of the purple polish one of my coworkers at the station had given me. “There isn’t any confusion there.”

“Shit.” She handed me the pan of sweets. “Another cookie?”

I grabbed a chocolate chip and knocked off the lid to my second beer.

“Who gives a fuck?” Sal said. “If you’re a good kid, then you stay away from them.”

“But why do kids need to stay away from them?” I said.

He was surprised I spoke directly to him. “Parents bring in bad apples to our school because they think it’ll save them—it won’t. Nothing can save them.”

Back in college, I went to a tanning salon. It was the only time I placed any serious consideration into skin color. I didn’t think about others’ skin color. Tiger mothers, however, did. When I was young, Mom told me acknowledging race was wrong. So was premarital sex, but I loved her just the same.

The discussion reminded me of another conversation I overheard when I was a kid. Sometimes, my mom had sent me to my Grandma's afterschool, and she'd fried plates of bacon for me and grumbled about her daughter's job. She wished my sick father wasn't so sick so her daughter could perform her duties as a mother. Sitting at my grandparent's dining room table, I eavesdropped on words exchanged between my Papa and my Grandma. They stepped into the living room, where the yellow carpet conflicted with the pink rose wallpaper. Papa had come in from his meeting, grabbed Grandma's arm, and tugged her out of the kitchen and away from my hissing plate of bacon. I pretended to scratch in my notebook the answers to math homework even though I couldn't see them from my spot at the table. Adults thought kids tuned them out, and though I knew it was a sin, I listened to their words anyway, holding onto my pencil in my left-hand and pulling down the hem of my plaid jumper with my right.

"This isn't right, Bob," Grandma said. "You know it isn't."

"What am I supposed to do? Tell them how to vote?"

"Put some birds out," she said, encouraging him to sneak around and gather information. "Call George. He can do the rest."

"Annie. I can't do that," Papa said. "The guys are already talking. I don't like it."

Papa had sounded so sad. There was a long silence after. I imagined Grandma consoled him, petting his black hair like she did the day my father died. While Grandma never thought my father did enough to "earn" his health, Papa fished with him until Daddy couldn't flick his wrists anymore.

"The vote is on Saturday's meeting. Either way, this won't be good," Papa said.

Papa had been the Exalted Ruler of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks Lodge

#54. Whenever my mom's family gathered together, the Elks were discussed. The club was Papa's life and therefore, his children's childhood.

That following weekend, Michael Lester was rejected from membership in Elks Lodge #54. Membership was open to males who believed in God, resided or were employed in Caperfield, performed community service, and were older than twenty-one. It also appeared that in Caperfield, a member couldn't be black. That wasn't an official rule, and since then, black members had been accepted to other lodges, but #54 remained an all-white fraternity.

With my legs folded underneath my ass, I leaned on the orange arm of Megan's filthy couch. I clinked a fresh bottle of beer against my bracelet and kept my thoughts to myself. Sal's thoughts concerning the voucher kids and their salvation were abrasive, and I wasn't interested in anymore confrontation. He really felt that way about himself, that he couldn't be helped and there was no rescuing him, and he displaced his rage onto others, but I wasn't skilled in therapeutic discussion. Sal and Megan laughed at the television, and in that moment, his eyes mirrored what his mouth was doing.

Every weekday morning, I addressed thousands of listeners on a Top 40 Hits station, and yet, when I returned to my childhood home, I hid away at my mom's house or Megan's apartment. I couldn't say anything in Caperfield. My Grandma had not wanted Michael Lester in Lodge #54 and the Kriegers were assembling a group of parents to fight for Catholic education. And I sat on old furniture peeling the label off of a beer bottle.

I believed Megan was a coward for never leaving this town, but it took nerve to stay and mend her brother's struggling mind. Every morning, I crawled to work, flipped

on a microphone, and told the world about the latest procedures in cosmetic surgery, the celebrity news fresh from Hollywood, and performed on-air stunts. I didn't disclose valuable opinions with colleagues, and after the last election, I found it pointless to work through these issues with friends. We never shared the same opinion, and I didn't want to think less of them for not thinking just like me.

It was just before midnight, but I had time to do something—what, I wasn't sure. I collected three empty beer bottles and threw them away. Sal watched me stand and move around the room. “Are you leaving?” he asked.

I didn't look at him. “Megan, is it cool I sleep on your couch?”

She agreed, brought me a blanket, and said she was tired too. We joked that we couldn't stay up all night like we did in college, when we used to smoke and watch late night infomercials about make-up that covered varicose veins on your legs and special accessories that added height to your hair.

“Lock the bottom knob when you leave,” she said. I hugged her before she walked down the hallway. She knew I showered only when I felt like it. Megan was a big girl. Much bigger than my solid figure. Her eyes were green and wide, her best feature. I hoped she kept baking cookies.

Sal never left the room. He muted the television and put on the captions. He was still awake when I stood and stretched my arms a few hours later. Sal watched me call my old station in Caperfield, where I interned and announced the county traffic reports during college summer breaks. He watched me touch up my makeup, and he watched me slip on my black boots.

“They aren't KISS FM anymore,” he said. “Bill's still there, though.”

“I know.”

The morning shows began at six. My old boss always arrived at five to kick-start the holiday’s previously recorded material. The building hosted four stations that broadcast into the greater portion of Midwest Ohio. He parked his car near the door. I wasn’t going to bang for him to let me in. It wasn’t raining, but dew layered the windows and grass surrounding the lot. I stood outside and balance-beamed my walk across a painted parking space line, performing my own sobriety test. Sober as the sun, Mom always said. It was Thanksgiving morning, and the spaces were empty. Only Bill would be inside, so I waited and touched my toes back and forth on the crackled paint. The metal door creaked open twenty minutes later, allowing me enough time to assemble my idea.

“I wondered if you were even coming,” he said. “You called an hour ago.”

“I’ve been here for 23 minutes.” I handed him the cinnamon raisin bagel I grabbed from Megan’s kitchen. “I didn’t want to knock. I remember that door’s echo.”

Bill ushered me down the narrow hallway, passing the sports station office. His obesity consumed the hallway’s width. “I can fit you in Monday morning on 1150,” he said. I followed him into the last studio—the one where they did the commercials.

“I’m leaving Sunday,” I said. “We have three weeks before Christmas. I’m hosting the Presents for Peasants party at the mall.”

“Jesus, what kind of name is Presents for Peasants?” His chin jiggled, but his smile told me he was joking. “Okay then, what do you want?”

“Just you and 20 minutes,” I said.

We did a session similar to my celebrity interviews. We laughed and reminded the ten people who would hear this the following week that I'd worked there ten years ago. Bill asked me what was grinding me. That was my old bit. I would share some tedious frustration that didn't matter now. Once, I ranted about parking on my college campus for nine minutes. It bothered me that I parked in overflow commuter spots and walked through gravel in my nice shoes.

"The vouchers are grinding me, Bill," I said. I was rarely nervous anymore. Many days, I yawned my way through the six o'clock hour and laughed through much of the morning's final twenty minutes. Most shows were five hours long, and I spent four and a half hours laughing at other people. This Thanksgiving morning, I wiped my palms on my dark jeans and sipped from a coffee mug filled with orange juice, wetting my dry tongue. Bill patted my shoulder.

"The vouchers at your old high school?" he prompted. He had never prompted me before today.

"They're ruining the Tigers." At that point, I could have said that the Tigers were good kids with Christian values. I could have argued that it needed to remain a scholarship program and that the government had no business mingling with the private education system. I swept my hand through my hair and looked at the old posters plastering the sound reduction cloth that carpeted the wall. Some of the posters yellowed and peeled off the fabric. They were public service announcements sent to stations as reminders to disc jockeys that not only were they the on-air talent but role models as well. The station managers sometimes encouraged the interns to make short commercials with health tips for listeners. One poster actually warned teenagers of the dangers of

pregnancy, as if participating in sex before marriage was fatal. Another poster encouraged teens to stay active. I found that ironic in my business. But two posters, side by side, reminded me of Sal. One was a promotional poster for the Army. It had a soldier in his battle dress uniform saluting the camera. Next to it, a boy held a clear bottle with black letters that said VODKA on the side. They couldn't advertise a specific liquor company, but they needed folks to understand that it wasn't water. The boy appeared sad. This wasn't the usual poster of teens partying around a bottle of beer, but of a young man suffering and slipping the liquid down his throat just so he could forget his problems until the next day or even the next week. The tag line read, "Get help," and provided a 1-800 number just below it.

"At least that's what people say anyway," I said.

I shared with Bill my encounter at Randy's—names changed, of course. I told him about what Sal said, that nobody could be helped and saved. I told Bill the vouchers didn't matter.

"They don't matter?" Bill said. "Why's that?"

"The students enrolling aren't bad kids influencing healthy Catholic minds." My fingers shook. I ran the jagged edges of my nails against my sweater, catching them on the threads. "The vouchers are a problem because parents make them problematic. Instead of ridding the school of these kids, why aren't parents and students embracing the change?"

It felt silly, the changes I suggested, but I wasn't going to stick around and apply for a counseling job at the school. The board of faculty members might hire me because they liked to hire alum, especially state qualifiers, but I liked my job and I loved my new

home. I knew how it all sounded, though—cheesy and unreal. Some of my other classmates drank themselves into underage pregnancy, but when I was a Tiger, I spent my weekends with Megan staring at cute boys and dipping french fries into frosted malts.

“Awful things happen, Bill, with or without voucher kids. But the parents don’t want the school to change—they don’t want to lose control.” I ended on a strong note, and Bill punched my fist.

He clicked off the microphones and shifted me into his office. “Great job, kid. I’ll post it on the site after it airs. Maybe make a comment thread, get some conversation going.”

On my way out, I thanked Bill. He’d air the bit on Monday and send an email to the new principal of the Tigers encouraging him to listen. Later, I ate sausage and pie with my mom—we both hated turkey—and we watched old Christmas movies until we slept. We awoke to Christmas music and rolling credits. Her petite body stretched out on Daddy’s old leather recliner. She relayed to me the Tiger’s football season. She spoke about my young cousin who was a freshman linebacker because he was so big. My cousin was a voucher kid as well. She said there was a new boy on the team. That this new boy led varsity to the playoffs, and he attended the private school on a voucher pass too.

That following night, I thought again about Sal’s hopeless view of people, of how they can’t change, and I called him. I asked him to meet me for a drink at the club. I never brought up his irrational anger toward me, and neither did he. I wasn’t going to pretend I knew what it felt like to kill another human being, even when it was done for the freedom of your people. We saw a few folks we knew. Marissa was there, and I

waved hello—she turned her head to the side, like my dog does when she’s unsure of what I’m saying to her.

“Do you think any of your friends can change, or are we all doomed?” I said. Sal had two fingers of whiskey in front of him and a bottle of his uncle’s beer. A slow, gospel version of “Deck the Halls” played over the sound system.

He spun the drink around, never sipping from it. “We can get worse, but I never see people get better.”

“I like to think I’m getting better. In the last few days, things have already changed,” I said. “Isn’t change about choosing?”

“You think I chose to kill those people?” he said. His voice rose, but I grabbed his hand. I could see him pushing his teeth together.

“I don’t know.” I placed my fingers on top of his, lining them one on top of the other. Then I pulled his fingers up from the table, slapping them back down. Sal released the tension in his jaw. “I think you think you chose it,” I said.

He grabbed the whiskey and swallowed in one pull. He waved the bartender over and slapped money on the bar. “Just beer,” he said.

Before we left the parking lot, Sal kissed me standing next to his car. He leaned back against the passenger side window, and I settled against his chest. It was sweet, and I wanted more.

“I will never live in Caperfield again, Sal,” I warned him. He was tall, and my temple rested against the cross hanging from his neck. He rubbed my back and moved his hands down to my ass.

“I figured,” he said. “That’s okay, but I like it here. It’s better than over there.” He wasn’t referring to the other side of the parking lot. He kissed me again, much longer this time, and his mouth tasted of Budweiser.

Shaved Legs

You should probably remain seated. I'm Vivian and I want to tell you how I died, and this is the only way I can explain it to you. You see, death has always interested me, even now after my own passing. It doesn't interest me the way a tiger costume interests a furry, but in all the ways it happens. Like how I could slip on gravel layering the hiking trail that contours the cliff at Shawnee Park. I loved that cliff and its far reaching line of sight, but then one look at the rocks below, which trickled into the flowing Maumee, and I stopped walking there. Of course, I didn't fall to my demise, but even after kicking the bucket I liked to think about all the ways I could die. What happened was unexpected.

Now I wasn't suicidal or anything, so don't get the wrong idea. Let's just say I was aware of my own fragile state. The wrong flip of my favorite boning knife would put me down and out, and too many cigarettes could blacken my lungs. Did you know the number one cause of accidental death in the United States is no longer traffic accidents, but an overdose of pharmaceutical drugs? I do. I know these things. They interest me.

You're probably thinking I worked in medicine when I was alive and that I did something constructive with all of my knowledge. I didn't. I managed a bakery in a grocery store down on West Elm. The building is a brick shithole now, abandoned and graffitied, but Rudy's was at the center of the good part of town back then. I didn't die there either. Don't get me wrong. I was aware of the various ways my job could kill me. I checked the wiring on the appliances once a week and I had calculated the distance and time between the employee restroom (it took thirty-seven seconds if I speed-walked) and

my spot in the bakery. You know, just in case of a tornado, which destroyed the movie theater in the next town over back in the eighties.

That was back when my father was a paramedic employed by Saint Elizabeth's Medical Center. Dad was featured in a commercial for the "miracle" center. They created an ad after the non-denominational hospital moved into town, and I say "miracle" because they referred to themselves as miracle makers. It was all very blasphemous and Dad was at the heart of it. Never mind the fact that Saint Elizabeth's was responsible for a pneumonia outbreak in the seventies that sickened nineteen patients and killed seven.

So it starts like this. Someone rang the emergency line and Dad responded to the call. A body in the Ottawa River, they said. A boy stuck on the pillar of the Black Swamp Bridge. By the time his team arrived, and by team, I mean Dad and Marty Daley, the body had floated near Sherwood Commons.

There was a baseball field where the river curved around the south side of the city park. A ball was hit too hard. A boy went too far and fell into the freezing water, which was why I never went ice skating. The story's changed now. My mother shared the tale again and again over time, and at first she said he wasn't breathing for twenty minutes. Another time the boy hadn't had oxygen for thirty-four minutes. When she repeated it to the new neighbor, it was an hour. Whenever my mother was excited about it, she'd wave her arms in the space around her and her arm fat would flap back and forth like a flag in a storm.

What Dad told me was this: he said the boy was dead. He was cold, blue, and his skin hardened. Dad said that was the dead sign—hard skin. But Marty was adamant, pushing Dad to keep working the boy's chest. Marty knew the boy—a sixth grade student

in his wife's class down at Horace Mann. Anyway, Dad pushed air in him—in some stories he used his own mouth and at other times, he placed a mask over the boy's face—and pounded at his heart. You know, all that resuscitation stuff you see on those medical shows.

They revived him later at the hospital. Some folks said the doctor prayed to St. Elizabeth before he stuck the electric paddles to the hard-skinned chest. Decades later and I still heard the older people talk about the “miracle” at our very own hospital. Dad would swell up and Mom would tell it all over again, when she was alive that is.

I remember Dad said the boy was hairless and smooth when they took his freezing clothes off of his hard skin. Dad wasn't one of those guys—he was just indicating the boy's youth, but I thought about that—about being hairless, too, when I died. You know, to show evidence of my youth. To have my fair skin smoothed over by paramedics and nurses when they worked me over and cut off my shirt or tore off my skirt.

My mother's skin was yellowed and ugly when she died. Her medicines messed with her hormones and she grew hair on her chin. She complained about it, and Dad would shush her and rub her legs, which were maps of varicose veins that swelled around her knees like the river that boy floated down. Dad was always the calm one. Someone had to be.

He'd come home and tell us to pray for the Martins or the Nortons. I played along, grabbing his hand and reciting a Hail Mary. He'd rub my head and call me Pickle. I ate whole jars of pickles in a week's time back then. I stopped eating them when I received six jars from my cousin at the Christmas exchange—turns out once people know some definable thing about you, they drive it into the ground. I haven't had a pickle in a

decade, but at my funeral, several attendees joked about my love of the sour vegetable. I wanted to hold a jar right then and pelt them in the head with my ghost pickles. I imagine I'd lean close to their ear and whisper, "Pickle this, motherfucker."

Every new tale, every fresh death, and every close trauma, Dad shared over dinner or bedtime prayers. He taught me things. Things like making sure the nail gun securing a door's framework points in the right direction. He told me secrets he shouldn't have been sharing with his only child. Like the time he and Marty responded to a call at Mr. George's house, my third grade teacher, and they revived him after his wife had accidentally choked him. At the time, I didn't understand why Mr. George's wife would choke him, but after college I came to understand what Dad meant when he said Mr. George wore a mask they had to cut off. But Dad knew I reveled in these tales, clinging to every detail about folks and how they were found. I would sit up straighter and say, "Daddy, please." Paramedics noticed things—like the excessive body hair on a young woman who fainted, cracked her skull, and bled out at the Drug Mart on Cable Road. Or the moles that littered the back of a man who was projected through his windshield onto state route 413.

Just because death interests me doesn't mean I want to work with it. I don't like bodily fluids or hair. Opening up a body to save it or to find cause of death was grotesque. So it was ideal to work in a bakery because the sight of a strand of hair could ruin you or leave a woman like Mrs. McNamara outraged, heaving bosom and all, because her daughter's cupcakes were destroyed after the discovery of a few misplaced blonde curls. They weren't my curls. I wore my mandatory hairnet and ball cap with pride, and my head was the only place that had hair.

I also loved the smell of baked goods. The only thing that smelled better than fresh apple pie was the scent of my dog, May, when she'd come inside after bathing in the sun's rays on a spring afternoon. While I was busy shaving and exfoliating my legs every day, May rolled in the grass. While I trimmed my arm hairs, May lay on her back letting the sun warm her white and tan fur. The sun cooked her skin and she'd come inside to cool down on my lap. She didn't smell like the putrid stink of a dog fresh out of a pond or an animal that hadn't received any attention in months, but of grass and warmth. Her fur curled and looped around her body and I leaned into her neck and stuck my nose to the back of her head. It was sweeter than any pie or cookie I ever baked.

At my funeral, my father discussed taking May home with him, but it was too difficult, he said. Maybe he remembered seeing me sniff at May and brush her fur. He said I loved May more than my family. Since Mom's funeral, during which I didn't cry or pray to God for her salvation, Dad looked at me like I'd experienced a trauma and he couldn't fix it. I imagine he saw me as a patient, fallen from a glorious tree, injured, and he couldn't figure out how to help me up. My friend Jamie took May with her—she has a few acres for May's sunbathing habits.

I didn't sunbathe—skin cancer is the most common cancer in the United States and someone dies of melanoma every fifty-seven minutes. My pale skin was wrinkle free and had few blemishes. One mark bothered me—I closed a car door on my left knee when I was nine. The blood soaked my white knee high socks and I vomited on the back of the passenger seat of an old Cougar. When I lengthened my leg, the scar looked like a swollen worm wriggling just beneath the surface. The day I died, I wore a skirt that danced along my knee and blue heels that heightened my body. No one noticed the scar.

The skirt was the newest addition to my closet. I wore knee length skirts with a white blouse. The apron at work was white as well and had Rudy's stitched across the midsection in a serif font. On my days at the bakery, I braided my hair down one side or the other and twisted it up into a knot in front of the store manager. He'd nod in approval. I said, "Don't worry, boss. I got it." Some days I'd snap on the hairnet and others I placed the ball cap over my hair or I'd wear both, just to change things around.

I was forty-one years old when I died. May had been with me for over ten years and my mother had been dead for seven. Dad was seventy years old and had no children or grandchildren. I married once, long ago, and after a few years of intense lovemaking, he left. He shaved his head and I rubbed the smooth skin when he was on top. I worked at the bakery for twenty years. In the average sixty-five-year-old's life, he or she spends approximately nine years watching television. If that's true, I watched five years and seven months' worth of television before I died. However, I suspect I spent more time removing the hair from my limbs or reading the newspaper's obituaries (the paper averaged fifty obits a week and approximately fifteen percent of them asked for donations to cancer research foundations) than engaging in the twenty-year reality television invasion.

So you can tell, I had my own priorities. Normally I managed the day shift, baking cakes and checking sales before working mothers purchased that evening's bread, dessert, or soccer snacks. Every week I put together a display of a new dessert. The day I died, the display showcased a cupcake tower made of bite-sized lemon cakes wrapped in pink paper. My new employee had hovered over a table, assembling a cake with small vegetable characters, a pickle front and center, skipping along the icing. She told me it

was a cucumber. I said, "Same difference, just unpickled." Once that definable thing is discovered by the public, it is no longer your secret love. It becomes transformable and mutated and teased. I couldn't desire pickles anymore, when they were no longer the pickles I loved in the first place.

I was on my way home that evening, when I remembered I didn't have a dinner in my new, white refrigerator. I had purchased a green vintage fridge from a refurbished appliances shop. Then I read this article about the Refrigerator Safety Act of 1956. It examined the history of the appliance and how it was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of children until that bill passed. Kids would climb inside, playing hide-or-seek or something, and never make it out because of the locking mechanism. So I bought a new one. I had no intention of climbing inside a refrigerator, but you never know.

I bit the big one on a Wednesday. I remember that because it was Dad's bowling league night. He bowled a 300 once. He bragged about that more than his participation in the "miracle," but either way, those were his two prideful points in life. He was on a team with Marty and two other paramedics and they ate Light-up Lane's pizza and drank three pitchers of beer every Wednesday after blessing the food with my third grade cafeteria prayer. Even before I died, when we met for food at my place, Dad made me recite the prayer and nod his head, like he nodded his head over the saved souls of Hardin County. It'd bob up and down like the tugging bob of a fisherman's line just before yanking up an eight pound bass.

My friend, Dickie, managed the deli. He was eighty something and had a thick mass of black hair greased down to his neck. With the exception of a few liver spots, Dickie's skin was smooth and tan, natural from his mother's Italian heritage. He wore

black framed glasses and a black tie under his Rudy's apron. Dickie tried new things in the deli too. Like my changing display, Dickie altered his weekly specialty sandwich with new recipes. He once tried a BBQ sauce that set my tongue on fire and I yelled at him for not warning me. He called the sauce buffalo and said it was the new thing. Apparently it was, because he stocked the shelves with it the following week.

That evening, I walked through the back and asked Dickie what he had for me this week. He stretched his arms above his head and coughed over the backroom sink. He hacked a nasty phlegm sound. He had stopped smoking, but the damage was done.

"Oh, I got something good," he said. "It's Asian. Has this new sesame stuff in it."

I glanced at my manicured nails painted in a clear gloss. I picked at the edge of a chipped pinky. "Asian. I don't know. The new place on Charles got my stomach rolling last week."

"It's just a seasoning," Dickie said. "So good you'll be begging like old Preacher Man for more." Old Preacher Man stood on the street corners of the town center. He wore a bright orange vest and clutched the Bible while screaming at passersby passages, intending to save all the Catholics from their hedonist ways. He kept a janitor's bucket next to him and whenever someone tossed a coin his way, he'd say they'd been cured. I gave him my six jars of pickles and he told me they gave him kidney stones. I said, "Drink more water, motherfucker." It was the only time I ever saw him laugh.

"I've got enough pork to make one sandwich. I'm out of potato salad," Dickie said.

"You know I just give that to my neighbor."

“I know, but I don’t have any to give you. Just the pork.” Dickie washed his hands and sautéed the meat. I didn’t eat beef or hot dogs, which were the only foods left after the dinner rush. Hot dogs weren’t even made from one single animal and red meat was bad for your arteries.

Dickie liked to fling and flip his spatulas and cooking forks in the air. I cringed, imagining the fork piecing his carotid artery. After wrapping the sandwich topped off Dickie’s way, which included lettuce, onions, and green peppers, Dickie asked me something he’d never asked before—was I single?

“I don’t date,” I said.

“I’ve got my nephew coming in this weekend. He’s divorced, but his kids are in high school. You should come over.”

I spoke in a high-pitch, flirty voice, teasing my old friend. “Why, Dickie?” I waved my hand in front of my face and batted my eyes. “Are you setting me up?”

“You’re a pretty girl—”

“I’m not a girl,” I said, interrupting him. Dickie was my friend because he didn’t see a problem with my love life—until that moment.

“Woman. Sorry. You’re a beautiful woman, and Gene’s a great kid—guy—sorry. Just stop by on Saturday, and bring May.” Dickie’s wife, Olive, suffered from Alzheimer’s or dementia or something that made people forget, and the only thing that made her nice anymore was my dog. May never lay down, but sat on her butt so Olive could scratch her furry head and call her Buck. Dickie said May looked like Olive’s childhood dog. That was the reason I planned on stopping by—I shuddered, thinking Gene might have a hair-covered pot belly and gray whiskers protruding from his ears.

“Alright. But I’m not going out with him,” I said. “Thanks for the grub, Dickie.”

The parking lot for Rudy’s employees was shaded by the large oak trees that sprinkle the town. The evening sky was in transition, pinks and yellows brushed across the clouds reminding me of my cupcake tower—my best one yet.

“What are you grinning at pretty lady?” A man stood by the dumpster eating the remnants of an expired meat and cheese tray.

“My cupcake display,” I said. “It’s inside near the bakery if you want to see.” They’d give him free samples inside.

“I think you like what you see,” he said. He was young, younger than me anyway, and wore a camouflage jacket and dog tags. A black cap pushed brown curls down over his ears.

“No, I don’t like hair, really,” I said.

He laughed, dropping some cheese slices to the ground, and said, “You have a lot of hair.”

“Yes, I do. But ladies are supposed to have long hair.” I remembered the sight of my mother’s bald head when she died. I thought this was it. I saw the knife in his belt and the desperation in his features. His soft chin and slacking cheeks spoke of his numbered days. “Are you going to kill me now?”

“What the hell, lady?” he said. “I make a sexy remark and you think I’m going to kill you. Jesus.”

I pointed at his knife.

He looked at his waist and pulled the blade out. It was short and had ridges at the end. It didn’t glint in the sun’s rays because it was filthy, covered in a variety of stains.

“My old fishing knife. I use it to dig around and stuff. I might warn off a few crazies sometimes when I sleep near the park.”

“Go inside and tell them Vivian sent you for the oatmeal cookies. Take them and don’t come back,” I said. “You’ll scare the workers with that knife.”

He left and I hopped on my bike. I strapped my helmet on and hooked my bag into the front basket. Home wasn’t far and I avoided riding in vehicles as much as possible. I swept down Elm and across Charles. I liked riding past Dad’s place, even when he wasn’t home. I checked the mail and placed it on the dining room table for him. He still received junk addressed to my mother. It had been awhile since I tested his fire alarm and carbon monoxide detector, so I did that too. I watered his dying plants and ducked back outside.

The city was rerouting Cable Road and the detour caused a lot of confusion back then. This was before the expansion of Eastown and Allentown. Cars were darting into side neighborhoods avoiding the construction. It was chaos. By that time, two kids had already been injured by unexpected speeding vehicles.

I stopped at every intersection and looked both ways. I anticipated every moment of my ride home and every bump on every sidewalk. I hopped the manhole on Whitehall and dodged the crumbling curb on Victoria. I swerved around Mrs. Davis tugging garbage cans next to her mailbox, and I waved at the Johnson brothers wrestling a football in the front yard. The Baileys’ small Chihuahua chased me into their neighbor’s yard, but I kept going. All of this was common, usual, and I anticipated it. What I hadn’t seen coming was the city truck pulled onto the sidewalk fixing the electric wiring of a

pole that stood next to an old tree. Just before I ran into the truck I pulled left, into oncoming traffic, and hit a red car.

The car was parked and I fell over, smacking my helmet on the ground. Like most reactions, I put my hands out first. You know, to break the fall. I didn't hit my face, but my hands were scraped and the helmet was dented. I held my hands to my eyes and examined the raw scratches on my palms. I said, "Motherfucking cars," and climbed back onto my bike. My basket had held onto the sandwich Dickie made me, but my bike flicked me off like a nasty fly landing on the tip of your finger. I wanted to die as beautifully as possible, and cars usually mangled folks.

When I walked inside my front door, May greeted me by sticking her nose in my crotch and then licking my hand. Apparently, our scents are more identifiable than our appearances. She could see just fine, but she always double checked down there. I followed her to the back door and opened it so she could do her business. You know how dogs are though, sniffing for twenty minutes before finding the right spot.

I pulled my hair out of the bun and loosened my hair tie. All of that tightness pulled at my scalp, so I massaged my roots and rubbed my fingers in circular motions above my ears. I washed my hands, antibacterial soap of course, and looked in my cabinets. They were an oak color which dated the house, but I liked the older look. It reminded me of the kitchen in Dad's house. There wasn't much in them, so I couldn't toss the sandwich and lie to Dickie. It was me and this sandwich. Oftentimes, I ate on my back deck and watched May smell every blade of grass as though another creature had spread its scent over the yard since she was last out there.

After mom died, I stole her sun lounger and placed a black umbrella over it. Just because I didn't tan didn't mean I didn't enjoy the evening air. The transitioning day smelled fresh with the scents of new growth, new life reaching for the sky, like a newborn unseeing but waving a frail fist for its mother.

After settling into the lounger, sandwich in my lap and chardonnay on the side table, I spotted my neighbor Mrs. Skelley smoking on her patio. I waved and she nodded in return. She'd wait until she finished her third cigarette before coming over. When she saw me outside, she liked to visit and tell me about what happened on her soap opera that day. Sometimes, instead of the soap's newest sex scandal, she told me about what was on CNN. The news was frequently about a bombing, or a popular court case, or even which celebrity earned her first DUI the previous night. She lit her second cigarette and the blazing tip glowed in the shadowed darkness of her house.

I raised the sandwich to my mouth, smelling the onions and new seasoning. Just as I opened to take my first wary bite, I noticed the sandwich had chilled. Its warmth was gone and the bread wasn't as soft as it normally was. I stepped back inside and turned on the oven, just hot enough to heat the pork in a few minutes and this way, the bun would toast. While the food warmed, I pulled up my skirt and rubbed my legs, which felt like the stems of purple thistles that pricked my feet when I was a kid. I'd planned to shave after dinner. I didn't know then that shaving would be difficult.

When I stepped back out onto the deck, I filled May's bowl with kibble. Mrs. Skelley closed her gate and shuffled toward me. Her brown slippers barely rose off the ground, and it truly appeared that each step slid across the grass, rather than over and above the thick blades. May barked at her and hopped away from her food and off the

deck. I say she hopped because when she got excited all four legs pounced off the ground as if she was a gazelle and not a mutt rescued from a rundown shelter. I settled into the lounge and sipped my chardonnay. The heat from the oven had goo-ified some of the ingredients in the sandwich, and it dripped down my right index finger. Frustrated, I set the sandwich down and wiped off the sauce.

“Something new from Dickie?” Mrs. Skelley said. “No potato salad?”

“Not tonight,” I said, placing my napkin around my fingers and palm. “Sold out.”

Mrs. Skelley nodded her head while telling me about her day. It was a soap opera kind of day. She was disappointed that her long running show dove into the supernatural realm, but I had explained to her soaps were a dying television breed, and they’d do anything to boost ratings. Finally, I bit into my dinner. This was Asian sesame seasoning greatness and, like Dickie said, was delicious. It wasn’t spicy, and once I controlled the drip, I devoured it, each bite wide and consuming. I promised myself to let Dickie know it was my favorite. That didn’t happen.

Mrs. Skelley was rambling on about the witches and midgets some writers inflicted on her soap, when I felt an itch on my hand. A fiery itch that spread over my palm. I had taken my last bite when I removed the napkin and examined the red splotches covering my two fingers. Soon after, my throat tickled, not in the remnants of a winter cold kind of way, but in the agitated can’t breathe kind of way.

“You alright?” Mrs. Skelley said.

I coughed my way through my speech and said, “Down the wrong pipe.” I clapped my thigh, signaling to May it was time to go inside and she followed me. As I

hobbled away. I managed a weak wave to Mrs. Skelley, and she left. Maybe had I let her follow me inside things would have turned out differently.

It happened quickly then. I grabbed my phone, teetering down the hallway, and stripped off my skirt and blouse. The scratching feeling that consumed my entire neck, the red rash that came up my arms, the dizzying effect on my eyes, and the tickle that took over my ability to breathe, devoured me. I knocked over the empty glass next to the sink in my attempt to fill it. The small cup tumbled to the floor, breaking into several pieces.

I realized I couldn't talk. My fingers were swollen and difficult to see while punching numbers on the phone through my watering eyes. I pressed some digits in vain hope that it was the emergency line.

In my bra and underwear, I grappled at the opaque shower curtain, and turned on the warm water. The water was steaming the room when I saw my face in the mirror. My lips puffed out and my left eye could barely open. Red patches layered my skin like the brown patches of grass in my backyard. My hands shook as I worked off the rest of my clothes, tripping over my wayward panties bunched around my ankles. I pulled open the closet door near the window, where I kept towels and medicine. I had placed a bottle of Benadryl in there once, just in case I ever had a late night nasty cough. I had been hesitant to ever use it, though, because of its trippy qualities. Once I yanked off the protective plastic and children's cap, I skipped the measuring lid and went straight to chugging that shit. But I couldn't swallow. No, instead it spewed from between my lips and over my naked chest, staining my skin. You see, not only were my legs covered in a

day's worth of stubble, but I resembled a bad horror film, artificial red dye dripping out of my mouth and down my chin.

A shower seemed like a good idea at that moment. I thought I could shave my legs one more time. I could do it in two minutes flat, when I hurried. You bet your ass that didn't work. I couldn't suck in anymore air, my lungs burned, and I cut my leg. I never cut my legs and yet, blood leaked from my knee and down the drain.

As I sank to the ceramic floor, I let water run into my mouth and I gagged it out onto the tub. A gargled, wheezing sound emitted from my throat. As I was losing consciousness, my palms rubbed my thighs—one leg was soft while the other prickled with hair.

And that's how they found me, swollen and unrecognizable, naked and bloody. The paramedics didn't notice my old knee scar or my scraped hands. They didn't comment on my smooth legs or my long red hair. They most certainly couldn't remark on my pretty eyes, swelled shut like they were. No, what they noticed was my inflated face, and one said I looked like a bloated fish, puffed out with its last gasp for underwater breath.

You can see how frustrating this is for me. At least I can say, thank God I shaved a leg. After all my life and all this time and this is what I look like when I die.

Bull Mastiff

Molly McKinley's life had not been easy. Upon reflection, she could see troubles, like heat waving in the air above tar laid on a newly paved road—with squinted eyes staring ahead, the waves were visible even when the road looked easy and smooth. People often referred to life as a road or a journey or some kind of path traveled. But Molly's life resembled a climb up an evergreen tree. It started off simple, pulling onto the first thick branch, but as she aged there were difficulties. There were sticky days, where sap layered her hands and she couldn't grasp onto the rough bark. And days when branches were too far apart and she couldn't make the next step. There were days when the branch snapped beneath her and she'd fall. Days when she had to start over.

Of course, some days were like the sun on her back as she pulled herself to the top. A few days in a row even, she could see the sky and feel the soft fur of green leaves. But Molly never thought of those days.

When Molly was seven years old, her father found her walking on the stones lining the landscape of their family's front yard. She wasn't very good at it, at staying straight. She stumbled after a stone or two, caught her foot, and wobbled. Molly had to place one foot back on the ground, straighten the book on her head, and try again. Just as she approached the wooden pole holding up the white porch, her father opened the screen door, stepping out onto the worn welcome mat. He startled her and she grasped on to a prickly branch of the evergreen they had planted, together as father and daughter, the previous week.

“What you doing, Bird?” he asked. When Molly was a little girl, she liked to sit in the sun. She would roll up her pant legs, push up her shirt sleeves, and pull up her midriff. She wasn’t aware of the dangers of the sun then and her mother always smeared her with greasy sunblock. One afternoon, she fell asleep on an embroidered afghan while her parents sunbathed in lounge chairs behind her. Molly had been munching on a slice of bread before she nodded off. A bird hopped close to her, unaware of the sleeping girl and stole a few remaining crusts. Molly never ate the crust. She woke to the bird’s beak pecking at the plate near her head. Instead of crying or screaming or even laughing, Molly wet herself. The bird flew away, crust pinched between its black beak. Her fear of the sharp beak, oily feathers, and the way a bird twisted its neck provided her family with an anecdote they retold to new teachers and new friends over the progression of Molly’s childhood. It also presented her father with an everlasting nickname for his only daughter—Bird.

“I’m doing chapter three,” Molly said. An aged pink book sat on the lawn, cream-colored pages rustling in the wind.

Her father, Gene McKinley, stepped off the porch, limping from his bad knee and walked in front of the evergreen. He had told Molly about his years of marathon running—she thought it sounded boring. He shielded his eyes with his right hand, blocking out the afternoon sun’s glare.

“*American Girls Handy Book*,” he read. “This from Aunt Kerry?”

Molly nodded, entirely too focused on her return trip across the grey rocks to speak again. On her seventh birthday, Molly had received a package containing two things from her father’s sister: a wooden box with daisies painted on the lid and a book.

This book offered Molly ideas on entertaining herself and her friends. When her father questioned Aunt Kerry a week later at dinner, eyeing the book and its purpose, Kerry said, “She can’t follow Shane around forever. He’ll be in high school soon.” Molly wasn’t sure what grade Shane was in, but he was exactly six years, seven months, and four days older than her.

For the following spring month, Molly read a chapter each weekend and completed an activity the book declared every girl must do. Working on posture and strength, the book encouraged young ladies to join a walking club. Girls needed square shoulders and straight necks, and required practice with a saucer and a balance beam. Since Molly couldn’t reach the cabinet holding the saucers and she wasn’t even sure what a saucer was, she used a flat, leather book that had been tucked under the coffee table. It wasn’t a regular book balancing on her head, but her mother’s photo album. The album held pictures of her mother’s young life, spanning from birth until her marriage to Molly’s father, Gene.

Molly stopped where the stones met the edge of the house and hopped down. She was upset the photo album had fallen off her head three times. When she picked up the brown binding, the back cover opened, and two items fell to the ground, drawing her father’s attention away from the *Girls Handy Book*. They were pictures that had come unattached from the adhesive plastic. When Molly bent over to pick them up, her hair fell forward, shadowing the images. One was a picture of her mother holding a tiny baby in her arms. Shane leaned in next to them, missing several teeth in his smile. Another picture was only of her mother, Cara Jo—Molly’s father called her mother CJ. The

woman wasn't smiling in this picture. She held a bottle of bleach in her left hand and her right hand, covered by a yellow rubber glove, pushed into her small hip.

Molly's father walked to her on the lawn and slid the photos into their spots on the last page.

"Don't mess with Mom's things," he said, placing his heavy arm around his daughter's shoulders. "Put this back inside."

"I couldn't find a saucer," Molly said. She bit her fingernails, ashamed of herself. She'd done something wrong, but she wasn't sure what that something was. Was it the photo album? She wasn't supposed to play with things in Mom's room or Shane's room. But this was in the front room, under the coffee table, where she found Shane's baseball cards. Shane never let her touch his cards.

On the Halloween after Molly's tenth birthday, she curled into her father's side munching on trick-or-treat candy. Her father wrapped his freckled arm around Molly's figure, hugging his daughter. They were settled into the couch watching Molly's favorite scary movie. Her brother rested in the leather recliner, propped back, and read under a small lamp.

"This movie's dumb," Shane said. He held a book on his lap, and his thumb rested against a page in the middle bookmarking where he stopped.

"Is not," Molly said. She pulled an afghan close to her chin. The blanket had been deemed Molly's afghan since she peed on it, even though it had her parents' names and wedding date embroidered on the bottom right corner.

"Is too. Three Witches take over and a girl saves the town," he said. Shane dog-eared his book and kicked down the footrest. "That's not scary. This is scary." He held up a videotape with a picture of a silhouetted man holding a suitcase under an ominous streetlight.

"That doesn't look scary," Molly said.

Her father slid on his glasses and reached over Molly's head for the movie in his son's hand. "This one's from my day, Shane. Too much for your sister." When he flipped over the tape to the beat up backing, Molly could read the name PARKER STEVENS scribbled in black marker at the top. "Watch it at Parker's."

"But Madison's coming over later," Shane said.

"You think you're watching this in your room with Madison?" her father said, tossing the movie back to Shane. Molly watched the tape sail overhead and smack Shane's chest. "I don't think so."

"I'll ask Mom then," Shane said, standing from the recliner. Molly sat up when she felt her father take in a deep breath. She paused the movie on the television.

"Shane," her father said, removing the glasses from his face. He wiped the lenses with the hem of the t-shirt she gave him for father's day two years ago. The shirt was decorated with handprints in a variety of colors and read DADDY across the chest.

"Don't interrupt her. She's working on a paper."

"For that doctor's degree? Does she even have a shot?" Shane said. He wore a plaid flannel over a t-shirt with the picture of a band Molly didn't know. Molly once heard Shane yell about them after her father shouted to turn down the music. Shane had said the lyrics weren't really about a man rolling a joint, but about white man's

domination over the rainforest—whatever that meant. “What’s an independent scholar anyway?”

Molly’s father didn’t speak, but he had trouble hiding his feelings. She once overheard him on the phone telling Aunt Kerry that he didn’t want Shane’s anger—he’d had enough of that. Her father also said that he was having trouble hiding CJ’s problems and that he shouldn’t have to.

“Either watch the movie at Parker’s or wait until Molly’s in bed,” said her father.

“I want to watch it,” Molly said. When Molly thought she sounded whiny, she would drop her voice so she could be taken seriously, and in that moment, she needed to be taken seriously. She was left out of everything. Her father said his daughter’s serious voice was amusing, but Aunt Kerry complained that it wasn’t normal. Molly’s mother never noticed her serious voice.

“Not until you’re seventeen,” he said. Molly unwrapped another peanut butter cup from her colorful stash of last night’s activities. Molly still wore black nail polish on her fingers. Her mother helped her apply it just before she slipped the witch costume over her daughter’s head, which was the first time Molly had seen her mother outside of her office in three weeks.

“Can we still watch this movie?” Molly asked.

“Still dumb,” Shane said. He settled back into the recliner, yanking the handle for the footrest back and projecting his legs parallel to the seat. The movement reminded Molly of the astronaut simulator at the space museum.

“Shut up,” Molly said, candy spittle flying from her mouth onto her father’s lap. She threw a sucker at Shane’s head, but missed and hit the blue wall instead.

“Enough—both of you,” her father said, noticing the orange and black wrappers littering the carpet. “Molly. You’ve had plenty. Clean this up.” He had eaten more candy than Molly, but she didn’t call him on it.

Molly snored from her father’s lap before the movie was over. Her father hauled Molly up, afghan hanging from her legs, and carried her to her room. Her long hair, wild from sleep, swung from his arm where her head was cradled. He stopped and whispered to Shane that Madison could come over, but they had to stay in the front room, unaware that Molly was still awake in his arms.

An hour later, Molly woke with a stomach ache and a dry-mouth. She tip-toed to the kitchen, hoping to catch a glimpse of Shane and the scary movie. She could hide behind the recliner if Shane was on the couch. The floor squeaked beneath her feet, but the loud screams emitting from the television echoed through the hallway, drowning out Molly’s steps. Shane sat with his arm wrapped around Madison, but unlike most girls and much to Shane’s disappointment, Madison sat on the edge of the couch, excited by the nasty green vomit pouring from the demon-girl’s mouth.

Molly walked into the kitchen, grabbing her plastic Noah’s Ark cup—a small fading depiction of her favorite Bible story—and filled it with water from the dispenser in the fridge door. Her mother’s study was situated on the back end of the house, through the kitchen. Molly noticed the light on, but she wasn’t allowed to bother her mother.

“This. This is me.” Molly heard her mother whisper. Her mother’s study was an old storage den that had once been the imaginative home to Molly’s adventures. Molly used to carry her dolls over the boxes, pretending the large squares of cardboard were snow-covered mountains. She’d place her ponies on various other surfaces, like the metal

filing cabinet and the upturned laundry basket. Some days, the dolls and ponies would overcome the dangers of an avalanche. Other times, toys would search for other animals to bring into their towns and villages. Once, she reenacted the building of the ark with her brother's abandoned pirate ship, until Shane took it away from her. When Molly cried over the loss of her secret spot, her mother told her she was growing too old for that stuff anyway. Later, her mother read Molly a book about a boy who left his home to save another boy. Molly didn't like that. Why would anyone leave their home?

"I don't understand, CJ," said Molly's father. "What is you?" Molly's father sounded confused. Molly had once heard him tell her mother that characters in stories don't exist. Her mother had pointed at a book and said, "They're talking about me," and her father said, "They aren't real," in reply. Molly had been sad to know that Curious George didn't live with the Man with Yellow Hat.

"Let me read it," CJ said. "...*That never, not for one second, ever, was she free from the pressure of time, from having to remember this or that. She could never forget herself; never really let herself go into forgetfulness.*" Papers crackled after Molly's mother finished her speech.

"You want to forget yourself?" her father whispered. His voice wavered like Molly's favorite radio station on their drive to her grandfather's house. The songs often disappeared after they passed the McElroy's home.

"Yes," her mother said.

How do you forget yourself, Molly thought.

Molly didn't like it when her parents fought, if that's what that was, a fight. It wasn't like when she fought with Shane, when they tumbled around in the yard. He

didn't fight her much anymore. No, this fight made Molly want to cry, but she didn't. Instead, she skipped the front room and went to bed, drifting to sleep after finishing her water.

Molly woke early the next morning. Her curtains filtered the early sunlight, and the rays made her stuffed animals' eyes alert and alive. When she walked the same route down the hallway that she had done during the night, screams didn't bounce off the walls from the television. Molly found her mother on her father's lap, weeping while he rubbed his calloused left hand up and down the back of her mother's nightgown. He held the Bible in his right hand and read from it. He said scripture said things better than he could. The Bible he read from was the book St. Matthews gave Shane after his Sunday school youth-group.

"I turned away angry for only a moment, but I will show you my love forever," Gene read. "In the time of Noah I promised never again to flood the earth. Now I promise not to be angry with you again; I will not reprimand or punish you. The mountains and hills may crumble, but my love for you will never end; I will keep forever my promise of peace."

Her mother's hiccups subsided but when she inhaled, her breath caught in her throat and she coughed. Her apologies were muffled and disjointed, but Molly heard the words and the resulting kiss from her father.

"Mom?" Molly said. She, too, wore a nightgown, but Molly's went to her ankles and had red and blue fireworks patterned across the chest and stomach. "Why're you crying?"

"I said some not nice things and I needed to apologize," her mother said, sitting up from her husband's shoulder. She rubbed the side of his face, scraping the day's growth on his cheeks. "I heard you ate too much candy last night?"

Molly hadn't touched her father's cheeks in a while—she used to play fishy face to wake him up on Saturday mornings—but she imagined they felt like the sandpaper she and her father used to clean the wood for the new bench outside St. Matthews on volunteer day.

"There's never too much candy," Molly said.

The McKinley family sat at the dining room table a year later. No one muttered a word as they thought over what the matriarch had just said. Eleven-year-old Molly, puzzled, didn't understand why her mother kept sweeping her hand over her slick hair. She watched as the woman clenched her left hand at the roots of her scalp and grunted. She would shove a grape or two into her mouth and then touch her hair again. The scene repeated itself several times: hand sweep, two grapes, and scalp pull. Molly's father gripped the phone in his right hand. In his left hand Gene held a fork, which swirled in a circle through left-over spaghetti from the previous night.

"CJ," Gene said. "Did you sleep last night? You never came to bed."

"You always got to talk about sex?" CJ said. She rubbed her eye, causing makeup to smear above her cheek.

Gene let his fork drop to his plate. The clatter interrupted tension at the table like a church bell on a silent Sunday morning. Gene still held the phone in his hand, and he dialed his sister's number.

Molly's mother focused her foggy eyes on Gene, who sat across the table from her with his back to the kitchen window. When she did so, preparing to interrupt whatever he was about to say, CJ became distracted by the scene outside. Instead of allowing her husband to say what he needed to say, maybe he'd give her hell about her hygiene or maybe he'd read another story from the Bible, Molly's mother cursed a word she had never uttered before in front of the kids.

After cursing, at which Shane laughed and Molly sat back in her chair, her mother abandoned the family luncheon and sprinted out the back door. The meal was the first time all four of them had been together in months, but CJ McKinley didn't seem to care. Instead, she left the back door open and jumped into the fall leaves barefoot. Molly's father left the phone on the table and ran after his wife. Molly and Shane followed him.

By the time Molly's small feet caught up to her family, the scene had unraveled like the snagged string on Molly's purple scarf. Molly's father was on his knees, as though he was in prayer. When Molly stopped beside him, her father said nothing but watched his wife as she hit a cat she had cornered over the head with his gardening shovel. The feline was prying itself out from underneath the shed, slowly walking towards the birdhouse, when her mother brought the tool to its body. The cat was large and fat, often sneaking through one small hole on the side of the shed and popping out the other side to surprise the tiny finches that ate, bathed, and lived in the small space Gene had built for them. Her mother liked to watch the birds as she read and scribbled small notes in the margins.

"Don't eat my birds," her mother said. The woman's nightgown had a splotch of blood on the hem and her wild hair waved in the wind.

“God, stop,” Gene said. “You can’t do that, CJ.”

She stopped for a moment, and Molly thought she was about to swing the shovel at them, when her mother said, “You sound the same, always on repeat. You’re a cassette tape and it’s spitting out of the player. How you feeling, CJ? What you doing, CJ? You shouldn’t do that, CJ.” The shovel hovered over the animal, while its chest rose and fell. She repeated her own name four times, each time escalating in volume and then she said, “Stop talking.”

When she lowered the shovel, she didn’t miss the cat. “So dirty. It walked through the flower beds.” She hit it again. “Fleas.” And again. “Hair.”

When Molly’s mother killed the cat, she had a psychotic breakdown and went into a state of psychosis. That’s what the doctors told her father, anyway. After a month in the Western Mental Health Institute, he was pulled into a meeting and told how things would work. CJ would stay in the hospital for an indeterminate amount of time. Visitation would be limited, but allowed. And that’s how the following two years went.

Molly’s mother had been diagnosed with several disorders: manic depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and schizophrenia. At thirteen, Molly could not fully understand what had happened to the woman. Every time they visited CJ, Molly would ask if she was coming home. CJ would pet her daughter, never really answer the question, and then pull Molly through the back garden pointing out the birds that flew between the bushes. When Molly asked Aunt Kerry about CJ, she compared it to the way the birds darted in and out of hedges. Aunt Kerry said it was similar to the way CJ’s mind worked. Her mother’s ideas, her dark thoughts, and her manic behaviors would cut into

her mind and hop around her consciousness like the finches hopping around twigs of trees. But with Molly's mother's new medicines, she could scare away the thoughts like a human frightens away unsuspecting birds. CJ's thoughts would hover up and down like a finch in flight, but they wouldn't stay long, flying away to another place and time. But that was there in the hospital, where her mother was different, Molly thought.

On a spring afternoon, the McKinley family visited their missing link, Cara Jo. Shane was home on spring break during his freshman year at college. Instead of camping and hiking the Appalachian Trail with friends, Shane drove home from Atlanta to see his family and check on Molly. After their mother checked into the hospital, Molly had taken to cleaning—obsessively wiping bleach over every surface of the house like CJ had done before she left.

For months the woman had exhibited delusions of grandeur and Molly's father had done nothing—until the cat died, slaughtered in front of the family. Aunt Kerry told Molly that her father feared his wife would never come home or she'd return to her manic mindset and hurt herself. But CJ did neither of those things.

The institute had a visiting room, which held two couches and a television set. The room had two double doors: one to return to the hospital and another that opened into the garden. The rain began just as Gene, Shane, and Molly closed their car doors, so no one ventured into the garden on this visit. Things might have turned out differently otherwise. Molly thought maybe her mother would have been able to see the foolishness in her plans if she had held the fresh air in her lungs and in her head.

When the family greeted CJ, Molly's father hesitated to hug her. He eyed the doctor sitting on the couch in what should have been his spot next to his wife. Instead, he squeezed onto the other couch with Shane and Molly.

"Bird," Shane said, "Tell Mom about your project." He told Molly he wanted their mother to understand they were doing fine without her.

"I'm cleaning the Barley House with Mrs. Carrington," Molly said, scratching her forearm. "We're setting it up for Saturday soup stations."

Shane smiled at his sister. He told Molly he was proud that she had taken to community service. Even though she hadn't made many friends her age, Molly talked to Mrs. Carrington. The old lady made Molly smile.

"That's great, Molly," her mother said. She looked at her hands and then at the doctor, who nodded his head as he peered over his wire-framed glasses. He rested two hands over a large belly and crossed his legs at the ankle. While Molly waited for CJ to speak, she watched the doctor kick his foot up and down like windshield wipers in a heavy rainstorm.

"Listen, guys," her mother said. "I know I said I was coming home, but I can't."

"Why?" Molly's father said. He wasn't surprised. Every time he brought up the positive changes he'd seen, Molly's mother reminded him the reason she was doing well was because she was at the institute. On some level, Molly knew CJ wasn't coming home—maybe never coming home.

"There's a retreat in Utah for folks like me," CJ said, "It'll help reintroduce me to the outside world." She handed Molly's father a brochure. He didn't open it.

“Gene, I founded the program,” the doctor said, absorbing Molly’s father’s lack of enthusiasm. When he leaned forward, Molly thought a button on the front of his shirt might bust off and she wished that it would hit CJ in the face. “This is a great opportunity to assure CJ’s success when she returns home.”

The argument began from there: Molly’s father told the doctor to stay out of it and the doctor said he couldn’t unless CJ said so. CJ had grabbed the doctor’s hand then and when she did so, Shane took Molly to the vending machine.

When Molly bent over to retrieve her peanut butter cups, she said, “Mom’s never coming home.” Shane agreed.

When Molly was eighteen years old, she sat next to her brother’s hospital bed dipping a cloth into a bowl of water and soap, and cleaned his arms and legs. Shane was dying—cancer. The morphine had been intensified so when he would wake up, he sporadically hallucinated or cruel vitriol spilled from his mouth. When he slept, though, Molly pretended he was awake and responsive. As she swept the washcloth down his leg, she wrapped it around his big toe and wiggled it, popping the tiny knuckle. That used to be his form of torture against Molly: she would tickle Shane and he would pull her toes so hard they’d pop. Tickling wasn’t an option when so many tubes hovered around his ribcage pouring medicine directly into his tumor.

Molly had to clean Shane—CJ never came around. After the woman drove away in their Jeep for the retreat in Utah, she never came back. The occasional phone call to Molly would find her in a different state, boasting of her new research or a new

adventure. The last time Molly talked to CJ, she asked her mother not to call unless she planned to visit Shane.

Molly's father rested in a wooden chair in front of a small window, reading his Bible. His legs were crossed at the knee and his black framed glasses slid off of his nose. Molly noted his breathing and saw he had fallen asleep. He needed it. Molly had never seen her father look old until then, in this moment of forced sleep brought on by the mind's demand to shut down.

The nurse walked in next to Shane and lifted his shirt. The time had come to adjust his medicine monitor. The stout nurse pulled out a tube, examining the tip. She appeared confused. The smell hit Molly's face, making her gag. She and Molly looked back at the spot where the monitor sat on Shane's side, a dark green liquid seeping from the hole. It flowed rapidly. It reminded Molly of the hole in the garden hose—a small leak that flowed until the hose itself no longer worked.

The nurses tried but death drove over Shane's body and he died within minutes. The tumor couldn't take the meds anymore, the doctors had said. They told Molly's father that it wasn't draining anymore and that it had taken over his spine—these were things they already had known but doctors wanted to reemphasize that it wasn't anyone's fault.

Shane had known that too. When Molly was angry and her father would disappear into his Bible, Shane reminded Molly that death took everyone at one point or the other and so it didn't matter. He told her this to help her understand that he wasn't above others. He asked her to think about why he deserved to live longer than any other person.

He wanted her to care about people after he passed away. He had said, “Death is all the same.”

Shane’s funeral was the last time Molly cried.

Molly met Ben after her twenty-first birthday. She had returned to school after her father had taken her to a baseball game. Shane had loved the Atlanta Braves, and she wanted to remind herself of the things Shane would miss—things or reasons that made living better than dying, he had said.

She hurried into the library, head down, letting her backpack slide down her shoulder. She needed to print off her paper before class. Molly settled into a chair in the corner farthest from other computers. The printing system frustrated her—it was slow. After Shane’s death, Molly had little patience for anything, let alone technological disruptions. While waiting for the computer to log onto the university system, Molly reached into her purple bag and pulled out a large bottle of antibacterial gel. She yanked a tissue from another pocket and cleaned the keyboard and mouse. Afterward, she wiped the screen though she didn’t plan on touching it.

“Can I have some?” a boy behind her said. She spun around to find a tall kid with a Braves hat worn backwards on his head. He held out his hand, shaped like a small cup. “That looks like a good idea.”

Molly wasn’t often spoken to—she figured her outsides projected her insides and it scared people off. She didn’t make much of an effort either. Without saying anything Molly squeezed a large amount of clear gel into his hands, which were creviced with dark stains.

"Your hands need more than this," Molly said, as she put the bottle back in her bag.

"Farm hands are permanent," he said. Instead of taking Molly's cue and turning around he admired Molly's scrawny body and her long blonde hair. She had it braided down her back and Molly could see him lift his hand and almost tug on it in the computer monitor's reflection.

"Braves fan?" he asked. The boy pointed at her bag, where a new patch was stitched into the front pocket.

"Yes," she replied. "Sort of." She turned back around, but didn't speak. Molly saw that this boy wanted to talk, but she didn't have time. With her body language, she was telling him to walk away. Molly had thought her mother's body language—or lack thereof—spoke more than any of CJ's words.

"I need to print out my paper," Molly said. She clicked through the annoying screens that repeatedly asked for her student identification number. "Got class in twenty minutes."

"Would you like to get coffee?" he asked. Molly appreciated free coffee more than any food or alcoholic beverage he could offer to buy her.

"If you let me leave for class—sure," Molly said. While she printed her eight-page paper—a final assignment for her last gen-ed course, Molly agreed to her first date, never realizing the effect this boy would have on her.

"What's your name?" he asked. He lifted his ball cap and scratched his scalp. "I should've asked that first."

“What’s yours?” Molly said. If he desired a coffee date, he could give his name first. She was worried this was a joke and she thought if she caught him off guard, she could see the falsity in the whole thing. But Ben Rosen wasn’t joking with her, and for the next year, Molly and Ben drank coffee, while he taught her all things baseball and she taught him all of the benefits of a bleach wash.

Ben and Molly sat at a wooden table on the quiet floor of the university library. They used that floor for their studies when the main floor felt more social. Ben played with Molly’s hair and Molly teased him about his grammatical errors in his papers. But after four months of dating, Molly focused on her own thoughts and her own words. A chemistry major, Molly found herself more and more attracted to politics and law, instead of the effects of sodium hypochlorite on bacteria. Rather than focusing on her organic chemistry homework, Molly read from *The Economist*. The anonymity of the articles made Molly feel like the writing was the only honesty she could find in the world. Ben told her politics was just another word for liars.

Molly thought about changing her major to political science or social work or even history, but the thought of doing so was a betrayal, as though she was betraying her inherent self. Molly had known early in high school she wanted to make a living as chemist. So in college, when she considered a change, she talked it out loud. She read about what she could do with a poli-sci degree or what kind of work she’d perform as a social worker. She understood the likelihood of her obtaining a job after graduation was stronger with a chemistry degree. But still, the pull Molly felt toward understanding her society and its laws was more overwhelming than her desire to research disinfectants.

While Molly read from the magazine and Ben rubbed his foot against her ankle, Dr. Clint walked out of a periodicals aisle and over to Molly's table. He had been Molly's Introduction to Political Science professor. The class was a large lecture, but Dr. Clint noticed Molly's insight in her assignments. He had approached her one day after class and he approached her again in the library.

"Molly," Dr. Clint said. He spoke her name as though he was drawing it out because he almost forgot it. "You're still interested. You officially change majors then?"

"I think I will, but not yet," Molly said. She stared at his belly, which had a brown stain that streamed next to the buttons of his shirt. She had witnessed him spill coffee several times during lectures.

"What are you nervous about?" he said. Dr. Clint held a few journals in his left hand, but the right hand pushed his glasses up his shiny nose. "Because you're not thinking. I told you about that. What's my slogan again?"

"There's no activity like proactivity," Molly said, while Dr. Clint echoed it. Molly had seen him repeat that to many students, but it didn't make his words any less valuable. He was right, Molly thought. She didn't study enough, read enough, and she surely wasn't active enough in her community.

Dr. Clint picked up Molly's magazine, knocked her on the head with it, and whispered, "You'll figure it out. See you later kid."

The floor monitor left her desk and headed for their table, but Dr. Clint waved her away. While Dr. Clint distracted the monitor, Molly asked Ben again what he thought of her changing career paths.

"I just don't get it. What're you going to do with that degree?" Ben said. "Grad school?"

"I don't know," Molly said. "Maybe I'll write for *The Economist*."

"Just do what you need to do," Ben said. He rolled his eyes. She knew he didn't think she would change her major and become more active. He said, "I'll just follow along."

Throughout the year Molly and Ben dated, Molly never had sex with him. She held onto that part of herself, not for purity's sake, but because she knew what sex had done to her mother. She couldn't become CJ—that woman who had intentionally left them.

The first time Ben and Molly discussed her body and her mother was during a trip to the city. Earlier that morning, Molly met Ben's parents when she picked him up. She drove Shane's car, which still smelled like his bad habits, but she breathed it in. Shane and Molly once agreed that if he could smoke, she could drink unlimited amounts of coffee.

She had stepped up to the door, where an older man's voice told her to "Come on in." Molly examined the house—it could use a bleach wash or two—and walked back to Ben's room. She passed several photographs hanging on the wall of the tiny hallway before she figured out which door was Ben's. The walk didn't take long—a Braves poster hung on the door—and she opened it to find him slipping on a button down shirt for their date. He kissed her and escorted her back into the kitchen, where she was formally

introduced to a small couple. Both were round in the middle with short dark hair on their heads. Molly liked their similar appearances, but noted Ben looked nothing like them.

“She’s smart,” Mr. Rosen said, winking at his son. “She went straight to your room when she saw us in here.”

“Because he wasn’t in the kitchen,” Molly said. Mr. Rosen’s insinuation made her nervous and she tugged at the ends of her dress.

“No worries, kiddo,” Mr. Rosen said. “Just teasing.” Mr. Rosen pulled two twenty dollar bills from his billfold and handed them to Ben. “Fill up her tank.”

Ben said, “Yes, sir,” and hugged his mother goodbye. “I’ll call later.”

They shopped, ate, and visited the museum. They walked and held hands, and Ben drove them to the oldest church in the state. After they toured the historical building, he led her to a bench on the sidewalk facing the falling bricks of a building next door.

“I can’t think of a better word, but you’re pretty,” Ben said. Ben’s compliments made Molly feel awkward, but she believed him when he said them. She hadn’t believed anything anyone had said since Shane was alive. With long limbs and sloppy tongues, Molly french kissed for the first time on a small bench in a big city. She had thought then, that she could love this boy.

Even with a boyfriend, Molly often preferred alone time, and she would drive home to her father’s to escape the chaotic life of college. She was staying at her father’s house on fall break when she grappled with the most difficult decision she had ever had to make. All the other problems in her life were small hang ups in climbing the evergreen

tree, but at twenty, the branch Molly had climbed on broke straight from the trunk and she fell the metaphorical fall.

The day beforehand, Molly shuffled in the university's tech lab, where she could check out all sorts of technology for a few days—including video cameras. After researching the current Tennessee codes, she figured calling the police on her boyfriend's father wouldn't be enough. She needed proof, and her school provided her with the equipment to obtain that evidence. The pimply boy behind the information desk said normally she would only get the camera for two days, but fall break followed the weekend so she could keep the camera for four days.

Molly left her father's and drove south where she found herself standing outside her boyfriend's parent's house. With her knees locked, feet planted in mud and leaves, Molly stared ahead at their dilapidated barn. She noticed a large hole in the roof, acting as a water well into the old building. The red paint from years past had faded and formed abstract designs in the chipped away areas. Random wooden boards were missing from the side, which served as small windows into the neglect inside and provided the barn's only light.

A month earlier, Molly had visited the Rosens on a Sunday afternoon following church. She wore a cream dress that swayed in the breeze as she walked outside with Ben and his parents. She asked about the property, age of the house, and when they bought it. When she asked what Mr. Rosen did with his time, Ben told her he was an accountant. That day, she first heard the dogs. When they began to howl, Mr. Rosen directed the family to the northern property. Later that night, she asked Ben about the sounds.

“What's up with the barking in the barn?”

“Dad’s helping a friend mate his bitch,” Ben said. “They’re rowdy when in heat.” He had kissed her then and shook his long brown curls in her face, which made Molly giggle and forget about the dogs.

The night after hearing the dogs mate, she saw a news report about restrictions in other states, places that were cracking down on puppy mills. A young reporter counted over two hundred dogs in one mill. The journalist had said only twenty percent of adopted dogs were rescued from shelters.

However, none of these things disgusted Molly as much as the smell. Decay and filth pervaded her airspace. Goosebumps rose on her skin, which made the little hairs on her legs stand up and brush against her jeans. The air shifted, and death’s presence neared her as if it brushed against her side and fingered the ends of her hair. Molly’s vision narrowed and blurred like the onset of a migraine, so she bent over at the waist. Her blonde hair fell past her shoulders and danced on the dirt, collecting small bits of earth. She counted to eight in her head as she drew in a breath and stretched into her favorite yoga pose, downward facing dog, right there on the Rosen’s property. She often practiced at dawn, but it was hardly on her mind that early autumn morning. Buck up, she thought, death is all the same.

Molly feared the sound of her heavy breaths were too loud. She hustled toward the barn, pushing away her reservations. The filming needed to be completed before Mr. Rosen woke.

She hesitated at a large door with white boards crossed in the middle. It hung by two rusted hinges that slid the doors open. The sounds of rustling and whining emanated from inside—small animals starved and dehydrated, drowning in each other’s filth. Molly

repeated affirmations in her mind, reassurances that Ben wasn't his father, and that this was all Mr. Rosen's doing. The lock hung loose over the latch. Ben had forgotten to lock it the night before—she had made sure of that.

The rough wood, layered with mildew and dirt, left a gritty feeling on her hands as she pushed the entrance. She opened it far enough to squeeze through, pulled it shut when she was inside, and wiped her hands on her pants. Molly nodded her head at the door.

Shrouded in darkness, Molly reached for her flashlight, which was tucked in her rain jacket's front pocket. Large and silver, the light was the last gift she had received from her brother. A button resided just behind the bulky head. She clicked it on, where it flickered before illuminating the barn in a yellow glow, a glow that was horrifying and necessary. Dogs, large and small, littered all surfaces of the barn. They were pushed into cardboard containers, metal cages, and plastic tubs with small holes drilled into the lids. The sight made her dizzy, and Molly grasped at her senses. If she passed out now, Mr. Rosen would find her—Molly thought of his shotgun, and how there wouldn't be any footage. She needed proof. She fought against her gag reflex. Nausea and dizziness ebbed into her clarity, and her instincts begged her to flee.

She was overwhelmed by death. Its presence outside was nothing compared to the feeling of it inside her, around her, in its most grotesque form. She recalled the one time in her life when she had witnessed it: her brother, young and beautiful, and his slow, drawn-out fight against cancer. His weight had dwindled to that of a child and his hair had disappeared, leaving thin wisps of coarse wire on his head. Shane had died a few years ago, but there wasn't this kind of smell to his death, not like this. He didn't lack

care or love. He didn't wallow in his mess and the mess of others. He was not hidden to survive only on his most basic instincts. He wasn't forced to claw at the walls until there was nothing left of his hands, but blood and skin.

Death is all the same, Molly thought.

That was the thought that made Molly remain in the barn. If not now, when? When would it be enough? Would she wait for a guarantee of Ben's love? Would she wait until she was more prepared—better equipped with added research?

Molly was uncertain how long she had stood there and debated with herself. She was unsettled, unsure what to do next. But the front door of the house on the other side of the yard squeaked open and slapped shut, propelling Molly forward. Thrusting her flashlight frontwards, she waved the light across the wide barn. Feeling around the slick material of her green rain jacket, she found and gripped the camera she had checked out from the tech lab at school. She powered it on, just like the pimply boy had showed her, and pressed record. With shaking hands, Molly panned the camera across the bottom floor. She focused on clumps of hay pressed into the ground, mingled with feces, urine, and blood. To the left was a set of stairs, the third step missing, which led to the loft above.

Next to the staircase were cages, boxes, and poorly constructed enclosures.

Molly shuffled close, ignoring warning growls from what lay inside. Bringing the flashlight near her ear, she was able to see the white reflections of living and seeing eyes. Dozens of irises looked at her, darting around her and at the back door.

Molly crept forward until the camera lens was pressed into the wire of a small crate. The nearness blurred the image, and she fumbled with the buttons. Even with a

sharper picture, Molly could hardly see what the camera recorded, so she brought the light into the left side. Her gasp startled dogs in the surrounding attachments. A tiny animal, smaller than a loaf of white bread, panted on the other side of the small gate. He put his weight on his left side, his right leg kicked out next to him. His back was propped against another dog resembling his own breed.

She stepped over to the next cage, which was bigger and held a dog speckled with black and white spots. When the light slid across the body of the female Dalmatian, Molly saw she had amber colored irises. Her eyelids drooped revealing the red rims around her eyes. Molly zoomed in on her paw, swollen with in-grown nails.

She moved from cage to cage. Some dogs were dead, most were emaciated, and many tucked into back corners. She couldn't see much of the animals in the dark plastic tubs with holes drilled into the lids, and she wasn't sure she wanted to.

Molly focused the camera on the ground, on the ceiling, on the uneven steps, walking slowly and forgetting about the front door that opened earlier. She stumbled when she heard Ben's voice.

"I will, Dad," Ben said. "Give me a minute."

"Get Betty ready," Mr. Rosen said. "Give her the full bowl. She'll need it for later."

"Is tonight the last for her?" Ben said. "She can't take much more."

Molly didn't hear a reply. She pushed her flashlight back into her pocket and crept to the back of the barn. She heard Ben fumble with the unlatched lock.

"Shit," he said. Molly knew he had forgotten to lock it the night before, excited and distracted by finally seeing Molly in his bedroom shirtless.

Molly pulled herself over the gate of a pen and landed on her butt. Hay and dirt clung to her palms, but she couldn't see anything but breathing silhouettes. Trying not to make noise, she crawled on her knees and sat in the back of the pen, clutching the camera to her chest.

She thought about revealing herself to Ben, pleading for help, telling him these dogs needed to go, but she remembered it was easier to ask for forgiveness later, rather than beg for permission now.

Ben moved around the barn, pouring food into bowls, and hissing at growling dogs. Some dogs barked, but most whined, emitting a desperate cry.

"Shut up," Ben said, rattling a cage. Ben wasn't vicious, but Molly had trouble fighting that idea when he was so clearly involved with his father's cruelty.

Even with the light from the barn door, Molly could not make out anything around her. She saw some light beyond the entrance of the pen, but she didn't know what she had crawled into, what she was lying next to.

The pimply boy at the tech lab had given her some brief instructions. She listened and nodded her head. Most forms of technology were difficult for Molly to understand. Her first computer was a laptop forced on her by the university—all freshmen had to purchase one. So when the boy waved his hands, explaining that even ghosts can be caught on this camera, she just laughed. He had been referring to the camera's night vision setting. He joked about the ghosts and Molly had thought he was silly. But ghosts of expensive dogs surrounded her and she needed the night vision to capture them.

She flipped the side screen open and pressed several buttons before finding the menu. The night vision provided a picture that was blurred with white and black shadows. Molly panned the camera across the pen. She focused the lens and zoomed out.

Molly didn't cry out. Tears didn't pool in her eyes or drip down her cheeks. She didn't gasp audibly or faint. She gazed into the screen and then above the camera, as though her sight might come through for her. In the screen, Molly saw a beast. This dog's chest heaved, beating up and down like a pen on the desk of a bored student. Her nipples were long, descending onto the dirty barn floor, and her tongue hung long from her mouth. Her paw sat inches from Molly's shoe. Molly judged it to be as long as her own foot, but wider. She saw grey shades on the dog's fur, but couldn't judge the colors.

The dog didn't growl. She didn't bark or bite. She didn't paw at Molly or shuffle away, but she stared. She eyed Molly, when Molly couldn't see her in return and yet, she didn't attack. Molly held out her hand to let the dog sniff at it. Instead, she licked up the side of Molly's palm, leaving slobber to drip down Molly's arm. Molly glanced between the camera and the darkness in front of her repeatedly, as if her eyes would adjust to the lack of light.

Ben was shuffling around the barn, unaware of Molly's attention to the biggest dog she had ever seen. He slammed something and Molly heard him move the door. More light filtered into the barn.

"We're out of meat," Ben said. "Want me to run to Wendell's?"

Mr. Rosen was difficult to hear. Molly listened to their voices, but the words were muffled. The sound reminded her of a game she once played with Shane. They would

stand face to face in the community swimming pool and duck underwater. Then one would shout a word at the other and surface to guess what the other had said.

Molly couldn't hear Mr. Rosen's reply, but Ben left and shut the door behind him, slipping the lock through the latch. Molly was trapped, stuck in this barn like the dogs in their cages.

After the rumble of Ben's truck disappeared down the gravel driveway, Molly climbed out of the pen and away from the massive female. The camera dangled from her wrist, slapping against her arm. She thought she might damage it, but the memory of Mr. Rosen's shotgun in the umbrella stand by the Rosen's front door kept her from stopping and protecting it more. She needed to hurry, to run to her car parked a half mile away.

The door moved an inch but didn't slide open. The back doors were chained shut. She wasn't panicking, but sweat pooled in the small of her back and dripped down her chest into her bra. It disgusted Molly. The barn disgusted Molly. Ben disgusted Molly.

She remembered the opening in the loft. A wide square at the south end opened into the woods lining the Rosen's expansive property. Ben and Molly had walked the trails amongst the maples several times. The south trail was where Ben told her he loved her and where Molly kissed him for the first time—the kiss was a short peck, but she had grinned the rest of that evening many months ago.

The stairs that were in front of her were a risk, missing the third step, which meant Molly would have to jump. She was slender, and tall with limbs that often caught on objects outside her periphery. She was shaped like a burnt out Christmas tree bought two days before the holiday. When she walked, it was like carrying the dry pine indoors,

where the branches poked at people or inanimate objects decorating the home before the tree was placed in the stand.

The squeal of each step was subdued by the barks and whines of dogs. After Ben left, the animals howled out for help. Maybe it was Molly's fear increasing their own. She had once read creatures picked up on that sort of thing—that dogs knew when humans were in danger or when humans were a threat.

Molly made it to the loft, and only one wooden step weakened. The loft was ancient and dusted with foliage and debris. Ben told her it was built after the war. She didn't ask which war, assuming the last world war. Or had he meant the Civil War? The boards seemed old enough. Molly crept toward the opening, where sunlight peered through the tree branches. It was beautiful, the way the sun's rays shined through the dew on the twigs' leaves.

The dogs continued to whimper and whine, but Molly couldn't move. The jump down was a straight fall. It would hurt. She looked back at the floor below and stared into the pen where she had hid from Ben and where she touched the big dog with the nipples that dragged on the floor. Death is all the same, she thought.

Molly slid onto her rear-end and hoisted her legs over the edge. She dangled from the edge as the camera clanked against the building. She was never interested in climbing or falling. The drop wasn't bad, but she rolled her ankle. The house was on the other side of the barn, but if Mr. Rosen stayed in the yard she would have to wait for him to leave, but he hadn't remained. She imagined him inside their ranch house shoving bacon into his mouth and grasping at Mrs. Rosen's butt, while she fried his breakfast on the stove. Molly had seen that happen when she picked up Ben for their trip into the city.

Molly hobbled through the woods. Her thigh was bruised, her ankle ached, and her shoulders held the weight of her thoughts. The air was cold and her breath blew back in her face. The camera was nestled into her jacket with her flashlight. Her jeans were wet and dirty, and her hand felt the same. She had left her bag in the car, which held her antibacterial wipes and stain stick, but that wouldn't have helped. No, nothing could make her feel better—not even a bleach wash.

The walk to her hand-me-down car given to her after Shane died was longer than when she had slipped through in the early morning darkness. The birds were alive now, and she could hear the sounds of the barn, the cries of the dogs. She could feel the glowing eyes of that big female.

But Molly couldn't cry. Her hands shook and her knees trembled, but she hadn't cried since Shane's funeral and she refused to do it then. The night before, Molly and Ben had walked the grounds. She had finally told him that she loved him, that she wanted to move in together next year after graduation. She wanted him to know these things before she betrayed him. She hadn't believed he was involved.

Molly thought about the news report that inspired her adventure as she hobbled through the woods. She could see her car and Ben leaning against it, his Chevy truck sitting idle on the other side of the road. Four large metal cans peeked over the bed of the truck and the sun glinted off the tops, shining a light in her direction.

"Hi," she said.

"Did you get what you came for?" Ben asked.

"Yes," Molly said. She felt the camera through her jacket. "Did you know I was in there?"

"Your shoe stuck out," Ben pushed from the car and bent toward her ankle. He lifted her jeans inspecting the limp. "I saw you with Bettie. You liked her."

"Bettie?" Molly asked. Her ankle was swollen, but Ben's touch was more important. "What is she?"

"A Bull Mastiff," Ben said, holding Molly's foot in his hand. "We can get five hundred a pup."

"Her nipples?" Molly suspected, but didn't have a firm foundation on why a dog's nipples would grow so long.

"She's had six litters."

Molly wiped at her face, spreading the dirt from her hands onto her cheeks, but she didn't care. Bettie's large body sat in a tiny pen—a machine made to fill an annual quota.

Ben stood and pointed at her ankle, but he wouldn't look her in the eye. "Get that wrapped."

"It isn't just your dad, but you too," Molly said. She was struggling with what she had to say next after seeing this side of Ben again—the Ben that brought her coffee on long nights in the library and the Ben that rubbed her shoulders when she finished her exams. "You know it's over, right?"

He nodded. Molly was never one to adore animals. She had hovered over children's Bible stories remembering Noah's Ark and thinking God should've told Noah to save the good people and leave the dirty creatures behind. But that didn't mean she wanted them to suffer. This wasn't gambling in the backroom of a bar, where only people's pocketbooks were hurt.

“The laws aren’t much down here,” Ben said. He flipped his baseball cap around, pushing the bill against the back of his neck. “The dogs’ll be gone by the time you bring someone.”

“Will you help him?” Molly asked. She hoped he’d say no. That he’d beg her to forgive him, tell her it was a one-time thing, and that he just found out.

“I always do.”

Molly climbed into her car, not speaking what she really wanted to say. She drove away, leaving Ben at the side of the road. The sun still rose into the sky, her ankle still ached, and she was still covered in fecal matter.

Later that day, Molly sat with the pimply boy in the tech lab as they downloaded the footage she had acquired from the Rosen’s property. He told her the video was great, that she caught ghosts too. She emailed the file to the police, to the mayor, and to her dad. Molly thought about Shane and about what he had said when he gave her the flashlight. He had been in the hospital, when he handed her a gift bag that read MAZEL TOV on the side. They weren’t Jewish, but he liked to give her gifts and cards unrelated to what he was actually saying. At her middle school graduation, Shane offered her a card celebrating her fiftieth birthday. The Hallmark card had an illustration of a woman hunching over a walker as she climbed a black hill. She hadn’t been confused by the bag choice, but what was inside.

“Molly, carry it in your car.”

“Like a flashlight is going to protect me,” Molly said. She had laughed, pretending to knock him over the head with it.

"It's not for protection, Bird." He slapped her on the side of her arm as he spoke. "It's for do-gooders like you, so you can always see."

She had betrayed her boyfriend and left Bettie behind. Molly didn't feel much like a do-gooder then.

Mr. Rosen received a fine for burning materials illegally. When the police arrived, the dogs were gone, and there was a large fire pit in the yard. The newspaper talked to the closest neighbor, who said it smelled like death for two days after.

Ben showed up at her father's house a week after that. He had Bettie on a leash as the dog panted on the front porch. Molly opened the door holding a bottle of bleach in one hand and placing another hand on her hip. She wore yellow rubber gloves.

"Take her," he said, readjusting his baseball cap. "I hid her at Bill's, but he can't keep her."

"I can't. She's big and dirty," Molly said. She imagined the work of keeping Bettie clean and mopping her drool off the floor.

"Dad will kill her," Ben said. "I get why you don't want a dog, but this could be good for you." He was wearing a hooded sweatshirt. Ben twisted his hands inside the front pocket and fiddled with his keys. "Bettie would break you out of the obsessive things—the cleaning and stuff. You know, move on past your mother's problems. You're not crazy."

"I have no idea what I'm doing," Molly said. After CJ killed the cat, Molly was vehemently against owning pets. "She'll be a mess."

"She's old. No one will take her," Ben said. "Bathe her, it'll be fine."

Ben turned and left Bettie sitting on the concrete. Molly lifted her hand to Bettie's face. Bettie sniffed her, snuffed a breath out of her nostrils, and licked Molly's palm. Drool slipped down Molly's arm as she tugged the dog indoors, leaving behind the bottle of bleach on the front porch.