

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA
Edmond, Oklahoma
Dr. Joe C. Jackson College of Graduate Studies

**Indecent Foodie: a Mini Trilogy
Streamed Essays in Memories**

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN CREATIVE WRITING

By

Alisha M. Chambers

Edmond, Oklahoma

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Indecent Foodie: a Mini Trilogy
Streamed Essays in Memories

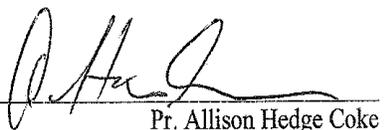
Indecent Foodie: a Mini Trilogy
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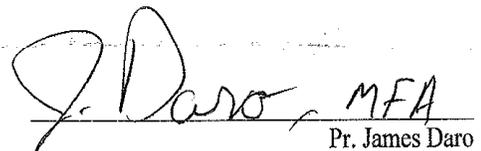
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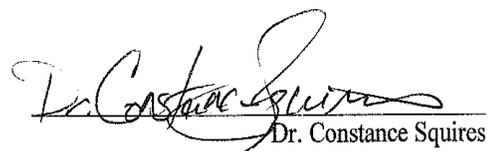
A THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Alisha M. Chambers

TITLE: Indecent Foodie: a Mini Trilogy

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Pr. Allison Hedge Coke

PAGES: 178

The eighteen essays in *Indecent Foodie: a Mini Trilogy* speak of how alone and ashamed, a promiscuous woman deprives herself of healthy attachments, healthy intakes, and healthy perspective. She devours the world and hides her obesity. Her coming of age transforms her from a curious, good girl into a dirty, *slam pig* before she can find a way to balance the two. Good food, good family, and just a little bit of danger stabilize this promiscuous girl and give her the courage to love an over-the-top man and conquer her guilt-ridden past.

The first section of essays touches on the dangers—perceived or real—present in the narrator’s life. Their intent relies on the creation of a neurotic persona, one that both seeks and fears dangerous situations. Control seems to heighten her panic and damage her perception of herself, her actions, and those she allows herself to associate with. These ideas leak into the next mini memoir—showing the dangers of love.

The second section touches on several faucets of love—the fun, the new, and the difficult, for the self, for subjects and hobbies, for sharing. These essays are the most diverse, as love often proves the case. A direct correlation is shown between new love and established love—or the realistic portrayal of marriage, as the narrator shows can be a constant battle to maintain and understand. As the section continues, the narrator demonstrates a love for culture—family culture, food culture, and a fascination of

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popular culture. Yet, “I Can’t Believe It’s Not God,” begins another transition of awareness of self and again hitting on the idea of control. However, the overarching theme, which connects the beginning and ending mini memoirs, demonstrates this search for love through means outside the self as unhealthy as a means of coming to terms with one’s past.

Finally, the last of the mini memoirs focuses on reflection of family and the past. The narrator takes on the persona of her parents in order to understand their behavior and her turbulent childhood home and family. An exploration of memory ends the section, and the fear resurfaces, leaving the reader with both growth and an inability to move beyond one’s past. Limitations are real for this narrator, and her stories show an attempt to come to terms with past rather than redeeming herself and taking on the freedom of a new personhood.

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Part I:

Where Fear Derives

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On the Count of Three

I huddle against the cold side of the plane, knees to my chest because there is little enough room for the four of us behind the pilot's seat. The canvas straps dig into my shoulders and my floating ribs at the narrow of my waist. Jimmy, my best friend, laughs and jokes with the men, and I, the only woman. I am the one paying for all this. And I am the one sitting with my heart banging around my chest and up my throat because in a few minutes I could die, literally.

Of course, I signed the waiver. The one that said I took the risk to my life, that I was in good health, and that I took no medication that would cause trauma during the descent. But I lied. The past week I was sick enough to lose ten pounds. I popped eight pills before we left to drive to Schenectady. I had a double ear infection, which meant my eardrums could rupture due to the quick change in altitude.

I scheduled the appointment in January for this May descent, but we waited in the Jeep for close to five hours because a group of eight or nine people showed up without appointments before ours. Since I'm a foodie, snacks were necessary, but they weren't

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near the extent we needed for the wait ahead of us.¹ We ate the cheese and cracker packages and Gatorade I brought, listened to the radio, watched, and complained.

At five o'clock, we re-entered what appeared a flimsy shack on the outside, but the interior proved polished, white oak—log-cabin-style—with framed posters of jumps, chutes, and planes. Most of that shack hid within the side of a hill, or possibly a low sloping mountain, since we were just below the Adirondacks. White painted cement blocks made up desk-lined room divisions, but the shirtless, hippie-type took us to a ratty, blue couch, stained with what looked like tobacco or marijuana tar at the end of the long rectangular business.

I don't remember what else appeared on the contract, but I do know they spelled my name wrong on the certificate they gave me for the experience—Alihsa instead of Alisha. I still have it displayed with my diplomas beside my bed.

The shirtless hippie-type donned a ratty tee that matched the couch and strapped on his jump equipment. He strapped on my harness, too, pulling it to ensure of its snugness. It pulled at my hips and shoulders, tightening like a constrictor around my confidence. I couldn't pinpoint my true compulsion to want to jump from an airplane, but in my childhood memories, I spread my arms, zooming around my yard with eyes closed to feel that prime rush of air. Human curiosity compels us to know what it feels like to do something we have no natural ability for. My own human experience is commonly plagued just so.

¹ I never seem able to go somewhere without bringing snacks—a useful gift of mine I suppose.

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As I crawled into the plane, realizing skydiving had only really been an idea, a foreign concept that had no real reference in my life, I had nothing to compare it to, and so, the eight percent chance that I wouldn't survive scared me silly. The one-in-one-thousand chance for the main parachute not to open, but one-in-a-million for both the reserve and main to fail, were just numbers now.

And I had never been on a plane before in my life.

The plane had no seats, but what it did have was a perfect view of upstate New York countryside. Most people don't know, due to its incredibly short warm season, that farming country covers much of the state. Honestly, until that moment, I never really thought about it.² But as the plane lifted off and circled slowly to our required 6,000 feet, brown, orange, red, and green patchwork, spotted and lined with thick borders of trees and shimmering slashes of blue rivers and boisterous lakes greeted me wholly. Although, I doubt that it now looks the same.³ Still, I will never forget how the trees rushed the parameter of the quilted ground, like a tsunami really, mountains in the distance as if they were the impending waves and the trees were the receding waters.

Turning his back to the unassuming farms, the now-shirted hippie opened the door to the plane; his hair tied back in a tight, yet somehow shaggy ponytail. Jimmy sat at the edge first, the young instructor attaching himself to my friend's back. I couldn't hear their conversation as the wind whipped in my ears, singing to me of impending dangers

² Although this sparked my serious inquiry of environmentalism—one I would be submerged in during my four-year stint at SUNY Plattsburgh as I studied Frost and Wordsworth.

³ In fact, I'm entirely sure that due to human expansion and the changing weather patterns this past decade has done its damage to the area.

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or pleasures that waited just outside of the aerodynamic aluminum, but I suspect it was similar to the one the hippie man had with me.

“On the count of three, I’m going to jump for you.”

They disappeared over the edge, as if dropping off the ledge of a building, and I swear my heart did halt and did not pick back up until I sat in the small opening where I first met the free air. My arms chilled as I tried to set my feet on the rack just outside of the door, but my feet uselessly dangled to the right like streamers as if I had no control over them as soon as my butt hit the thin carpet. The patchwork now lay below me.

Towering over me, the hippie dude connected our harnesses and slid in behind me, his legs on either side of my hips.

Jimmy and his tandem partner did tricks, summersaults and spins below us.

I can't do this. Fuck, I can't do this. I can't—

Gravity left; cold licked at my face; my arms flew out to the side, and I screamed. In that moment, I understood exactly what drove man to find a way to fly. Mid-air suspension, for the few seconds I achieved it, became one of the most joyous and exhilarating moments of my life.

Weightless freedom. Mine.

And I craved nothing more than to flap my arms and remain there. In that exact moment, the parachute could have never opened, and all I had to do was keep my eyes closed and enjoy the feel of floating, of weightlessness until my body struck the ground. It seemed a carefree and wonderful way to die.

The instructor laughed behind me when I screamed. While I freaked out, he'd counted. And then he ripped my joy from me as he pulled the ripcord. My body jerked,

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sending gravity back into my guts. My empty stomach protested, crawling its way to the back of my throat, threatening to stain this wonderful moment in stink and grime.

“What do you want me to do if I have to puke?” As if suspended in a vacuum, my voice carried no sound.

“Turn your head to the side. I’ll make this as easy as I can on you.”

He tried, and I didn’t puke. But my finicky guts made the descent longer than it should have been. We had to land on our butts—not the typical way—in a patch of green bordered with tall pines and spruces.

I imagine what it would have been like had I not been sick; how I could have ridden along my descent like a spinning and tumbling ballerina, like a rollercoaster without the track.

The ground erupted sharply on one side. Climbing up to a low mountain, which truly didn’t look much like a mountain from where I sat, Jimmy ran up to me and helped me stand.

Paranoid Intent

Roll up to a stop sign where trees create an edge barely darker than sky. Slivered highlights shimmer across the pavement under the sloped streetlights there. Another car breaches the top of a hill, and my world explodes in light, the trees fall away, the blacktop turns milky, and I feel an explosion in the back of my brain.⁴

Picture a hairy arm of the man lined against the eleven o'clock position on his steering wheel. His hand makes a loose fist, holding the heavy, scratched metal butt of a revolver. With finger posed, his rough index finger squeezes and the hammer cranks, the engine noise drowns out the clicking. The car careens closer with its front end almost kissing the corner of mine. A bullet shoots from the gun, smashing through two layers of windshield, three yards of open air, and both now reeling brains—one with intention and the other with ignorance.

This scenario takes more time to flash through my mind than the scene would actually take to play out, yet the endless loop plays every time I leave my home—especially at night. My brain constantly reminds me of just how many times a day I could

⁴ And for a moment, I wonder if I've been shot.

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die. I'd like to blame this on my husband for telling me to never flash my lights at another car at night.

The first time I visited Oklahoma, Jason warned me that gangs initiate new members by having them shoot drivers who flash their lights at other cars. I'd like to say that this story alone had conjured my imaginary shooter, this one time, and ridiculousness birthed in me a paranoia ever since. Is it true? Probably not.

Unfortunately, my reasoning falters. My parents raised in me the notion that anything could happen anywhere at anytime, and this lesson—if no other—grasped my psyche and will only let go when that self-imposed prophecy, that inevitability, solidifies. We will all die. I know this. But dying of old age doesn't scare me. The unexplainable evils of intention and disease at a young age do.

Maybe the place my parents raised me birthed some deep-seated paranoia. Syracuse, New York, may not have the density of New York City, but I'm no less likely to be the victim of intention or mere accident in the place I call home. Actually, statistics have proven that Syracuse's crime rate quadrupled the City's with population ratio qualifiers.

I lock my doors when I slide into the car, check the back seat, sure not to dawdle in my exposure. My leg must not sit where intent under the car could grab it. I cannot turn from the opened door completely or be unaware of what intent the mirrors show me. Nor can I crawl from my car and meander up the steps to my home—day or night, I rush, I seek safety, I hide. Being a writer did not birth my seclusion, as my husband believes—nor does my lack of patience with ignorance, as I like to portray. I hide myself away out

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of pure fear—that heart seizing, arm numbing, brain buzzing fear that can completely paralyze a person.

This makes me wonder if I am an agoraphobe, but I want to dismiss this straight away. I don't fear leaving my home for the possibilities of some outside force causing the death of me.⁵ Unfortunately, I have the same fears at home. No preconceived notion that home meant safety ever rooted in my psyche, although my parents did their best to make home seem that way. Lock the doors and windows, know the exits, and safety is guaranteed.

We even had intense fire drills where all four of us climbed out of my back second-floor window on a red barred fire ladder that stayed below the window in a broken down box for years.

Unfortunately, the fear of every twinge and pain in my body has me checking my fingers to ensure blood flow, tapping at my chest to ensure my heart still beats, and unable to take sleeping pills because I fear that my entire consciousness, beyond sleep, will slip away.

It may have begun with my four-year-stint of sickness, when eating generated a pain so severe in my middle that I'd double over and curl up on the floor and wait to die.

A year later, doctors find my gallbladder functions at a mere 6% and remove it at the tender age of eighteen.⁶

Have tonsillitis seven times within a six-month period and remove those expanding tonsils and androids at the age of nineteen.⁷

⁵ I actually enjoy the outdoors to a degree, especially wooded areas.

⁶ This type of gallbladder dysfunction usually occurs in the elderly. I hope that's not a sign.

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Have bronchitis for weeklong stints and smoke a pack and a half of Marlboro Lights for three years before being smart enough to quit the habit.

Life will only grant breaks of two or three medium-grade-health days between before the cycle begins again.

Have a burning chest pain, acid reflux twelve times a day, and a cyst in the left shoulder that makes the arm go numb. At the time, the two seem unrelated. So, I spent late nights up with my father, who would talk me down from my hysteria until I could fall asleep.⁸

Live in constant fear that my heart will seize and kill me at any moment.

The truth will be a mixture of a hiatal hernia and too large a dose of experimental bipolar drugs that gave me constant anxiety attacks.

The second, the medication, my husband fixed by tossing out what was left. But the hernia took another surgery and a six month recovery at the age of twenty-two.⁹

Topamax, the anti-seizure medication prescribed to me by the college psychiatrist for my supposed bipolar, now approved by the FDA to aid in weight loss and headaches, caused my world to crack for a long time.

Maybe my paranoia originated because of the *Goosebumps* books I read at the age of seven or eight, maybe even younger than that. I'd enjoyed a good horror story long

⁷ Two surgeries in two years—have I mentioned this neurotic obsession with controlling my wakefulness? Now, just imagine leaving me stuck on a needle for four hours before forcing me out.

⁸ Never mind the one night, I worked myself up to a fear-induced panic attack, had an ambulance retrieve me from my dorm room, and spent the night in the hospital and the next twenty-four hours under surveillance to test my heart. Not that the bill of health eased my paranoia in the slightest.

⁹ Anyone else seeing a pattern here?

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before I dove into R.L. Stine's world of vengeful puppets and monsters in basements that tore children into pieces for being brave.

Maybe because a child's world is so small, that invasion of fiction paired with the abundant violence allowed on the news—the gang shootings, kidnappings, and assault and batteries—created this fear in me.

Cultivation Theory or Fear Theory demonstrates how the abundance of violence or crime on news programs artificially increases the concern over crime in America. In fact, concern over violence reached its peak percentage in a 1994 Gallup Poll; however, police reports and victimization studies illustrated that violent crimes declined through the 1990s. Cultivation Theory rests on the assumption that television influences the public's perception of violence. Essentially, the more crime portrayed on television, the more fear instilled in the public that the world is an abysmally violent place.

Although this isn't entirely the truth, the combination of crime coverage paired with personal experiences and those experiences of people in their social networks determine the level of concern individuals feel about violent crimes.

Once again, pair those with my idiotic tendencies to watch movies like *The Devil's Rejects*, *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*, and *Melancholia*—where a planet passes between the earth and the moon before it turns around and demolishes the earth. This paired with the math equation from Astronomy 101 that said the next celestial body passes close to Earth is more likely to hit than the Giants are likely to win the Super Bowl, which they have, at least four times. But then, add my conspiracy theorist of a husband talking about a planet with a two-thousand-year orbit around the sun that is

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supposed to pass by us soon on its 2,000-year cycle or the numerous asteroids that others claim will come crashing into the Earth at any time.

So maybe this fear birthed from a culmination of television, horror stories, the close attention my parents paid to when I left the house and how I got into my car, the prominent vandalism in our neighborhood, and the time my mother's best friend's daughter was dragged into a van in the back of our neighborhood on Halloween night.¹⁰

Maybe it's the era in which I've grown. My mother told me a story about when she grew up that made me rethink what it meant to spend my childhood where and when I did.

The Era of the Mashed Potato—From the Mouth of My
Mother

You know where you don't trust anyone nowadays? You can't walk down the street. Kids can't walk down their streets by themselves.

We were in the era of "Free Love." Of course nowadays, it's more or less the same, but we didn't have worry about diseases, you know. Everyone kind of gave it away for free, but now you know, not really. It was the era that came from an era before that was very structured and very prude.

I just remember having a lot of fun—walking all over the place, hitchhiking, not worrying about it. We would hitchhike from

¹⁰ Who was fortunate enough to have her friends there to pull her back out of it before the van drove off.

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Erie Blvd. from Syracuse to Manlius because they had a dance club out there. It was just a club where kids actually danced to music. I don't even know if you have them nowadays. There wasn't a bar. We could buy sodas and pizzas and that kind of stuff there. But it was just a dance place, called the Campus Inn.

This was the era of the Mashed Potato, and every kind of dance they could come up with, they did come up with at the time. And we would just dance and have fun and be totally exhausted and hitchhike home.

Dan says he's never been there. It was for hoodlums like me. He would go out and go hunting, which around here nowadays you can't shoot off a gun without getting arrested.

He used to shoot in the backyard. But now you can't shoot off a gun in the backyard. They have a lot more restrictions.

He says he also used to go skinny-dipping in the ponds by 481. And he calls me a hoodlum for dancing.

The Suburban Park used to be a park that had rides and stuff like that, kind of like Verona Beach, where they had a carousel and a rollercoaster. It wasn't a big amusement park; it was a very small amusement park. The Campus Inn was a part of that with the roller skating rink—that's where they used to have the dances.

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They used to have huge rinks we could go roller-skating at. That was a big part of it, just going and having fun. Going bowling. Clean fun. There were no real drugs until we got older, like pot and stuff like that, but the college kids had the drugs. We were kind of innocent.

What made me kind of grow up was when I walked home, at night, from Girl Scouts. In Girl Scouts, you're pretty young, right? I walked home down Burnett Ave—not a back, off-the-road road but a very well lit road. Right at the corner of Hickok and Burnett Ave, which is a block away from Gram's house. Well, this white guy pulled up in a car, and he asked me if I knew how to get to Teall Ave. And I said, "Yeah sure, now go straight down there. It's your next light."

It was dark, but not, and I couldn't really see his face. I stood right at the door on the passenger side.

He goes, "Do you know what this is?"

He had his pants unzipped. And I didn't know what it was because I was maybe nine or ten years old. I didn't know what that was, like I said, very innocent. He asked me something else, again, did I know what this was or that was or something to that effect. Did I want to touch it, or I don't know what he said.

But all of a sudden, I got that feeling over my whole body that holy shit; I'm in deep shit. That feeling that you just get, and I

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ran home like a bullet. I didn't say nothing to him; I just started running.

It was an innocent time. Those things didn't happen in Syracuse. Murders didn't happen in Syracuse. Abductions didn't happen. Things like that didn't happen. We could leave our doors unlocked and not worry about it. Kids could be left out in the front yard without someone trying to take them—a very innocent, very happy time. Nowadays, it's very scary. We didn't have any of this crap.

Sandy and I used to hitchhike to Campus Inn all the time, and it's a good twenty or twenty-five miles away. We could hitchhike all over the place safely and not worry about it.

One time, we were hitchhiking again, and it was Tennessee Street where it split to go to Manlius or Fayetteville, like a driveway to a business—a highly busy place—we were on the way back and had been dropped off there. Sandy was very tall, with blonde-blonde hair. I had hair down to my butt, and this van pulled up with a bunch of black guys in it.

We both got that feeling again. And we said that no, we were kidding around, but they wouldn't stop—"Come on. Come on. Get into the van."

The van had no windows—what's called a pedophile van now.

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Both her and I started backing up, saying, “No. No. We were just goofing around. We don’t really need a ride.”

But they kept insisting.

All of a sudden this car came screeching around us—two guys in a Corvette. And they say, “Girls, are these guys bugging you?”

We grabbed onto the door handles of the Corvette, saying, “Yeah. Yeah. They’re making us nervous. We don’t trust them.”

“We’re sorry we can’t give you a ride, but we’ll take care of them.”

And the Corvette took off after the van, and we don’t know what happened to those black guys because the white guys took off after them.

There were things like that that could happen, but it was one-in-a-million.

I’d hitchhiked by myself, but usually there were two of us. And we would hitchhike all over the place because it was that kind of time.

That was the last time we ever hitchhiked.

I was fifteen.

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What isn't in this story is our banter back and forth—about how the times have changed for me. How she is sad that I never had the experiences she did. How I have to lock my doors, how I couldn't walk anywhere at night, how I couldn't hitchhike at any age, how I couldn't be alone and be safe.

I couldn't be safe.

Maybe that's it.

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Warm Cider

The trees tower over the hay-covered trailer. They reach down for us. Some of their limbs brush the side of the box where my parents rest their backs. The sun descends along the rise and fall of the orchards and the higher reaching vastness of sycamores, maples, and oaks—all lit up in fiery glow as if fighting off the impending cold.

And, coldness does descend upon us—my parents, my brother, and I—as we hump along into the mountainous shrub imprisoning the orchard like we are prisoners driven along to our deaths here. Screams from the wagon a few minutes before echo off the branches overhead, and the weight of my eight-year-old-self’s fear resonated years later when I waited with the grandmother in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find” for her death. How she looked to the sky: *There was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun. There was nothing around her but woods.*

Like the grandmother, I could not fight, and I could not run, so I tucked my head-shaped pumpkin between my thighs, guarding it as best I could with my knees for it was my child; I wouldn’t give birth to it until the next night with a serrated knife and a metal, slotted spoon, spraying membrane and placenta across the newspaper-covered floor.

My mother squeezed my shoulders as the darkening sky disappeared, spotting along the leaved roof, and my brother kicked at my sneakered feet, sighing in his pre-

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adolescent way, as if this were all some childish joke he couldn't bring himself to care about any more.

The first screams were not my own, but they ricocheted through me just the same. My shoulders stiffened with whiplash from my search of the darkness. The crank and clank of metal against wood combated the humping of the tires over half-dried leaves.

Ghouls and monsters jumped, scratched, clawed, and swiped.

My back shook against my mother's knees. Her fingers brushed through my hair as some type of masked monster appeared in the middle of the trailer—I cannot remember what he looked like, except for the pale face, dark clothes, dirty and stained with fake blood. And he held a chainsaw.¹¹

Gnawing vibrated through existence as the chainsaw reared up over my head. I cannot remember if I screamed or not, but my mother's fingers dipped into my shoulders. My father laughed as the chainsaw came down on his arm.

Terror strangled me, almost asphyxiated me as the chainsaw roared against my father's flesh. No matter how hard my parents tried to convince me that the chainsaw didn't hurt my father—for there was no chain—I cannot erase the terror I felt seeing the rotating steel swipe at him.¹²

Oddly enough, nothing else for the entire haunted hayride spooked me—not even with my brother goading me. And the end of the ride seems sweeter in reflection than it may have been. The trailer stopped in a clearing of woods. A woman in a burnt orange

¹¹ Again, I took up with the grandmother, worried over my own safety, but with no epiphany or lack of regard for my family's wellbeing.

¹² This may be where my vivid nightmares derive—the ones so real that I curled up with my father like a child as a sixteen year old.

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coat sat with glazed cider donuts and hot apple cider in Styrofoam cups; white napkins fanned the plastic table.

I'd never had either before, and, in memory, they seem more sweet, savory, and superb than any I've had since. Every fall when the air turns crisp with cold for the first time and the first crunchy leaves are trapped under my feet,¹³ I return to those donuts and that cider. It warms me still.

¹³ The ones I dance in like a child as I walk between classes.

Lights Out

A cold, black metal scarred with silver encased the front glass door my seven-year-old hands moved over, the once clear glass now mucky with fingerprints and nose smudges at the lower end. Outside, clouds hung with heavy darkness over the rooftops of suburbia. A cracked line of light reached from the earth to the sky, and I counted, my moist breath fogging the glass around my inhalations.

One-Mississippi. Two-Mississippi. Three-Mississippi. Four-Mississippi. Five-Mississippi. Six-Mississippi.

A crumbling avalanche descended upon my ears. My older brother, Jeff, just taught me to count the seconds between lightning and thunder to know how far away the storm raged from our home.

Thunder and lightning only scared me in wakefulness. Silly to say, but storms never jarred me awake. Even the Labor Day Storm, which had three unusual tornados touch down on the New York State Fair Grounds, felled tens of thousands of trees, and shut down the power to Syracuse for three days caused no abrupt awakeness. No sleep disturbance. None.

The stores were dark when we went for food, and each customer had to be accompanied by a store employee with a flashlight. My mother had me grab bags of ice,

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and her bags of bread and a select few cans of vegetables. We ate American cheese and mustard sandwiches those three days, although my mother hollered at me each time I opened the refrigerator, and I resumed my typical summer days of reading *Goosebumps* books in my purple beanbag chair, snacking on Cheetos and Pop-Tarts.

Still, I had no recognition of the storm that morning, only flashes of thunder and lightning vibrating across my room.¹⁴ The window sat at the end of my bed, and in my pre-adolescent slumber, a T-rex stomped around my neighborhood, crashing the roofs off of houses, reaching its tiny arms through the sliding glass door in my living room as I hid in the laundry room with the door that wouldn't truly close. His steps shook my house, as the thunder crashed and the storm knocked trees and power lines down across my tiny bubble of the world.¹⁵

Rain still littered the windows, but the sun shone cleanly through the open house. Without our morning cartoons, Jeff and I slurped down two bowls of cereal and dug two umbrellas from the foyer closet. They hid under outgrown black and pink snowsuits, half a dozen slickers and snow boots, falling heavy jackets and flannel over-shirts, and plastic-ribbed boxes of various mismatching hats, gloves, and scarves.

In cheap flip-flops, my brother and I skittered outside. I hopped to avoid the long and thick earthworms that crawled to avoid drowning in the over-saturated dirt only to bloat in the shallow puddles of our driveway. When the heat returned, they would wait too long to return to the lawn and bake into thin curving lines of jerked flesh.

¹⁴ This was no surprise to me; I'd already slept through my brother's hefty frame falling on me—something I know only because he told me.

¹⁵ The same bubble that carries the majority of my nightly nightmares.

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We soaked our feet in the half-flooded streets, the gutters overfull with rainwater that we gladly splashed in before we knew anything of acid rain or sewers. We didn't know about the blackout of '65, or e-bombs then.

In early November of 1965, the northeast experienced a massive disruption in their electrical supply, affecting Ontario, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Jersey, and New York, that left over thirty million people without electricity for twelve hours. Common belief was that human error caused the outage—due to lowly set capacities and power surges leading to a simple chain reaction, shutting off the power to the northeastern states and Canada.

The blackout created multiple myths and urban legends. One, called the *Blackout Baby Boom*, states that a peak in the birthrate of the blackout areas occurred nine months after the incident, and many speculative publications appeared in *The New York Times*.¹⁶ Another myth formed when no immediate cause for the blackout could be given. UFO writers, such as John G. Fuller, hypothesized that UFOs caused the blackouts, and several sightings of most likely everyday objects were reported, along with an arc from a power line to a tree in Syracuse, New York.

My father told me that many believed the cause to be an e-bomb, or an electromagnetic bomb, which is a weapon designed to take advantage of the dependency humans have on electricity, especially that of technologically advanced societies like the United States. E-bombs would destroy most machines that use electricity not just cause a

¹⁶ Later, this theory was found debunked, although the evidence did prove that an increase of births occurred in those months. I lean toward believing the theory true. What else is there to do when the lights are out?

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simple cutting of power in a confined area.¹⁷ Generators, for example, would prove useless, cars wouldn't run, and there would be no way to make a phone call. If a big enough e-bomb detonated, it could thrust an entire city back two hundred years or cripple a military unit.

The fears were real enough in the mid-sixties, but in the early twenty-first century, the reality of such a weapon detonating could create consequences of a much deeper severity. What would happen if children and adults raised to be dependent on frivolous technology, like microwaves, computers, iPods, cellular phones, and air conditioning, and needed technology like hospital generators, refrigerators, and stoves, had to go without?¹⁸ Could the Internet Generation figure out how to cook with gas or fire and preserve food without a cooling unit? Could they entertain themselves with the outdoors, books, and jumping in puddles as my brother and I did those three days the power was out after the Labor Day Storm? I shudder to think about the realities of our dependency on technology.

Rather, I picture my brother and me in our pajamas—me in a pink Disney nightshirt and my brother in his blue and red Spiderman two-piece—hopping in the expanding puddles built up from the overflowing sewers, umbrellas forgotten and bobbing along, upside down, in the water. Our feet chilled and wet as we splashed each other and squealed in one of our few shared pleasures. We danced utterly alone on that street in front of our house, taking the time to enjoy a forced freedom from our entrapments.

¹⁷ Think *Revolution*.

¹⁸ Believe me, as much as I hate it, I don't want to survive without it either. I'm an Internet junky. I'd plug the Ethernet straight into my mind if I could, even though I hope that's never possible. I haven't got enough faith in humanity to hope for that.

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The Heart of Promiscuity

McStalker

At sixteen, I worked two jobs: Wegman's Grocery and McDonald's. Every one of my friends in high school worked at McDonald's, so my first day on the job was a blast. My second day, I met the assistant manager—Victor. After a few hours, the comfort of hiding in the grease-filled grill prompted me to grab his ass and hit on him. My nickname quickly became Stalker—Mrs. Stalker according to my nametag.¹⁹

When I turned seventeen, I asked him out. It was the legal age of consent in New York. He turned me down because my virginity and instead slept with one of my best friends—someone who would make it a habit to sleep with men I liked in the years to come, sometimes within hours of getting to know the person to prove to me, opening her legs meant more to a man than having a brain, or tact.

¹⁹ Not to mention that stylized picture I bought him from a door-to-door saleswoman that read: "I love you more today than I did yesterday and half as much as tomorrow," which sent him running to his Jeep, clutching the framed picture to his chest, after I'd sent my friends after him to read it. Or that gigantic bag of Skittles with the hand painted rainbow that read "I want to taste your rainbow," and rainbow balloons with "S"s written on them.

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So, I asked an Internet friend of mine to come over. On his second visit, my virginity was gone and my sheets stained with the phallic shaped blood print.

Indecent.

I waddled into work to show off my new womanhood; so then, I was sure that Victor would touch me.

He didn't. I thought it was because I was too fat at 165 pounds and too pimply. So I took diet pills and acne pills, and as I drove down interstate 81 with its long stretches of gray cracked pavement, all along the way I thought about crashing my car into the semis beside me.

Afterwards, I began to make plans.

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The Roxanne Cafe

Put on that red light.

Be flattered when a guy tells you that “Roxanne” reminds him of you. That and “Bette Davis Eyes.”

Take these as compliments when you are a naive twenty-year-old and smile.²⁰ Sit out in the wide student parking lot outside of the Whitney building in his brick-red Sedan while everyone else attends their classes. Papers and plastic garbage create mountains and valleys across his floorboards. Feet crunch over stale crumbs and whole fries. His back seat won’t be as bad as you’ve seen others, but chances are that no one else rode in this older, divorced man’s car.

The song comes on, and Sting sings his eerie faux-Jamaican jam.

You listen to it without really understanding that how you dress and flirt reminds him of the song, and you aren’t all too clear what the song is about and won’t understand until much later when you hear the song again, on your own.

I loved you since I knew you. I wouldn’t talk down to you—“Roxanne.”

An Imaginary Meal

Make sure to wear two bras—one with the cups too small that makes you spill out the top and a matching sports bra in an attempt to hold you in. What this does is make you perky and gives you torpedo breasts so that when you attend your junior-level classes both men and women will look for their various reasons: lust, jealousy, and loathing. All of them red and hot in the center because of you.

²⁰ Yes, a naive slut. They exist. Honest.

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Now, wear stretchy pants and tank tops, so then when walking, strangers can see your curves—this will gain you more attention because you didn't get enough as a child.²¹ You were left to entertain yourself as a toddler, most days, because your father worked nights and your mother worked days. Your father would fall asleep while he watched you. This caused those sixty-seven imaginary friends to come, and why you seek so much attention as a new adult.

And she knows just what it takes to make a pro blush—"Bette Davis Eyes."

A Thick Slab of Meat

Remember to wear shirts that reveal large amounts of cleavage—enough that the drag queens at Trexx feel the need to spotlight and fondle them during the show. This is why the dark, abandoned-warehouse-looking, gay bar becomes your hotspot, where you discover flirting with each bouncer gets you free things. The unexpected success through exploiting your body will surprise you.

After all, your mother demonstrated this type of gain since you were eleven when she handed you a lacy half shirt²²—no matter that you were a chubby pre-teen—and told you to go find a boyfriend.

Give the shirt to your skinny best friend, who will wear it the night she loses her virginity.

Flirt with Trexx's owner's nephew. This will get you the VIP ticket to the back stairwell and the hash pipe. Let him feel you up when your body is so alive that his touch

²¹ Create your own time of Free Love, far past its prime.

²² Reminiscent of the hippie-esque (life)style that will expand across your world and color your glasses rose.

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feels good. He will whisper to you, “You’re a beautiful thick girl,” and you will decide to take it as a compliment as his hands cup your hips and his hash-flavored, split tongue enters your mouth.

You don’t have to wear that dress tonight—R.

Slam Pig in a Honey Glaze

Be promiscuous because that’s what you think a man wants—a girl who puts out. Go through a handful of men in a month—none of them will work out. None of them feel right, but it took lying on your back with them to know this. You wouldn’t buy a car without a test drive.

Don’t understand when the bouncers at the bar call you a Slam Pig. Ask what it means but don’t be upset when someone you considered a friend²³ informs you that it means you are a dirty whore and good for nothing else but fucking. Don’t cry in front of him and never mention it for the six months you two date or the years you two are best friends. It’s not like he asks if his rotten teeth or missing thumb disgusts you. You both already know the truth.

I wouldn’t talk down to you—walk the streets for money—R.

Karma Tastes Like Mint

Dance on the rickety black stage at Trexx. Wiggle and sway your hips. Be confident and have fun and don’t care what others think of you. A guy will make his way to your corner of the stage and grab the railing in front of you. You will dance back into

²³ Jimmy.

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him, swivel your hips and butt until to make sure he's turned on, although you don't know who he is. His name will be Maxim. He will be big and broad and tan with white blonde curls, an angular angel face, and beautiful bowed lips.

Let him push you into the back corner, against the red curtain that covers the black wall with his wide, caveman body. Roll your body against his. His kisses will taste sweet and minty with just the right amount of tongue. Push him away because you are waiting for someone else, someone you already slept with, someone who seems special. Someone you will discover sleeping with at least four other women after you already avoided any other viable New Years plans.

You don't have to sell your body to the night—R.

Skinless Monogamy

Work at Dunkin Donuts, meet a fun, older woman as free spirited as you. Go to her house and smoke pot with her daily. And then meet her abusive, skinhead husband. You come back and come back and come back. He does not hit her with you there, and he does not yell at her with you there. He likes you.

She will ask you, "Sleep with my husband, please? I need the break."

But you only get along with him so that you can talk her into leaving him. Tell her, no.

He isn't your type. Somehow as many bad choices as you make, obvious asshole still won't be attractive to you.

All the boys think she's a spy. She's got Bette Davis eyes—BDE.

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Romance Author ala Mode

Write your first sex scene at age twelve. Be a virgin and have only your imagination and romance novels to understand the true mechanics of it. You will have known what it was—in general terms—when you were five and went far enough to put your Barbie and Ken dolls in your closet, interlocked as best you could get them, to see if they made a baby Barbie.

At ten, your mother will prop you and your thirteen-year-old brother on your parents' stained, king-sized bed and will play an old black and white cartoon for you to watch.

Together.

The thickly outlined white man will lie on top of the woman, even between her thighs on the blank white screen, but you will not be able to see what the parts look like against each other. The sex-education drawings will confuse you more than they will clarify things for you. Your brother must know more about what it all amounted to by that age.

Ask to watch it again by yourself because you watching it with him made you uncomfortable. It turns you on, so play with yourself afterwards. This won't be your parents' intent for showing it to you.

Have seventeen, eighteen, and twenty-two-year-old friends when you write the scene. Set it in an abandoned building and have it star a more mature self and Nick Carter from the Backstreet Boys. Put in a lot of thrusting and fondling and caressing and

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moaning. Avoid any real narration and any real physical reactions, and create only scripted movements and external responses.

Be surprised at how much of that turns out to be true for many of the partners you will later have.

She'll let you take her home. It whets her appetite—BDE.

Back for Seconds

Have morals. Only make out in the bathroom with the Trexx dancer that has a girlfriend instead of actually fucking him. And offer her your old clothes when their apartment burns down and they lose everything because she wants your pink, sequined, snakeskin stretch-pants.²⁴

And when you sleep with two strangers in the finished basement of the dirty talker's house on his ratty couch, drive the dial-twister home because he doesn't own a car. Make polite conversation. You only slept with them both, anyways, because your friend went home and left you there. Threesomes would be ruined for you then. Nothing like two bad lays, one right after the other, to make you want to be celibate for a while, or to go find someone who can do it better.

I won't share you with another boy—R.

Open-Faced Promiscuity

Find a boyfriend named Greg who will express a want for freedom on your weekends away from each other. Grant him this and be sure to take advantage of it. But

²⁴ And your black and white, sequined, flame stretch-pants or the Hawaiian shirts you used to wear with them.

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he'll act sweet, even if he isn't the one. Attend class with him instead of going to your own, sit in the back, take his notes, and the test, and when he receives a forty-two and you receive a sixty-eight, this will be your first clue.

He will model on the side, do anything for you, and sexually outperform nearly every other man you sleep with, but you will still need a man to challenge you intellectually. So tell him yes to the idea of an open relationship.

Besides, it will only last another week before you meet the brother of a friend, Scott, and feel something more, a challenge and attraction that will mean more than how Greg genuinely cares for you. You will drop the sweet oaf and try your best with this new asshole, spending all of your money on him only for him to leave and break your heart before he comes back and spits in your face for moving on.

Greg will never take advantage of the agreement, and you will break as friends, discovering that an open relationship doesn't work. It merely prolongs the end of the relationship.

Which is only worth it because the sex is so good.

The crumbs she throws you—she's ferocious—BDE.

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Garnished with Self Respect

I talked to Victor again on AOL instant messenger when he was stationed in Iraq in 2006—him then twenty-five, married with three kids, and me twenty-two, away at college, and celibate.

IvyMarie21 (1:38:45 PM): My mom suggested that I go to work at Hooters, isn't that messed up?

Duckshire (1:39:00 PM): I would go there and leave you a big tip

IvyMarie21 (1:39:09 PM): Nice

Duckshire (1:39:43 PM): Me and my cousin were talking about you at Hooters that day

IvyMarie21 (1:39:54 PM): Yeah, what were you saying?

Duckshire (1:40:10 PM): I told him the situation, and he looked at me like I was stupid lol. He asked me why I would let a nice piece of ass just go like that.

IvyMarie21 (1:40:43 PM): I remember hanging out with him. He was nice. Cute too.

Duckshire (1:40:56 PM): Yeah he's prolly one of my best friends, but he was the one who almost got me to change my mind actually, cause like I said I always found you attractive, it was the other stuff that kept me away lol

IvyMarie21 (1:41:45 PM): Because I'm scary

Duckshire (1:42:21 PM): Well, I really felt that getting involved with you

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would put you in an even worse situation. I didn't want to make you any worse, and I was good at making women crazy back then

Duckshire (1:46:23 PM): Listen, I couldn't sleep with you cause it would have made me feel bad, like I had corrupted you, if you got me cornered would have been your best chance

IvyMarie21 (1:46:42 PM): I don't force myself upon people. I believe that people should make their own choices

Duckshire (1:47:09 PM): Good answer

IvyMarie21 (1:47:14 PM): Thank you

Duckshire (1:48:16 PM): I never felt bad about sleeping with those other girls cause I knew they weren't... gonna be any worse off because of me.

Not long afterwards, we set up a time to meet and catch up when he came back to New York. And then he asked me if I would sleep with him. I said, "No." And that I could no longer meet with him.

I might say that I gave up my chance—the one I would always wonder about—and it did, indeed, feel that way for a time; a good man could change a great many aspects of a lost woman.

Zucchini Bread

4 eggs
2 cups sugar
1 cup oil
3 1/2 cups flour
1 1/2 tsp baking soda
1 1/2 tsp salt
1 tbsp cinnamon
1 tsp baking powder
1 tsp vanilla
2 cups shredded zuch
*optional 1 cup raisins

Preheat oven to 350 F.

Beat eggs, sugar, oil together.

Mix in zucchini.

Mix in the rest of the ingredients.

Grease and flour eight aluminum mini-loaf pans.

Bake for 45-55 minutes.

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PART II:

Learning Love

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Love Drunk Fools

He would climb out of bed over me at five-thirty in order to leave at five-forty-five a.m. Rarely did I fully wake when he kissed me goodbye in the morning and told me that he loved me. In a dreamy consciousness, I would tell him that I loved him back, but all Jason heard was murmurs.

The deep red sheets would unfurl around me after he was gone, creeping up from the edges of the queen sized bed. In a second of wakefulness, I turned over and pulled his pillow against the length of my body, dreaming about his smooth naked skin still pressed against me. My body gradually uncurled, and I became restless.

At eight o'clock when he got home, my teeth would just be brushed and my bladder emptied. I could hear his feet from the bathroom, taking the stairs two at a time in his black running shoes. Suddenly, he would be at the bathroom door, leaning in with his hands on the doorframe, asking me for a kiss without saying a word. His arms would envelope me as his nose and mouth careened down the curve of my neck with whispers of love. With another kiss, he'd be gone again into the bedroom to change from his Army-issued PT garb into his uniform.

His tall, thin form doused in pixilated Army green, pale green, and tan squares. Large rectangular patches of Velcro carried his rank as Sergeant, his wings above his

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name on the left side of his chest signifying his crew member status, his branch patch on the left side of his chest proudly proclaiming him as a soldier in the Army, a unit patch—277ASB—on his upper left arm, and a combat patch—25th ID—on his upper right arm. His loose pants were tucked into his bright tan Army issued boots, which were laced tightly to mid-calf. Underneath his uniform jacket, he wore a tan shirt that matched his boots and camouflage. The shirt was soft cotton, and his torso softer than it had been when we first met and before I found my hidden talent for the culinary arts.

He would tuck his beret under his arm as he walked into the kitchen. The beret would be tossed onto the shiny black table as he cornered me by the toaster, pressing himself against me and me against the counter.

“I missed you,” he would say in his soft, Southern-gentlemanly voice. I missed him, too. The bagels popped up from the hot toaster as he turned me around and kissed me. Rough but gentle hands held my cheeks as he grinned with the pure kind of new love happiness. After a second kiss, he allowed me to go back to breakfast. I spread brown sugar Philly over each half his cinnamon raisin bagel and topped it with a sprinkle of cinnamon and sugar. Once I plated breakfast on paper, he sat at the kitchen table and ate quickly as I made my own. By eight-thirty, he was out the door and headed back to work at the hanger to fix Black Hawks.

His house in Watertown, NY, was like an apartment stacked on top of itself, but with a basement. The white exterior was paired with deep green trim and a green side porch. Bushes divided his yard from the sidewalk and from the neighbors to the right. They were too curvy to be square, but too angular to be round. A long driveway for suburbia reached behind his house to a detached white and green garage.

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While he was gone, I would do laundry in the basement, vacuum the living room, wash dishes, go grocery shopping down the street, write on his computer in the bare bedroom, and read in various places of the house.²⁵ After things around the house couldn't hold back my boredom, I fled upstairs to his bed with a book and waited for him to come home. I could hear his Jeep pull into the driveway below his bedroom window, and would hop down the stairs to wait for him at the front door. The door would be closed, but unlocked. And I would wait until I could hear him grab the mail from next to the door before I opened the door for him.

The first time his eyes went wild and huge with surprise. I pulled him into the house, wrapped myself around him and kissed him. He stumbled inside the living room, the mail forgotten on the arm of the couch. His six-foot-two arm span kept me against him as he smiled like a love drunk fool. "Nobody's ever welcomed me home before, let alone been excited about it."

"Your ex-wife never welcomed you home before?"

He shook his head, "Nope. She was usually mad that I came back."

I shook my head that time and began to undress him, leading him towards the stairs. His smile had returned and never left the entire time we spent in bed together.

After regaining movement of my lower body, I would cook for him. My cooking skills were just being unearthed while I stayed in Watertown with him. This summer night, my experiment was to make a mushroom sauce for steak. It never really turned into a sauce merely champagne soaked mushrooms and beef with corn, green beans, and glass

²⁵ A strange feat for me since I don't think of myself as domesticated, especially where cleaning is concerned.

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goblets half full of bubbling pink liquid. We ate in the living room on his couch or on the floor as we watched a movie.

He had two TVs, one in the living room and one in the bedroom, but did not have cable. We used his refurbished Xbox to watch DVDs on both televisions. Something about the lack of television programming made our relationship strong.

Daily, he would ask me if I was going to cheat on him. Every woman he had ever been with cheated on him, and it affected him so greatly that his psychologist thought he had post-traumatic stress from his love life, but I'm unsure if he was ever diagnosed with it. After a while, the daily accusations that I would cheat on him like all the others became intensely difficult. But when he questioned me, I remained calm and talked him through his paranoia. My ability to do this with him is what saved our relationship in those beginning months, and the two solid weeks I lived at his house that summer.

If I had overreacted or flipped shit, the relationship would have ended. Eventually the questioning died down but not until after a few reminders that his persistent accusations made me depressed and angry.

Yet, that summer was the most romantic time in my life.

He gave me roses hidden in the fridge as a fresh surprise with poem written in Sharpe on a large piece of drawing paper taped to the fridge door.

We had picnics at the park where we could see parts of the city below us as we fed nineteen seagulls that wouldn't leave after the food was gone.

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He would sit on the dryer in the basement as I took a shower because I hated being down there by myself,²⁶ and I would sit there as he took his turn.

One night, he surprised me with dinner. A man that burns water made a perfectly juicy marinated chicken. When I cooked for him, he would help me if he could. But if he couldn't he would stand there and watch, stealing a kiss or touch when possible.

Our relationship didn't consist of expensive romantic gifts, or vacations, or nightly dinners at restaurants. Romance was the knowing that at night, he would sleep next to me as I held him.

²⁶ I had this insane fear that someone hid behind the cabinets in the basement or would break into the house and catch me naked and defenseless.

Hosting Disorders: Insight into Living with a Person with Disorders

Symptom: *Pervasive patterns of preoccupation with orderliness (OCPD)*

“Where does this go?” Jason will hold up a stack of papers, a bottle of vitamins, a pair of flip-flops, any number of household items, and looks at me first.

I shrug if it’s not mine. Or stand without speaking to take it from him and find it a new home, where he will later go through a similar scenario with me, and he will say to me, “This doesn’t go here. How can you find anything in this mess? That pile is getting bigger.”

If the area is one of mine, he will attempt to organize it, shifting papers, asking me if he can throw this receipt away. This stack of papers is in the way, can it go over there? Do you even use this candle? It smells—until I stop working on whatever it is I am working on to stand and take his place, organizing the area that is setting off alarms in his head, and he can go back to his desk to sit down and worry about his own things.

Fact: *It’s twice as common in males as females. –Internet Mental Health*

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Symptom: *Preoccupation with perfectionism (OCPD)*

“Did you check the expiration date on those?” Jason lifted the Yoplait singles from the register’s belt to find the dates himself, turning them over and over and over again to no avail. “They’re required to have the dates stamped here. It’s usually on the top.”

We both turn the yogurts around and around with no success at finding the dates. Then I look at the large container, and it reads a month past expiration, so I wait for it.

“Yeah. I bet you I will find more of these back there.” He moves from the cash register and points both right and left. “Which way?”

I smile. He even hops with anticipation or excitement or a need he can’t really control. The cashier, bless his heart, turns on his blinking light to signal a manager as I warn him that my husband will make a mess of the aisle in attempts to fix it.

“My manager will take care of it. No worries,” he says to me.

But I must shake my head. “You don’t understand...”

His manager arrives, calmly takes the yogurt, and says that she will go fix it.

“My husband has already gone to the aisle. You may want to intercept him before he pulls your entire product from the shelf. He’s got OCD.” I drop the “p” because I don’t have time to explain.

See, despite some overlapping symptoms and their similar names, some major differences present themselves between the two disorders. The largest difference is the presence of obsessions and compulsions, which are not present in OCPD. And most importantly, these obsessions and compulsions create extreme distress in OCD stricken

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individuals; however, those with OCPD perceive these activities as necessary, efficient and beneficial.

The manager provides a look that I've seen before—furrowed brow, down-turned mouth, and clouded eyes as if to say, *Really? And you brought him to my store? Can't you control him?*

I shake my head again in answer to her unasked question. No, I can't control him. It would be like bracing myself against a freight train in hopes of bringing it to a stop. And besides, I enjoy his public displays. I even find them needed on more occasions than I don't. Out of date stock can give a customer food poisoning, as it has Jason many times, and so why shouldn't he make enough of a ruckus to make sure it doesn't happen to someone else, even if the concern is short term?

The cashier gives me a sympathetic smile. "My other manager would have reacted more vehemently than this one did."

I return his smile. There is no need for sympathy. "My husband will make a big enough reaction for her. He's former military, which expounds his crazy."

Come to find, my husband returns with a new yogurt for us to take home and smiles. "I've got three managers and some stock boys back there I need to talk to."

"Want me to wait for you?"

He shrugs. "If you want."

I don't. I take the bags to the car to wait for him there, so that I don't stand around shifting them back and forth for an undetermined amount of time. But he's quick. Less than five minutes later, he's sitting in the passenger seat of my Ford, smiling.

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“They had a new guy. And I asked if he started a month ago, since all of the products are a month out of date, and he did. He didn’t know how to rotate stock. So they’re teaching him. Took everything in me not to dismantle their whole case. I would have done it, too.”

I knew he would have, and he would have done it with the precision of a highly decorated soldier.

Fact: *OCPD occurs in about 1 percent of the general population.*

–Internet Mental Health

Symptom: *Mental and interpersonal control (OCPD/BPD)*

Jason’s most prominent issue is control—both over himself and others.

I don’t like to repeat myself. Should I say it again? Why don’t you listen to me?

My husband repeats this when he’s repeated himself more than once, usually making it a clean three to make sure I’ve heard. Generally, I find it very hard to not roll my eyes, as I clarify why I asked him to repeat himself—one of various reasons I may have: specificity and his tendency to talk to me before he gains my full attention.

His main prop for this is the whiteboard hung beside his desk on our brick red walls. It currently says:

Alisha—Quit leaving your things on the floor.

Q? (+Nobody Knows) = GOOGLE

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Daily Term: Ass Cloud...also known as a FART.

Even as I write down these terms my cat, Rhea, has burrowed herself in the sheet covering my seat. Jason tells me to get her out of it and fix the sheet, so I unroll her and she runs off. I stand to fix the sheet, and Jason stands and prepares to take over.

“Do you need me to do it?”

“No.”

“You’re moving slow.”

“I’ve got it, sit your ass back down.”

“So, when a cat does something they’re not supposed to, you don’t pat them on the ass as they continue to roll around. It’s the same as if some kids are spray-painting a wall. You don’t pat them on the ass as they turn around and continue spray-painting the wall; you beat their ass. If the cat does something wrong, you beat her ass. Do you need me to demonstrate?”

“No.”

“You need to beat a kitty butt. Do you want me to show you?”

“I don’t beat cats.”

“Discipline. You want to be compared to my cousin Trish who tries to discipline and gets walked all over.”

“No. I said it twice, should I say it again? No.”

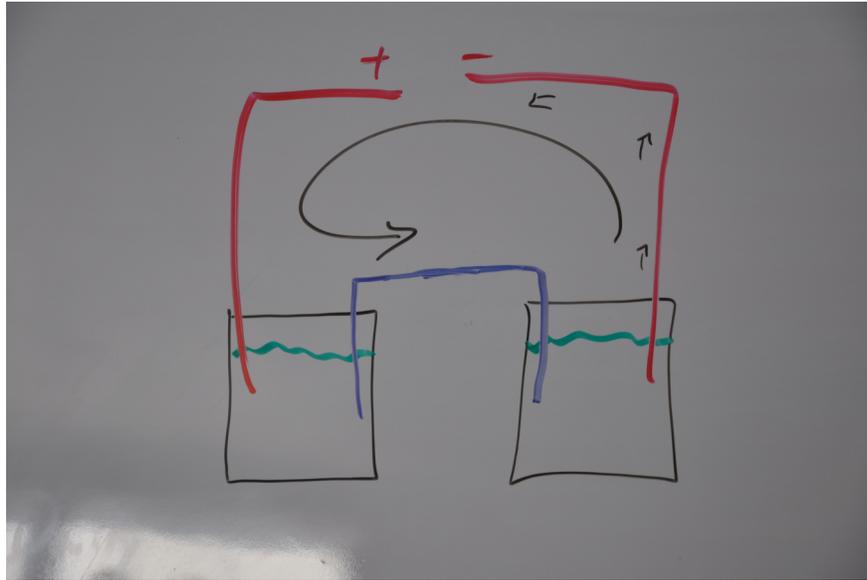
“You repeating yourself is stupid. When I repeat myself, it’s because shit is wrong. Discipline the cat.”

I fix the sheet and sit back down. Proceeding to get the same kind of teaching about mixing battery types and not reading packages. I sigh, continue writing as he

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teaches me, repeats himself about how if I don't pay more attention to the world that I'm going to die for a stupid reason—for not reading warning labels.

So he draws me this picture:



The discussion following this generates an argument with batteries tossed at me, and thusly thrown away in his garbage can, my coffee dumped in the sink, and my recorder tossed in after the batteries, before I have to dig everything back out, and clean up after him. I try to remain calm. I know he can't always help himself.

But the double standard feels like a heavy weight. See, I'm not crazy. Attracted to crazy, yes, but when I behave as he does, I act immature and wrong. He merely cannot help himself. I must remind myself not to mimic his behavior as an example—it compounds his crazy.

Fact: Typically, people with OCPD don't believe they require treatment. –Obsessive Compulsive Foundation

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Symptom: *Interpersonal control at the expense of flexibility, openness, and efficiency*
(OCPD)

Unfortunately, with all of my complaints, I have to admit that he is, more times than not, right about whatever it is. But this may feed his god-complex, and his likeliness to tell us what to do and how to do it.

I am, however, one of the few people who will tell him directly, “No. I’m not doing what you want me to based off the fact that you want me to do it.”

Surprisingly, it’s what makes him like me so much. I fight him. Maybe we fight too much.

We once fought over how to fold my hair towels—I now do my own laundry because I am the only one who folds it right.²⁷ I asked him quite nicely to fold the thin white towels so that I can pull the towel from the cabinet and hang it straight away. After I had showed him my method, he unfolded the towel and refolded it the way he had originally, and told me, “No. I’ll fold them this way until you can hang them properly and quit being so lazy.”

His complaint is that I hang my wet towels clumped together instead of flat and straight.

My anger flared so brightly that I could barely see him, so fiercely that I locked him out of our bedroom and studied in quiet, so deeply that days later we fought over it again, and I started straightening my wet towels. But I still don’t like for him to fold my laundry or anybody else for that matter.

²⁷ Yes, I see the irony in this.

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I laughed about this the other day, how I tell him, “No.” He actually seemed amused by it as well because no one else in the house has the gall to stand up to him for an extended period of time. He is, after all, very good with his words, very smart and convincing, and able to use psychology to disarm others.

Not me. Okay, sometimes me, but usually when I’m the one being unreasonable or just don’t give a shit about whatever it is he wants done. But he can’t win all the time, or I’d develop some kind of disorder.

Fact: People experiencing OCPD generally perceive their behaviors as correct and desirable. –“Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder.” BehaveNet

Symptom: Difficulty controlling emotions or impulses/ Wide mood swings (BPD)

“Can we watch this now? Why can’t we watch this now?” Jason had just found a new episode in a sporadically published miniseries and was excited to watch it.

“Why don’t you put it up where everyone can see it?” I said.

“Katt’s in the shower,” Sam said.

“But, why can’t I watch it now?”

Katt saunters into the room. “What about me in the shower?”

I inwardly groan because this type of scene happens multiple times a day. Katt is out of the room; we speak; she returns and must know what has happened while she was gone—something that happens nearly every time. My patience thins with the presence of

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too many disorders—especially when they combat each other.

“We want to watch this show. Are you getting in the shower or are you coming to watch this?”

“Watch what?”

“You were here when I found it. You watching it or not?” He said.

“No, I wasn’t. What show?”

“With the—*Bitch, I eat people*. There’s a new episode. Are you watching it or not? I’m going to play it. Are you watching it or not.”

“Just watch it.” She turned and went to take her shower.

Jason deflated, features hardening on his face, and I sighed again.

“I’m going to stop trying to make people happy today. Stop doing shit for people. Which means don’t do anything for me either.”

Sam and I exchange a look. He will forget he has said this within the next hour.

Fact: *Approximately 25% of those with BPD also meet the criteria for post traumatic stress disorder. –BPDtoday*

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Symptom: Suicidal behavior and feelings of self-hate and self-loathing/ Your relationships are usually in turmoil/ feeling worthless, hopeless, or guilty (OCPD/Bipolar)

The bigger fights Jason and I have are typically over such small and minute clarifications of words or misinterpretations of communication or an array of small issues couples deal with on a day-to-day basis. The last had been over a cup of coffee and had been predominantly my fault, although given the circumstances, I am sure the fight would not have been blown to the proportions it had been had I not been fighting with my husband.

It began with him pouring our coffee into cups—something I generally do, since I am the one who also brews our breakfast. Only he poured mine in a to-go cup, which struck me oddly. Never mind my pre-menstrual churning hormones, I asked, “Am I going somewhere?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

I pointed to the to-go cup before I poured it into my porcelain Naughty Nessies mug I had brought back from our honeymoon in Scotland. This set off a series of events that I can’t quite remember, although he did pour out my coffee, his coffee, and there were a few other items strewn about.

I was fed up with the display no more than fifteen minutes later and stormed out the door to work on my homework in peace at a Starbucks—where no one would throw away my coffee before I got to taste it.

I made it to the end of the street—some mile away—when Jason texted me: “So

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can I kill myself now?”

My car swerved under the sudden pressure of my foot on the brake and the jarring U-turn I made at a four-way intersection to make it home before he did it. Due to the compounding disorders, I knew that once he made a decision, he'd follow through with no remorse. And I knew he had no fear of dying.

In fact, come the rest of our conversation that day, I garnered that he contemplates serious thoughts of suicide daily, that he loathes himself, that he fights daily with the voice that is his own but isn't so he won't walk off into the deep end, and that he was only trying to do something nice for me that morning—something he doesn't often get to do. I am self-reliant, hard to read, and at most times, unappreciative of what others do for me because I am anti-consumerist and practiced at making what I like the way I like it.

For the next forty minutes, I tried to convey that having him in my house was more than enough for me. He helps take care of me, especially when I'm sick; he rubs my shoulders when I'm bent over my computer working for too long or I've slept wrong; he does his best to make me laugh with his stories and songs and drawings and videos and faces... He doesn't see that he does enough for me. And maybe that's because I don't thank him enough, don't reassure him enough. I try, but maybe I need to remind myself more often that I have no idea what happens in that brain of his, what's speaking to him when, and that he fights himself daily to pretend to be some semblance of normal, all the while hating himself for what he's not.

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Fact: When you have borderline personality disorder, you often have an insecure sense of who you are. Your self-image, self-identity or sense of self often rapidly changes. You may view yourself as evil or bad, and sometimes you may feel as if you don't exist at all. An unstable self-image often leads to frequent changes in jobs, friendships, goals and values. –MayoClinic.com

Symptom: Repeated nightmares of the event/ having trouble falling or staying asleep/ little need for sleep (PTSD/Bipolar)

I wake in my bed alone more times than not. The bathroom light might glow around the edges of the door. He's likely in the tub. The light might streak through the air vent above my bedroom door. With his desk on the other side, he's likely watching videos or playing a video game, reading the news or conspiracy theories.

Either way, I've learned to wake up alone without him. Or to sneak out of bed in the morning because I know he's been up most of the night.

He tells me he can live off of three or four hours of sleep. And because I tend to need eight or more, I don't really believe him. Then again, I'd been that way since I had mono in the twelfth grade, and he's been that way since before he enlisted in the Army.

Jason talks to me about both—his blowing up porta potties, standing at the top of a mountain in the Himalayas, volunteering for every mission that crossed his path so no one else had to; his stealing cars and bikes only to tweak and return them, his days doing meth and acid and any type of pill he could find, his need to find a way out before

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something killed him. The Army was a way out, so I can't be sure if his dreams encompass only his days of active combat.

He tells me that he's in a different place in many of his nightmares, when I catch him awake in bed, when he cuddles up against my back to squeeze me, to anchor himself against reality. The other place is a constant combat zone, where I assume his psyche attempts to either make sense of emotions he's suppressed or to feed his wakeful psychosis. Either way, he isn't likely to fall back asleep.

There are other dreams, ones that he merely tells me are nightmares, combat dreams, Afghanistan dreams, but he never elaborates, and I don't push him to talk about them. For a man with no remorse for his chosen actions—the result of his borderline psychosis—he seems to carry the trauma of a fully functioning and guilt ridden adult. Perhaps it is merely survivors' guilt. Perhaps because his best friend died on a mission with him. Perhaps because while three bullets hit their mark, a luck stray killed his buddy.

I like to think that he's improved. When we first shared a bed, Jason's palm would rest on his ear, his elbow in the air, and his arm would tip back and forth until it dropped, waking him. Most nights, I would gently cradle his arm in mine and ease his arm down beside him. The elbow would be in the air again, twice more, before it would stay down. He'd trained to keep himself aware, even in sleep, so he'd be able to respond to immediate threats.

Maybe I've merely gotten used to it and don't wake to this action any longer. Maybe at some point, his arm falls and stays fallen, and this is why I find him sleeping in the oddest of positions. I'd rather believe that he's gotten better, but I know I could be

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fooling myself.

Maybe. Hopefully, Jason's merely grown used to being home. He'd gotten home from his second tour of Afghanistan in early-February of 2007, and we'd met March 7^t, 2007, when he'd spent that night in my dorm room. I can't remember if his arm dropped on us that first night or not, but I remember the warm contentedness I'd felt wrapped against him on that twin-XXL.

Fact: Survivors feel guilt about the event physically manifests as agitation, dizziness, and headache. –U.S. National Library of Medicine

Symptom: Strong, uncomfortable reactions to situations that remind you of the event/avoiding places, people, or thoughts that remind you of the event (PTSD)

I've never quite experienced his uncomfortable reactions to situations or events—other than knowing he cannot go certain places and do certain activities—especially ones where a lot of children are present. That is, unless his own children are there. Then he seems like a normal, happy dad—one that enjoys the company of children far more than he enjoys the company of adults at family events. But that may be because of his history with his family.

Other than my experience with his refusal to be in certain situations, this part of his disorder doesn't manifest itself loudly or often—at least not in comparison to his other disorder symptoms. But I know that he's experienced child bombers in

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Afghanistan, and so I imagined him when I wrote this:

The crash of metal tearing through wood and
metal and flesh was accompanied by
screams and groans, the sound of
bodies falling to sand.

The distant bomb whistle
the ratta-tat-tat-tating gunfire
barely rouses this sleeping soldier.

Foul bile at the back of his throat tastes
better than fumes from
burning flesh of fallen, masked by
the beef jerky sticks he chews.

Does this foot match that leg?
This hand and forearm that torso?
Is this part of Franklin or of Thomas?

The soldier crawls over sacks
of dead to retrieve the last
loaded gun so he
can make his way home.

And the psycho-nut gives him
pills and words to take
him to his next mission.

And his wife and mother and
son back home cannot understand
why he cries in his sleep,
why he jumps at each bang of shut cabinet doors,

Why he pales and shimmies
when he has to drop his son off at school,
why he was more in his element
in the desert sand and
under enemy gunfire than he is
in silence.

*Fact: PTSD can be triggered in a moment by a memory, an image, a sound, or even a
smell. –Expedition Balance*

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*Symptom: Emotional "numbing," or feeling as though you don't care about anything—
feeling detached/ pulling away from friends or activities that were once enjoyed
(PTSD/Bipolar)*

I have experienced this with Jason a few times over the last six years, more so at the beginning of our relationship than now. When he returned home from Afghanistan, he was not allowed to return to his home. His friends picked him up from the air base in the blizzarding Central New York snow and took him to their couch.

When he did finally make it to his house, he found that his friend, whom had been taking care of the house, had trashed it. Piles of garbage hit his waist with narrow paths made to walk between rooms. I never saw it this way, but I did see the damage, the piles of trash, the dirty floors, the broken boards, and rank smell that permeated the walls of his house. I helped him clean this, even though he'd cleared out more than half the heap. When the living room had been cleared, we moved his bed to the first floor so that we could paint over the mess in his bedroom.

When we spent the night beside the front door—half in the living room and half in the kitchen, he lay beside me in a blank state. I cannot remember what triggered this—possibly a bang, a smell, something I had said. Seeing him this way disturbed me.

I curled into him, usually his arms would wrap around my shoulders at the least, but he merely stared at the ceiling and the glowing shapes created from the kitchen light. The man that would latch onto me with his body and not let go lay there limply, as though he was empty, as though he wasn't there anymore. He was like a corpse, unresponsive, unmoving, staring blankly at the ceiling.

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Fact: *18 veterans commit suicide each day: 126 each week. 6,552 each year.*

—Expedition Balance

Symptom: Difficulty concentrating—feeling more aware (hyper vigilance)/ Feeling irritable or having outbursts of anger/ Impulsive and risky behavior, such as risky driving, unsafe sex, gambling sprees or illegal drug use (PTSD/Bipolar/Borderline Personality Disorder)

My husband has been a week without his medication—something I cannot name due to its illegality since he has not been prescribed with anything. People often ask me if he truly needs it to keep him balanced. I've often reassured them that, yes, he does. And people don't believe me most times. They must think me an enabler, but they haven't been with him when he's off.

I've often thought that Jason is better. But, I realize the statistics may be true. Disorders untreated do not improve. What we do is suppress it—him and I together work toward him suppressing the crazier or more dangerous side effects of the multitude of disorders whirling in his brain.

He'd been without medication for a week. The air in the house had become tight and sharp. He was on edge, impulsive, and more aware. His movements changed, shoulders higher and close to his ears, arms away from his body in aggressive arches,

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legs moving in wide and powerful steps. Jason had walked this way when he wore his uniform.

The neighbors—our least favorite neighbors, the ones who broke into the circle's cars and robbed us of what they could, which included a knife of Jason's he'd had for over twenty years—were having a party.

Jason circled the living room three times before he stomped into the bedroom and came out with his rifle. The robbery had been recent, within the last few weeks, and he'd set up night cameras and spotlights to catch the robbers when they made rounds again. After all, they've siphoned gas from our cars on multiple occasions before we purchased locking gas caps.

But he goes outside.

"I'm just going to watch. Someone comes on our property, and I'll shoot the ground and warn them. Not until then. I'm not stupid."

I waited less than five minutes inside, waiting for him to finish walking around the house to check for trespassers before I went outside after him.

He stood at the southeast corner of the house, watching the house. I swiped my hand down his arm and took his elbow lightly. "Hey. What are you planning out here?"

"Waiting for one of the fuckers to screw up."

"I would feel safer with you inside, where I can know what's happening, too."

He followed me to the porch, where we stood at the corner, his gun still resting in both hands.

"I'd rather you be inside with me. My paranoia is going off."

Sometimes, when I tell him that I'm anxious, that I'm paranoid, that I'm in

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distress, I can talk him out of his suffering. Or at the very least, I talk hi psychosis back into suppression.

Fact: *Untreated, PTSD does not get better in time. It often gets worse.*

—Expedition Balance

Spicy Crispy Chicken Sandwich

Ingredients:

2 chicken breast halves
1 cup flour (unbleached all purpose is what I use)
3 shimmies garlic powder (roughly a teaspoon)
3 shimmies onion powder
2 shimmies salt
Dusting of paprika
Dusting of cayenne pepper (red pepper)
1/4 cup water
1/4 cup hot sauce (I use Frank's® RedHot® Buffalo Wings Sauce)
4 hamburger buns
4 dollop mayo
4 slices of tomato
4 pieces of lettuce

Directions:

Fill large skillet with ¼ inch frying oil, and turn burner to Med heat.

Pound chicken thin (about 1/4 - 1/8 inch thick), and cut breasts in half again.

Mix dry ingredients on a plate. Mix wet ingredients in a bowl.

Dredge chicken in flour mixture, then wet mixture, then in the flour mixture once more.

Plop in oil when hot.

Cook for a few minutes on each side until crisp and golden red. Cut to be sure the chicken is cooked thoroughly.

Assemble and eat.

Geek Badge

Okay. So, I'm a geek. Jason, too. We're similar types of geeks but not. Beyond the emotional relationship we share as partners, we share our geekdom.

Geeks have been defined as dislikable or peculiar people, as overly intelligent, or those scrawny, abnormal folk that get picked on in high school. However, connotative definitions of the word *geek* have changed significantly in the past decade, and *geek* is often clumped together with the terms *nerd*, *dweeb*, and *dork*. I identify and am affiliated within the geek group and deem the seemingly subtle differences between its like terms as defining characteristics.

A geek is a person who gets things done—an intellectual or intelligent individual who is sociable but has a few quirks. Geeks generally associate with topics deemed uncool, or that the individual's reaction to said topic may seem extreme to the general populace. My geekitude ranges over several topics, from vampire literature and role-playing on Facebook to satirical texts on social conformity and activities that deal with paper in general, i.e., writing, reading, filing, paperwork, etc.²⁸

Geeks have not always been associated with such a range of subjects or topics, nor did they appear with the invention of the computer. Many geeks have devoted webpages and blogs to the subject, proclaiming that the history of geekdom stretches

²⁸ Pretty much anything except for paper cuts. Those little bitches hurt!

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farther back than the society outside the group seems to acknowledge. Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, the Sophists, and many other rhetorical theorists could be deemed as rhetoric geeks. The same could be said of literary theorists, political theorists, and scientific theorists; therefore, the rich geek history can be followed back to the very beginning of learning and teaching or argumentation and academia.

My personal history as a geek has been life long. From a young age, I have been an introvert with an overly active imagination.²⁹ These stereotypical characteristics of geeks, in this case, are true. The majority, if not all, of geeks seem to possess a sense of shyness or a want to remain in one's own world, which in turn requires a lively imagination, or at the least, an entertaining one.³⁰ My imagination led me to creating roughly sixty-seven imaginary friends by the time I began elementary school and may prove as the reason I became a writer and a role-player. My childhood was full of socially awkward situations and more proof that I could not easily shake my growth into a full-fledged geek with limited friends and a need to fill my spare time with intellectually stimulating activities.

For example, I spent my ninth birthday waiting for a party that never happened. With the party planned, the invitations sent, the cake and party favors on the table, no one showed. Well, that isn't exactly the truth. One girl, the only girl more socially awkward than me at that age, stopped in for five minutes to wish me a happy birthday and give me

²⁹ This is also referred to as a Fantasy Prone Personality, famous fantasizers (or geeks) include: Enid Blyton, Emily Bronte, Charles Dickens, and Nikola Tesla. But this personality type also contributes to that uneasy horror I deal with on a moment-to-moment basis.

³⁰ Like the time my teenage friends and I watched a fantastical beast war in my backyard through the basement windows. And we weren't even on any drugs.

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a present—a puzzle that I started and finished that night at the kitchen table with my mother as we ate cake and ice cream.

However, I have enough fortune to compliment my inner world with social and communicative skills, keeping me from the label, *nerd*.³¹ I can begin a conversation with strangers easily and find common interests or topics for discussion. Many geeks can do this as well, where as a nerd, a dork, or a dweeb share the trait of being socially inept. I, on the other hand, make quick friends and keep them for more than a decade, and in some cases, more than two.

The most noticed and observed ritual, of the expansive list of geek rituals, is the convention. Attaching the words *geek* to *convention* provides its own connotative stereotypes, such as gaming conventions and science fiction conventions. Comic-con is probably the convention with the most press and the epitome of a geek ritual, although I had to look up what the convention truly entailed.

The more basic everyday rituals or routines of a geek may include a quick game on their iPod or computer before leaving for work; or as my husband admits, checking his *Eve*, a massive multiplayer online roleplaying space game, account to check on his characters' training both in the morning and before bed.³² My everyday rituals and routines include micro events such as the coffee break, my morning text messages to my Facebook friends, an attempt at writing 500 words after my workout, and checking my email. Although these are considerably mundane and only slightly geekish, I do carry

³¹ Sometimes, I am a nerd. Stricken by the fact that I can't seem to keep from embarrassing myself, and at times, others.

³² And of course, every day at two, he sits and chats on TeamSpeak with his friends around the world as they perform sleepers. But since this ritual surpasses my geekitude, I have no idea what the heck sleepers are.

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paper and a pen with me at all times and always have something to read with me in case of those opportune five-minute breaks when I can accomplish something.

Many of my larger geek rituals involve writing full group scenes with multiple players on Facebook, where I take on the persona of a character instead of myself. This activity can take upwards to ten hours in a day depending on how many characters are involved or how many scenes I choose to do in a single sitting. My Thursdays tend to be my role-play days because I can sit at home in my pajamas with a mug of coffee and a sack of tortilla chips and be someone else for a little while.

To put this into perspective, I have twenty-three profiles other than my real life account: Severins, a 700 year-old wolf with a daughter that just married a human woman; Alexandria, a two-week-old vampire and the main character in the novel series I write; Psyche, a Greek goddess from a popular Sherrilyn Kenyon series and many more. My first character, Psyche, sucked me into the black hole of online role-playing. I took over her account more than three years ago and slipped very easily into her bipolar, trickster attitude and have slipped deeper into the realm of geeks.

This example leads me to the more specific stereotypes or perceptions of geeks, many of which I consider false or half-truths: geeks never date; geeks are only male; geeks are basement dwelling kids that still live with their mothers;³³ geeks are overly involved with ‘virtual reality’; and geeks are out of shape. My proclamation of my geekness dispels many of these stereotypes. I am a married woman, living with my geek husband and geek roommates in a house I own, where I work out most mornings.

³³ Although I did live my mom’s basement until I was twenty-three.

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Granted, I am involved with virtual reality due to Facebook, but it is an outlet, not the end-all-be-all of my existence—that would be school and my husband.

However, pop culture reinforces these stereotypes with shows such as, *Beauty and the Geek* and *The Big Bang Theory*. Recently, both have added women geeks to their shows and have shown a more savvy side of the geek. For example, two of *The Big Bang Theory*'s main characters, Leonard, an experimental physicist, and Penny, a beautiful blonde waitress, date for a full season after several attempts by Leonard to win her over. The transformation of Penny's intellect and knowledge of geek trivia reinforces Leonard, a geek, as an interesting and charming individual.

Quite frankly, the world wouldn't be as interesting without my geek glasses and certainly not without my geek husband—I could write a hefty book about his abnormal geekness.³⁴ And I'm glad to see that the way popular media has portrayed the geek are changing, if slowly.

I proudly adorn my geek badge on my person with every conversation I hold, every word I write, and every photograph I take because geeks are the ones who get it done.

³⁴ And I certainly plan to, many books in fact.

Basic Red Sauce

(How to make Prego® taste like homemade)

Ingredients:

- 1 cup Prego® Traditional sauce
- 1 swooping dash of garlic salt
- 1 shimmy of garlic powder
- 1 shimmy of onion powder
- 2 pinches dried mint flakes
- 1 pinch sugar
- 1 bay leaf

Set burner to Med/High heat. Bring the sauce to a gentle boil before stirring in the ingredients. Cover and simmer for five minutes to meld the flavor. Remove the bay leaf. Serve—if you leave it, the person served the bay leaf is believed to have good luck and love.

Pickled and Sweet

Waiting for the butter to soften and the egg yolks to warm next to the stove, I pull mango honey from the cabinet, thinking that I can't wait to taste something sweet, which is why I bake after all. I spread a dollop over my finger and immediately smooth it over my tongue, letting the crystals of the sugar dissolve over my taste buds. My lips close around the sweetness as I pull it forward, hearing my roommate, Sam, laugh at my sweet hunger-rush. I smile and repeat the process as she walks to my husband and points for him to come take the honey, maybe I'll lick it off him.

Katt asks us if we are serious from the living room as my husband bounds into the kitchen with the hopes that he might just get a lick. I hand over the honey as my cheeks flush red, and I lick the honey from his chest.

"Be careful where you waste that. I'll only eat so much of it." Already it stuck to the back of my throat as a sweet, thick reminder.

I test the butter. It's still hard, although it begins to grease the package, which signals its temperature change, and cold condensation still gathers on the underside of the eggs.

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The recipe calls for things I don't actually have, but I will make do—because I always do.³⁵

I wonder if I had the inherent talent for baking or cooking for that matter. Many who do not study the culinary arts, and those who do, tend to keep to one side of the fence—cooking or baking—because cooking is the act of creation or creativity and based on taste, and baking is a pseudo-science of measured ingredients and reactions and no testing, only hopes that it will all turn out in the end. And yet, my Nonna³⁶ cooked for her family of twenty; as the second oldest child, she took on that responsibility. My mother and grandmother both baked recipes passed down for longer than I know, and now, they're mine. Few things will I not tinker with in the kitchen, very few things that I don't add or subtract or substitute for, even on the first run through a recipe—I can just feel the flavors blossoming, blooming within the dish, deeper than the recipe called for. A recipe cannot teach someone to cook, but a cook can teach a recipe to transform and improve.

But the recipes that weathered the generations of my big family and our picky eaters, those are set into tablets of stone, and I know my boundaries. Something within my genes tells me I will only cause disaster if the handfuls change into cups, sprinkles and dashes into teaspoons and tablespoons, or if I ignore the color of the food for a thermometer or a scale.

I remember watching my Nonna cook before the stove during the summers. Her white hair curled closely to her head, her five-foot, squat frame hunched over the stove or the counter as her thin, seemingly frail yet nimble fingers sliced, chopped, rolled, and

³⁵ Although sometimes... Maybe *always* isn't quite the word. Let's go with 93% of the time.

³⁶ Pronunciation: Non-nah.

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popped. Her crystalline eyes held sorrows Oneida Lake deep,³⁷ yet she smiled with me every time I sat with her in her kitchen—for whatever kitchen she entered was hers until she was done with it. Her and my Nanno³⁸ lived in Florida seven months of the year, the months when Syracuse, New York, were frozen and windy; where snow joined into heaps and snow banks that piled taller than me, when my mother baked at our tan, laminate kitchen-peninsula at the house on Metauro Drive; the one on the news in '94 for the number of Christmas lights she strung up; the one my brother now owns.

Both women showed me how to sift flour through my fingers to coat something sticky, both women taught me how to use my finger or a toothpick to poke a treat's doneness, and both women taught me how to properly grease a pan by hand rather than use non-stick pans or aerosol.

I acquired two great seasons of cooking—the season of hot and the season of cold. The hot when grills and pans and open windows created wondrous Italian treats and my Nonna's sauce. The first sauce I ever tasted that I knew was cooked correctly—with a piece of browned pork to flavor it, fresh ripened tomatoes, a pinch of sugar to cut the acid, the single bay leaf, and the meatballs as big as my fist, which would simmer on the stove for seven hours before it fully reduced. The season of heat and my Nonna were the only months I could get an Italian meal that was *truly* Italian, a meal I could never eat in my childhood home unless I somehow learned how to make it.

My Italian family had long meals—an Italian tradition. When extended family would come, Nonna made outrageous amounts of food, and preparations began a week in

³⁷ Like how her father shot her mother in the gut with his shotgun before he shot himself, but strength must be hereditary as well, because my great grandmother pulled herself from the house out into the street for help, and she survived.

³⁸ Pronunciation: Nah-noo

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advance, something that wasn't left in the old country when both my paternal great-grandparents sailed to the U.S. from neighboring towns around Siracusa, Sicily. The event wouldn't truly begin until everyone arrived. I remember as a child, waiting for the food and lifting foils to pinch off a bit of ziti, a crumb of garlic bread, a swipe of cream cheese frosting, or a cookie the size of my seven-year-old fist. And when the festivities began, talk and laughter and waving hands slowed eating, and the family grazed on food for hours, ultimately until the moment they left, and even then, there was always their portion of the leftovers to nibble on during their drive home.

The season of cold—of winters and holidays and bundled, family gatherings—became the season of my maternal, secret recipes. Of the homemade apple pie that's more sweet than tangy, towers six inches above the rim of the pan, and tastes better cold than hot. Of slowly working my way from peeling apples on the breakfast nook floor, leaning against the kitchen-peninsula as my mother prepared her homemade crust. Of washing and coring apples to slicing and sugaring them. To finally being given charge by my mother to season and taste it without her taking part, only to comment on the apples' color and scent as I tasted for enough cinnamon—enough to remind me of the earthy, tangy scent of the trees we pulled them from—so that I would know how to pass this tradition onto my daughter and niece.

For all the whining of my husband for not making a real lemon meringue pie, he boasted about the lemon flavoring I worked into the sugary white meringue cookies, and he asked me if he could eat as many as he wanted. I laughed. That was the reason for baking after all; to share something sweet with those I spend time with, care about, or

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care for. Because food equates to family and the only real way I was ever taught to show someone that I loved and wanted to care for them.

My Nonna, now, must sit and instruct my aunt or Nanno to cook for her. She can no longer stand for any extended period of time because of her diabetes and her refusal to give up sweets. She will pat her white hair with her weathered hands when I visit, telling me how she needs to get out to have her hair curled. Nanno will tell her she doesn't go anywhere anyways, and they will bicker back and forth about the one reason why that may be. When food is ready, Nonna will wrinkle her nose and puff her flat cheeks as she discovers she forgot to include an ingredient—the basil leaf, most commonly.

My father, Poppy's, hands are becoming the same way, now that he's sixty. But they are far rougher than anyone else's hands I ever saw. The first time I really looked at my Poppy's hands was the first time we had a real conversation. They are square with short, thick fingers. Hair cascaded like waves surrounding rocks around his knuckles and down the side of his palm. His knuckles appeared swollen and darkened by scars, as were his fingers with black perpetually clogged beneath his nails from long days driving tractor-trailers and working skids.

He stood there in the dark kitchen with me when I first tried cooked spinach. I sat on the inside of the kitchen-peninsula, my heels swinging into the second drawer as he scooped the green mush up on a fork and sprinkled salt over it. It tasted nothing like I expected, bitter and tangy from the vinegar, but my mouth flooded as it closed around the bite.

He boomed when he spoke, when he laughed, when he yelled, and even when he whispered. He was not the type of man that could go unnoticed. But Poppy has his quiet

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moments; those moments where we could simply sit, my six-year-old head rested against his bulbous belly as we watched whatever was on the television.

Or the time when he and I sat at the kitchen table in the breakfast nook. I was five, and he and my mother had just taught my older brother and I how to play poker. Then we played for pennies. This time, a bowl of pickled beets sat between Poppy and me, and the winner of each hand got to eat a slice. At five-years-old, I got the first and only spade, royal flush—the highest hand a player can be dealt. And I shared in my splendor, celebrating as my father and I both ate the last two pickled beets in the bowl. A sweet and bitter mix reminiscent of spinach and meringues and sauce—the accumulation I had no idea as a child that would encompass all my memories of food.

I imagine what it was like for my husband. He is, by far, the pickiest eater I have ever met and has the finickiest stomach—one that can be turned by a simple passing smell. For him growing up, food revolved around a single mantra—*Eat it or wear it*. And he, more often than not, wore it.

He would sit over the table at KFC, looking defiantly up at his silver-haired father, and say, “I don’t like coleslaw.”

His father’s bulky fist would slam down beside the red tray. “You’ll either eat it or you’ll wear it.”

Jason, in one of his moods, decides to test his father with compliance, spooning a forkful into his mouth. I can feel his throat close around the obstruction, his stomach barring the mayonnaise and dill coated cabbage, and the buildup of bile let loose and rocketed the shredded mess back at his father, splattering across his chest.

His mother would turn to his father and say, “He told you he didn’t like it.”

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And now, although Jason gripes when I ask him what he wants for dinner, sick of me asking him this daily, “You know what I’ll eat, just make something,” I attempt to make food a loving experience. To find food that has rich and complex flavors for his super-taster’s pallet.

But I feel heartache for him when I cook, how he can’t taste the flavors that I do with my supposedly sub par taste buds. With a deeply ingrained love for food, I experience taste throughout the entire process—not just the end product. I taste and lick and season and smell and stir and portion and measure and experiment. When I cook, food and I are equals; we reciprocate a mutual love even in failure.

No Bake Avocado Lime Cheesecake

Crust:

1 package Graham Crackers, finely ground

1/3 cup white sugar

6 Tablespoons butter, melted

Filling:

2 avocados, ripe, peeled, and pitted

1 package cream cheese, softened

1/2 cup fresh lime juice

1 cup sugar

Preheat oven at 350 F.

Mix graham cracker crumbs, sugar, and melted butter thoroughly. Press into a nine inch pan.

Bake for 8-10 minutes.

Blend avocados and cream cheese until smooth. Alternate adding sugar and lime juice until incorporated.

Pour into pre-baked crust.

Chill for at least three hours before serving.

Eight Loads

I hide in the kitchen—my favorite place to work, even when I’m writing. This kitchen with pumpkin colored tiles stacked three high around the L-shaped counter. My hip turned on the washing machine beside the oven as I chopped crisp, thin onions and garlic for three-dozen sliders. With the bottom of the oven broken, I broiled them and charred a bit of their flesh even though I occasionally had to relight. The char was a happy accident—one I replicated with each batch. I made four batches, and a good cook knows to try the product before it goes out the door, so my last batch perfected those little burgers.

I’m in no way a scientist, but it seems that my husband, Jason, might see the connecting threads with what I do in the kitchen. Oblivious to the outside world, there are certain times I do pay attention.³⁹ When I cook happens to be one of them. I glanced at him mingling outside with friends of my friends. He doesn’t typically like strangers, but he found the neighbor’s husband to chat with about video games and drugs. He laughed and traded stories, and he’s good at both.

Mia’s birthday party, what I made all the food for, was the only time Jason ever praised my onion-infested burgers. I made him four without, but the way they were

³⁹ Other than those overtly paranoid moments.

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passed around left him what he could get—a rare phenomenon, since I serve him first due to his irregular pallet. But I must have hit a stroke of luck there in London because he not only ate onions willingly he went back for seconds.

I also made four-dozen stuffed mushrooms—each batch killed before I could get the next out. Each batch meant I began the cycle on the washing machine with my hip. By the end of catering duties, I tried to start close to eight loads of laundry—or the same load eight times—and my hideaway became the blazon sun set on the back deck of Mia and Chi’s home.

I met my husband on the raised wooden deck where the other hors d’oeuvres were being picked at. Pouring myself some wine, I joined in the picking—both sad and proud that none of the food I made was left and others’ was.

Most of the conversation became a blur to me, as I tried to listen in on the four groups that had formed around the back yard. Two took place on the deck alone, around the table, another on the smooth stone beside the collapsed clothesline, and the last in the loose stone of the backyard where four folding chairs sat in a semicircle. My writer brain scatters on me at times, trying to take in too many details at once, which generally overloads my poor memory.

“I’m just going to kill you,” Maddy said to my husband as she gulped at another red Dixie-cup of wine. “It’s like I tell those little fucks when I sneak on. Go ahead and run, I’ll find you, and I’m gonna kill you. Oh, my son gets so mad when I do that.”

We traveled the city for the five days before the party, Jason and I alone as Mia and Chi worked in their dog grooming shop with Maddy. The architecture in London, the

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people, the art, and even the shopping outshined some of the more beautiful cities in the United States, New York City more specifically. I took over two thousand pictures in London alone.

The only problem was nourishment. Thankfully, I cooked breakfast and dinner while we stayed in London, although they fried their fish and chips to a delicate crunch, which I purchased on our walking tour that followed the movements of London's most famous unidentified killer, Jack the Ripper.

The section reads: *Goulston Street: The solid block of flats on its right side is Wentworth Model Dwellings, built in 1886 and largely occupied by Jewish tradesmen in 1888. It was in the doorway, now the takeaway counter of the Happy Days Fish Restaurant, that PC Alfred Long discovered a piece of Catherine Eddowes's apron at 2:55am on 30 September 1888. It was smeared with blood and the killer had evidently used it to clean his hands...*

We stopped there for that reason, that I could squelch two fascinations simultaneously—real life horror stories and food. Jason, however, suffered through searching the streets for food he would eat, and I sat with the foot-and-a-half-long, batter-fried cod and wedged potatoes. Jason won't eat any fish except Oklahoma bass caught from a pond. Happy Days Fish's fish and chips tasted fresh, crisp, and greasy, but they made no comparison to the cod and fries I'd grown used to eating in Syracuse, New York. Architecture and history couldn't make up for much of the mediocre food.

The night dwindled down to the drunken crazies, the hippies, and us. Really, nine of us remained in their court-like backyard. The kitchen light punctuated the darkness

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through the picture window and glass door. The food was devoured, and the laughter, drugs, and fighting began.

I sipped on my second glass of wine, far behind everyone else at the party. I catered the party as my present to Mia; that and the Chicken Alfredo I had learned to make back in Oklahoma for the occasion. And I was glad to not disappoint them.

Part of our exchange, we had not met before Jason and I left home to go on our honeymoon to London, Scotland, and Ireland, but I was friends with both girls online for over a year, and we couldn't come all that way without staying a week with them. So I cooked dinner and paid for half of the groceries in exchange for the roof and bed. *That* I could do. In fact, if I could travel the world merely cooking for the roof over my head, I would spend the rest of my life that way.

Maddy told Jason that she was going to kill him for the last hour. They were talking about *Halo*. She liked to sneak onto her son's game when he went to the bathroom, sometimes locking him in there so that she could kill his little, eleven-year-old friends.

"I'm a sniper," she said to him. "You won't see me, and I'll blow your head off and come steal your sword. Those are my favorites—the sniper rifle and the sword. I'll cut you in half before you turn around." She swung her empty, red Dixie-cup like a sword and nearly toppled off the back of the deck into some bushes. Jason caught her, and she seemed to realize she needed some food to counter the wine she drank. Her hand delved into the leftover snacks.

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Susie stepped up to the table and pushed Maddy back into the gravel, although Maddy caught herself. Susie told me again how I would be coming to stay in her house for my last few days in London.

“No,” Susie told my husband. “You can’t have her back in the States. She’s going to come live at my house and cook me mushrooms every day.”

Maddy slapped at Susie’s arm and disagreed; she wanted me at her house instead. So, Susie punched Maddy hard enough in the shoulder to send her pin wheeling into the gravel. Thankfully, her cup was empty.

I told both women, “I learned I could cook for Jason. I love him, and he will continue to be the reason I cook.”

The day before the party Chi and Mia drove us to Avebury and the Devil’s Chair where England’s southern cooking came in a close second to America’s Southern cooking. A miniature town, Avebury housed old stone architecture and thatch roofing, and, of course, the stones. Older than Stonehenge by a few hundred years, Avebury was constructed in 2600 BCE.

The girls brought us there for the Devil’s Chair and the food, but mostly, the Chair. A large stone sits in the west of Avebury was, during the New Age movement, given its own lore and Pagan ritualistic ceremony. It is one of the largest stones and weighs more than sixty tons, and to sit in the stone would face a person directly south.

Devil’s Chair felt cold, almost wet, but sitting there thrummed energy under my skin as the stone arched over me in a broken U-shaped awning. My fingers clung to the crevices along the east side of the seat, my feet dangled over the patch of dry dirt worn

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away from the field grass at the base of the seat, and did the most important of rituals performed in the Devil's Chair. I made a wish.

I may have wished for a happy marriage or a larger house. I may have wished for better health or a long life. I may have wished for a stable career or a life of traveling. But I didn't wish for any of that.

Or maybe I did. Either way, I can't tell you. I'm a tad superstitious.

After our four wishes and a quick walking tour of the main grounds, we sat down at the Red Lion to eat. At Chi's suggestion, I tried their award winning hand-battered haddock and chips with mushy peas. It was the first time I tried the mashed, vinegar-laced peas before and was pleasantly surprised, but the fish was just that, battered and fried fish, still a runner up to my childhood memories.

My wine-headed-self followed Maddy into the gravel after blushing and laughing at their compliments on my cooking. I'd already been fought over for the last hour, and thus, they'd already heard my rebuttal.

I pulled up a lawn chair for myself next to Susie's man. He lit a joint and passed it. I took it, but nothing came through, just nasty, nicotine-tasting air. The joint was twisted, relit, stamped out, relit, flattened, and relit before Susie's man put the burning end in his mouth and gestured me forward. Leaning in, I tipped my chair and nearly fell into him, mouth close to his to take the smoke he tried to blow through the joint into my lungs.

Chi and Susie squealed. I'm sure it looked liked I all but kissed him. But still, the joint didn't cooperate, and my husband quickly came to sit beside me.

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“It’s all right. I ain’t worried or nothing like that,” Susie called as I blushed in the dark.

“It looks like she tried to bloody kiss him.” Chi’s voice jangled with her perpetual tease. Most people wouldn’t think to look at me or talk to me that I had practice doing all sorts of things—one being how to smoke and the variations thereof.

Unfortunately, that attempt didn’t last long and the men tried various different configurations to get the smoke to pull through easily. The only problem or pleasure in recreational smoking was food and cooking. I was hungry and, thus, always cooking. This came in handy, of course, for the culmination of my culinary skills. It made the vanilla cake with cream cheese frosting all the better when we cornered Mia to sing her “Happy Birthday.”

The cake produced another flow of banter about stealing me, although it was not nearly my best. My chocolate, chocolate chip, chocolate cream cheese iced cake: my triple-chocolate masterpiece.

London’s food prospects deflated until Chi proposed to cook for us. But when she didn’t feel well, I took her turn and her lesson. Having never made a risotto before—something the Italian in me is ashamed of—I took to Chi walking me through my first time. I, of course, had no qualms cooking in her place. This brought me back to my summer days watching my Nonna,⁴⁰ and my winter nights baking beside my mother.

A splendid mix of onion, crème fraise, prosciutto and rice, and of course other ingredients, provided me with a wonderful first risotto, and the salty meat, the earthy

⁴⁰ Pronunciation: Non-nah

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sharpness, creamy sourness took over the dish. Sitting with friends, husband, and a new experimental dish, reminded me of how much this experience really meant.

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Stuffed Mushrooms

3 packages of mushrooms, cleaned and stems removed
1 packages of 1/3 fat cream cheese
1 package bacon, cooked and chopped
2 tsp garlic salt
1/4 tsp parsley
2/3 c breadcrumbs
sprinkle of pepper
*Add a small slice of mozz on top if desired.

Preheat oven to 350-375 F.

Clean and stem mushrooms.

Combine the rest of the ingredients in a bowl, taste, add more breadcrumbs if desire a stiffer filling.

Stuff mixture into mushroom caps with a little mound excess.

Bake for 5 minutes.

Broil for 5 minutes until semi-soft (mushroom juice will have leaked into the pan and the tops will be crisp but not burnt.)

Porcelain Mask

I sit in my bed after a long day of running around, shopping, and cooking so that a friend, and her boyfriend, could come and share a meal with my family and me. I did the work, and my mother bought the groceries. Granted, I didn't make a masterful feast, but I whipped up some good, Syracuse, home cooking, and it was free for a friend of mine that couldn't pay her bills. That should have been incentive enough, right?

Well, I think we both know the answer to that question—no. Why else would I write about it?

But my point won't linger on this whoa-is-me-type thread. No, my point has something more to do with the porcelain mask that weighs on me when I return home—one that I felt even before I left for the fortunes of my life. You might think that I will to talk about my high horse, about how luck and good family allowed me to attend college for the past decade,⁴¹ how at sixteen my father bought me my own car, how someone always put food on my table, clothes on my back, and a roof over my head. Well, no, that's not really what this is about either. All of those things are true.⁴²

⁴¹ My family's support overwhelms me—with jibes included, especially from my father.

⁴² And really boring to talk about—no tension there.

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Capitalist culture believes that money creates a blessed state. The rich, after all, don't have to worry for anything, right? Well, then why do a good majority of them dope themselves up on pills and drugs and antidepressants? Why do they drink themselves to death and feel the need to risk their lives for reckless and dangerous split seconds of pleasure.⁴³ The answer remains somewhat simple. The hierarchy of needs has not been fulfilled. Sure, they don't need to worry over food or clothing or their homes. But the top three tiers—the need for love, self-worth, and self-actualization still plagues them as it plagues the rest of humanity.

Again, I don't want to sit and brag about my life, but I want to set up the truth in which lies humanity. I am loved. My family loves me, my husband loves me, and the great majority of people I call friends do love me. But times come when my life can become more daunting than one might perceive—times when you can see my smiling face and my easygoing demeanor and hear my laughter and jokes.

I often do the best I can to make myself and others laugh—either at me or at a situation—although times call for them to laugh at themselves as well, and I can be clever enough to accomplish this now and again.⁴⁴

You won't see the tears I cry more often than I wish to admit.

Here. Sit with me for a moment in the Dunkin Donuts on 7th Street, Syracuse, New York. I worked in the back for two years, and often snuck out the back to smoke a ciggie or a bowl—the only way for me to deal with the pressure of managing without the title and the laziness around me without going mad out of my mind.

⁴³ Say, like skydiving?

⁴⁴ Put that comedy mask on here. Don't take it back off until you're alone. Until your tears loosen the porcelain from your flesh.

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At the time, I didn't know that my anger seeped from me when my mind straightened.⁴⁵

Neither did I realize my problem with men,⁴⁶ a problem that plagues me, now, and will likely always. In fact, most of my employment there makes me cringe in reflection.

I sat in the dining room beside the swing door to the back. A girl from my math class talked me into this meeting—one with her sister—one with the girlfriend of a just recently fired co-worker—one about how this woman's babies' father, flirted with me at work, tried to kiss me.

Only. Here's the thing. I can't remember the truth. That time in my life overflowed with half-truths and exaggerations and flat out lies. I can't remember if I lied.

Fortunately, the woman dismissed it.

I wonder if I looked like a floozy.

I certainly was one.

Let's go back to this crying I do in the shower, in my car on my way to work, in my bed with the door closed, alone. Not very often will you see someone console me or hold me or rub my back and tell me everything is all right. No, I keep that burden solely to myself if at all possible.

I've never actually detailed the darker parts of my life before, like the rape or pressure to have sex that I didn't want. How I defended Yvonne to my friend, Nikki,

⁴⁵ When I used to smoke eight to ten times a day—at 4, 5, 6, and 8 am, at noon, 4:30, 6:30, 8:30, and sometimes at both 10 am and 10 pm if my luck struck.

⁴⁶ Or more specifically, sex and attention.

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saying that I couldn't believe Yvonne would sleep with Nikki's boyfriend and father of two.

Yet Yvonne, when about to take off on a miniature road trip with said man, compared her character to mine by saying, "Don't worry, I'm not Alisha. I don't sleep with everyone." But she slept with Nikki's boyfriend. How foolish I felt for having an optimistic perspective.

How my promiscuity hurt no one but me.⁴⁷

I have, however, told several about my one abusive relationship that I could deem truly abusive. Only the guy was my best friend. The both of us were so starved for positive attention that we clung to each other like egg whites or, more likely, wrapped cellophane. He was a compulsive liar that could only be gay in school, never at home. And my parents were so preoccupied fighting or avoiding each other that I dyed my hair pink and green and purple and blue and black, talked loudly about liking girls, and dove so completely into my fantasy worlds that I feared I became schizophrenic. Dickie took advantage of this I believe, assuring me that I was crazy, that I needed him to keep me sane, that I couldn't live without him.

He took control of my life. Told me who I could hang out with and when. Called me every day to check in on me and asked me why I hung out with Amanda all day, playing cards, instead of with him. Stopped in and imposed himself in my house if I tried to spend more than one evening without him. Planned my future and told me that I would teach Art one day. Decided who I was—some crazy girl that no one could ever love more

⁴⁷ However, I've learned that this surely can't be true. Rarely do our actions only affect ourselves.

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than he did. Trapped me in a spiral so low that my need for right kind of love became unmanageable.

But it is easier to be happy, to spread the happiness, to cram every nook of my inner self with disappointment and hurt that holds no real purpose in my life until my mask cracks and the tears cleanse them and prepare them for repair.

I hide my scars behind my porcelain mask.

Should I be pitied? Absolutely not.

Why else would I hide that darkness from others if I sought pity? Rather, I crave acknowledgement, fulfillment, and praise. I always worked harder at things than I saw others work—unless it came to cleaning or mechanics.

Does that mean I should pity those of my friends that really are less fortunate than I?

Again. No. And I don't, or at least, I hope that I don't.

A pang will always be there for someone I love that I know could do better, have the potential for really great things, but lack the risk involved in progressing forward in life. Syracuse holds that kind of pang for me. I see my thirty-year-old friends working dead-end, food service jobs at minimum wage, partying every week, with no furniture, no food, or living with their parents, and I want to give them my mask. I take it off and bare myself to them so that they can see my life is still hard, but I make it work every day

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because of a willingness to risk myself for what I want. Willing to take on debt, to see my family for only a few weeks a year, to fail.⁴⁸

Ah, the key word: Failure. These are my stories. I would have no mask, no appetite, without.

Meditate on this.

⁴⁸ Like the \$70,000+ in college loans; like living 1,378 miles away from my family; like failing out of a full year of classes.

I Can't Believe It's Not God

Sit up, coccyx centered beneath you, legs propped within each other as if they will cradle something tender or breakable. Straighten your back so that your gut tethers to your ribs and place your hands on your knees, palms up, as if you're holding an egg. Breathe in through your stomach, not your chest. Hold it. Center yourself.

Wait. What? You don't know how to do that?

But it's as simple as clearing your mind.

Wipe it clean.

Make it empty.

Still not happening?

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Yeah. Not for me either. Funny thing is, I've practiced the ritual off and on for almost a decade, and still, my mind runs rampant every time I try. These last few weeks, I've given it a heavy push—shoving my thoughts out of my brain and dwelling in the deep black/blue—the vibrating square that accompanies my empty mind, before words, images, and thoughts drop like grenades in my meditative consciousness.

After a few minutes of battling for that desired blankness, I focus on *Om*, that symbol that looks like a three with a squirrel's tail, holding up a bowl of tofu. I push that tiny, vibrating three at my third eye. They seem to go hand in hand for me.

The symbol translates loosely to “I Am Existence.” Since several versions of yogic beliefs rest on the notion that every living thing is connected by a mutual life source,⁴⁹ a serious devotion to meditation and yoga can connect a person with this source. Phrase it thusly: God is Everything. We simply need a mode in which to connect.

I won't ever push this as a religion.⁵⁰ I'm highly against religion—the organization of human souls, the cataloging of sins and virtues, and promises no one can ever truly keep. Nope. Thanks anyways. Although, I do believe something keeps tabs, but I call it: Karma or Dharma. What you put in is what you get back. Simple. I like it.

Besides, I truly believe all religions are the same but wrapped up in different packages.

Om.

⁴⁹ Or God, in Christian terms.

⁵⁰ Mostly because yoga is simply a practice, not a religion, although it is based off of the Hindu religion, that's not the type of yoga I'm talking about here.

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Ajna, the third eye chakra, seems to fit me, and he leads me to places I might never have thought to think about. Yeah, disassemble that one. But truly, he has. And here's the thing. Meditation can be more than sitting on the floor in some fancy pajamas, bending and twisting and thinking about not thinking.

For someone like me, meditation comes in the form of creativity. Hatha yoga isn't the only form of mental and physical stability. Some of my favorites are Vinyasa, Power Yoga, and Creative Meditation. I favor the last. After all, we are all creative in some way. When the juices are flowing, creators feel an intense high; as if being possessed, creation bleeds out of us on its own accord. It's somewhat addictive, isn't it?

What if it came with practice?

Wait. Practice. Isn't that what creative individuals are told to do: practice their craft every day? When we set a time and a place to sit and create everyday, what we are really doing is giving in to the urge that we need to connect with that outside source that is both separate from us and a part of us.

Okay, so the type of writing I'm talking about isn't exactly an acknowledged form of meditation, although there is a form of thoughtful writing that takes the place of meditation for some.⁵¹

But why can't creativity in itself be a form of meditation?

I find that the process of writing clears my head in a way that traditional meditation can't. Whether I am writing with the scrape of a pen or pencil against paper or

⁵¹ According to *Living Yoga*, "Tantra yoga is about realizing that our personal creativity is rooted in, or derives from cosmic creative potential itself. From the tantric perspective, creativity is a manifestation of the feminine principle of the universe, the Goddess, called *shakti*."

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the mechanical sound of the keys when I type a story out on my computer, the process cleanses and opens me.

The images in my head swirl, and the words pour out of my fingers. I'm in a trance. I have to concentrate, so I feel as though I am meditating. I'm more or less clearing my head because I have to let the story come to me. Come through me.

That initial spark of inspiration sets a cycle, flows on by itself, and I watch it impassively, possibly giving it a guiding hand every now and again when it travels off course.

And a peaceful euphoria vibrates within me for the rest of the day.

Does it feel this way for everyone?

With the God in me, I hope so.

According to Anne Cushman in her article, "The Creative Spirit," the Muse chooses certain, rare individuals to endow with information and to follow her basic guidelines for tapping into this creative source. But anyone can meditate through writing.

"Trust your intuition," says Cushman.⁵² Honor initial impulses—that "raw, uncensored vitality of your 'first thoughts,' which your internal critic will usually try to censor." Writers, and artists in general, try to balance the parameters of form with the creative process—this may be the result of our daily consciousness leaking into our

⁵² This would be step one, just so we're clear.

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creative minds. We function within a set of boundaries—of *shoulds* and *should nots*, but during the act of creation, boundaries are be limitless, or even better, non-existent.

Step number two: “Stay in the present.” Forget plans. Stay in tune with the here and now. Follow an idea. Follow a pattern. Don’t manipulate. If you’re not interested, it won’t come.

Step three: Don’t cross out and don’t erase. Commit to what you express. Create boldly without regret. Don’t block it.

Four: Process matters, not the product. The product is for others to admire. But what humans really need is a sense of aliveness or “deep contact with the sacred mystery of our lives.” Don’t aim to produce masterful work. Create out of sheer pleasure. Create from the simple power of being able to create. Create for the vital life that comes with creative expression. Purposeless or process-oriented creation is difficult because it seems contradictory, but really, process is the point of it all.

Five: Don’t analyze. We’re not psychiatrists or psychologists. And artists can’t all agree. Period.

Six: No special talent necessary.

Seven: Practice. Perseverance. Gather the courage to confront the blank notebook and the expectations of your audience. Face the freedom of beginning again and again.⁵³ Marring that page can be frightening.

The unknown is frightening.⁵⁴

⁵³ These are Cushman’s steps, just so we’re clear.

⁵⁴ Wait, how did we slip back into this paranoid frame of mind? Quick, run back toward the peace.

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But curious minds will wander into the darkness.⁵⁵ It's human nature to seek discovery in all of its forms.⁵⁶

To do meditation correctly, rough and frightening times will come. This is not a quick fix for relaxation—that's a joke: "Genuine meditation involves a whole series of deaths and rebirths, extraordinary conflicts and stresses come into play."

Ready to plunge into the darkness yet?

Om.

"Do what you love, the money will follow." ~D. Patrick Miller

A mantra like this I can stand behind. I've had trouble with what I want to do for the rest of my life and am scared about my future career. Either way, I know I will write. That's a part of me I won't ever eliminate. I would write if I were poor or if I were rich. I write for me.⁵⁷

As Marsha Sinetar, a pioneering author, educator and keynoter, points out, "ninety-five percent of our working force says that they don't enjoy the work they do," a shockingly high statistic. Yet, I'm not all that shocked.

People seek instant gratification. Instant pay off. Big bucks.

⁵⁵ You know, the place where we think about not thinking.

⁵⁶ Oh hey. Why don't we learn how to fly?

⁵⁷ Like this moment, in fact, where I discover connections I didn't see before popping in my subconscious.

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Why do we teach our young to admire those who are wealthy instead of those who have brains, who have talents, who have purpose?

“It is because most people have not found their purpose and function that they experience painful disharmony within, and thus the body of humanity is headed for chaos... ‘While the world perishes we go about our way: purposeless, passionless, day after day.’” Rapid changes in technology, societies, and the environment disturb humanity more and more.

Humanity as a whole does not take the right kind of measures to change this.

Attack the symptoms. Satisfy the short term—the now.

Don’t consider the future.

Don’t heal the inner self.

Fix the symptoms.

When our backs hurt, we go to a chiropractor that asks us if we want the symptom fixed or the cause.

Wouldn’t fixing the cause fix the symptoms?

Logic. It’s a real killer.

So, wouldn’t our spiritual healing work the same way?

We must fix the broken pieces within ourselves. Lacerations deep within ourselves cause our depression and pain and sorrow. Happy pills and alcohol and drugs cannot mend those problems.

They merely mask the symptoms.

Here’s my happy face. That’s all you need to see.

Because the God in me is not inherently good or evil.

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The God in me merely is.

Let's venture back to Ajna, my chosen chakra, the third eye.

When I focus my energy and point it at my third eye, two things happen. One, my eyes cross, even behind my closed lids. This can become uncomfortable, but I haven't found a way around that discomfort yet, and I'm not sure I'm supposed to. And two, my mind opens, allowing the world to penetrate my psyche. Energy invades me.

This doesn't last long because my concentration wavers.

But Ajna's dual-petalled, white lotus represents psychic channels, as the chakra truly sits within the brain. Since Ajna translates to "command," using this chakra for intuition purposes—or seeing with one's mind's eye—allows for better communication, allows us to tap into spiritual energy and protective forces.

I use Ajna simply for tapping into the inner realms of my mind, where I believe my creativity is stored, or where my mind taps into the Muse. Is there anything spiritual about this? I don't know. Maybe.

Does it work? Absolutely.

But either creativity or something higher taps into that opening from time to time.

For example, my second run through an academic yoga class opened my intuition or my connection with Plattsburgh, New York.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Now, remember, this doesn't mean I have these supernatural powers, just a little more inkling than I used to have.

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Once, when Jason had been visiting for the weekend, he'd agreed to go out with my friends (all but two of which were male) for some off-road fun.

I wish I could say a noise rang in my head, some kind of chime or bell or twinkling or something, but I had no noise as my signal. I just *knew* that they shouldn't have gone.⁵⁹

Now, although I had an aversion to off-road driving, that didn't play out here. I hadn't planned on going either way—I had too much homework to do. But I told Jason so—that I had a bad feeling, that something would go wrong.

But I never could've guessed what that would be.

Jason came back covered in what looked like mud, but as he drew closer, I could smell it on him—that rancid smell of decay that grabs onto you and won't let go.

They'd found a leach field,⁶⁰ or more accurately, they'd driven right into one and gotten not one but two vehicles stuck in the waste. It made me wish I knew some kind of cleansing ritual, other than the obvious.

I will never look at a self-service car wash the same again.

Although none of my intuitions have been overtly significant—just messy. My mother had one of these moments when I was young. She'd been working on her craft—either her fabric angels or her stained glass, I can't remember—and she came to me in the living room, panting, frantic, filled to the brink with this intuition and insight until she shimmered in each movement.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Believe it or not, Jason actually reaffirms this memory, and that doesn't happen all too often. Small miracles.

⁶⁰ Otherwise known as a septic drain field. Yup, they were stuck in shit.

⁶¹ I wonder how much of this intuition is based on her motherhood and how much on her own hoodlum days.

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“Something’s wrong with your brother. I can feel it.”

Mom had seen my brother, Jeff, face down in water. He’d gone out bridge jumping with his buddies.

And the frenzy set in.

She packed the amazing mess of herself into her van and drove down to the bridge to find my brother.

The moment she called Jeff to the top of the bridge, a group of guys jumped his friend and stole both Jeff’s bike and my father’s, which the other boy borrowed.

Mom swears that she saved my brother’s life, that if he’d been down there, he would have fought back and lost.

Om.

Assume that most people’s goal in life is to be happy and that everyone’s life is filled with *if I could onlys*. I’ve had more than my fair share—if I could only have a career as something other than a student, if I could only revise this until it was perfect, if I could only stay home and write, if I could only support my family, if I could only have a bigger house, if I could only make everyone happy, if only...then I could be happy.

How many of our *if onlys* are objects or events? A house, a car, a job, a boyfriend, a wife, a place in the country, an apartment in the city—that new iPhone, that new computer, stereo, music, hairstyle, clothes, makeup, shoes...

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Catch your breath; I know I need to at least once a day. All of these *things* have made life incredibly busy, circling and circling and circling with the newest, the prettiest, the smallest, the biggest...the best. And somehow, fun seems to have become our only goal. How are we supposed to be happy when we're expected to have fun, *constantly*?

Let's face it. Life's hard, so that's not possible.⁶²

But happiness can come with practice.⁶³ It's a matter of perspective or state-of-mind. External objects can't bring balance into our lives, only desire without satisfaction, and change is inevitable. Happiness can only happen from within.

Approach life with your defenses up.

First off, that's far too much energy to waste. A certain amount of defenses, I can't argue with that. People are inherently selfish; I know, I am, too. That's why I have Earbuds—to ignore everyone else and be in my own little world for a while. And unfortunately, the busier I get, the more I have to do that.

But secondly, how are you supposed to recognize positive energy, positive people, positive opportunities, let alone accept them into your life? Others don't want to talk to someone who doesn't want to talk to them.

Instead, think of that person you *would* want to talk to. Be that person. As you think, so you become. This took a long time for me to implement into my life, and at times, I still struggle with positive thinking.

I am unsure if this is a yogic belief, but it fits in with the same line of thinking. Words have an immense power over people. Japanese author and entrepreneur, Dr.

⁶² Or as the words tattooed on the back of my neck would say, "It's just another day in a broken world."

⁶³ Oh, there's that word again.

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Masaru Emoto, and I agree that since our bodies are made up of 70% water and that the energy behind thoughts and words can influence water that thoughts and words also affect the human body. Dr. Emoto, among others, took photographs of frozen water crystals in bottles or Petri dishes that had words written on them. Those crystals that accompanied positive, loving, kind or thankful thoughts and words generated beautiful and symmetrical crystals; whereas negative, ugly, selfish or hateful thoughts and words generated unattractive and unsymmetrical crystals or did not crystallize at all.⁶⁴

Now, think about how names and self-perception affect your overall health and happiness.⁶⁵ How it affects those you spend your time with. How their perceptions affect you. Since yoga is about controlling the body and mind, wouldn't positivity make the practice so much easier?⁶⁶

Anyone who knows me well or sees me on a regular basis knows I try to smile, to be happy, and to compliment when I can. If I think I am, and I act like I am, why can't I become happy? Sure. The plan isn't fool proof, but it beats dwelling on my past and putting all of that negativity out into the world.

Ah, this is where yoga comes in, or at least the Karma/Dharma part of the yogic-lifestyle. You get back what you put out. Not only true for physical accomplishments, but for health, for beauty, for relationships, and for balance.

⁶⁴ I know what you're thinking. Crystals. Yoga. Healing. I don't know much about them. I mean, sure, they have power if you know how to use them, just as anything else. But I haven't got the foggiest.

⁶⁵ As Allison would say, "A name creates life patterns, which form and shape a life; my life, like my name, must have been formed many times over then handed to me to realize," and a striking truth exists in this notion. The same is true when we define ourselves; we have a fascinating ability to change who we are.

⁶⁶ Is the horse dead yet? Nah, I didn't think so.

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Yoga is truly about balance, and in the twenty-first century, balance seems less and less manageable. But I'll get back to that.

I'd rather take a detour right here to talk about health and beauty.⁶⁷ Many combine the two terms and implement a synonymous relationship between the two. Although this can be turned into a truism, many have a skewed perception of both terms, which can drastically alter one's perception of beauty and health within one's self.

Imagine your ideal form, what you think you need to look like to feel beautiful. Are you waif thin? Broad and muscular? Plump and curvy? Do you fit into your clothes? Do you use makeup to accentuate or hide your features? What result does this create in how you feel about yourself? Can merely the feeling of maintained health make one beautiful?

Why not?

I know those outside myself—the media, advertising, my peers, my parents, my husband—have influenced my perceptions of beauty for a long time. Even though some of these perceptions positively influence me, most of them do not. And with deep honesty, my body image is poor—not as bad as it used to be, but worlds away from being healthy. This may be because of my love of food and my neutral feelings about intense workouts, like running.

But whatever pressures collapse in on us from the outside, beauty is perception, and self-perception must be separated from those outside of us. The obstacle of maintaining good health means connecting ourselves with our bodies instead of thinking of our bodies as mere tools.

⁶⁷ Although this isn't really a detour, health and beauty is about balance.

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Expert in weight management, Gretchen Rose Newmark, MA, RD, LD, remarked that often times destructive habits toward our bodies become a ritualistic coping mechanism: “Most people with eating disorders are seriously cut off from their body’s signals—hunger and satiety, fatigue, satisfaction, sensual pleasure, even pain. Learning to let yourself eat when you are hungry and stop when you are full is one step toward letting go of binge eating or food restricting—as is learning to heed your body’s requests for rest, pleasure, or attention. Becoming aware of how your body feels in a yoga pose helps to reawaken your sense of how your body communicates with you.”

This brings me back to the idea of balance. We learn by means of our mind, but with yoga, we learn through our body as well. Many struggle with the constant balancing acts of modern life; however, “health and yoga are about finding balance. Effort and rest. Elimination and assimilation. Yang and Ying. Day and night. Extreme action leads to death and so does extreme inaction. Finding balance leads to health.”

I can feel when I am off balance—body or mind, never mind when they’re both out of whack. Imbalance can keep me from productivity for days. I struggle for the right words when I write; I struggle with concentration when I read; I struggle with movement or stillness.

There are four yogic pillars, which focus on the four major facets of life—*Ahar*, *Vihar*, *Achara*, and *Vichara*. Balance comes from equilibrium of the four pillars.

Allow me an explanation.

Ahar means food: what I eat affects my mind and health.

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Vihar means relaxation: Sleep is the best way to relax, so how much am I getting?

Other relaxations, such as meditation, listening to music, nature, or any way I enjoy my state of being,⁶⁸ can aid my relaxation.

Achara means routines: these are how I spend my time with myself, i.e. baths, eating, dressing, activities I perform every day. These physical activities should aid in the cleansing processes.

Vichara means emotions: the way I think, whether I'm stressed or happy—how I treat myself affects how I think of myself and vice versa.

Hansaji Jaydeva Yogendra, the director of The Yoga Institute says, “The secret to complete and permanent relief is to introspect...[as you] study the four pillars that rule your life to control your body and keep it healthy always.”

We make our bodies and minds behave, not the other way around. Yoga, after all, is about control over ourselves, whether we concentrate on craft, poses, breathing, fuel, or our minds.

So lie back. Breathe. Take notice. And don't bother worrying over what works for someone else.⁶⁹ Transform your body and your mind to work for you.

Om.

⁶⁸ Say, like writing?

⁶⁹ Especially if you're an artist, like a writer.

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Calm, right?

Om.

Then I remember.

Indecent

I sat between two men—boys—buying my half-ounce of pot, alone when I shouldn't be. I knew them both for more than two years, smoked with them countless times, and dated one of their best friends, so I felt safe enough driving there by myself as I smoked my last joint.

“I've always thought that you were beautiful,” Josh said, sitting next to me on the couch as Cory measured my baggie on the coffee table. Josh ran his hand over my thigh before his arm lined the back of the couch behind me.

They weren't the reason I stopped going to Trexx, my nightly hot spot for three-plus years, but their definition of me kept me from going back. It didn't matter how much of my skin I covered up; I was already exposed, and I would never earn the right to rewrite my own definition.

Josh kissed me beside my mouth, leaning into me as Cory passed me a newly lit joint, and I wanted to leave. Instead, I took the brittle and browning blank paper between my pointer and my thumb and brought the thin end to my mouth, letting my insides stain and decay before my blank skin would show the signs.

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I couldn't tell you how I got from the couch to the bedroom, a measly fifteen feet of marred hardwood floors and discarded clothes, except that I must have stood to leave and found myself steered that way. I couldn't tell you how I wound up with my face planted in a pile of dirty pillows and sheets, except that I must have fallen that way and found myself unable to move.

I can remember how the bed smelled like must and man, how my head lay turned toward the open door as Cory pulled down my pants, how Josh just sat there and watched as my fingers curled into the thin mattress, how Cory didn't exactly hurt me, and how although I knew I wanted to leave, I didn't know how to stop him, so I turned away and stared at the worn burgundy marks on his blue comforter until he finished.

I'd like to say that this was the only time I did not voice my opinion, that I'd not rolled over and taken that kind of torture without a fight, but I can't. That simple weed-run wasn't the first time or the last. Coming into my own sexuality as a young, seventeen-year-old woman hadn't been smooth or pleasurable or anything at all normal. In fact, when I typically refer to it, I say it as the first time I was raped. Not by the man; he had my permission long before penetration. I raped myself of more than just my virginity—of my identity, of my ability to define myself, of the right I had to say no.⁷⁰

I wonder how my views may have been shaped with friends who either had more or less experience than they did, as I had many with much experience and many with none at all. Maybe with some knowledge of a middle ground, I would have known how

⁷⁰ An immense pressure comes with the loss of one's virginity, both male and female. And like others, I felt that I could not reclaim my innocence once I'd tossed it away, but I encourage others to remember that saying "yes" once does not mean that always has to be your answer—because I did not know I had that choice.

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to balance my sexual explorations, and thusly, been able to voice my opinion for whom, when, and where my sexual escapades took place.

Unfortunately, my virginity was of no real consequence to me, or that's how I remember feeling at the time, although I do remember it being more violent than it should have been since it had been planned.

At the time, I'd been proud of myself for finally completing such an important rite of passage—enough so that I cleaned up, put on my ripped jeans and waddled down to the McDonald's where I worked with my friends and celebrated my new womanhood. One that I hoped would cease my obsession with the wonder of it, built off of a bombardment of sexuality I'd experienced since I was five years old.

But why had I been so willing, so eager to throw something so special at a stranger? Why had I been proud to do so? I remember feeling like I could be included in all of this talk that my friends had.⁷¹

I wanted to be Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera. I wanted men to look at me, to want me, and I wanted women to want to be me. I wanted to be so charged with sexuality that no one could escape my gravitational pull.

Included. Noticed. If I could have sex, men would notice and pay attention to me, and presenting a few inches of cleavage or mentioning my sexual activity garnered me most of the attention I sought—a power I hadn't been properly instructed to wield. This became obvious during my second sexual encounter, which went precisely as follows without much editing or rushing to get to the juicy parts.

⁷¹ As a teenaged it seemed as though everyone had sex, but really, everyone *talked* about sex, me included. And I felt like a fake. I wish I had known better.

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One of my sluttier friends, Jorielle, invited me out for one of her sex-capades with two of her booty-call's friends. Jorielle sat up front, leaving me in the backseat between two Tims, believe it or not, one of whom was hers; the other two men were fair game. Fortunately, the other Tim was cute, and he took to rubbing my bloody knee—the one I fell on, the one with the new tear that I acquired on the way to their SUV. I'd never known that merely having a man massage the sides of my knee could be a turn on.

But as I sat between the two Tims, interested in the one to my right, trying to be polite to the one on my left, I'd never heard of having multiple partners at once—had never contemplated the scenario. However, the power of my sexuality burned brighter. My curvy size twelve hips and 38 DDs, my most prominent weapons, emphasized my femininity and made me compliant to the inequality of men's desire. Because as the first Tim kissed me, the second Tim's hands found the outside of my hip, his lips found my neck, and the man driving found the zipper to my jeans.

I hadn't known that all three of them were touching me until I pulled away from the first Tim. I batted the other two away, slowly sinking into myself and the first Tim. A dirty itch crept under my skin.⁷²

We were in the middle of nowhere, headed to a dark, abandoned trailer, where the third man watched me sleep with the first Tim as Jorielle slept with the second Tim on a nearby bed. I turned into nothing more than titillation.

The third man sat between Jorielle and I on the way back, obviously wanting and left without. He pulled it out and told me to play with it, to use my mouth, before he tried to kiss me. His hand pulled at Jorielle's trying to wrap her small hand around his cock.

⁷² I can't be sure if Jorielle knew all three men touched me, of if she thought that it was what I wanted, but she, like me, remained silent and objectified.

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His hands dipped between our thighs. And the whole time, I tried to be polite, giving him vague responses and hedged touching him as much as possible. I tried to play both the weak and fragile girl in this mating scenario even as I fought my predetermined role.⁷³ And I thought that if I could stall long enough, I wouldn't be forced to do more than I could handle.

Fortunately, that time, I made it home safely, having never touched him intimately, but I left Jorielle in the car with them for her ride home, and I never asked if they had done anything to her.

That second experience must have set up a rebounding karma aimed directly at my soul. Shortly after I turned eighteen, I frequented a bar and dance club named Trexx, which was a dirty and writhing gay club with couches for sexual encounters, a back stairway for the elite to bring their playthings, and poorly guarded bathrooms where favors could be exchanged. I made a habit of looking the other way when I saw other patrons participating in their own sins in hopes that they would in turn look away from mine—funny to think of, now, how shy a slut I'd been, and how I'd never directly thought of what I did as a sin until afterwards.

By this time, I had been celibate for more than a year, having tucked five sexual partners under my belt in the year between my seventeenth birthday and my eighteenth. For a young female that had never received much attention, minus ridicule for having

⁷³ Feminist theories—and not all of them agree—say that opinions derive from the depictions of women in advertising and media, through portrayals of submissive women in pornography, and images of women in more mainstreamed media advertising, art, stripping and prostitution, and the sexual evaluation of by both sexes in the general public—creating a need for plastic surgery.

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knotted curly hair, the spurt in fifth grade when I had no eyebrows or eyelashes, or when my hair was green or pink or black or purple, and my lips lined in black, eyes piled with blue glitter, and cheeks pasted with deathly white powder, sexuality seemed like the only way to find a man to have a relationship with.

My attractive friends, the friends who seemed to have the most fun, or the more entertaining adult problems, had all lost their virginites at young ages, found attractive men to perform sexual favors with, and got the kind of attention I had always wanted from a man or even a boy.⁷⁴ They came to me with stories of their sexuality daily. And so I searched for this type of experience, dwarfing my self-respect, ballooning my depression, and further enhancing my promiscuity—changing my personality, warping me from the nice, smart, and creative girl into a slut, into the *slam pig* I would later be denoted as, a definition that would live within me for a long time.⁷⁵

Out at Trexx with four of these friends, one of which was twice my age, a young blonde soldier approached our table, his dog tags dangling from his long slender neck—he was like the Hollywood poster child for a beautiful man in uniform—let’s call him Achilles, since he resembled Brad Pitt’s portrayal of him.

“I’ll give one of you ladies ten bucks to go grab my buddy’s ass. He’s uncomfortable with the whole gay scene and could use a little boost.”

⁷⁴ And there are times when I sought attention from boys, as much as it shames me to admit it.

⁷⁵ According to Doob, sociology professor and author of *Social Inequality and Social Stratification in US Society*, research indicates that psychological consequences occur in individuals and societies including, “self-consciousness, increased anxiety, heightened mental health threats (depression, anorexia nervosusness and sexual dysfunction), and increased body shame...[and] stereotype formation, sexual perception and sexual typing.”

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I waited, counting to ten in my head as we all looked at each other. *If this guy's friend looks half as good as him...*

"I'll do it," I said.

I stood, slipping from the booth and following the sexy soldier to his friend, watching his rear flex in his jeans on the way with all of my girlfriends trailing behind me. Breaking off from the group to glide by this man on the way to the dance floor to fill my hand with his backside—a firm piece of flesh—couldn't faze me then and wouldn't for a long time afterwards. I merely winked at the man as I walked onto the dance floor, joining my four friends in shaking my hips and butt—a gesture that generally didn't receive the kind of attention the movements would at a straight club, since a gay club should have been safer for a woman to be sexual, or that was my thought at the time.

Within seconds, the second soldier follows. His name is Matt—a short, dark, and broad man who was not unattractive, but he didn't resemble Achilles as his friend had—a man I would later let use me based on his skill in bed and his beauty.⁷⁶

That night, they followed my friends and I to my father's house, where I made out with Matt on the couch as Achilles slept with my older friend in the downstairs bathroom. After a short period of time, I went upstairs to my room. My other three friends left, and Matt followed me to my bed. I didn't mind because he was a good kisser, better than the twirling of tongues and saliva reminiscent of teething toddlers. Besides, dry humping was one of my favorite activities. Sex didn't seem any better than the revving up of my engine at that point, especially without the type of consistency it took to learn another's body and movements.

⁷⁶ Yes, I acknowledge the double standard here. I, too, objectify others—men and women included.

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So I accepted Matt into my bed to mess around—an act I wasn't able to limit myself to since before I sacrificed my virginity. In fact, I told Matt, "No," three times as he pulled off my jeans, thumbing my underwear to avoid making a second trip. I told him no again as his brick red cock appeared between my legs. I only read about cocks that looked like his—the mushroom head, the curve upward, the color—but I couldn't marvel for long, my *no*'s went unheeded as my beer-buzzed-brain tried to catch up with what was happening.

Hadn't I said *no*? Did kissing this man mean that my *no*'s didn't mean anything? Had my weak attempts at pushing this overpowering man off of me been foreplay? Once he entered me, I gave up my fight in less than a minute. He'd already invaded me, defiled me, and it didn't matter anymore. I became a *slam pig*—nothing but a vessel for his cock and his pleasure, good for nothing more than the ten minutes of romping he gave me on my childhood bed—the bed where I lost my virginity. The bed where I dreamed of my death.

My father lay sleeping in the master bedroom down the hall. I could have called out for help, but embarrassment embraced me. Would it be worse for my father to see me that way, to know I put myself in that position, that I was that utterly stupid, or worse, for him to reaffirm that my only worth was on my back or on my knees because I gave away my virtue and was defiled by a number of other men, so what did one more matter? I wanted to be a sexual being, and so I was, for anyone who wanted to treat me that way.

Later, I would see Achilles again and tell him I was pregnant with his friend's child—something that would truly hurt Matt rather than scare him as I intended—I wanted the power over him that he took from me. I wouldn't understand how I gave up

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my power at a young age because I thought of myself as an object of pleasure, he didn't take it from me, personally; he took advantage of the compilation of lashes to my self-definition that began when boys became the center of my universe at age five.⁷⁷

The incident with Matt set off another string of one-night stands—my attempt to redeem my sexuality and myself. Although many of them seemed to resemble the same scenario, the loss of my power over my body solidified when I entered an ill-conceived relationship.

Split-Tongue Aaron made a poor boyfriend; besides his six other girlfriends and his inability to allow me any male friends that were not also his, he consumed full power over me—both sexually and mentally.

Aaron overpowered my will twice.

Let me give you a little peek into those—the worst parts because none of it could be considered good—pleasurable maybe, but not good.

The first took place when we went to his uncle's house—the owner of Trexx—to have sex on the couch. The sex I agreed to, willingly bending myself over one of the body-sized tan cushions to present myself to him.

His hand wrapped in my hair, turning my face to the side and pinning it to the couch cushions as he leaned over me. With breath like tar, he whispered against my cheek, "Tell me I can do whatever I want to you."

I tried to nod, but his grip tightened.

"Say it."

⁷⁷ Although at that age, I resembled my mother. I wouldn't have known what a cock was if a stranger asked me.

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And I did, but he didn't release my hair. He lifted himself, turning my head more sharply, sharp enough I thought he might break my neck from the pressure as he pulled out of me. I merely thought he would be rough with me, bruise me a little. It happened to me before, and I didn't mind a little pain. But he did what I didn't expect—shoving his ten-inch cock into ass with no regard to lubrication or gentleness.

I didn't know what to do.

I couldn't tell if it made me bleed, but the penetration hurt for the first thirty seconds, whereas afterwards, I felt a mild discomfort and burning, almost like constipation for the next three minutes.

Afterwards, Aaron again turned the tables on me, pulling out to sink himself back where he was supposed to be. I don't know if he felt the physical shake within me. How much dirtier did he just made me? There was no time between transitions for him to wipe himself off, and my imagination did the worse for the kind of grime he just filled me with.

Still, I kissed him goodbye afterwards, festering within myself as I drove below the speed limit—due to the steam roller he provided me before I left—to sit in the hot shower for an unknown amount of time.⁷⁸

I would like to make clear that I didn't sleep with him for drugs. They happened to be a perk or a side effect, but he didn't give me drugs; he shared. I bought my own.

The second time made it even more obvious to me that he controlled my body and what I did with it. A late January night, snow already piled high from plows, yet snow

⁷⁸ Where I scraped at my insides, gathering the mud to mend the cracks in my mask.

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still fell and cluttered the street, so one of the bouncers, Jimmy, drove Aaron and I back to Aaron's uncle's house.

We smoked pot again, more than a daily occurrence in my life then, and I could swear that Aaron did coke with his uncle in the back rooms I never visited—there were enough rumors for me to think so, and really, I didn't care if he did. Once inside, Aaron sent me upstairs with Jimmy, telling me to fuck him for the ride.

I hesitated. He couldn't be serious. But he sat on the couch where he usually took me and gestured to the stairs. "Hurry up and get it over with."

Jimmy ushered upstairs, more than enthusiastic to comply.⁷⁹ And I did as I was told, letting his sweaty, floppy hair hit me in the face as his nicotine stained mouth gnawed on my neck. It didn't matter that Jimmy would later be my best friend and boyfriend for six months, or the only one who would tell me that Aaron had those other girlfriends, and a suspected boyfriend for that matter, but what does that say about my choice in dating material?

Looking back on even that slower and saner part of my life—the six months I dated Jimmy afterwards, my past influenced my choices, and the men I slept with defined my self-worth.

Because I didn't have to count a man twice even after more than a year passed.

It took a long time to realize that I have the right to control my own body, but marriage and meditation made available the discomfort—the indecency.

And it opened me up to barrels of my unearthed past—the rotten parts of me I thought mixed with the compost of my flighty memory more than a decade ago.

⁷⁹ Yes, the same Jimmy.

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Part III:

Understanding Family

Redefining My Parents

Their divorce had never been touchy for me. I, as shown in my father's tale, admittedly rooted for the end of their turbulent time together. I spent as much time away from them as I could—in my room with the music blasting, the TV blaring, playing cards with a friend, reading a book, having porch parties, and spending the night at any friend's house I could.

When I left for college, eight years after they divorced, my mom drove with me in my car to the SUNY Plattsburgh campus—a four-and-a-half-hour-drive where she waited until we were forty minutes away to tell me that she'd cheated on my father when she'd reverted into alcoholism. Neither of these phenomena was ever obvious to me.⁸⁰ But in the next forty minutes, I would have to spend the next few hours with my mom, my dad, and my step-dad, setting up my dorm room before we would go to dinner together before they all left for the four-and-a-half-hour-drive home in my father's Jeep.

My palms grew wet, and I scraped them across my jeans. *Did she really just tell me that?* Mom both tensed then relaxed in the driver's seat, arms out straight against the wheel, but she peered at me again and again.

⁸⁰ Although I just admitted to making myself completely oblivious.

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I had no ungodly clue what to say to her. Instead, I watched the trees run for us as we zoomed through another mountain pass in the Adirondacks. The greenery played such a big role in my choosing to go to Plattsburgh, and Poppy seemed to enjoy it, too. When we went one weekend retreat for future students, when we slept on bare beds in separate dorm rooms, and when we boomed in our Italianness as we walked around the serene campus, I began to think that there might be some genetic encoding that enables my compatibility with my father—maybe we share the *I-don't-give-a-fuck* gene.⁸¹

And then my mom told me she cheated on him with an electrician from Oswego—the reason she didn't want me to attend that particular SUNY school so close to home. My memory of our conversation is hazy at best. But that heartbeat of a moment smolders blue and green sliced down the middle with gray.

This may be why I ate my leftover Prozac for the next semester or why I felt such an immense homesickness that I drove home every other weekend. Maybe they just conveniently happened at the same moment.⁸²

From that experience, I went through my own turbulent time with my mother. Once, I even called her a cunt, inadvertent as it was. I said it.

To understand my parents and their relationship, I had to: one, understand why my mom behaved as she did; two, understand why my father behaved as he did; three, understand how their relationship with each other escalated to an unbearable level; and

⁸¹ It's even likely that I could have the promiscuous gene along side it—maybe they're attached my some sciencey pairing I don't know the name of—because my father's stories about women make me think of him as some sort of *Sauvé-player*.

⁸² Could also be all that co-dependence my mom had instilled in me, too. But who knows.

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four, gain a better understanding of why our family works better the way it is rather than the way it was.

I find it rather funny to think that the last time I called home during the holidays that my father sat in my mother's kitchen peeling apples for her coveted apple pies. He hadn't peeled an apple in more than ten years—possibly fifteen.⁸³ Or, that they occasionally check up on one another because they make better friends than they do husband and wife. Or, that my father goes to Thanksgiving with my mother's family because he is still Uncle Roger; because he can still talk sports with Gram, politics with Uncle John, and religion with my cousins.⁸⁴

Over a lifetime, my father, my mother, my brother, and I concocted a stew that allowed our truth to blend into some harmonious past.⁸⁵ Some of the lingual spices clue my relationship with both parents—that my father always hated his name and wished he had been called Tony after his Italian uncle rather than his French one; that my parents compromised on the name Alisha rather than Lisa or Veronica—Roni for short, which is what my dad wanted to name me; and that the song “Meet Virginia,” by Train reminded me of my mother, beside the fact that Ginny rhymes with my mother's nickname.⁸⁶

⁸³ Until I was old enough to finish such a monstrous task myself.

⁸⁴ Or how Poppy went and shoveled my mom's driveway because my step-dad had a vasectomy, so that Dan wouldn't hurt himself and not keep my mom from bugging my father.

⁸⁵ As harmonious as a turbulent past can be, at least my palette for it has improved.

⁸⁶ Plus, the song reminds me of the Oldies for which my parents instilled such a deep love in me.

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After completing these stories, the definitions of my parents changed—my mother transformed from the cunt I imagined her as, into a forlorn woman, and my father from this ruthless instigator into a devil’s advocate.⁸⁷

And from my altered perspective, I, too, changed.

See, a shift occurred when my parents became less of the all-powerful and all-knowing superhumans I saw them as, and they transformed into relatable and vulnerable people.

⁸⁷ Very clearly here reminding me of Miles Davis. His gall and fervor tests not only those he deems smart or worthy of the fight but all people.

The Tones of Gray, Pale Turquoise and Pink Will Prevail⁸⁸

Ginny stuffed the receipts and new credit card into the strawberry-colored pouch in her underwear drawer. A ridiculous color for any forty-year-old woman, but her husband would think she hid it for their daughter. Four other credit cards hid in there too—the ones she took out in his name.

Her hand brushed the black lace that peeked out from the monotony of white and pastel pinks. Her only pair of lace panties, she bought three years ago, still tag adorned.

She pulled them out and spread the material between her hands, marveling at the V-shape cut that would potentially slim her hips and waist, make her look like she were in her thirties again. Ginny spread them out on top of her dresser and pulled a slim bottle of cheap rum from the back of her drawer, wrapped in one of her husband's old, black socks. She unscrewed the top and sniffed it; the spicy burn made Ginny close her eyes and will herself to put the bottle back. No need to restart this cycle.

The bedroom door's handle jiggled, making her jump just a little and spin to look at the door as a thumping knock vibrated through the room.

⁸⁸ Title quoted from Christian Dior.

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“Why the hell is the door locked? What are you doing in there?” The Italian boom of his voice made her skin shrink.

She took a deep swig of the rum, then another before stuffing it away. Ginny looked again at the panties, quickly changed into them, and stripped down to a small t-shirt before she unlocked the door for her husband.

“What do you want?” The harsh tone of her voice covered her fear, but couldn’t mask the fine tremor that consumed her limbs.

Tony narrowed his eyes at her, and the frown on his fat lips deepened under his mustache. “I need a new pair of underwear for tomorrow if I’m gonna sit on my ass for twelve hours in a fucking truck with no air.”

He pushed past her and walked straight to the low, white dresser against the wall beside the door and pulled open the top drawer on his side.

Her skin went clammy, and her hands tightened into fists at her sides as she watched him bend over and unfold nearly every pair he had before grabbing one.

He glanced up at her. “Why are you dressed like that?”

She looked away, over the sagging king-sized bed, layered in white, pink, and blue, where her pillows were stacked neatly on her side. His side was bare and permanently discolored from the oil of his skin.

The squat nightstand on her side was precise—a bulky contact case sat diagonal at the base of her bulbous, pastel south-western-style lamp, the cream-colored phone in its cradle two inches from the edge closest to the bed, and pink tissue box behind it.

Her glasses perched on her nose, squeezing the bridge with a dull constant ache. She closed her eyes. “Going to bed.”

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He grunted, fisted his tighty-whities in his hairy hand, and stalked out the door.

Ginny sat on the living room floor in front of a speckled tan and brown armchair, folding laundry. She made a stack for everything. Towels and washrags on her left, then Tony's clothes, her daughter, Roni's, then Ginny's own clothes on the right.

She leaned back against the base of the chair as Roni bounded in and sat on the matching couch beside Ginny. Roni pulled at the loose strands of fabric on the front of the couch between her knees and her toes curled into the shaggy brown rug.

“Hey Ma.”

“Ma? Since when do you call me Ma?”

She shrugged her delicate shoulders, making her blonde curls bounce and Ginny envious. Ginny had permed her hair since she had had Roni ten years ago, but never to the same effect as her daughter's natural beauty—the buoyant hair, which was the perfect rendering of Tony's curls before he had gone bald.

Ginny folded another pair of ripped work jeans and plopped them on her husband's pile.

“I've decided I want to paint my room green.”

Ginny paused and looked up at her daughter. “Green? What's wrong with the pink?”

“Pink's too girly. It's prissy and...” Roni stuck her tongue out.

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Ginny frowned, she'd never heard of green as a girl's favorite color—pink or purple or even yellow, but green? The only time she liked green was when she was spending it. She stacked two more towels on her left. "I'll think about it."

Roni pouted, her lip curling down to her chin.

"You could park a truck on that lip of yours." Ginny whacked her daughter lightly on the leg with a dishtowel. "Go do your homework. I'll think about it."

"Kay, Ma."

"Hey, what happened to Mommy, Mom, Mama, or even Mother?" Something about Ma was too distant; she wouldn't have called her own mother that even given how stiff the two of them were with each other.

Roni shrugged her delicate shoulders again.

"I don't like Ma."

"Kay, Ma." She giggled, turned, and ran around through the kitchen to her room.

Ginny leaned against the dark high ledge of the polished wooden stage, pressing down the curls sticking out around her ears. She hated the way they frizzed like two pompoms when she'd sweat. Sue set her orange juice on a dark line of wood as Ginny took a bite of her eggs and patted her curls again.

"I can't believe it's been five years." Sue's voice pitched and echoed in their corner and a few fellow crafters turned to look at them.

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Ginny ducked her head, giving her friend a hard look. “Shh. Sue, people can hear you.”

Sue tore off a big chunk of her croissant. “So? They’re all busy setting up their own shit.”

With her cheeks burning, Ginny glanced around the craft show again. A young man, at the end of the stage, caught Ginny’s gaze. He winked at her.

“Well, it’s inappropriate. And since you’re talking about me, quit.” She didn’t want the whole world to know her husband hadn’t touched her in years.

Sue scowled over her breakfast, her frizzed out hair waving out at the bottom like a cocker spaniel’s ears. “You’re the one who brought it up to begin with. Why shouldn’t I talk about it?”

Ginny pressed her palm to her forehead as a headache formed. Why couldn’t people keep private things private? Sue was just like Tony, having a screaming match in the middle of the mall because they’d argued in the car.

“Because I asked you not to?”

Sue blew at her floppy bangs, and they parachuted away from her forehead before landing in her baggy eyes again. “Well, he could have at least complimented you on all the work you did to look good for him. It’s not like twenty pounds just disappears.”

Ginny cringed outwardly. Before they had left, Sue had met her on the porch. Tony was just getting home from his new overnight shift at St. Johnsbury.

Sue pushed Ginny out into his path. “Doesn’t your wife look good after losing all that weight?”

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Ginny had stilled, fidgeting lightly with her purse and avoiding her husband's gaze. But his once-over had been quick before he stepped around her.

"It's not her weight that's the problem." He then pushed past Sue as well and thundered into the house.

She hadn't cried on the way here and wouldn't cry now. Ginny let the anger in her swell instead. "Want to go shopping? I heard they're having a sale at JC Penny's."

Sue curled her lip briefly, tugging at her new Pink Floyd t-shirt that she had gotten at their concert at the Carrier Dome in Syracuse just a few days ago.

"I've got a new credit card. I'll buy you a pair of shoes."

Her friend shrugged. "All right."

A foot came across the stage, kicking Sue's orange juice over to spray the stage.

"Hey," Sue called. "You owe me lunch."

The young man bent and tossed down a dark-streaked rag to soak up the mess.

"You got it."

Traces of grease infested the undersides of his fingernails. He looked at Ginny with a curious interest and a small smile. Sue glanced over at him, returning a full-mouthed smile before turning back to Ginny and grabbing the remnants of her breakfast.

"I'm going out for a smoke."

Ginny finished her orange juice before returning to her spot. The tables set in a U-shape; white table clothes with white embroidery covered each, and her miniature Christmas tree in the back left corner where she could hang the ornaments she and her daughter hand-painted with snowmen, Rudolfs, Santas, and Christmas trees.

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“Jesus, Gin. Can’t you ever make me some kind of steak and potato?” Tony scraped the plate closer to him and leaned over the circular maple table, the wicker seat creaked under his weight.

Ginny fisted her hand around the edges of the ceramic salad bowl. She thunked it down on the table. “I don’t like it when you call me that.”

Tony stopped and peered up at her from his plate of Sloppy Joes. “I’ve called you Gin for almost twenty years.”

Ginny turned and grabbed a green scouring pad from the shallow metal sink and began scrubbing the splatter marks on the stove top. “I know.”

Roni sat up straighter as if she’d just had an enlightening thought, the sheer mauve curtain rippled behind her. “Gin is alcohol. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, Pumpkin. It’s an alcohol.” Tony spoke softly, a tone of voice he hadn’t used with Ginny in years—now reserved only for their daughter. He smiled at her, and Ginny’s heart sank a little at the warmth in that smile. It was something else she’d been denied for a long time. The scrap of paper in her pocket burned like a coal—the young electrician’s phone number.

She scrubbed the stovetop harder, rinsing the grease, and scrubbing again. She wouldn’t eat until he was done and halfway out the door. Verbal bile rose in her throat, but she clamped it down, hoping that once her husband was out the door she wouldn’t spew it at her daughter.

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The two of them were so alike, and Ginny had a hard time handling it. She turned and nodded at Roni. “You’d better eat some of that salad too, Chiclet.”

Roni stabbed her fork into the ceramic bowl and pulled out a chunk of lettuce, squeezed a glob of ranch dressing onto it, and shoved it into her mouth with a grin.

Ginny shook her head and rinsed her scouring pad again.

Tony ate quickly, pushing away from the table, leaving the plate near the edge and the seat out in the kitchen’s walking space as he turned and stomped off to the spare bedroom to change for work. Ginny grabbed the plate and pushed in the chair, rinsing it off as the verbal bile rose in her again. This time she was unable to cap it off right away.

“God-damned fucking-asshole.” She turned to see Roni hanging her head slightly over her plate, moving her fork through the sloppy ground beef that had fallen from her sandwich. Ginny placed the plate in the dishwasher and tried to give her daughter a kind look. “I’m sorry, Sweetie.”

Roni shrugged her shoulders and nibbled on the end of her fork.

“Are you done?”

She nodded and stood, pushing in her chair and scrapping the leftover food into the garbage as she rounded the counter to give the plate to Ginny.

Tony thundered out of the spare room and back through the kitchen. “I’m leaving.”

Roni pulled the bag of bread closer, her gaze dropped as she played with the twisty-tie. “Don’t come back ‘til Thursday.”

Ginny stopped, clenching her jaw tight to keep it from falling open.

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Tony didn't seem able to; his mouth hung slightly agape, showing the bottoms of his teeth. "What?"

Ginny's skin went icy as she looked over at her daughter again. Pink clouds formed over Roni's cheeks. Roni stilled, looking down at the loaf of bread in her hands, her skin had paled as she blinked up at Tony.

"It's Wednesday, isn't it?"

Tony shook his head. "No, it's Tuesday."

"Oh." Roni stopped fiddling with the bread and stared at it blankly. Ginny touched her daughter's shoulder gently. The air in the room congealed like stew around them. She looked back at Tony; he lowered his eyes briefly before looking at her. She could barely meet them, wishing she hadn't spoken so poorly about him in front of their daughter. Slowly, she shooed him and pulled Roni away from the counter.

"Come on, Chiclet, let's go paint your nails." She ushered Roni into the living room and sat her on the edge of the couch below the sandy arches of an abstract painting Ginny had purchased on her trip through New Mexico. Roni started picking at the thick threads on the couch again as Ginny pulled out a coral-orange colored nail polish from the far side table drawer and shook it. "You know," Ginny pulled Roni's socks off and set them neatly on the brown shag carpet, "I always wanted a little girl."

Roni peered up at her with glossy eyes, and Ginny smoothed the hair away from her daughter's face with a smile.

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Ginny sat in the dark of her wood-paneled minivan, the bottle of cheap rum plain in her hand, the top lost under her seat somewhere. But it didn't matter. The bottle was nearly empty, and she'd finish it before she got out of the van.

Soft globes of light popped out in the dark, along the outer walkway of the Red Oak Apartments, and illuminated two adjacent doors in front of her. They were both a vibrant red, even in the muted light. The hammered, copper-plated numbers read twenty-six and twenty-seven above two oversized peepholes that reminded her of Mr. Magoo when he put his spectacles on.

Ginny took another long swig of the rum, reveling in the burn deep in her chest and the unnatural warmth tingling in her fingertips. She could sleep off the alcohol in her minivan, if she couldn't build up the nerve to get out of it.

After she had painted Roni's nails, she put on *The Beauty and the Beast* and set the remote next to her daughter, who was slumped back in the corner of the couch, hugging one of the small pillows. Ginny fled upstairs, pulling the rum from her drawer and sipping it slowly.

She took the small torn paper from her pocket and unfolded it.

Nick 315-867-5309

She sat on the edge of her bed, rumpling her pillows and shifting them. The cream-colored phone sat impassively at the edge of her squat nightstand. It couldn't care less if she used it or not, or who she called on it. Ginny lifted the receiver to her ear and listened to the dial tone for a long moment before pushing in the numbers.

It rang so loudly that it seemed to echo through her room, bouncing off the walls and hitting her with each trill. On the third ring, a man's voice answered, "This is Nick."

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Ginny froze for a moment before stammering. “Hello. Nick? This is Ginny, from the craft show.” She paused, feeling ridiculous. This guy couldn’t be more than thirty. He was ten when she married Tony.

“Ginny.” The smile in his voice came over the phone. “I remember. The beautiful woman that joined me for lunch.”

She blushed, even though Nick couldn’t see it. Sue had bailed on lunch, leaving her with Nick. The conversation had been awkward at first, until they’d stumbled on what his plans for Christmas—a topic Ginny could be sure he had wanted to avoid.

You don’t even have a tree? She’d asked.

No. No point in decorating for myself. He’d taken a bite of his pizza slice to avoid saying any more.

That’s not acceptable. Everyone should have a Christmas tree up. Unless you’re Jewish.

No, I’m not Jewish.

Ginny had joked that she’d have to visit to put up his Christmas tree. “The woman who’d promised to put that tree up for you.”

He chuckled softly, causing her to worry her lip between her teeth.

“I tell you what, Ginny. I’m going to give you a room number. If you’d like to come and pilfer through what decorations I have hidden away, I won’t touch anything until you get here. Okay?”

She nodded, and blushed harder because he couldn’t see her response. It was harder to say yes than to nod. She managed to whisper, “Okay.”

“Okay, beautiful, the Red Roof Inn, room twenty-seven. You got it?”

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Apartment Twenty-Seven. Ginny stared at the number on the door and then drained the last of the rum from her bottle. The liquor sent a jolt through her, but she didn't move from her seat.

She dressed in her black lace panties and deliberately left without a bra under her snug t-shirt, but she was now unsure what she had been thinking. Her clammy skin clung to the cotton and lace.

The DJ on 99 KISS FM claimed, "Playing the greatest hits of the 70s, 80s and today," in a raspy boom before he put Tony Orlando & Dawn's "Knock Three Times" over the airwaves.

Ginny peered down at her bare legs, imagining the feel of a man's hand on her skin again. How different would it be from what she remembered? Would his hands be rough from work? She ran the pads of her fingers down the inside of her thigh, closing her eyes.

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CB Handle: Instigator

Tony stepped onto the dock, his hands full of the paperwork he needed to make his runs. The familiar smell of grease, cold cardboard, and sweat eased his bones mildly. His trailer sat near the terminal for once, so he took his time walking to the cab and shuffling things around before loading his trailer. Already, he knew the twelve-hour shift would be long, after the shit Gin pulled back at the house. Gin had these fits more and more often. Maybe she was finally fed-up with how they were living.

Tony never could communicate with her properly. Hadn't wanted to marry her either, but she had the only one left when he had come back from 'Nam. Now he just wanted the divorce she skipped around, the one thing that she had gone out of her way to avoid talking about.

He'd shut her out of his room so that he could tie up his work boots in peace. She screamed her head off about the toilet leaking into the basement. A large misshapen black smudge loomed on the basement's finished ceiling, and it continued to spread. No, he wouldn't fix it. Why should he bother? Why should he put in more effort than she did?

Her fists met the door between her sentences.

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“Why can’t you do anything around this damn house?” Bang. The scratch of her nails scraped against the cheap, hollow-wood of the door. Sure fucking acted like she was the queen of his house.

“Why can’t you pay for a plumber instead of spending my damn money on glass?” Tony said.

She screeched and threw her fists at the door again.

He scowled down at the laces in his hands, watching them cut into his thick fingers, turning the meat white.

“Do your damn job and take care of your family.” Bang. “You want Roni breathing in all of that mold?” Bang. Scratch. “Couldn’t give two shits if something happened to me, you fucking asshole.”

Tony grabbed his jacket and paper-sacked lunch and opened the door, plowing past her as she nearly fell into the room. No, he didn’t care. The only thing he cared about was when she finally drew up the courage to leave him that she’d still let him see Roni.

Gin stomped right on his heels, screaming until he threw open the front door of their one-story, ranch-style house and stomped to his old, red Dodge in the driveway. He’d shut out her words, letting the screeches and wails fall out of her mouth and die on their own, alone, and without his acknowledgment. He put the sacked lunch on his seat, throwing his heavier jacket over to the passenger side.

Then he had felt her hands on the back of his flannel over-shirt, nails tearing the weak fabric as she pulled him back, trying to stop him from getting in his truck. Tony turned to bat her away. He’d never hit a woman, out of anger or otherwise, but Gin pushed him hard. His hands closed into fists. As he turned, she stepped around him and

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snatched up his lunch. Tony had been so stunned that he watched as she threw it to the ground and stomped it with her bare foot.

He'd never seen her so crazed before, even after the twenty-two years of hormone shifts and lay-offs; after the thousands of dollars she'd put him in debt for crystals and glass purchased for her supposed business; after the home improvements she refused to hire out for and he refused to complete.

Tony stopped at the back of his trailer and hung his head, smoothing his thick mustache down with his thumb and forefinger. He had known today was going to be hell. Someone had put the six skids of wire down in his truck, covering the entirety of the floor so that the tow-motor couldn't drive over it. What kind of dumb-ass didn't know to put two in the nose and wait for the lighter stuff to be put on top before putting another two skids in?

He threw his clipboard in the cab and loaded his cone down the side of the trailer, just finishing as his boss sauntered over.

“Sauce, what the hell is that?” his boss said.

“What kind of shit for brains puts all six skids of wire in at once?” Tony had had it. He wasn't doing someone else's job.

“Who did that?”

“Who do you think?”

The boss stopped, narrowing his eyes in what seemed to be thought. Only one guy would do something that stupid—Stretch. “I'll take care of it.” The boss walked away, and Tony went to sit in his cab, rifling through the paperwork, putting the slips in order

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for his drive north to Ogenzburg. He could hear the squeaks and shifts of his trailer being loaded.

Tony climbed out of the cab. Fixing the skids shouldn't have taken too long; it wasn't that big a mistake, just a stupid one. Anyone with smarts would have taken the tow-motor—a smaller version of a forklift, meant lift and load skids—taken out the four skids of wire and proceeded normally. Tony pulled himself up onto the dock in time to see Stretch, a man big enough to put Lurch from *The Addams Family* to shame, hand-carrying every piece of freight onto the trailer. Tony shook his head. That man stood as big as a bus, but had the IQ of a damn ice cube—melting.

Once Stretch finished, he came barreling toward Tony, not even out of breath from the work. Stretch towered over him, pointing his finger close to Tony's face. He started stuttering, apparently he wasn't that mad. Stretch could pull off a string of curses without a single stutter when mad. "Y-you lazy son-of-a-bitch. Y-you got to have me do y-your work for you?"

"Oh, did he make you do that, Stretch? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you do all that. I meant for the stupid, retarded..." Tony strung along a line of all the curses he knew. "...dumb-ass who put the wire in there to fix that. Not you, buddy."

Stretch's face blanched before red sprouted over his cheeks from his thick neck. "O-oh, I'm stupid, huh?"

"You're about as dumb as they come."

"Y-your mouth is going to get y-you in trouble."

"What are you gonna do, Stretch? Huh? You're gonna look real stupid, the size that you are, picking on someone five-four." Tony sneered up at Stretch, knowing if the

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man decided to get physical, Tony'd be dead. But as stupid as the big man was, Tony knew Stretch had gotten in trouble before for hurting a man at his last company and wasn't likely to repeat that mistake. Tony needed an outlet, and the only communication he was good at was instigating. "What's worse is you're gonna look even more stupid when I kick your ass. I'm gonna cut you from your belly to your throat." Tony paused, smiling up at Stretch as he held out his hand, palm up. "Now, let me borrow your knife."

Stretch walked up to Tony on his way back to unload one of the Electric Motors' trailers for the road guys. The big guy settled his weight briefly on one leg, then the other as he rubbed his thumb over the handle of the Fairbanks hand-truck, a bigger-sized dolly with more heft and stability. "Did I o-offend them guys?"

Tony smiled, glancing at the road guys. They stood against the far wall, guarding their backs. Stretch had been taking loads from their trailer, chatting with them, unloading it before coming back and chatting some more. The poor sap idolized them guys.

"I don't know. Why?" Tony knew. He'd gone over to them after one of Stretch's trips, and told them to watch out, that the big guy was gay and he stuttered when he was horny—even though Stretch nearly always stuttered. Then he sent over Danny Highrow to say the same thing. It was far too good of an opportunity to get Stretch, and Tony couldn't pass it up.

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“T-they were talking to me, and a-all a sudden, t-they’re standing over by the wall, talking to each other and w-won’t talk to me anymore.”

“No, Stretch. I don’t think they were mad at you.”

Stretch’s long mouth frowned, and he turned to glance at the road guys again.

“Might have been ‘cause I told them you were queer.” Tony said.

Stretch’s hands turned white as he gripped the hand-truck, and Tony feared the big guy might actually bend the metal handles. But Tony couldn’t keep the prideful smile off of his face. This was the reason he picked on Stretch. He’d make a big show of getting mad. Otherwise, instigating wouldn’t be any fun.

Tony gave Stretch a pat on his big shoulder and left Stretch to finish his work before laughing and going back to the terminal to sort out his paperwork. The man deserved it over everyone else. Not like the other guys didn’t get their share of ribbing. But Stretch was a racist. Just last week Stretch invited the guys out to his house for a party, but told Wardell, the only black man on Yellow’s dock, that Stretch lived in a white man’s house, and he didn’t allow colored people inside. The guys all went to Wardell’s instead.

The closing out paperwork didn’t take but a half hour, and Tony trudged his way home. Stretch pulled out onto Northern Boulevard right behind him, and Tony sent him a quick wave of his middle finger, expecting the big guy to do a u-turn at the light. But Stretch followed Tony onto Route 481 toward Liverpool.

It wasn’t until Tony pulled into a gas station—and Stretch in right behind the beaten-up, red Dodge—that his curiosity was piqued. The man lived on the other side of the terminal; surely he hadn’t come all this way to beat Tony’s face in. The wind cut

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through his thin over-shirt as Stretch lumbered out of his big white Toyota and lurched toward him, twisting his work-hat in his hands.

“What are you doing coming this way, Stretch?” Tony left his hand on the open door of his truck.

“I want y-you to stop p-picking on me. I-I’m getting tired of everyone p-picking on me.”

Tony let the truck door close softly and faced the giant. “If you didn’t get so mad at it, people wouldn’t pick on you. But it’s fun because you get pissed off every time somebody does. You got to learn how to take it.”

Stretch’s mouth thinned out, and he looked hard at Tony’s boots, the hat crushed in his one large hand. This guy was going to snap soon. Tony figured it might be time to lay off him.

Gin sat behind the low foldout table, stained glass piled in front of her, soldering gun propped in a metal coil above a soiled, yellow sponge. The sponge fizzled as solder dropped and quickly formed into a ball. Her graying hair was pulled back into a banana clip; the hair around her ears sprouted out like whiskers. Tony folded his arms over his bulbous stomach to keep from throttling her. They had decided to try and work things out for Roni, their daughter, even though Tony really wanted nothing to do with Gin and her violent mood swings. But Tony didn’t want to screw up his daughter, and he didn’t want to lose her. She was the only good thing in his life.

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“I don’t want her walking at night. Go, get her.” She pulled the soldering gun, melted a large drop of solder, and pressed it down the long line between two blue pieces of glass.

“Just leave her be. We don’t need to pull her from her sleep-over for this.” Did he even have the willpower to stay with her for another six years?

Getting Roni now could keep him from losing his nerve. It wasn’t like he had to move back into the master bedroom.

Gin narrowed her eyes at him, her head tilted down so that she glared over the silver rims of her glasses. Her lips thinned out, and her jaw grew taut. It was her version of the look, something his mother had been using on him for decades. If Nana couldn’t sway him with hers, Gin most certainly couldn’t make a dent in him.

“You want to tell her, then you go get her. I’m sick of being the bad guy.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake, you’re never here to be the bad guy. She’ll nod and do what you say.”

Anger burned through his chest, making his voice rise. “Because you’ve made her scared of me, bad talking me to her all day. You’re just like your mother.”

“I am nothing like my mother. I swear to God, Tony, if you don’t go get her...”

“You’ll what? Try to hit me again? Spend more of my damn money, open up more credit cards in my fucking name?” Tony’s hands curled into fists. He’d never wanted to hit her more in his life than in that moment. But it’d be better if he went to get Roni himself. That way Gin couldn’t poison their daughter’s mind any more than she already had.

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Tony stalked to the door in silence, swinging the front door open with too much power so that it ricocheted off the wall.

“Where the fuck are you going?”

He allowed Gin to have the last word. She knew exactly where he was going. Where else did he have to go? He closed the door behind him and drove the two minutes it took to get to his daughter’s friend’s house, a cream-colored three-story in the adjoining neighborhood. Tony parked in the riveted driveway before knocking on the door. Margie, the mother, answered the door as she hiked her sweats higher over her hips. He hated to think that the woman walked around flashing the bare skin of her ass in front of his daughter but bit his tongue.

“Roni,” she called. “Your father is here.” Margie turned and went back to her lopsided couch, letting the door hang open without inviting him inside. He stepped in and closed the door to keep the cool air out.

Roni bounded into the foyer. “What are you doing here?”

He put on a smile. “Hey, Pumpkin. Your mother and I want to have a talk with you.”

She frowned. “Does that mean I have to come home? I can’t spend the night?”

“No. No. You can come back after, your mother and I would just rather talk with you about this tonight.”

Roni hesitated and reached for her shoes and coat. “Ma. I’ll be back soon. Can you tell Carey?”

Tony glanced at Margie as his daughter called her “Ma.” Were things that bad at home? Did Roni call her other friends’ fathers *Dad?*

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“Sure thing.” Margie called from in front of her big boxy TV.

Roni nodded and pulled her coat over her shoulders. Tony opened the door for her, following her to the truck, and driving her home in silence. She fidgeted with the Velcro on the puffy sleeve of her coat as Tony tapped along to “Brown Eyed Girl” by Van Morrison all the way back to the house.

Once inside, they both stood before Gin at her worktable. He let Gin take the lead. He didn’t know if he could spit the ugly truth of it out. Roni stood close enough to Tony that her coat scraped against his jeans as she moved, still fiddling with her coat sleeve, twisting her torso to and fro ever so slightly.

“Roni. You’re father and I have come to a decision.” Gin said, looking directly at their daughter before narrowing her gaze on Tony. “We’ve decided to stay together and work things out for you. So you can have both of us, and we can be a family.”

Roni stopped twisting, slowly dropping her arms to the side. Tony watched his daughter transform from the quiet, peaceful little girl into a defiant young woman. Her features hardened and her slender fingers curled into fists, like delicate replicas of the ones he had made only moments ago. “If you don’t get a divorce, I’m running away.”

Tony took a deep breath as he looked at his daughter. She didn’t back away from the new tension in the room. She was more his daughter than he thought.

Gin slowly lowered the pieces of glass she had been fusing together. Her jaw clenched, though she didn’t look harshly at Roni. Her eyes rounded behind her oval frames.

“Can I go back to Carey’s now?” Roni’s fists had softened.

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“Yeah. Yes, you can go back.” Gin’s voice was softer than he had ever heard it before as she looked from Roni to him. Tony shrugged.

Roni stormed out the front door, slamming it behind her.

He could take a cue from his daughter. “Gin, I’m taking control of the money again.”

It was only nine p.m., and Tony was tired, even though his shift had only started two hours ago. Luckily, he had a dock shift, so he wouldn’t be driving. The JCPenney load was his easiest night of the week.

That afternoon before work, Gin’s screaming and stomping and slamming had woken him up early. He had been surprised she hadn’t burst into his room to attack him again. Instead, the front door slammed hard enough to vibrate their one-story ranch, and she peeled out of the driveway.

He’d washed himself and went through his normal routine at a much calmer pace, since he didn’t have to avoid Gin, taking the time to eat a decent breakfast and brush his teeth thoroughly. He’d even remembered his deodorant.

When Tony about walked out the door, Gin swung it open and pushed Roni through. Gin’s face was so red with anger that Tony imagined steam whistling from her nostrils with each breath, like the bull in the Bugs Bunny cartoons. Roni’s gaze stuck to the floor between their feet.

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“What happened?” Tony glanced at Gin, who folded her arms under her chest, her look etched deep on her face.

“She got caught stealing pickles and fruit roll-ups from Price Chopper. She’s already grounded for six months.”

Tony grit his teeth, unsure which made him more mad, Gin for making the decision without him, the fact that he had to leave Roni here with her in order to make it to work on time, or that Roni had been stealing. “We will talk about this tomorrow, when I get home, Roni.”

She nodded and shot off to her bedroom.

Tony checked off the latest load for JCPenney on the clipboard in his hand. Stretch loomed over Tony with a rug on his shoulder, having weighted the thing like a dumb son-of-a-bitch, but Tony kept it to himself; he hadn’t picked on Stretch in three days, even though he’d had plenty of opportunities. Tony shook his head and marked the cookware off the Cortland list as Danny Highrow called it.

“Hey, y-you dumb anchor clanker.”

Tony looked up at Stretch, the man’s blonde waves matted down around his oversized head. Anchor clanker? Stretch was trying to pick on Tony for being in the Navy? He’d let that one slide. The big guy couldn’t be so dumb as to pick on Tony and expect him not to return the favor.

“Rug f-for Horsehead, y-you little roly poly.”

That dumb ass was free game now. “Hey, Stretch. You were in ‘Nam weren’t you? In the Army, right?”

“Y-yeah.”

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“What’d you do in the Army? Infantry?”

“No. I dro-ove tanker truck.”

“Oh, that’s right, I’ve seen you drive. They knew what weapon to give you. You could kill more guys with a truck than you could with a gun.”

Wardell laughed from the nose of the Cortland trailer as Highrow jumped down to the dock, laughing. Stretch threw the rug down on the end of the Horsehead trailer, the thud echoing against the walls of the trailer. It took both Wardell and Highrow to drag the thing to the end of the trailer as Stretch went for another load.

Tony peeked into the trailer when the guys didn’t reappear right away. Wardell sat on the pallets of cookware smoking a cigarette, and Highrow stood farther into the nose of the truck with his pants down around his ankles, reminding Tony of the prank crack checks they had done in the bottom of his Navy ammo ship. If Stretch had asked the other guys to lay off him, they hadn’t listened. Tony bit back a bark of laughter as he turned to see Stretch come walking up with a fifty-pound Fairbanks hand-truck.

“Oh Stretch, honey. I’m waiting for you.” Highrow⁸⁹ called as Stretch got near the open end of the trailer.

Stretch skidded to a stop, turning with the hand-truck still in his hands. “Wh-wh-whoa.” He swung around, letting the hand-truck loose and sending it at least fifty yards. Good thing there was no one else on the dock.

⁸⁹ The only actual gay man on the dock, who used to tease Poppy about his good-looking son.

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When Tony woke up, Gin sat eating a leafy salad at the kitchen table in the nook and tying ribbon into tiny white bows between each bite. He wouldn't have acknowledged her if he had found Roni in her room. But his daughter's bed had even been made when he peeked in.

“Where'd Roni run off to?”

Gin kept her eyes on the pale wooden table and her tiny bows. The mauve curtains behind her making the gray in her hair seem sharper in contrast. “Out back. She's got no TV, no phone, no friends after school, no computer, and no music.”

“For six months....”

“Yes, for six months. She embarrassed the hell out of me, not that you'd ever care about that.”

Tony couldn't help but frown at the back of her head. “I'm giving her the music back. You know she can't sleep without it.” He didn't wait for an answer; he slipped his sneakers on and trudged out the back, sliding door.

The chain-link fence surrounded a calm in-ground pool and big overgrown bushes and miniature trees—Gin's idea of landscaping. The back garden was a big bare patch of brown in dark grass next to his shed. A rusty swing-set, with monkey bars and a slide attached, squeaked lightly as hornets swarmed the ends where they had built their nests. And in the very back corner loomed his satellite dish, a twenty-foot black dome of netted metal imbedded in the ground with one-hundred-sixty pounds of concrete.

Roni sat in the bottom curve of the dish. Holding a R.L. Stine paperback up against the glare of the sun. Tony leaned against the rim, waiting for her to put it down. She slowly slid it down to the side to peer at him.

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“Hey, Angel. I hear Mom was a little rough on you.”

She looked down at the book where her thumb kept her place and shrugged. Her features stoic, passive, waiting. Maybe she wasn't as scared of him as he thought.

“I'm giving you your music back.”

Roni slowly smiled before her gaze lifted to his. “Really? You're not mad?”

Tony shook his head. “No. I've had all night to simmer down. Want to tell me why you were stealing food?”

“I was hungry.”

“Pumpkin, we have food in the house.”

She cringed. “Nothing I can make. Cans of veggies, beans, and Mom's always busy.” Her slender shoulders shrugged and a few blonde curls fell around her neck.

Tony nodded. He'd been far more trouble than Roni could ever think to be. “You know, I got caught stealing once when I was your age.” Maybe the time had come to introduce the real Tony to his daughter. Having someone know the real him, someone that he could communicate with properly sounded pretty nice. He slowly lifted himself into the satellite with her and patted her knee.

He sat on the edge of his full-sized bed, leaving the room dark as he leaned forward on his knees. Tony had finally moved the rest of his things into the spare bedroom—his bedroom. His marriage and his life amounted to a box of work clothes, underwear and socks included, a pair of worn sneakers and a pair of light brown, leather

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work-boots, his new lunch pale, and stacks of nudie magazines and *Girls Gone Wild* DVDs—the last two compiling more than half of his full possessions. It had been Gin’s biggest complaint. That he looked at porn instead of touching her. But the young women were only fantasies, ways to take care of his hormone-related needs and give him a pause from reality. Tony wouldn’t know what to do with a new woman in real life, not any more. Anything beyond the pages of a magazine or the girls bouncing around on the TV would become too real for him, and most likely, too much like his wife. Gin had ruined him; he knew that. And he was okay with it. He just couldn’t wait for her to finally leave him.

A soft knock came from his door. “Hey? Daddy?”

Tony’s throat tightened. Roni almost never called him “Daddy” unless something was wrong. He stood quickly, struggling into the work pants he had discarded on the floor next to his bed. “Yes, Angel?”

“Um. There’s a police man at the door.”

Tony stopped, his pants hanging open around his waist. She’d called the police. Gin had actually called the police on him—that conniving bitch. He shook his head. “I’m coming, Pumpkin. You tell them, I’ll be right there.”

He finished dressing and quietly opened the door, meeting his daughter at the corner of the kitchen and the front foyer. She shook slightly, looking at her shuffling feet, her hands in her back pockets. Tony gave her a few warm pats on the shoulder, and she looked at him with her big eyes.

She was almost as tall as him now, almost a teenager. Her blonde hair grew darker now that she’d stop letting her mother put that citrus crap in her hair. She was

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blooming, and Tony wasn't too fond of seeing his daughter develop and knowing boys watched her liked he had watched girls develop.

“He's not taking you, right?”

“No, Pumpkin. Just a misunderstanding, I'm sure.” Tony gave her another pat and walked past her to the front door, which hung only slightly ajar. Roni tucked herself beside him in the doorway as he opened it, and he was glad she was there.

The officer, an average looking man younger than Tony, smiled down at Roni before explaining that he was there for a domestic abuse call. Gin hid over at her friend, Sue's, pretending to cower from his abuse. Even though it had been Gin who had hit him. She'd come at him with the cordless phone, for canceling their joint credit cards and leaving her to rely on her business cards. Tony had held her back, first trying to surround her with his arms, but he had to grip her by the biceps as she struggled. No doubt he left bruises on her.

Roni's hand trembled as she wrapped it around his forearm.

“I didn't hit her.”

The officer gave a small nod, flipping through the pages of his notebook. “The pictures she provided us with don't match the normal signs of spousal abuse. They appear to be marks of restraint. But you understand, it's my job to check in on you either way.”

Tony nodded almost absent-mindedly. Pictures. She'd really been gunning for him this time. “Are there any charges?”

The officer shook his head. “Not unless she decides to press, but if you want to make a statement for the record now, I'll take it.”

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“No.” Tony reached down and squeezed Roni’s hand. The way her gaze darted around the floor and over the cop’s boots told Tony that Gin had convinced Roni to take the pictures for her. This was just a power play. He’d deal with it when he had to. “I didn’t hit her. No need to say anything more.”

And, he didn’t.

The Meat of the Batter

My family's main source of communication is steeped in storytelling. Stories become us; our days, our past, our future, our reasons for this or that or the reasons for the way we behave. Our stories create us and allow us to create ourselves.

My stories are who I am. I have all kinds of stories: how my mother's tight control over me made me rebel; how my connection with my father came late but strong; how my brother and I bind together through common experiences; how the day of my parents' divorce was one of the happiest days of my life; how I went through friend after friend after friend in my life, but still have friendships that have lasted upwards to twenty-six years; how I met the man of my dreams online (while he was deployed to Afghanistan).⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Insert stigmas about dating online here.

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Poppy (Dad)

My dad and I sat on the beige and brown striped couch in the family room that squatted perpendicular to the big box TV. My dad sat in the closest corner, and I can remember laying my head on his large round stomach to watch TV as a little girl. It sounds like a cute memory, but I remember how I put a pillow next to his butt because of his really raunchy farts.

I always describe my father the same way. As a short, fat, Italian man, who looks like the godfather, he stands a few inches shorter than I am at about five-three, although he claims an additional inch. Poppy wears those big square-rimmed glasses and the t-shirts with a pocket in the front where he carries his phone. With a loud voice and a mean sense of humor, he's still my big teddy bear. I have only seen my dad once without his mustache⁹¹ and never since. Most importantly my father can tell a story—he's a natural—and his stories are what allowed me to get to know him at fifteen-years-old.

We sat together in the old McDonald's—the one I worked for as a the only grill girl a year later with my high school friends, and one that was torn down two years after that to make a church parking lot. Many times I contemplated stealing Ronald McDonald's shoe many times from the construction site for the memories that shoe stood for.

The mauve backed seat squeaked underneath him as he moved in his chair. I cut eggs—a single, congealed, square mass—from my Big Breakfast and curled my feet under me in the booth side by the east door.

⁹¹ Like Mario's, stereotypical Italian.

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I truly got to know my father while we ate at the McDonald's every Saturday and Sunday before he dropped me off to work at Wegman's Grocery. It's not as though I didn't know my father. I spent fifteen years of my life with him. I shared several food firsts with him, and I got what my husband calls my "bad taste buds" from him because we will both eat damn near anything put in front of us.

Poppy and I share food whenever I return to New York today. The moment I step off the train or out of the car, we place an order at Dominic's, a family-owned Italian restaurant at which I once worked, and we order the same dish—Chicken Riggies, native to central New York with its sweet tomato and spicy pepper and cream sauce, Italian bread with real butter, and salad. Typically, he will treat me to an authentic chocolate covered cannoli. The last time I visited home, we dined there twice.

Our ritualistic moments center around food—Wegman's subs, thick, fourteen-inch bread stacked with meat and veggies for under eight dollars; my Nonna's for Peeties, or Italian fried dough, that my Aunt Miki taught me how to make on my own; or our daily trip to Dunkin' Donuts to share coffee and breakfast whether it be in the morning or late afternoon.

My mother created an image of my Poppy in my head, one of a brash, old, angry man who wanted nothing but what he could have for himself, neglecting what attracted her to him.

Poppy's funniest story began with: "...Stretch was big enough to put Lurch from *The Addams Family* to shame, but he had the IQ of an ice cube—melting."

Stories about Stretch were the first true introduction to my real father and quickly became my favorites, so much so that I can repeat most of them from memory. My

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Poppy, my Nonna, and I shared this in common—the ability to tell a story, although theirs were oral, a withering form of communication, and I tell a story better when I have a chance to revise.

Poppy told me about girls, about the gobs and gobs of girls he slept with before he came back to Syracuse from his naval duties. How skilled my father was at getting into a woman's panties, which continues to make me laugh and sad simultaneously because most of his best memories occurred before the seventies were well underway—before he married my mother.

He laughed his booming, Italian laugh when he told me his stories in the McDonald's dining room.⁹² I laughed with him. I always laugh because he knows how to deliver a story.

His volume used to scare me, but I learned my entire New York Italian family struggles with volume control. But Poppy had his quiet moments; those moments when he proved that he wasn't the man he showed to everyone else—the tough guy, the instigator, the man that no one could rattle.⁹³

One morning as we waited in the Wegman's parking lot before my shift, his hands gripped the steering wheel, and that uncomfortable tension filled the truck's cab—the kind where you know that what happens next will change you.

And I couldn't look at him.

“Do you like girls?” he asked me.

⁹² Like the one about Green Dodge, one of Stretch's girlfriends, or the one about the dock's preacher.

⁹³ Although his strength still baffles me. I've never known anyone with his kind of strength, except maybe my husband.

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Already that statement made this a defining moment in our newly forming relationship as father and daughter. Poppy preached to me for years, countless times, about homosexuality: how gays were sick and should be treated as such; they were no different than a man with cancer; they couldn't help themselves, but I should never be gay.

The tension crackled along my arm hair.

"I won't love you any less if you do," he told me.

Something cracked, for a moment, I saw the man my father really was—someone I don't believe many others have ever had the pleasure of meeting.

And I told him the truth—the beginning of a new trend in my life for those adolescent years.

Chicken Riggies

Ingredients:

1 (16 oz) package rigatoni pasta
3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
6 skinless chicken breast halves
salt & pepper
1 onion, diced
3 cloves of garlic, minced
3 roasted red peppers, drained and chopped
2 hot cherry peppers, seeded and minced
1 (28 oz) can crushed tomatoes
1/2 cup heavy cream
1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Directions:

Cook pasta until al dente according to package directions. Drain but keep warm.

Heat olive oil in large skillet over Med heat.

Season chicken with salt & pepper. Cook until golden brown, make sure it is cooked thoroughly. Remove chicken, chop, and keep warm.

Stir in onion and garlic. Cook until the onion softens.

Add roasted red peppers, hot cherry peppers, and crushed tomatoes. Bring to a simmer.

Stir in heavy cream and cooked chicken. Simmer for a few minutes.

Stir in pasta and sprinkle with Parmesan cheese.

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Mom

My mom just finished mopping, so the four bulky tan kitchen chairs sat stacked in the small entryway to the family room like a fort. The entryway is made of a half-wall and wide enough gap that two chairs fit side by side. My four-year-old self leaned over a chair to peek around the wall at my mom. I told her that I wanted to go upstairs, which meant that I would need to walk across the still wet floor. She told me no, and I started crying.

My mom stood at the kitchen sink rinsing out the mop. She whirled the top half of her body and gave me *the look* and told me to stop crying or she would give me something to cry about. I shrank down against the half wall so that my mother couldn't see me and cried silently.

The look, or at least my mother's, used too often on me, so much so that the effect reversed itself. Once, when I got caught stealing at the age of twelve, my mother came to pick me up in the Price Chopper's security office. They sat me down at the end of a table with my mother at the other, and she sent me her *look*, half-closed eyes, lines drawn down her forehead and around her mouth, her permed bangs falling across her eyebrows to darken one eye and make her appear angrier in my memory.

I covered my mouth and nose with my hands, eyes wet with unshed tears; I even shook. But I didn't cry. I didn't even feel upset or scared. I masked my laughter at the control that had begun to slip from my mother. I don't remember what the managers said or the security guard—something about keeping me under control and not involving the police since I only stole a pair of individually wrapped dill pickles and a handful of cherry Fruit Rollups. Never mind that the previous week I stole over a thousand dollars in

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teen *Bop* magazines, sports drinks and boxes of chocolate, plastic rings, bracelets, hair dye, Backstreet Boy posters and T-shirts, and a bright pink tiara.⁹⁴

After she ushered me back to the wood-paneled van, I tipped away from her, leaning against the arm of the door as my best friend, Rosie, slipped into the seat behind me. The energy from my mother felt like an engulfing flame of fury, spreading through the van with seeping cold.

Her backhand followed in three quick strikes across my arm. I wished she waited until we dropped Rosie off at home for the show to follow, but she merely smacked my arm and told me how I embarrassed her before silence stole the air in the car.

Making my mother out to be this enraged enforcer isn't quite the whole truth, even if most of my childhood memories are of her disciplining my brother or me. What else could she do when Poppy worked ten to twelve hours a day? I suppose the two of us didn't exactly make it easy on her.⁹⁵

Given my mother's childhood as the middle child, highly disciplined and unwanted, my mother surpassed other mothers⁹⁶, especially her own. Whereas my grandmother gushes with pride of my accomplishments, she similarly told my mother that if abortions had been legal, my mother wouldn't be here. Whereas my grandmother wouldn't loan my mother the money she needed to survive her first years of marriage, my

⁹⁴ I became addicted to the thrill of stealing that even after my six-month home detention, I couldn't keep myself from stealing again for years afterwards.

⁹⁵ For all of her discipline, my mother consistently defends my behavior, even when I am blatantly in the wrong, and reinforces the idea that I am her good girl, her angel.

⁹⁶ Like my friend Donna's mother, who stole her identity and ruined her credit before she turned sixteen; who left her and her younger brother alone in an apartment for months to play with her coke addicted boyfriend—so much so that I brought them food and did their laundry; who has her daughter so dependent on her that Donna perpetually ruins her life for her mother.

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mother lent me \$50,000 to buy my first home. Whereas my grandmother beat my mother with her hands, her feet, and an iron, my mother hit me the once and pushed me into a door—and the door handle—once, during the time when her life seemed to fall apart around her.

My mother and I have our own rituals when I come home. Typically, this surrounds food as well.⁹⁷ I love to bake with my mother, which started in that beige kitchen with boxed brownies and pancakes and French toast—a great source of argument and confusion for my husband and I, since my mother taught me to use milk, cinnamon, and sugar with the egg mixture rather than just egg.

I can remember kneeling on the wicker chairs against the hacked-up wood-paneling under the kitchen peninsula—from the chair of course—and watched her drop peanut butter cookies with Hershey kisses, roll up rum balls in her greased hands, cut sugar cookies from the wax paper spread over the counter, before she set me to mixing colors into the sugary paste I would later frost the cookies with.

My favorites, by far, I don't even have a name for—I call them chocolate dandies and I'm not sure why because I know that is not their real name—essentially, they are a mixture of Chinese noodles covered in melted chocolate—crunchy, salty, sweet, and silky—the perfect mixture of cookie.

Now, I get to visit with her in the largely reconstructed kitchen of the house she shares with my step dad, Dan. Only now, she typically sits on the other side of her blue kitchen peninsula as I grate zucchini, sift flour, and grease pans for zucchini bread.

Now, I kick Dan out of the kitchen to chop and slice and season chicken and

⁹⁷ Like that was a leap

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vegetables⁹⁸ and cook rice or pasta for dinner, chop and dress salads for lunch, and brew a real, caffeinated coffee for breakfast—I really have no idea how my mom can stomach the half decaf crap that those two drink.

⁹⁸ Most times, with my mother's help of course.

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Jeff (Brother)

At eight and five, my brother and I used to play by making commercials in the family room. Both of us would grab random items from around the house—Windex, Comet, a cassette tape, Poppy’s tools—set them up on a light wooden TV tray, put our parents’ enormous gray video camera that only took VHS tapes on a tripod and tried to sell each item to our make-believe audience. We took turns and got along for one of those few and far between times in our childhood.

If my father looks like the godfather, then my brother looks like an Italian hit man-slash-bodyguard with his six-foot-tall, stocky build, but he hides that same gentle demeanor that our father does, although not to the same extent. My grandmother calls him chocolate eyes because they were black at birth, and even now you can barely make out his pupil. He shaves his head either because of his receding widow’s peaks or an accumulation of gray hair; it may be both. And, for the first time in twenty-six years, my brother grew substantial facial hair as a goatee.

A few years ago, I visited home and spent time at the house I grew up in. My brother recently purchased it from our father, although Poppy still lives there to help him fix up the twenty-two year old house. During Columbus Day weekend, I sat with my had-almost-been-future-sister-in-law for several hours and talked—mostly about my brother. It startled to hear her say talk about how tremulous his childhood turned out.

Growing up, I believed that my brother’s strength made him more immune to the events that made up my childhood.⁹⁹ Jeff witnessed my mother attacking my father with the cordless phone, while I hid upstairs, where my mother came running to me crying and

⁹⁹ A very strange assumption of mine, I know, that my brother’s childhood would differ so much from mine, but I honestly believed it so for a very long time.

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asking for me to take pictures of the bruises on her arms. My brother told me that Poppy did not beat our mother but the other way around, and that the bruises rose from him holding her back.

Even though my brother and I are not particularly close, probably due to the overabundance of emotional turmoil in our house on a daily basis or my choice to sink within myself rather than participate or even flee. But my brother and I did share the calm giddiness of sharing Christmas Eves together, lying on either side of our parents' bed where we giggled and had farting contests until our mom yelled up at us to settle down. We shared the intense interest in trying to catch Santa Claus and a healthy competition for Easter eggs hunts.

However, typically when Jeff and I played together as children, our ideas of fun and technique drastically differed. I watch him now with his four-year-old daughter, Bella, and they play with their Micro Machines in the same way—lining them up in neat lines, taking one out at a time to zoom the miniature cars around the floor or up my brother's face as Bella enjoys doing before the cars return to their spots in line. My brother always played with his cars in this way, and when I played with him on the brown carpet of the living room, he would give me the cars he didn't like and tell me to line them up. But we never crashed them, or raced them, or drove them over anything fun. His car game turned into a car show, a slow procession that sent me looking somewhere else for entertainment within the first half-hour.

His mundane car game began the process of creating distanced siblings. His deep hatred for my button-mashing skills contributed to this. After forty rounds of *Mortal Kombat*, pushing every random buttons and button combinations would win me a single

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round and piss my brother off to no end, which resulted in him restarting the game.

Organized and precise, my brother didn't seem to understand my idea of fun—or that if I had no idea how to play, I would smash my way through it.

Too bad that I didn't learn from him as a child because the skills to stay organized, clean, and patiently learn how things work would have better prepared me for my marriage.

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Jason (Husband)

I met and tackled my husband right into the side of his Jeep a mere two weeks after he came home from Afghanistan for the second time. We had our first date in the SUNY Plattsburgh organic dining hall. We sat at the speckled blue and black lunch tables with my two friends Pork and Meurlla. He easily partook in man-banter with them both.

I stood and rounded the table to get a refill of chocolate milk, purposefully circling around the back of him. My hand found his short shorn hair, and he turned to look up at me with his large eyes popping wide. Gentle beats of my heart tattered against my ribs and invaded my lungs as my steps broke the contact.

Although we talked for months, I couldn't have prepared for the immediate physical reaction we had with one another.

Jason stayed in my dorm room with me for the next five days before coming home to meet my parents and staying at my mom's house with me throughout spring break. We were inseparable,¹⁰⁰ so much so that I missed more than a handful of my classes to stay wrapped in his extra-long arms, legs intertwined as we kissed and pushed against each other, and I couldn't sleep for a week after he went back to work at Fort Drum.¹⁰¹

In fact, we spent most of our time tangled together in some way, exploring each other, teasing each other, drunk with the reality we both imagined for those five months the Army stationed him in Afghanistan when we could only communicate through

¹⁰⁰ He often draped himself over me as I read for class, his book propped beside mine, and his breath invaded my hair.

¹⁰¹ Literally, four hours of sleep in a week. I'd begun to hallucinate and lash out before the psychiatrist gave me Ambien.

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MySpace's private messaging, and even the month after he came back to the States when we were able to talk over the phone.

A heavy vibration would fill my chest with the pregnant idea of love when my phone rang—his name in the ID.¹⁰² I ran off like a giddy girl to talk to him for however long he'd been able to.¹⁰³

After a week together, sexual and romantic tension coiled around us so tightly that my desire to wait—to prove something about my change in sexuality, I suppose—vanished. I struggled on weekends to balance my desire for him and my responsibilities at school.

The balance I found in my studies was hard earned, rectifying the year I failed out of college, the number of men I slept with, and the amount of marijuana I smoked.¹⁰⁴ The two years at Plattsburgh State derailed my former life before it forced me to build a new track. Rebuilding carried a tremendous weight because I could not change everything about myself at once, as I wanted to.

But in my newly concocted life, I found myself reverting into my old self in a way, sexually experimenting with Jason rather than with a multitude of men—for example, balancing together on a yoga ball, pleasing him and myself on the drive

¹⁰² Our song became “I Knew I Loved You Before I Met You” by Savage Garden, the first song we ever danced to.

¹⁰³ Once, I even went so far as to answer the phone while I'd been playing with myself, and let him know so, something I'd never done with anyone before.

¹⁰⁴ More about this later.

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between Albany and Plattsburgh on I-87, incorporating paddles and plugs and toys and food, and stroking him in the theater during an R-rated movie.¹⁰⁵

This doesn't happen as often as it used to. At times, his crazy gets in the way—his constant criticism of how the house was ran, how much work I have to do, what I cook for him, what he waits to see if I take care of. I can't say that mine doesn't get in the way either, although I'm not seriously crazy, just hormonal, but sometimes, the pressure from his is more than enough to demolish any intimate kind of moods that linger in our house.

Although after six years, we still take trips to the Christie's Toy Box, an exotic novelties store, to find ways to experiment, to buy new toys, to find ways to ease into new forms of play. And I still maintain that untainted joy when I see him because I know we'd do anything to make each other happy.

Love takes a certain kind of crazy.

¹⁰⁵ And of course the one time when I had accidentally posted a picture of his cock pressed against a steamy shower door—that I'd taken on our honeymoon in Scotland—on Facebook with the rest of our vacation pictures.

Epilogue

My husband calls me a push over and not just in passing, but as a daily reminder that I am not a take charge, bulldozer kind of person like he is. What tickles me silly is that compared to the former me, I wouldn't label myself as a push over any longer.

Granted, I know my battles, and I am a little more understanding at times, but I haven't left my life rotting in the garbage like I could have, like I've seen many others do. Instead, I gathered up all the ingredients I managed to get a handle on, and I set in to create a new five-course meal—a balance of old tastes and new preferences and a twist of experience.

I've barely passed the appetizers, but the meal so far looks like a rather juicy blend of Italian, Irish, and Southern flavors tasted and sampled, kept warm for ample opportunities to break bread and sip wine with new guests, and before the end, dessert will be an amalgamation of refined flavors—a soufflé—with lots and lots of chocolate to dunk and dip and smear.

Fears still remain that I'll never get to sample my soufflé, or even get the chance to make it, or worse, I get to eat the whole thing by myself so that it leaves a badly overpowering taste on my palate.

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I think I've found a way to keep that from happening, but the process seems like a long one, a hard one, that requires my sifting more thoroughly through the compost of my past and digging up those usable parts of me that I let go to waste—with all the probability that I will have to test and taste everything I threw in there again and again.

After all, I can't flavor my soufflé if I don't have my proper base or the right texture for the lift.

Chocolate Soufflé

Ingredients:

6 oz finely chopped semisweet chocolate
4 tbsp butter
1 tsp vanilla extract (the purer the better)
3 large egg yolks
3 tbsp warm water
1/2 c sugar, plus 2 tbsp
1 shimmy salt
8 large egg whites, room temperature
1/2 tsp lemon juice

Directions:

Grease 6 (6oz) ramekins with butter, then coat with sugar. Place in freezer until ready to be filled. (This can be done a day in advance).

Set oven rack in lower third of the oven and preheat to 400 F.

Put chocolate and butter in a medium heatproof bowl (I use glass). Bring a saucepan filled with water to a very slow simmer. Set bowl over water without touching. Stir chocolate occasionally until completely melted and smooth. Remove from heat and stir in the vanilla. Set aside.

Combine egg yolks and warm water in a bowl and beat until frothy. Gradually add 2 tablespoons sugar and salt and continue beating until light and thick, which will create ribbons, a few minutes. Fold the yolks into the chocolate mixture.

Remove ramekins from the freezer.

Put egg whites in a large bowl, add lemon juice. Whisk until whites on medium speed until frothy. Add 1/2 cup sugar and whisk on high until they create stiff but not dry peaks.

Working quickly, gently fold a third of the egg whites into the chocolate to lighten the mixture. Fold in the remaining whites until blended.

Ladle the soufflé mixture into the ramekins and place on a baking sheet. Level off surface using a straight edge.

Immediately bake until the soufflé rises. The tops should be slightly brown and crusty. About 15-20 minutes.

Remove from oven and dust with confectioners' sugar if desired. Serve immediately.

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