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**I Dream of Major Nelson**

A THESIS

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By

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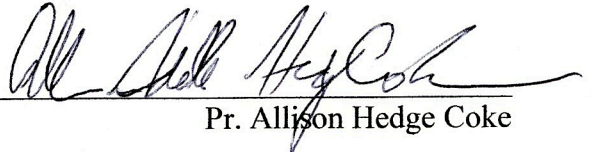
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**I Dream of Major Nelson**

A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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TITLE: I Dream of Major Nelson

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Memories are snapshots in a person's mind. Those snapshots, with time and creativity, become stories. This collection of nonfiction pieces represents the search that began in childhood and continues to this day.

One woman's search, mixed with television and pop culture, led to the memories that became these stories. These pieces address the theme of searching for perfection, happiness, and love. The author's ideas of contentment, based early in her life on television romance, led her in many directions, ending in marriage to a military man.

Readers will see the soldier theme, the containment theme, and the search theme in this collection. The pieces are ordered in a way that connects theme and ideas. They should be read as independent pieces, but together in the collection, they make a whole. Like all good stories, they give the reader a glance into another's life, yet leave room for

a relatable experience between the author and the reader. These specific stories demonstrate the universal search for love. The question of whether the author has led a successful search is answered in this collection.

*I Dream of Major Nelson*

# Fire

The first real memory I have of my parents and me together is when I was severely burned. It was autumn, with crunchy dun brown leaves strewn across our yard. We were all working in the back, my father pulling and moving large wood pieces to his stack of firewood, my mother raking the tremendous spore-covered leaves into piles, and I carrying small twigs across the lawn.

I don't know whether I was meant to be taking the twigs and sticks to the fire, whether that was a job I had been given, or whether I was merely playing outdoors while my parents worked in the yard. I remember a clogged feeling inside my head, and a tinny buzzing in my ears. Once again I had developed a severe ear infection, something that would plague me for many years even after I was burned. The ground was wobbly under my five-year-old feet. I was unstable, dizzy and somewhat confused. I don't recall



whether I kneeled to drop the twigs into the coals of the fire, or whether I misjudged the distance from myself to the coals.

I simply bent down on one knee to put the sticks down, and I felt the cold burn of the coals on my right knee. I could not get up from the fire, but screamed for my mother. She ran to me immediately and pulled me from the coals and ashes. She then began furiously slapping the clinging white red coals from my small leg.

By this time my father had arrived at the scene and no doubt slung more of the burning briquettes from my knee and leg. In one movement, my mother had me in her arms and ran to the house, into the small bathroom, and sat me on the edge of the bathtub. She turned the faucet on and cold water blasted into the tub as she scooped the water over my leg with the little Tupperware basket she used to rinse my hair when I was taking a bubble bath. She poured the cold water onto my fire-melted leg and tears ran from my eyes. She was simply panicked and trying to think of a plan.

I did not know then, nor did I know for many years later, that we were so poor that our family did not have any type of health insurance. As my father continued to work in the backyard, I am sure my pitiful mother had half-formed ideas racing through her head. A trip to the emergency room would not be possible if she asked my father. She picked me up once my leg was thoroughly rid of the coals and black marks and carried my little limp crying body, with flesh melted and hanging from my limb, to her bed. She did the only thing she could think of to do; she called her friend Donna Fay.

Donna Fay was my mother's best friend for years. He weighed about eighty pounds and smoked one Virginia Slim after the other. Her hair was salt and pepper gray and twice as big as her head. Donna Fay made quick work of the situation and told my

mom that she would be there in mere minutes to drive us to the emergency room. As we waited for Donna Fay's big white car to pull up and get us, my mother cradled me and put a cool washrag on my face. I think by this time I had stopped crying and was most likely in a child's state of shock. When Donna Fay honked, my mother scooped me up and carried me to the waiting car. My father was still working in the backyard. Did my dad worry about me, wonder who was taking me away? Was he zoning out or carrying on?

For months after my fall into the fire, my mother had to rub off the new skin that grew on my knee and down the side of my leg. The doctor told her that to prevent ugly scarring, we would have to soak my leg in warm soapy water, and when the new skin turned white and moist, to wipe it from my little leg with warm water and peroxide. I was also told to either keep my knee straight or bent, but only one. If I changed my knee's position at any time when the skin was dry and tight, it would rip open and bleed. For a five-year-old, this was an undoable proposition. I bled many days, several times a day. I even fell once at school while my class was walking down an asphalt road – going on some kindergarten excursion – and ripped my almost healed new skin completely from my knee.

The evenings in the bathtub, with my mother hunkered down over me, rubbing the raw white flesh off of my knee, were excruciating and I still remember how I loathed them. I also remember the nurse who would periodically change my bandages. She had long, fake nails and they were like fingers of ice stabbing into my new, tender pink flesh. I cried as soon as she walked into the small examining room. I wish my mother had

complained, but since I am sure we were there on credit and at the doctor's mercy, my mom probably felt she had no room to say anything.

I think back to that day of the fire, and those months that followed, and I remember ice, cold. Freezing pain. The mystery that to be burned is to be besieged by iciness still fascinates me. I never felt the burn, just the extreme coldness of fire that only one who has been badly burned truly experiences.

Now, at forty, I have two small scars on the lower inside of my right knee. No one who did not know the scars were there would be able to spot them. The icy memory of the pain and my father's absence from any of the memories of healing are all I really have left.

About his absence, I still wonder.

# Big Creek

“Turbo!” I screamed. Upon hearing our special word, my dad pushed the pad of his thumb harder into the gas on our family’s Honda 250 CC three-wheeler. The three of us, me seated on the gas tank, my father driving, and my mom sitting behind him, flew down the dirt road. I giggled until I lost my breath. “Turbo!” If during any number of our turbo sessions, I ever spotted a large spider web in the road, I would yell, “Stop!” Then, my father let off the gas and I would miss plowing head first through the gauzy net awaiting interlopers such as us. More than once, I did not see the web in time, and had a screaming fit as I tried to rid myself of the sticky mess and hope that no scary spider was now living in my hair.

Big Creek consisted of hundreds, if not thousands, of acres owned by a paper company. It was The Woods. Just minutes from Wilburn, Arkansas. There were logging

dirt trails that we called roads, weaving and interlocking the acreage into a town that more than a few country people knew. A gritty subculture developed in those wooded and dusty places. Three wheelers and four wheelers rode trails, up embankments, most with coolers attached to the backs and riders with beer in hand. Swimmers swam in the creek, flinging themselves from the rope swings into the fish-packed waters of Big Creek. Horseshoes pinged at campsites set up by weekend interloper families. Hot dogs grilled and smoked over fires that were tenderly put out afterward.

Big Creek is where I grew up, Saturdays and Sundays, from cool, green March and rainy April though the hot sticky days of July and August each year, until I no longer wanted to hang out with my parents and their friends anymore. Big Creek is where I later learned to drink beer while sitting on the back of a tailgate, watching a tire someone had set on fire blaze into the night, smoking cigarettes and kissing boys under the watchful eyes of the pine trees and spiders. I owe many laughs and horseshoe wins to that dreamy place, many boyfriends and hangovers, too.

My dad and I went three-wheeling one day. It was late summer and the creek was sluggishly running, a drought taking most of its water to thin air. The trails and roads were dirt, hard packed and tough, like concrete. We rode off to look for a new place, somewhere we had not been before. We came across an old trail, much older than the logging trails my dad knew so well already. This forest trail led us up to what could barely be consider a path, and here we saw the devastation of the drought for ourselves. Little puddles that had likely once been a small out stream of the creek intermittently dotted the path. In each puddle, reverse islands surrounded by dirt and dryness, lay a

clump of frog eggs. Heartbroken, I knew even at this early age of eight that the eggs wouldn't hatch. I did not know the gestational period for frog babies, layered up in their jellied houses, but I knew the race against the evaporation of the puddle would be lost. As we rode, we passed puddle after puddle, each small and barely over two inches deep, with a cluster of frog young just waiting to die. Big Creek, the place I considered my own, belonged to them, and yet the land and the elements conspired against its own occupants now.

Sometimes, ignorance of law and our participation, simply ourselves, waded in on those creatures whose home we borrowed.

On another trek, my father and me on a rainy spring afternoon that smelled of freshness and water, we came across a beaver dam. We thought we would be good Big Creek citizens, so we pulled the wet bramble and grass and wood out of the little bystream and helped the water run swiftly again, racing on to meet its molecular brothers and sisters. Now I think to myself, how many hours the beavers worked on that dam. More than I could probably imagine, their tiny mouths and paws and brains working, working, working to set up a home. Our misunderstanding of that ecosystem, all brought about with the best of intentions, caused so much damage to that little beaver family.

I did not realize this until years later. The broken dam and the frog eggs. I still hurt for those creatures and their pain. Nature, in all of its majesty and beauty, its awe-inspiring vastness and universal pull, is still a fickle bitch. The gossamer tendrils that hold life are strong yet very seldom tender. The Roman and Greek gods have been called petty and selfish. The Christian God I believe in has been said to be vengeful and wrathful. Nature is the same. Yet, that creek, those trails, that water, those spiders, those

snakes, those frogs, that land. They call to me even now, and I am guilty of love and ignorance.

As an adult, I long within the trails and paths of my soul to return home. Not just to the bygone days of youth or childhood, but to the only place I know, I have been ever, that is real. The real nature, the real world. My woods.

The time of riding on Big Creek is over. No one is allowed on the land without a permit, and I should know. I received a two hundred and forty dollar fine a few years ago for just this.

“I’ve always ridden here,” I told the park ranger.

“Well, no one does without a permit, Miss. The sign at the entrance even says to see the brochure for rules.”

“Where are the brochures?”

“Back in the Forester Office.”

“So, I can’t get a brochure out here. I drive up here and if I see the small print on the sign I am supposed to . . .”

“That’s enough of your smart mouth. If you say another word, I am hauling your ass to jail. Shut up.” His shirt buttons grasped for their buttonholes, showing his white undershirt beneath the straining, gaping fabric.

I shut my mouth. I looked at my father, the man who would actually pay the ticket. He, too, did not know the rules had changed.

Later as we packed up to drive home, dad told me, “You can’t mess with a park ranger. They have federal jurisdiction. They’re worse than the law. That guy was an asshole, though. Power mad and pushing you around. You did the right thing.”

About a year later, when I was sitting on my couch reading, the phone rang. Mom said, "Dad has some good news for you. Hold on." I could hear my mom handing the receiver of their rotary phone over to my dad.

"Hey, Amygirl. Remember that sonofabitch who gave you that ticket at Big Creek? He's dead. He had his head cut off by a helicopter blade. I laughed when I heard about it. He got what he deserved. Just thought you'd want to know."

True enough, this park ranger, whom a lot of people disliked, did in fact die by helicopter blade. I did not take the pleasure from it my father did. He stills tells the story every once in a while. I must admit, my dad's obvious glee freaks me out a little.

It's true, what they say. The one thing about nature, if you leave her alone, she will balance her equations.



## Wolves on the Wall

Three-year-old me sat on my dad's lap in the recliner. He had a dip of Skoal in his mouth, a cut-down Dr. Pepper can on the table next to the chair. His spit cup, we called it. The dried spit hung like old wallpaper down its insides, a tan and brown liner covering the aluminum. Handy, and always by his side. We sat in the chair every night and watched TV. Channels 2, 4, 7, and 11. My job was to turn the dial at any given time prompted by my dad. I considered it pure bliss to turn the channels in a speedy motion; the noise of fast dial movement tickled me something fierce, but always brought out a protest from my dad. I knew not to do it, but every once in a while, you just have to let the small powers of temptation bring you joy.

"Dad, I need to go to the bathroom." I always tried to go during sitcom commercials, but three-year-old bladders aren't the most commandable of organs, and if

a kid has to go, she has to go. Always, and I mean always, he would gently lift me off of his warm lap and follow me to the one small bathroom in our home. He would see that I was plopped on the toilet, then kindly go stand outside the door, waiting on me. He had to, you see, because of the wolves.

The three wolves that lived on the bathroom wall terrified me. The plastic wall covering, some Seventy's garish idea of a decorative bathroom wall, was light green with rusted gold abstract designs on it. The two smaller wolves hung down and flanked the biggest wolf on either side. Papa wolf, he sat atop a rock in the middle of the wall, face turned toward the door, but directly in my sightline as my tiny bottom rested on the toilet seat. I could not go to the restroom by myself at night. The wolves terrified me. I would try to count my pee, onetwothreefour — If I could pee by the count of sixteen, the wolves might leave me alone.

My father was my soldier, my savior. He kept terror at bay.

We moved to the house on Pinewood Street when I was three, and I became aware of the wolves on my first trip to the bathroom. This would not work, my brain said. The horror I experienced in the bathroom could not be tolerated. My dad and I came up with this plan, I am sure more mine than his, and it became one of our rituals. As I neared five years of age, he began to warn me. "I'll do this until you're five, Amygirl, then you're on your own."

You cannot believe the fear those words rocked down into my soul. It was like a pronounced death sentence: You, insert name here, will have until you are \_\_\_\_\_ years old, and then we will eliminate you. So, with each quick pee or those horrible long poops that must be taken, I knew my days were numbered. The wolves, looking sideways at the

door, were patient. They could wait. They knew time was of no consequence, because I would reach five, and then they would have me.

I sat on that cold, white rock of a toilet and looked at them. They paid me no attention, but menaced me nonetheless. Little girls were what they searched for; they could wait on us indefinitely. All they had to do was sit on those rocks, on that plastic wall. They had all the time in the world.

I had until I was five.

Like lots of good Daddies in the world, mine caved in to my scared little face and my pleas of an extension. As my fifth birthday approached, I couldn't take it anymore. "You have to keep coming with me to the bathroom!" I wailed this at my dad as tears trickled down my extra white cheeks. And he did. It was a few more years until I was ready to face those wolves without my sentinel patiently standing guard outside the door, in the cramped hallway, missing a few minutes of whatever show we were watching at the time.

Aside from his bathroom duty for me, we had another nighttime ritual. I would proclaim from my seat high above the rest of the house (his lap) that I was hungry. "Ok, Amygirl. Let's go get a snack." He would hoist me up on his shoulders, and we would walk in to the kitchen. "Where to look first?" He would smile when he said this.

"There." I would point at the cabinet to the left of the sink.

"There's nothing in that one," was his usual reply. But, we'd go check that one out first. Paper plates and peanut butter lived in the cabinet, with some cooking oil and other spices. Never, never, did I want anything from that cabinet, yet it was the first one

we went to each and every night. We would then make our way to the other two cabinets – our house was extremely small, and there weren't many places for goodies to hide – and I would select some popcorn or some chicken soup. He would patiently make my snack for me, and then we would head back to our seats in the living room, me primed and ready to change the channel at the first motion from my dad.

I don't remember my mom at all during those years. She was surely there. Lying on the couch or sitting in the other chair in the same living room. I guess she might have asked me to change the channel now and then. I never remember asking her to go to the bathroom with me or to get me a snack. It's odd. Common sense tells me that on many, many occasions she must have. My father was gone all week, and didn't return until Friday evenings. My terror surely brought her to the bathroom door many nights. My memories of my faithful bathroom soldier and snack getter, those are only of my dad — my favorite person in the world. The person who would do anything in the world for me.

Later, as I got older, our relationship would change. My personality big, and my opinions voiced without tact. His daily cussings would replace our nighttime rituals. Both parts of our relationship lie in my memories now.

## Saturday Night

The fireplace burned nicely, my parents and I settled in watching television on our four-channel set. At about eight p.m., I made my declaration. “I think I can stay awake late tonight. I’m not sleepy a bit!”

“O.k., we’ll watch *Saturday Night Live* then,” Dad said.

Mom went into the kitchen and began popping popcorn. We had an old skillet that was a perfect corn popper, and I knew the treat would be wonderful. The popcorn would be small, just barely bursting from its hard shell, with melted butter poured over it. Salt would be shaken throughout, and my portion would be placed in a small metal bowl, perfect for finger-swiping the shiny, oily residue of butter/salt heaven.

The single two-liter of Dr. Pepper would be opened, the rush of escaping air mirroring my excitement of the prospect of late night giggles with my two best friends – my parents.

When the nightly local news started, an old quilt came out of the closet. Mom snapped it out and laid it on the living room floor, just next to the fireplace, and the three of us settled down to watch TV. Many nights like this, we roasted marshmallows, the Best Value big white puffy ones on whittled sticks dad would make. He always carried an old pocketknife, which came in handy on many occasions. Nothing is as good as a blackened puff of sugar, the middle gooey and hot, burning my tongue slightly as I squished its charred outer casing and let the white lava of kid food fill my mouth.

As usual, I awoke the next morning knowing I had missed *Saturday Night Live*, but neatly satisfied with the thought of warm, salty, wet popcorn and the hopes of being able to stay awake longer the next Saturday night. We'd probably roast marshmallows or eat late night Banquet Turkey TV dinners, always a special treat. Nothing can bother you on Saturday nights, when your dad is home, and you have some good television to watch.

## I Dream of Major Nelson

Little girls play out their hopes and dreams. I played pretend teacher and waitress many years before I would be either in my actual real life. I made paintings and newspapers, sold for dimes to my parents. I played bartender and pie-baker. The refrigerator box became a house, then a racecar. But my most repeated game of pretend when I was very young was the wedding.

The red brick hearth was barely a foot deep and maybe five feet long. Every Saturday after my few small chores were finished – dusting, cleaning my room, picking up my father’s shoes left in the living room floor (he still has several pairs lined up by his recliner today) – I would prepare for the wedding.

It was a ritual really. I would go to the bottom drawer of the chest in the hallway and take out the soft, smooth white pillowcase. The chest was kept in the hallway, since

our two-bedroom house left little room for such niceties. Each bedroom held a bed, a closet, and a couple of pictures on the wall. The master bedroom actually had a dresser. I selected that one special pillowcase in that hallway chest of drawers. It didn't have a match, and to me it smelled of cleanliness and purity. It smelled of snow and clouds, or what I believed they would smell like all mixed together and then poured into a cloth. This pillowcase.

I would somehow manage to miraculously tie this pillowcase around my head so that – in my mind – it resembled a veil. A wedding veil of the softest, most expensive silk or satin, whatever it was that made a wedding dress and veil. Maybe lace. The actual pillowcase was cotton, worn soft by many uses and washings. Once the beautiful veil was in place and the make-believe ensemble was luxuriously wrapped around my head, the wedding of my dreams would commence. I would play Jeannie and in these moments be happy with childhood's thoughts of weddings.

It was a play I simply put on for myself, as my dad was out at the coffee shop, where he spent most of his mornings during winter months, and my mother was ironing for the week or washing dishes. It was always the same: Major Nelson had finally decided to marry Jeannie. Sweet, funny, handsome Major Nelson was now ready to make Jeannie his bride . . . and little Amy/Jeannie would step up on that red brick hearth and walk its short length and see Major Nelson in his NASA uniform and repeat after the judge. I always knew that a judge could marry people. I knew my own parents were married in front of a judge, too.

I would eventually be married by Reverend Cotton at a Howard Johnson in Las Vegas, in 2007. To my own uniformed military man.



I was always so happy and excited to play this little wedding game – to know the extreme joy that Jeanie must feel on the day of her wedding to the man of her dreams. This play was short, lasting only a few moments. So much would have gone through my head, the walk, the music, the vows, the flowers, the cheers from the guests, the kiss. I never really fantasized about what would happen after a wedding. I don't think I knew what a honeymoon was, and I sure didn't know about sex. I also didn't think about the numerous times Jeannie saved Major Nelson, how he really never saved her. Did he even really protect her? She spent most of her time trying to make him happy, or banished to her bottle. He contained her; she saved him.

I was simply happy to be Jeannie finally getting to marry fantastic Major Nelson\*.

\*Major Nelson (played by the late actor Larry Hagman) is a prick. He makes Jeannie live in her bottle most of the time – never lets her use her powers so she always has to “work” behind his back. He continues to date less attractive women who are intellectually inferior even to him (for a NASA man, he is not the brightest rocket in the fireworks bundle). He is continually embarrassed by her, always trying to hide her, sending her off to her bottle like a father sending a bad daughter to her room. He neglects her and is always pissed at her. Then, laughingly, neurotically, he forgives her mistakes (some scheme to help him in the only way she can). His closest friend is an idiot, and they both drink a ton. Yet, he never really, truly, wants to marry her. Why buy the Jeannie when your wishes come free?

\*See also, Male Sexual Fantasy

# Teeth

Momma Rosie opened the door as I stood behind her, peeking around her large, round body. My dad stood in the doorway, which was extraordinary, since my mom always picked me up from Momma Rosie — who kept children in Heber for a few working moms. She and her daughters, Pam and Beverly, all wore their long, dull colored hair in buns atop their heads. They were Pentecostal, and wonderful.

I saw my father wounded, blood-caked with more fresh blood running down from his mouth. He held one of his white handkerchiefs to his mouth and chin. He was off work this day and was picking me up to take me home. He'd come straight from the dentist's office after having all his teeth removed. I don't remember the ride home or

even whether I asked anything about the blood, although I am sure I did. Tact has never out-willed my curiosity. I was and am a talker.

Not long after that day, one evening in the heat of summer, my family and I rode out of town, into what Southerners call the Booneys. An old trailer sat on some land, two cars in front, a dirt driveway, and a little shop out to the right of it. My mom and dad walked me into the trailer and I quickly began playing a board game with the three kids who lived there. Children are special and can make fast friends in moments, play and pretend together, and then never see each other again. My mom and dad went with the man out to the shop. We kids had so much fun playing that game, and I could tell the kids were poor, but in a peripheral way that young kids do (I was four). I did not realize at this young age that we were a poor family, also. However, I noticed that the family we were visiting was extremely poor. Now, I look back on my family life and I do see how poor we were. Lovingly, my parents kept it hidden from me, probably on a subconscious level. I don't think they made any overt moves to hide anything from me. We always had food to eat, although mostly vegetables and bread. We were poor enough that my father had his dentures made in a shop outside of a trailer in the Booneys. When you are young, you don't notice enough of these details to hit your little kid radar. So, basically, it was a poor kid hanging out and playing with some poorer kids. All I knew was that they were fun and let me play their game. What more does a four-year-old need to know about new friends?

After an hour or so, my parents came back and we left. Soon after, my father had a new set of dentures. Booneys-made and cheap. He began wearing the top plate immediately, and waited months to wear the bottoms. He told me that because he dipped,

he didn't want to wear them. By the time he was ready to wear the bottoms, his mouth had healed in such a way that the bottom plate didn't fit correctly. He just didn't use them, and to this day only uses the top dentures. He struggles with certain foods, and has to use his fingers to help with chewing some. I never even noticed until I was much older – it was just something my dad did.

Then, at sixteen, my dentist told my mom that I really did need braces. They could not afford them, but my dentist Dr. Wilson made me a retainer. He pulled six permanent teeth to help with the extreme crowding in my mouth. He said if I wore the retainer every night, it would keep my front teeth from bucking. It was a poor family's solution to an orthodontic problem.

Twenty-five-plus years after the retainer, long forgotten and lost, and my smile is an embarrassment. Because of the removal of so many teeth, my narrow palate, and the remaining teeth shifting, I have a problem. My front two teeth stick out, and the lateral incisors are pushed back. My smile stayed nice until my thirties, but little by little became worse, until now it is something I try to hide in pictures. I try the closed lip smile, or the angle of my head just right. If I am not careful, the flash will hit on my two front teeth and then it looks as if I am missing one tooth on the left.

There are some solutions to this problem, but none of them in my price range. I have decided to live with my smile, for now at least. I do notice other people's beautiful smiles, and I look at them with envy. Did they have braces? Are their teeth naturally that straight? I have bigger problems to face than this one, but my teeth bother me still. Then I think of my dad, his mouth bleeding and still smiling, his smile now. His laugh. How our faces are so similar. Both with small, narrow mouths and full lips. I try to decide whether

my smile, open and real, is diminished by my pushed-in teeth. I think of movie stars like Barbara Eden and Larry Hagman. I never once looked at their teeth and thought about anything but their beautiful smiles. Then, I think about those little friends I played with that day in the trailer, and what problems they may be dealing with now. Then I think some more.

I still want a better smile.

## Family Stories

My family, like most, has its own mythology. The stories parents tell to the young'uns over and over again until the children can tell the story as if they remembered the events themselves. I love these kinds of stories, especially the ones where I was there, but I don't hold the memory, just the memory of the story.

As a baby, believe you me, I was somewhat of a phenom. Jeannie-like, amazing. I walked by nine months and was potty trained before ten months. I threw my bottle against the wall at eight months and never touched it again. I talked well before I was one, complete sentences, not baby talk. I know these things to be true, not because I remember them, but because my parents swear to them. As advanced as I was by the time I entered kindergarten, I have no reason to doubt their stories.

I was one month to the day overdue. I am a little surprised my mom's doctor let her go this long over her due date, but it was a small town and things are done differently in places like Heber Springs, Arkansas. I like to think I was left percolating so long that I came out a genius. Born at ten pounds seven ounces, bald as a baseball, with hairy ears, I was the picture of an unattractive white baby. I want to note here that it is my opinion that white babies are the least attractive of all kinds of babies (this is strictly my opinion and not meant to offend), and I was in the bottom half of that group cute-wise as well.

I entered the world pretty darn big, but stayed the same weight for a long time. I have pictures of me when I was a baby, and I was slim (still unattractive and pale, less the hairy ears) and looked very young. Still bald, not big.

Sometimes in the Piggly Wiggly with my mom, sitting up by myself in the front of the cart, looking months old at the most, people would come up and say, "Hello. What's your name?" They would wait for my mom to answer, but she knew what was about to happen.

"My name is Amy Seymore and I live on Pinewood Drive. My parents are Delbert and Sue Seymore," and I would go on and on (something I have not grown out of, by the way. I still love to talk.)

Mom said one time I scared a lady so badly that she ran away.

My parents became used to my precocity pretty quickly and forgot that other children weren't like me. My mom thought my cousin was slow, mentally, until one day a friend told her that Missy was perfectly normal. She pointed out to mom that I was special and ahead of most babies my age. My parents, probably due to their advanced

ages when they had me, treated me as a third grown up around the house. I was using the toilet, talking, and walking all by one. I was not a baby in their eyes.

My dad tells it this way: When I was about a year-and-a-half-old, my parents made a run to the liquor store. Heber is about fifty-five minutes, at a good pace, from the nearest liquor store in Cabot. It was some Saturday afternoon and I rode along in the front seat snuggled between my parents I am sure, with no seat belt or car seat. Never had one.

Dad says that they bought some seven-ounce Miller Lites and some corn nuts and pork skins. On the way home, they pulled over on an old gravel road and drove down a ways. Once parked, the engine off to save gas, they drank and snacked. I even had a few sips of beer as well. After about an hour, Dad drove us home. About six months later, we all piled into the car and made the drive to the liquor store again. As we were driving back, Dad says I turned to him with delight and exclaimed, “When we get to that road, let’s have another party.” I loved parties, even at a young age.

My mom tells this one. I remember some of it. I can still see Jackie and me in the boat store. He is standing beside me and I am sitting on the big red and white boat. I see it like I am standing outside the glass window at Heber Springs Boating, looking in at the little girl with the pageboy haircut and the jolly man beside her.

My mom was washing her car at the carwash in town. She was in one of the stalls and before she knew it, I had disappeared. She stopped washing and started looking for me. I was nowhere to be found. Panic set in quickly. Two stalls over, the drainage grate was missing, leaving a five-by-five watery hole in the ground. Mom says she had visions of my poor, lifeless body down in the murky gray waters of the car wash. She ran to get the man who worked there and he dredged the hole. No tiny four-year-old body was



found. Desperate, she began driving up and down the street. Five blocks up the road was the boating center where our neighbor Jackie worked. He and his wife had unofficially adopted me by this time, and I spent more hours at their house than at my own. Mom sped into the parking lot and burst through the doors. She says there I was, a smile so big it was a half-moon across my face. In her extreme terror and relief, she marched over to me and spanked the shit out of me. Jackie did not like this and started to gripe at her. She tugged me up into her arms and marched us out of there. She told me she has never been so scared in her life.

On Friday nights, we had a bit of heaven. My dad was home from his week on the road, and it was the night *Dallas* came on TV. We had four channels, PBS, CBS, ABC, and NBC. My job was to change the channel if need be. At eight p.m., JR and the Ewings would beam into our home. My dad sat in his recliner with me on his lap, or sometimes I lay on the couch with my mom. At five-years of age, it was my favorite show, second was *The Bozo Show*.

President Carter once interrupted *The Bozo Show* with a special program – this was probably the Iran Hostage Crisis, so I am sure it was nationally important – just not so to me. Sadly, I hated him for years after.

I used to love watching Bozo ask little kids, “Do you walk to school or bring your lunch?” And whenever the audience clapped and cheered, I did as well. I thought that they could hear me if I could hear them. It was something to see on weekday afternoons, me loudly laughing and applauding, just thinking someone might hear my voice. I always wanted to be heard, recognized.

My family's relationship to each other was special, I know. My parents never treated me as a child, as I have said. I am sure that decisions were made without my ok (paying bills and such), but I have to admit, I was the boss. I can only imagine what I would do if I had a child like me.

I know that I was a handful and strong-willed. Even before I could walk, I was pig-headed. Mom says that I loved to play basket. Here is how it worked. She would see that I had pulled everything out of the basket in the hall closet, and then she would beseech me not to get into the damn basket. She would pick everything up off the floor and place it all back in the basket. Before she knew what happened, she would turn around and the basket's contents would be back all over the floor. I once asked her why she didn't get on to me, swat my behind, but she said, "You loved playing basket."

I know most everyone has their own stories like these, and they would agree that the remembering is fun. The telling is fun. My dad and I still talk on the phone and burst out laughing when I ask him to tell me about the liquor store run. My mom and I still talk about *Dallas*, and we are watching the new series. I have to record it for her and show her the episodes when she comes to visit. They only have thirteen channels in their cable package and don't get that station. My days of channel control still in effect.

These stories keep that part of my life, something that is just beyond my reach, close to my heart. I can imagine the fun we all had, and if I can't remember the actual activities, I can think on the stories. We were three branches of the same tree, my poor

working-class parents, my dad with a seventh-grade education, my waitress mom who made it to the eleventh grade and the little adult that I was.

My brother doesn't come in to any of these stories, as he was out of the house by the time I was three. I know his upbringing and mine were extremely different, even though we have the same parents. I do not know what his mythology is, and I should ask him someday, but I know it will be far from mine. Although, it will be his and that will make it special all on its own. In truth, he is not a real part of my life now, and our relationship is that of two acquaintances. Maybe one day our stories will merge. Maybe.

# Hooligan

I don't remember whether I put the wood chips in Crystal's hood or not. I probably did. When we came in from recess, all of us little first graders lined up single file to hang up our coats and jackets with our tiny fingers. When Crystal hung hers up, wood chips poured onto the tiled classroom floor. Mrs. Carmack, the meanest damn first grade teacher in the world, began in a huff to find out why there was a mess. Crystal then decided to tell on me.

Telling in first grade is usually known as tattling. I know because when I told the playground teacher about Justin Stover kicking me repeatedly in the shins I was told not to tattle. I think that could be translated into, "Don't bother me, kid, with your problems." When my dad saw the purple and green bruises up and down my legs, his veins popped out on his neck and I was so scared I couldn't speak. When I finally admitted that Justin

Stover was kicking me on a daily basis, dad said something I never thought I'd hear him say, "I'm going to go up to the school." Now in the early Eighties, what teachers did was their business and poor parents like mine just didn't go to the school. Mine were probably intimidated by the teachers, but I didn't know that at the time. To hear my father say he was going to the school filled my six-year-old stomach with bile and I screamed, "No!" I didn't know much about sociology at six, I sure wouldn't have known how to spell it, but I knew two things.

#1. Mrs. Carmack would not be happy if my parents went up to the school.

#2. Justin would do more than kick my legs if I told on him.

Luckily, I was able to talk my father down from that ledge, and life went back to normal. When I mentioned this story to my dad a few years back, he said that incident was the biggest mistake he ever made raising me. He regrets not going up to the school. He feels guilty, like he allowed too much to happen to me. Like most shared memories, his is slightly different from mine. He does not remember my pleading for him not to go to the school; his memory is just that he didn't have time to take off from work to go.

Then Crystal told on me. (There is always someone to ruin it for the good people.) This I find strange because if she knew I had put some wood chips in her hood, then wouldn't she have just gotten them out on the playground? This is where I do allow for the possibility that the mean little brat, Crystal, framed me. There is logic there that I suppose Mrs. Carmack had no problem overlooking.

I vehemently denied the allegations to my teacher. She was having none of it. I was proclaimed guilty. Then, she took me out in the hall and brought her paddle. Here is where it does truly get disturbing – and I have reflected on the fact that Mrs. Carmack

must have been either going through a nervous breakdown at the time or was one mean bitch – She plops me against the light blue block wall. She then goes to each of the other three first grade classrooms and knocks on their doors each in turn. She requests that all the students line up outside in the hall. They are to watch my paddling. I don't know why she did this. To dissuade other woodchip hooligans? I doubt it. I think she meant to humiliate me, a six-year-old, and she did.

First grade was a long time ago, but I still remember it with pain and cringing. After having been a teacher myself for over fourteen years, I can't believe some of the things that happened to me. I can only say that it was a different time. People weren't litigious parents; laws weren't in place. Bullying is now the topic of posters in school halls, not the work of first grade teachers.

Even more haunting in my memory are Mrs. Carmack's actions over the Thanksgiving turkey I made. When I was a child, I adored my dad. He was a truck driver and was away Monday mornings until Friday evenings most weeks of my young life. I missed him like crazy, and I was attached to him from the time he came home on Friday until the early morning hours on Monday when he had to leave again.

When Mrs. Carmack told us that we would need some fabric for a turkey, I knew I would want something of my dad's. That weekend my mom and I went through his closet looking for an old shirt of some kind. It never would have dawned on us to purchase a little fabric, money was tight and expenditures kept to a minimum. We leafed through his shirts like patrons going through art. I found an old, old one I loved. All of the shirts were old, but this one had at one time been black with grey and green paisleys on it. The black background had been worn down to a gravelly grey, the color of a gravel

road after a long rain. The paisley was muted and pastel. And the fabric was so slick that it felt like silk. Silver snap buttons completed the shirt. My mother and I cut a square from it and she put the rest up somewhere – probably to be used as rags. I don't remember what she did with it, but I doubt it was thrown away.

On Monday morning, I could not contain my glee. I pranced into class and sat in my little desk with the cloth tightly snuggled in my hand. I was smiling with a gigantic space between my two front bucked teeth. Literally, if I were to turn a quarter on its side, I could insert it in the space between those two front teeth. Mrs. Carmack, all five-feet, eight-inches of her, slim and puckered, walked by the desks and handed out copied turkeys on a sheet of paper. We were to color the turkey's head and feet and cut out the inside of the body. We would then place the sheet on our fabric and attach it with glue, so that the fabric became the color of the turkey. Ecstatic cannot describe my mood; I am surprised I did not have an anxiety attack preparing my turkey. However, when the time came for me to glue the hollow turkey on my dad's shirt, I was horrified to find out that the fabric was not large enough to fill in my entire turkey. I raised my hand in panic.

Mrs. Carmack eventually walked around to me. "What is the problem, Amy? Oh, you don't have enough. Let me see it."

She picked up my fabric and walked away. What? I couldn't understand what she was going to do with my dad's shirt. She came back and gave me some generic fabric she provided (I guess for irresponsible students who did not bring their own material or panic-stricken six year-olds with less than sufficient inches of fabric). I looked at the red checked cloth and stared up at her in astonishment? Ok, I was to use the new fabric. I might could have wrapped myself around that idea, although I seriously doubt it. I mean,

that turkey was supposed to be made out of my dad's shirt. But, the horror, the horror . . . she had not walked back with my original, too small piece of shirt I had brought from home.

"Where's my fabric?" I am not being dramatic as I tell you that the quiver in my voice was pitiful. I was on the verge of tears.

"I threw it away. Use this. The other is far too small."

Oh, I needed to explain to her and then she'd see the major error of her ways. The mistake she would take back in a heartbeat. "But, that's my dad's shirt." What more explanation could she need to understand the depth of my despair? I knew I would not be seeing my dad for five days and I wanted that turkey to give to him. I needed that turkey. I could handle that the turkey would be red checked, but I could not survive without taking his scrap of shirt home with me.

I don't know how long this debate continued, but knowing Mrs. Carmack the way I think I do, I imagine it was short-lived. I do remember I cried, not huffing loudly, but tears overflowing and rolling down my reddened cheeks while she walked away. She never did give me back the piece of my dad's shirt, but I can still see it now as clearly as I did in the first grade. I can almost touch it right this moment. I have no idea where the damn turkey is.

Mrs. Carmack is dead.



## Garbage Men

My father gives Jimmy Carter the credit, I should say the blame, for forcing him to sell his dump truck in the early Eighties. I give President Carter the blame for the only memory I have of him: interrupting the *Bozo Show* on numerous afternoons for special news bulletins about the Iran Hostage Crisis.

I think the correct term for my father's type of truck was a Tri-Axle. I just remember it as a huge, mountainous vehicle I would have to climb to get in. Hoisting myself up using an iron bar by the door just to get my little feet on the sideboard. I would climb into the cab, that manly domain of leather and oil mixed into a cologne that was my dad, and be in heaven for a while. I would play trucker; I would dial into channel 19 and "breaker breaker" my way to a conversation. I am sure in retrospect that the people on the other end of my conversations knew I was just a little silly girl, but they never let on to me. I was Patsy, Big A, Hot Mama, and all kinds of killer women truck drivers. I would

10/40 and 10/20 my way through what seemed like hours on Saturday afternoons. My dad was only home on weekends, off from work. When I was older, I would dread the coming of Friday night, knowing my dad would be there to cuss and rave about something. But, when I was little, oh the ecstasy of Fridays — my daddy coming home.

In 1981, when I was in first grade, my father sold his truck. That big, white jewel that parked in our gravel driveway on the weekends. Almost all of the truck drivers my father knew sold their trucks like he did. A few with more money kept theirs but relocated to Texas, where roadwork was still being done fairly regularly. My dad was lucky, he said. He knew Goldman, the man who owned the garbage trucks, and he offered my dad a job as soon as his truck sold.

I don't remember Goldman, although I think it is fair to say he and my father were close friends. I do remember his daughter Kim. She was my best friend in first grade. She was cocoa brown with the straightest, blackest hair I had ever seen. Her rounded teeth were white cursive Ws, written one right after the other. She wore long denim skirts and plaid snap-up western shirts. We loved to Hula Hoop in the front yard. Years after Kim and her family moved away, my mother told me how they had adopted Kim. The Goldmans visited Vietnam, and they found her in a basket, thrown away on the side of small road. It was the early Seventies. I don't know any details more than that. I just think the story sounds strange to my adult ears now. Was she a love child of her father's? Could people just find a baby and take her to another country? I puzzle over this sometimes now, as I search Facebook for Kim.

Kim and I were always together. My poorly chopped hair barely brushing my too white shoulders, and Kim's pin straight hair pouring out into the air. We played Hop

Scotch and chase during recess at school, always together, alone, separate from the other kids. I don't think we were ostracized, I just think we enjoyed our own company, so we kept it.

It was a Tuesday, in April of 1981. It was morning recess. The bell had just rung and all of the first graders, all four classes of them, were herded out to the playground by our bored, pretty teachers. Kim and I ran fast and hard to the end by the fence, probably to chase each other in the spring air.

“Amy!! Look!!! Our Dads! Over there!!”

Sure enough, I saw the garbage truck backing up, the beep beep beeping of reverse ringing like a school bell. Funny, we had never seen the garbage truck at recess before. Her father was driving the truck and mine was grasping to the back, uniformed and poised to jump off and snatch some bags of school children's trash.

“Let's go tell!! How neat! Our Dads!”

I stopped her in her tracks. “No, Kim. We don't want to brag. We're the only ones who get to see our dads today. We don't want to hurt the others' feelings.”

Kim looked at me with those chocolaty brown eyes and the biggest smile spread across her plain face. “You're so thoughtful, Amy.”

Kim moved away the very next year. I think her father had bigger plans than small town trash pick-up, and they moved to Texas. My dad soon after bought another truck, and this one he named “Amy.” My name was right there on the door with his address and phone number.

I know my dad forgives me for being embarrassed of him that day, that time in our lives. I now realize that there are far worse things dads do than work a hard, socially low job for their family; I don't actually know many things dads do much better than that. We have talked about it on several different occasions. I am so proud that he was man enough, husband enough, father enough to be willing to work that job for us. But I do feel guilt about my deception of Kim. The little skinny brown girl in the too long Pentecostal skirt, with only one true friend, thrilled seeing the father she loves. The man who plucked her from poverty, abandonment, death, worse. I feel guilt for letting my embarrassment rob her of a special memory of her dad. I fell guilt for allowing her to accept my words as truthful, as guidance instead of what they were, childish pride.

If I could, I would go back to that Tuesday in April. As soon as Kim told me she saw our dads, I would point and holler for the whole world to hear. "There are our dads!! Look everybody, our dads!!!"

I would give Kim that moment. I would take the enjoyment for myself that I should have embraced. I wish in those young moments of life, that we sometimes had the wisdom that time allows us. That we could see for ourselves what is true and what is the lie of society.

## Abortion Clinic

Any young girl who survives seventh grade should receive a medal of some kind. Or a badge. The backstabbing. The jealousy. The humiliation. And the crushes. The hormonal hurricane that eventually becomes life.

In our seventh grade, Heath was the new science teacher's son. He was on the roundish side and his Levis always slid down a bit on his butt, creating a rumped-ass look. He had a nice tan complexion. He looked tan year round. He had pretty blond hair. In a class of eighty kids, thirty-five being boys, he definitely fell on the cuter side of the Bell Curve.

Beth Ann was a daughter of two fairly popular teachers at the middle school. She was the oldest of four in a family where Sir was spoken instead of Daddy. Beth Ann was pretty in a seventh grade kind of way. Thick blonde hair and clear blue eyes. Heath had

brown eyes. She did have a few red acne bumps around her nose and the corners of her mouth. She always received the highest grades in science and math. Our English teacher complimented her penmanship on more than one occasion in front of the entire Honors English class.

Me, I lived in a daddy home. I had one older sibling, my brother Danny Joe. He had moved out when I was three. I was talkative. I had a cute face, although my two front teeth were Wife of Bath times ten. Also, my boobs were enormous by seventh grade standards. I made straight As but was never as smart as Beth Ann. Overall, I had it ok. I had friends; my home life was good. I was pretty typical, healthy, and well adjusted (as much as any seventh grade girl can be).

Like all seventh grade girls, I loved to have sleepovers. I'd simply ask on Thursday if a friend could spend the night. Moms might talk on the phone making final plans. And, if the answer was yes, the friend brought a little overnight bag to school on Friday. Beth Ann had lots of friends, and I was not at the top of that list, but we were still close. Emily was Beth Anne's best friend. I hung with that crowd, Beth Ann, Emily, Cindy, Linda and Marla. We were the pretty, smart girl clique in junior high. Beth Ann was the leader and she would spend the night at my house once every month or two. We always had the same taste in boys. It was either Heath or Sean or Matthew, but, usually it was Heath.

Seventh graders are a little old to play dolls. We would play card games, gossip, watch movies. This was the Nineties, so we listened to a lot of *Aerosmith* and sang along to *Angel* at the top of our lungs. Beth Anne and I had a special activity we liked to do.

Inevitably when we were together, the game always became Abortion Clinic. One of us would sit at the old typewriter on my desk. The other would ask . . .

Question one: “What is your name?” Type type type

Question two: “How far along are you?” Type type type

Question three: “Who is the father?”

Now, question three was always the hardest. We both wanted to say Heath. Or Sean. Or Matthew. It would always be the same boy for both of us, depending on who had our hearts at that time. The sticking point came with who got dibs on THE boy first. Usually there would be some snarky comments by the abortion secretary (that was the title we chose, each of us having little knowledge of what actually occurred at a clinic of this type) when a name was spoken. Then type. Type. Type.

Beth Anne went on to graduate as Valedictorian from our high school. She is now a surgeon, although not the kind who works in abortion clinics. I am a teacher. We are both still pretty smart; although I have to admit she is my intellectual superior still. We haven't seen each other since our ten-year class reunion. I didn't get my dream lover as a husband, and she probably didn't either. I doubt our tastes in men coincided as closely as ours did in boys.

I never had an abortion and I would bet my last dollar she never did either.

## Dirt Bike Day

My family consists of four people. My mother, father, brother and myself. Granted, you could add my husband, my brother's long-term girlfriend, his son, numerous aunts and uncles. But really, my family has always been a pretty small circle, and we've never been ones to do the big holiday meals with hundreds of cousins and extended family members.

As far as I can remember, there were only a couple of times that any extended family members came to our house. Uncle Joe would visit occasionally from Tulsa. Aunt Patsy and Aunt Judy from North and South Carolina – I can never remember which one lives where. There was one day, though, when we had a gathering, close to a family reunion, at our house. It was my dad's family. I am sure not all nine brothers and sisters were there, but most of them were. I don't really remember talking to many of the



cousins or aunts and uncles though. I was too busy doing donuts in the yard with my new (used) dirt bike.

My Honda 70, purchased mere hours before the reunion began, was one mean machine. More times than I care to count, I rounded a corner in my neighborhood only to be heading dangerously into a car. Magic or luck or maybe some guardian angel always veered me to safety at the last minute. As an adult, I can hear those conversations that most likely took place in neighbors' homes.

Angry man: "What the hell did they think buying that child a dirt bike? She's going to kill herself!"

Angry woman: "I know, she almost ran into me after work today. Good thing I was going ten miles an hour, because she was going about forty. That kid's crazy."

If neighbors didn't talk to my parents about my driving then they must have been the most laid back neighbors in the world, because I was hyper and barely knew how to ride a bicycle much less that Honda.

That first day I rode, the day of our reunion, my mom was at home busily preparing for the coming group of Seymores. She was making deviled eggs and tea, preparing a vegetable tray and getting all the lunch meats out of their packages. She would have been the one to go shopping for the company, and she would have been the one to pay for it. My dad gave her sixty-five dollars a week for groceries, and I know feeding twenty or thirty people sure blew that budget. Yes, while she is home fixing everything up, Dad decides to take me to the Honda Place.

In my family, a few places were household names. The Hoot-N-Nanny, our favorite place to go on summer Saturday nights to hear live folk music and old country. I

had heard the line “Take the ribbon from my hair” about six hundred times by junior high. Piggly Wiggly, where we got our groceries, and The Honda Place, where my dad bought his boom-booms as I called them. Since he traded for a different boom-boom at least once a year, he was well known at The Honda Place. I had been there with him several times, but on this Saturday, unbeknownst to me, we were in the market for my first dirt bike.

There was much wheeling and dealing that Saturday. We came home with a little red Honda 70, complete with black tape on some of the wires, good tires, and as my dad would point out later as I lay in the woods surrounded by brush, a kill switch. As soon as we pulled in to our gravel driveway, the dirt bike came out of the back of the truck, and I began to tear through the front yard like a tiny maniac. Dad spent about ten minutes teaching me how to ride, and I guess I showed a phenom-like ability, because after that, he headed inside and left me to my own devices.

Parking was limited at our house, and as relatives began to arrive, they needed to park on the side of our yard, by the street. I can imagine their glee as my twelve year-old self gripped the handlebars for life and sped right and left, between cars, through the rosebushes and back to the side of the house for a breather. Cousins looked on admiringly at my unhelmeted face, a smile of determination plastered for all to see. Maybe one or two even hinted at riding on the back, but I was not ready for that. I was a solo-riding hellcat and spent the entire afternoon riding around the front yard like Evil Knievel.

And, for a time, I was.

## First Time Out of the Bottle

The blonde boy across the street played with his volleyball outside his dad's house. I had spied him for several days. Setting and spiking, that volleyball stuff that I knew nothing about, but looked super cool. He was just here for the summer, visiting his dad and stepmom. I knew that I wanted a closer look. From my vantage point across the street, he resembled the drummer from *U2* (this was the Eighties). I figured that I needed a sporty intro into his sight, and since the only athletic equipment I had on hand was a tennis ball, I pulled on some shorts and headed to the front yard.

Setting myself up in front of our closed, light green garage door, I began throwing the ball at the door. Clump, bounce, catch. This was the best I could do. For about twenty minutes, I threw the tennis ball at the garage door. Nothing happened. I think he noticed me. He looked incredibly like Larry Mullen, Jr., except with freckles. I envisioned him

playing in a band, being a super cool California kid. (I knew he was from California since my mom had chatted with his step-mom months ago and told me he was coming for a visit.) At the time, California seemed about as exotic as any place on the globe. His hair, all white blonde spikes, never moved while he ran and pumped his biceps at the volleyball. I took in some super-secret spy intel, and continued throwing my tennis ball.

Two days later, my throwing arm sore, but the garage door no worse for wear after three days of workouts, he walked to the street between our houses.

“Hey.”

Oh, wow! He had made contact. I tried to amble over to the street in a jaunty, non-self-conscious way. Sporty-like.

“Hey,” At twelve years old, I was pretty happy that this (oh my gosh) at least fourteen year old was talking to me.

“My name’s Keith, what’s yours?”

“Amy. You staying with your dad?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty bored. I was actually hoping to meet you. I really don’t like hanging outside and hitting the ball that much, but I wanted us to meet.”

With no ounce of sarcasm and a pound of self-doubt, I said, “I like throwing the tennis ball at the garage.” I’m still known for my great one-liners.

We decided to go the following evening to the mini golf course. I believed this a date. For several hours before his stepmom was to pick me up, I traipsed around the house in various mini-golf outfits. I finally selected a sleeveless yellow sweater with big blue yarn lines running through it. I had a yellow and a pink one, why I had two of these ugly ass sweaters, who knows. I think my mother helped me pick out that final outfit. I

wore cute tan shorts and some summer sandals. My hair was combed as best it could be in the humidity.

Keith and I enjoyed a wonderful round of mini-golf in 107-degree Arkansas summer heat. The mini-golf course had a sand dune at one of the holes, just like where Major Nelson found Jeannie's bottle. The sweat that accumulated in the yarn under my armpits could keep a camel hydrated for weeks, no, months. Keith played well. I think I managed to hit the golf ball like a caveman hitting at a dinosaur turd that has rolled into his casa. While we played, we ran into Nancy P. Nancy P. attended my school, one year ahead of me. Her mother had once assigned me detention hall for throwing a ball at her while she wrote on the chalkboard – I guess I've always been talented at ball-throwing. I didn't like her mom, and I sure didn't like Nancy. Tall, with a nose slightly too large for her beautiful face. Even though she was in the eighth grade, she had the body of a high schooler for sure, including big hair and C-cup breasts. I noticed immediately that Keith was interested. I believe it was him saying, "Who is that really pretty girl over there? Do you know her?" that kind of helped me figure out his interest, too. Oh course, awkward and strange, out on what may have been a date, but probably wasn't, I jumped at the chance to be helpful. I told him all of the good stuff that I knew of Nancy (and jogged over to get her phone number for him.

She was fairly nice to me, but I think it was because she saw the hot guy I was golfing with looking at us both. I told her that my friend wanted her number, and she rambled it off in no time. Lucky for both of them, I had a good memory, so I made sure to write it down on our golf scorecard when I made it back to Keith.

The next week, Keith did not play volleyball outside his dad's house, but Nancy's mom's car parked in his dad's driveway. I think Keith had a nice summer love.

I wonder if it was the sweater?

## Me and D.J.

My mother was thirty-five when she had me, my father forty-one. I was the accident baby and came along when my brother was in his fifteenth year. He and I had very different upbringings; he knew our parents when they were young people. His early life seems so much harder than mine. I know from stories he tells that our dad was not around much. He and my mother were best friends, though, so that must have been wonderful.

Danny Joe is my brother. Not Daniel Joseph, but Danny Joe. I think there is an e at the end of his name, but I am not sure and only a peek at his birth certificate could truly set that straight. My mom tells the story of when the nurse brought the tiny baby Danny Joe to her after the drugs and pain had worn off. She reclined in the hospital bed and the nurse placed a little pale baby in her arms. "This is not my son!" Panicked, she hollered at the nurse.

“Mrs. Seymore, look right there on his little arm. It says Danny Joe Seymore. Calm down.”

My mom didn't calm down, and even though she was in a tiny little hospital in a small Arkansas town where only two babies had been born that day, she knew the infant in her arms was not her baby.

When she tells the story, she says, “I knew it wasn't my baby because I remember when I'd seen him when I'd had him. He was hairy, like a monkey. Black hair all over his arms and body. The baby they brought me was pale and had a little bit of reddish peach fuzz. My baby was a hairy monkey, and this was not him.”

True enough, the babies were mixed up at the hospital and my mom was able to get her little hairy Seymore after all. I have seen my baby pictures many times, and I, too, have monkey hair. Mine is only on my ears, though, and I look like the spitting image of my dad, so no mix-up possible there.

When Danny Joe was brought home from the hospital, my parents lived in a laundry mat. My mom ran it, and in turn my parents received free rent. Dad was gone through the week, staying out of town working. Once Danny Joe was older, he and my mom would sit in the recliner and watch TV. Then, around seven p.m., he would run across the street and get some snacks: popcorn and Cokes, and they would sit and snack until it was time to go to bed. They did this every night, I am sure, except for the nights my dad was home from his workweeks away driving his truck.

Danny Joe loved to play baseball. When he was five-years-old, he joined Little League. This was in the 60s, so it was no tee-ball game, and teams didn't get awards for participation. Being the smallest physically, but a good player, he was able to start his



team's first game. Mom says he was so scared to get in trouble with the coach that in the outfield he peed his pants, not wanting to ask to come in.

Later, at thirteen, he was still the smallest on his team and played shortstop. When it came time for the big district tournament, one of his coaches didn't want to start him. The head coach said, "I know he's not a very good hitter, but he's our best glove." Danny Joe played the entire game, his team won, and he received the golden glove for that tournament. My mom still loves telling that story.

My brother lived in our home along with me until I was about three years old. I only have memories of him sleeping in his room, and one vague memory of a man in uniform coming to the house. The recruiter knocked on the door and came inside to sit at our table in the little kitchen. "I'll go wake him," my mom said.

She tried to wake him up, but he wouldn't come in the kitchen. I think he did not want to meet the soldier in our house. I matter-of-factly told the recruiter, "He's always sleeping, and he's stinky."

My brother never joined the military. He soon left our home.

I grew up like an only child, with this cool older brother who sometimes would drop by and visit. I have years of my life where I don't have one memory of him. He has always been somewhat of a loner. Mysterious, I guess. Though he was only five-foot five-inches tall, he was our small town's Don Juan. He had dark black hair that shone blue in the light, a handsome smile and a sweet personality. He might not have been tall, but he was definitely dark and handsome. When I was about thirty, he told me he had slept with over 200 women. I'll never forget when he said to me, "I would rather sleep

with an ugly girl I'd never slept with before than a beauty queen I already had." Of course, he loves to quote me as saying once, "I don't care how the guy treats, me as long as he looks good."

So, I guess we are both a little screwed up in the romance department, once we vacated of our bottles of youth.

Once, when I was sixteen, Danny Joe called me and asked if I wanted to go to a party. "Sure," I said. He told me to grab a friend and meet him at his house. I brought along Angie C., a pretty girl a little older than me, who had a kid at the time she was always pawning off on someone else to watch. We arrived at my brother's to see Tom – a handsome chiropractor in town – and Danny Joe waiting on us. We all drove to the marina and got in Tom's boat. By this time, I knew we weren't going to a party, but Tom was handsome. Tom and I drank wine coolers at the front of the boat and made out a little. Angie and my brother were at the back of the boat making out – and doing cocaine, I would find out later.

When we pulled up into the slip, hours later, and walked to the car we heard the flat slapping of shoe soles on the parking lot. Out of the dark raced Danny's wife and Tom's. We ran for it, but the women caught up to their husbands and the cops were called. I was nicely driven home by the police, and my parents were pissed, but actually took it in stride. I think the fact that I was out with my brother tied their hands from really punishing me. Also, I hadn't technically done anything wrong. Now that I am older, I think the boat we were on probably wasn't Tom's. The fact that I was sixteen and no one really thought that I was doing anything with Tom helped out, too. However, looking back on that night, I have to think that my brother was a real shithole for taking his little

sister out in the middle of the lake with married men and a young friend. At the time, I wasn't even mad at him.

When I was nine, my brother and Kay (who would become his wife) had my nephew Justin. I nicknamed him Booter and spent hours rocking him and singing songs about Amy and Booter running in the hills. He was a good baby. Danny Joe and Kay would stay married for many years, then divorce, and soon after Kay would go to prison for drugs. Justin lived full time with Danny until Danny went to jail when Justin was a senior in high school. Justin failed that year and one more. After three years as a senior, many of the nights living in his truck or at his maternal grandmother's house, he would graduate.

Years before Danny Joe went to jail, when Justin was about twelve, he came to stay with me one Christmas break when I was living in Maumelle with my first real love, Kurt. We took him ice-skating. We drove up to Heber on Christmas Day to celebrate with the family and return him to his dad. Justin was quiet and sweet natured. Danny Joe didn't show up for lunch, so we ate without him. By the time Kurt and I were leaving for home that evening, Danny Joe still hadn't shown up, so we left Justin with my parents.

In 2012, Danny Joe and Justin rode their motorcycles to Oklahoma to visit Dan and me. Danny Joe feels guilty for the way he acted when Justin was younger. He stepped up and kept him once Justin's mom went to prison, but I know the guilt must eat at him for the way Justin was raised. I don't think he was a very dependable father, and I know any amount of women marched through their home quite frequently.

We had a nice visit, although Danny Joe and Justin fought a few times about Danny's eating habits. At 290+ pounds and diabetic, my brother should eat better. He just doesn't think that Justin should have a say in it. It was strange to see my brother, now in his 50s and obese, teeth missing from years of drugs. He was once the hit of the town and could sleep with almost any woman he wanted, his teeth straight and pretty unlike mine, which were bucked and crowded.

We once had a talk about a girl we knew in Heber when I was in my early twenties. The town people called her Toothless Tonya. She was an attractive girl about my age, missing one of her front teeth. Her brown hair was thick and she could have had a nice smile. Lots of guys slept with her, no one dated her. Everyone called her Toothless Tonya, although most people didn't to her face. Toothless Tonya partied with some of the same people that my brother and I did. The fact that he was fifteen years older than I should have made me wonder why we had the same friends. In a small town like Heber, old and young do tend to party together. A Heber party means drinking, listening to live music out in the middle of nowhere or in someone's trailer. It can also mean doing drugs together, depending on the group of people.

Sometime in Danny Joe's little white rental house, we had another conversation about teeth. Although mine were not perfect, I had a nice smile, just a bit of an overbite. Danny's were straight and the not-bright white of a smoker, but not yellowed in any sense. "Let's make a pact with each other, Sis. If either of us loses a tooth, even if the one doesn't have the money to fix it, the other one will help out. We can't let that happen."

“D.J., that sounds good. If you lose a tooth, I am there, Brother. I don’t want to spend a day missing one. So, forever, we’ll have this tooth-pact!”

Even though we were buzzed on Budweiser, this was a funny but truthful discussion. In the south, there are many faces with smiles like Tonya’s, but not on young people. We meant it when we said it. Neither of us had dental insurance, but we had a sibling who cared, at least about teeth.

Now when I see my brother’s smile, I am sad. I know it matters to him, but we have never talked about it. We do talk about his weight, and he is usually about to start some diet. When he got out of jail and moved in with my parents for six months, my mom put him on the Atkins diet, bought all the necessary ingredients and cooked for him. He got down to about 150 and looked so handsome. Those six months that he lived with our parents, my mom noticed that he was a sleep eater. She said she would find him asleep in front of the refrigerator with a cold wiener or a piece of cheese in his hand. She would shut the refrigerator door and get him to go back to bed. I am sure she had to hide this from my dad, because one of the rules of our house is to know what you are getting before you open the fridge door. You don’t want to let cold air out. Dad would have thrown a fit if he had known the time Danny slumbered in front of the open fridge at night. Of course, he would never have said anything to Danny Joe; he would have let Mom have it though.

Still now, Danny Joe is funny, really humorous. His smile can electrify a room, even now. He is also tenderhearted. I remember one Christmas when I received an Atari for a present. He was already married with a son, but he spent Christmas Eve night (our family always opened presents on the 24<sup>th</sup>) at my parents’ house so he could play games

with me all night long. We played Pac Man and Pong until my head drooped to my chest and I headed to bed. Once for Easter, he brought me a gigantic card about two feet tall that said “To My Favorite Girl.” Later, for one Christmas, he bought me a case of Boone’s Strawberry Hill – which I thoroughly appreciated at nineteen years old.

We message on Facebook now, and I go see him and his current girlfriend, Betty, when I go back to Heber, which is not often. He bought a nice, respectable house in a suburb two years ago. He rides his motorcycle at least once a day, and hangs with his two dogs. I think he is happy. The difference between the two of us is so profound, but when I think about it, I think it is this. I left Heber, really never wanting to return. I am a woman of routine also. A paradox maybe, but true. Danny Joe, although he would never leave Heber, is restless. It is in his hours-long motorcycle rides, his past of drugs and ever-changing women, his need to be moving, moving, all the while staying in the same place.

# Deep Water

I lived fifteen years of my life a short walk from Greers Ferry Lake. My father and I would fish from its water, I tanned on its sun-dripped bluffs, I skinny-dipped, swam away from midnight turtles, and made my money from a summer job all from Greers Ferry Lake's shores.

In the late Eighties, as a town of about four thousand people that saw its tourist population explode in the summer by hundreds of thousands, Heber Springs was a great place for a pretty teenager and her friends to cruise the strip on nights to meet cute young guys, and a sunny wonderland to lounge upon the cliffs or the sandy beaches during the days. I felt pretty there and then.

By the time I was seventeen, my mom allowed me to stay out as long as I wanted on summer nights, so long as my white Mazda MX6 was in the garage by midnight. We

had a deal that I was free to sneak out after I made it home for curfew – but if I ever got caught, she would feign ignorance and let my dad handle it any way he wished. She had raised my wild brother through the Seventies, and I figured that she was simply too worn out to worry about another crazy teenager. She also wanted me to enjoy my teenage years. Little did I know, but I do think she did, that I would be so thankful for the freedom she gave me (even though I did occasionally need containment). My mother knew the tired, hard life of most adults, and since she missed out on carefree teenage years, she gave me the best gift she could, almost ultimate freedom. I had more fun for those last three years of high school than most girls my age in the United States. We laugh about it now, how glad she is that she let me have all that fun, because for the last ten years, fun is something I rarely have. Maybe fun mutates when one gets older. I don't know, it seems like plenty of adults still have it. But life is harder, full of responsibility, and carefree is simply not a word one can use with adult life.

When I was sixteen, my friends and I went skinny-dipping one night at Sandy Beach. By skinny-dipping, I mean, we stripped down to our underwear. We were having a blast, tipsy on Strawberry Hill wine and kissing some cute boys. Out of nowhere, we heard the cop car pull up.

“Shit, it's the police,” Cindy said. Cindy weighed about two hundred pounds. She was a year older than most of us who all hung out, and she had a Ford Escort and endless gas. We knew we didn't have time to scurry to the shore, pull on clothes, and make it back to our waiting cars in time to avoid being caught.

“Duck,” Sean yelled.



O.K., that was the plan. I don't know what everyone else did, but I plunged my entire body under the water, holding my breath as long as I could. At night, with barely a moon, and the warm, black water surrounding me like a blanket, I waited. A strong light passed over me, slowly. Slowly. When my lungs were about to implode, I saw the light finally pass over. *O.K., I thought, surface, catch a breath, and resubmerge.* All this time, my heart was beating so fast, I thought ripples could be surging from the water around me.

My head popped above the surface. The damn light was shining directly at me. I saw several of my pitifully caught friends walking out of the water, a lucky, few breath-holders still out somewhere in the dark. I was beaten. They had me.

“Get out of the water, Miss,” the officer said. Somehow, the warm dark water pulled at my legs, trying to hold me in its grasp a little longer. I walked the teenage perp walk up to the officer who had spoken to me. Within a few minutes, all of us were haphazardly situated around the beach, little electrons orbiting one or the other of the police officers who had busted us. In all there were four cops, having come from the two police cars parked in the almost vacant lot.

The officer handled me rather curtly. He pulled the beam of his flashlight up and down my slight figure quite methodically, I am guessing to ensure I was clothed, or to take a little peek, one or the other.

“Get dressed and go home.” Matter of fact, just like that.

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.”

We all quickly got dressed, piled into the cars awaiting us, and made our ways home. Cindy dropped me off in front of my house, and by then fear had dissipated. We giggled profusely at each other. Fun times.

Sometimes I imagine myself surrounded by that water, the hot air above me, my friends underneath its weightlessness with me, just out of my reach. All of us holding our breath, hoping to avoid getting into trouble. The feeling of excitement and loss of control. The feeling of comfort in the warm darkness that the lake gave to me. Now, when I am in the dark waters of life, as I often find myself, there is no comfort. I long for the night of teenage rebellion and a safe place to fall into at the night's end.

I carry my dark waters with me now, and they are not friendly.

## Now Gambling

Nine o'clock on a Saturday night. Luigi's Italian Restaurant was packed. Quinn walked in, looking handsome and rugged, and younger than his age, which was somewhere in his thirties. Blonde hair closely cropped, green eyes slightly bloodshot, long surfer shorts showing off his extreme summer tan from working at the marina all summer. He usually wore a t-shirt that advertised a great bar in Fort Worth or a skateboard company in San Diego. He walked up to me and said, "Hey, want to go to Vegas tonight?"

He ran through the plan, we would be flying with Ron and Tonya to Vegas for the night. They were leaving around eleven p.m., and if I wanted to come, he was inviting me. I told him my mom would probably not allow me to go, but I would ask.

I drove home at ten p.m., and asked my parents. Mom said, "No!" I don't blame her; I was only nineteen. I walked across the street to tell Quinn. He lived next door with

Ron, the older man who owned the largest marina on Greers Ferry Lake. I rang the doorbell, and Tonya answered. Tonya was dating the recently divorced Ron. Tonya had also chased me through the marina parking lot three years earlier after a boat outing with my brother and her husband, but we were pretty good friends now.

Once inside Ron's house, she told me Quinn was not there. Ron walked in and said, "If you can't go to Vegas, how about Tunica?" I called my mom, and she said it was fine. I think if Vegas had been a location that we could have driven to, she would have allowed me to go there as well. She wanted me to do pretty much whatever I wanted to. My mom wanted me to have a good time, and I know it was not just to spoil me (which she did), but also to allow me as much fun and happiness as I could have. She knew that happiness and good times are hard to find, and she wanted me to ring as much from life as I could. She also trusted me to make good decisions, and of course, I usually did not.

The plan quickly fell into place. I would go home and change. Ron would continue to try to locate Quinn. We would head out before midnight. The drive would take almost three hours. We would gamble and have fun, drive back to Heber in time for me to make my five p.m. shift at the restaurant.

When I walked back over to Ron's less than an hour later, I wore a leopard print short set that showcased my long, tan legs and my extremely ample chest. The shirt resembled a bikini top more than a real shirt, and had a tiny jacket that covered my shoulders. Quinn had not appeared, so the three of us tore out of Ron's driveway in his green Jeep Cherokee.

Since I was only nineteen and the legal gambling age was twenty-one, we knew I would not be able to get into the casino legally. However, Ron's daughter, Robin, about

thirty at the time, had let me use her driver's license multiple times to get into bars in Batesville. Ron procured the license for me again this night. Robin had light brown hair with curls, and weighed about two hundred and fifty pounds. So, the face in the picture of the license did not look like my nineteen year old, slim self. At barely one hundred and fifteen pounds, it was a big chance to take after a three-hour drive, but we never gave it a thought. Also, Ron knew the owner of the casino and was sure he would be able to get me in.

I rode in the backseat, propped up between the two of them. We drank wine coolers and blasted rock music the entire time. The ride zoomed by in what seemed like mere minutes, and when we pulled into the Splash Casino parking lot, I was more excited than I had ever been. I think I had about eighty dollars of tip money. Ron had a bank bag with about seven thousand dollars in it. He made us promise not to tell anyone how much money he brought.

We parked and walked up to the big glass doors leading to the casino.

Reader, you may be asking why I was dating Quinn, a man in his thirties. First, I want to clarify what happened in the Nineties in Heber. It was a very small town, and with small numbers come smaller numbers of truly attractive people. Besides, I liked older guys; they were mysterious (read that as hiding a bunch of shit and dating young girls because young girls were too naïve to ask questions or even think of the questions to ask).

Very few people dated. A real date consisted of the hour-long trip to the liquor store in Cabot. If the guy really liked you, you didn't have to pitch in any gas or liquor

money. The drive back was full of throwing empty glass bottles at road signs, lots of loud music. Then, once back in Heber, or Quitman, or Wilburn, you would meet up with a small band of friends, drink and have fun. Or meet up with a large group on someone's land, listen to a live band — usually *Plum Crazy* — and have a real party. Tires lit and burning through the night and tailgates as seats were party staples.

Quinn and I were “seeing each other.” That was the term then. Now, I think teenagers call it “talking to each other.” I spent the majority of the school year in Conway at college, then when summer came, Quinn and I would hook up. This summer, the casino summer, was our second summer together. Looking back, I am sure he was sleeping with other women, and actually he may have had a wife and family back in New Mexico, where he lived in the fall and winter months, the marina's off-season. It never even occurred to me then that any of this was a possibility, and Quinn never talked about much, anyway. What I knew then was that Quinn was a quiet, semi-fun guy to hang out with. What Quinn lacked in the conversational area, he more than made up for in the sexy, hot as hell, so damn good looking your eyes could melt when you looked at him area. I loved hanging out with really good-looking men. Their attitude and treatment of me, those were secondary concerns. I just knew Quinn was damned hot, and tons of girls wanted him. And I knew that I was the one he hung out with in public. So, I felt special.

Ron, Tonya, and I walked up to the glass doors. Propped at each door was a man, semi-heavy, in a Splash Casino uniform. Our doorman greeted us, asked for IDs. Ron pulled his out, Tonya hers. Then I pulled mine out.

“Wait,” the doorman said.

“What’s the problem?” Ron chimed in.

“This’s not her,” the doorman said, pointing first to Robin’s ID, then to me.

“Yes it is,” I said at the exact same time that Ron said, “It is.”

A few minutes of talking ensued, then Ron told the doorman to call the owner.

“Tell him it’s Ron W\_\_\_\_\_.”

Within a few minutes, the owner of the entire casino greeted us at the door. He took my ID from the doorman, looked at it, looked at me, then turned to the doorman.

“It’s like looking in a mirror,” he said.

The three of us walked into the casino after some handshakes and small talk with the casino owner.

The floors were beautiful, carpeted in purples and reds and golds. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and smoke and crowds dreamily floated through the casino. Ron walked us up to a blackjack table, told us to come back when we needed a little money. Tonya and I walked over to some slots machines and started loosing our own money.

We all quickly got into a routine. After Tonya and I slotted for a little while, we would walk up to Ron’s table, where we would kiss his cheeks. Tonya stood on his right, I on his left. We bent at the knees and planted a kiss on each side. He was bookended by a young, pretty brunette and a sexy older blonde. He loved it. After his kisses, he would hand us some poker chips. Then, we walked to the cashier’s cage, turned them in for cash, and proceeded to the nearest slot machine. We ordered free drinks, laughed, lost money, and walked back up to Ron’s table. This went on throughout the rest of the night and into the next day. Around noon, Ron had lost all of his money – the bank bag deflated and sorry looking. It was time to head back to Heber.

Ron and Tonya were exhausted and needed to sleep in the back seat. I was told to drive. At this time, I knew how to drive to Conway and North Little Rock from Heber. I could drive to any Cabot liquor store, and to Searcy. After that, my driving knowledge was null. I tried to put up a little fight, but I knew I needed to be back for my shift, so I took the wheel with trepidation and a small prayer.

Ron gave me basic directions, and off we went. I did a fairly nice job of driving, at least until I passed our exit. I knew I had messed up, so I slowed down, put the Cherokee in reverse, got in position to take the exit, and did. Lucky for us, it was a Sunday and there was miraculously no traffic behind our vehicle. I drove on for at least another hour, until I heard kissing and moaning sounds from the backseat.

“If you have the energy to make out, you have the energy to drive.” I told them. I pulled over on the side of the road and Tonya took the wheel. Ron and I fell asleep in the backseat. When we woke up, Tonya had driven us out of the way, to Lonoke. Ron cursed her awhile, then we decided to get something to eat. Pulling change from our purses and coins from Ron’s console, we had just enough to order one Big Mac meal from a McDonald’s. We all shared it as Ron took control of the last hour of the drive.

I made it home with time to get ready for work, and tired as I was, took off for another night at the restaurant

A few days later, when I saw Quinn, he mentioned that he’d heard we all had a good time. I saw Quinn for most of that summer, and never saw him again. I only think of him now when I think about my first trip to the casino.

I sure love to gamble.



# Bones

“Finally you’re here. Look at this,” Shannon told me. I couldn’t process what I saw when she opened the box.

You see, when I was twenty-one years old, I lived on Robin Street, in Conway, only a couple of miles from the University of Central Arkansas. My two roommates, Shannon and Amy, were my same age, and Shannon was a close friend.

Amy had her own bedroom, while Shannon and I had our single beds in the other bedroom. The house was yellow, and over eighty years old. It was my first foray into living in a house as a college student. I had gone from living in the dorms to an apartment (I like to call it the commune now — there were so many people living there). This was my first big girl house, and I loved living in it with my roomies.

At the time, I worked at The Country Club of Conway, making decent money. I dated Kurt then, and we were young and in love. But this story is not about young love, it is about the bones.

One afternoon as I was dressing for work in my uniform of black skirt and white tuxedo shirt, completed with bow tie, Shannon and our good friend Monica were discussing their Saturday night Halloween plans. “We don’t have any boys to go out with, so we’re going to scare the shit out of ourselves,” Shannon announced to me.

Neither of the girls worked, their parents providing liberal allowances for needs. Amy, the roommate I barely saw, like me, had to work. She worked at the Dixie Café and barely maintained herself by getting student loans that she’d probably work the rest of her life to pay off. This afternoon as usual, Amy was out, working or hanging with her boyfriend, who only came into the house via her bedroom window. I lived on Robin Street with them for over a year and never saw her boyfriend Mike one time.

“Huh?” All I could think of to ask.

“Yeah, when Amy and I moved in here, the landlord told us to stay out of the attic. He said that this house is too old, and the attic was probably not stable, so we had to promise not to put anything up there or even go up there. So, Monica and I’re doing some exploring after dark.”

At this, Monica pulled two flashlights out of her gigantic purse and giggled huskily. For a little ninety-pound redhead, her voice was deep and manly. “Yep. We’re out to find some scary shit.” Monica winked at me, probably to let me know this was all Shannon’s idea.

As I walked out of the room with my waitress apron half hanging from my waist, I told them to have fun.

I didn't see them until late Sunday afternoon, after I had spent the night at Kurt's apartment drinking and having good college sex. As soon as I walked into the living room, I saw Amy, Shannon and Monica sitting on the couch staring at a box. The cardboard box was old, and written on the side in black marker was the word – in all caps – BONES.

That's when Shannon told me to sit down and opened the box.

The story came out quickly, with Shannon and Monica picking up and ending each other's sentences. They had gone up into the attic around nine o'clock Saturday night. It was stuffy and smelled like yellowed newspapers. Not much exciting was up there, a lamp, some old magazines, and a few boxes. Tucked in the very back, where the gables made an acute angle out of the ceiling, the box sat.

Monica said, "My flashlight landed on the word BONES, and we both squealed, didn't we, Shannon?"

Shannon agreed they'd squealed their heads off, and then she went on to finish the tale. After they'd found the mystery box Saturday night, they'd decided to bring the box down from the attic and inspect it in the living room. As good as it's name, it was a box filled with bones. Monica, at his point in the story, held up a bone about a foot and a half long and showed it to me.

I squinted my eyes, as if by close inspection I would know what the hell kind of bone we were looking at.

We all decided Monica would take the box of bones to her anatomy professor the next day and see what kind they were.

Monday around two p.m., Monica burst through the front door and loudly declared to Shannon and me, just in from the American Literature class we shared, “I have to call the police!”

It turned out that Monica’s professor said that it was illegal to have unearthed human bones. And, those bones, they were human. Monica fought Shannon for the phone in the kitchen, and made the call. Within two minutes, there were sirens outside our little yellow house. Two officers came to the door, and asked for the bones, which Monica and Shannon handed over. They spoke to the officers for a few minutes, and that was the end of the bones. We never heard back from the police, and the landlord never mentioned anything to us, although I am sure he was contacted.

With college work, my job at the country club, and my sexy boyfriend, I really didn’t think about the bones again that week. The following Friday night, I pulled into the driveway about midnight, just getting off of work. I’d worked an extremely hard night at the Country Club, and wanted to change and spiff up before heading over to Kurt’s. Amy’s car was gone, no big surprise there, but Shannon’s blue Saturn sat askew on the side of the lawn. I let myself in to the house and heard my name, “Amy.” It was not a question. It sounded like I had awoken Shannon and she’d just called my name out, all sleepy and breathless.

I shouted out “Yeah,” as I ran to the bathroom to wash my face. I then went to our shared bedroom and turned on a lamplight, not wanting to blare the overhead at her if she

was asleep. I got ready in record time, already wanting that wine cooler in my hand and my face on Kurt's. But, it was super quiet in the room, and something felt strange.

Something felt off. I turned on the overhead, and Shannon's bed was empty.

“Shannon,” I called. No answer.

“Amy?” No answer.

I ran, panicked through the kitchen, Amy's room, which I had only been in twice, and back to my bedroom. It was slowly dawning on me that no one, but myself, was in the house. I was alone. Within seconds, I had my shoes on and was running to my car. I sped out of the driveway and to Kurt's apartment in record time.

Later, when I talked to Shannon about this, I found out she and Monica were at a party, and no one was at the house that night. Someone, some thing, had called my name, but it wasn't one of the lively young women who shared that home with me. For the next couple of months, we had breaker problems, our house lights going off for no reason, and a strange feeling mounting in me each time. Although, deep down, I knew not to be afraid. Nothing was there to hurt me, but something had wanted to make contact with me. Something knew my name, and wanted my attention.

Now, each Halloween, I share this story with my students. Sure, it's scary. And weird. I turn off the classroom lights and have them sit in a circle on the cold tiled floor. I tell it slowly, building the drama, making the voice of the visitor whispery and soft. (Of course I leave out the sex and the drinking.)

I like telling this story to them. I think most of them like hearing it. They, too, jump at the chance to tell their own spooky stories after I finish this tale. It connects us on Halloween, but more important it lets me simply share a secret part of myself with them.

I believe in ghosts.

## Truck Ride

It was a 1999 green GMC pick up truck. His name was Kurt, and he was movie star good-looking. The eyes on that young man. Those green eyes and those beautiful white teeth, housed in a year-round tanned face. His hair the color of acorns, shiny and soft. He had salesman good looks. You know, the kind of guy who could get you to buy anything. He had been Air Force for four years. He was discharged for obtaining cable from a neighbor in his apartment building, at least that is the story he told me. He had lost most of the six-pack he had when I first met him. But, he still had those green eyes, and a penchant for heavy drinking.

We had been living together for a while at this time. I still had about two semesters left of college, and I was working my ass off at a local fish restaurant, Cock of

the Walk, to pay my half of the bills. And most of his half, too. The irony in the fact that I made several of those truck payments is not lost on me.

Our apartment was tiny and new. I would look out of the little window cut from between the kitchen and the living room and talk to him while he watched TV. The small bedroom had my queen size bed in it. I don't think he had much furniture when we moved in together, come to think of it, neither did I. The beige carpet was soft the first night we stayed there. We slept on the living room floor with pillows and a blanket.

That was a good night.

And by the time Tommy came to visit us, we were falling into a slump. Our relationship had moved from college-aged love to just not so great for grown-ups. Tommy was an old friend of Kurt's from his Air Force days. Tommy had a few kids by different girls around the country and was broke and tired of living with his latest girlfriend. Tommy was the first grown man I've ever known who had kids and didn't pay any child support. He was definitely not the last. He was much shorter than Kurt's six-foot-three-inch frame. He was average looking and talked with a heavy northern, Chicago accent. He had extremely short legs; I remember that. For some reason, even on a guy of about five eight, his legs were not as long as they should have been. His proportions noticeable, and strange.

Kurt and I loved to drink. We drank every weekend. We would buy some cheap liquor, Boone's Farm or Budweiser, and play yahtzee or darts and drink. Once we moved into the apartment together, I had to work more weekends. So, whatever drinking he did, it was without me. I was in love back then, and I didn't see what was really happening, or



I didn't allow myself to see. Drinking without me reminds me of a story, not about the GMC, which is the story I am telling, but an important story nonetheless.

I didn't have health insurance all through college and only finally got some when I landed my first post-grad job. So, I didn't go to the doctor much while I was in college, and I sure didn't have money for tests that doctors seem to hand out like candy now. I had some troubling symptoms, my hair had all fallen out, and the doctor said I needed a biopsy. I was scared shitless, and my dad had to come up with the money out of pocket for the tests. It seemed like weeks waiting on the results. It was cold and dark on a late Tuesday afternoon when I got the results call. Inconclusive. That really scared me. I didn't have a cell phone then; most people didn't. But, sadly, I had an idea where Kurt was. I drove the fifteen miles to the roadside strip club, dance thingy, whatever the hell you call those places. He never had money for food or bills, but he could find his way to pay a bar tab on his own.

Sure enough, there was his truck. (Hey, it was the lovely green GMC still, yet a different story). I went to the front doorman and asked for Kurt. I had never been in a place like that, and I was extremely embarrassed. The doorman took a few minutes, but he returned and said that Kurt was on his way to the front. When he came out we walked to my car and got in. It had started to drizzle. I tried to tell him about the results, but I don't even remember if I got all the info out or not. He was pretty buzzed, so he said he would come home with me if I would wait on him to go inside and pee. I sat in the car for over thirty minutes; he never came out. I drove back to our apartment and cried for hours until I fell asleep. I would love to say that was the day I decided to pack up and leave, but that day was still years away . . .

Back to the truck. By wriggling and maneuvering, I managed to get off of work on a Saturday before midnight. I ran home and changed into some decent clothes. Tommy and Kurt miraculously had stayed at home and just had beers all night waiting on me. We piled in the green GMC and headed for the Electric Rodeo, a bar and dance club about forty-five minutes away. I am sure I had fun while I was there, but I honestly don't remember that part of the night. What I remember is the ride home.

When I think about telling this story, I fully believe most people will not understand why I stayed with Kurt. And those sweet readers who do, I am sorry. It means you have probably gone through something like this yourself and stayed. It hurt me at the time, but the memory hurts me much more. The embarrassment I have for myself; the pitiful young woman who thought he was good enough for her. The funny thing is, even now, I am more upset with my twentyish self than with those assholes who treated me so badly. I don't even think it was that they treated me so horribly, but that Kurt said those awful things in front of me. Like I didn't even rate the status of "don't say the horrible shit about her in front of her." He didn't even care enough to hide the way he felt. And I was fool enough to take it.

We were leaving the dance club and about to get into the green GMC. Of course, Kurt was going to drive drunk. When you drink all the time, how else do you get anywhere?

"No, let Tommy get in the front seat," Kurt said to me when I was about to open the door. I quickly moved out of the way and let Tommy move the seat so I could get in the back. It was an extended cab, so I sat kind of in the middle between the two bucket

seats in front of me. The engine roared to life, and we were off. I couldn't hear very well because the windows were both rolled down and the cold air rushed in on me.

“Roll the windows up, ok? It's freezing back here.”

“No, Tommy and I're hot.” Kurt shot back.

I think at this point I was a little surprised at the way he was treating me.

“PLEASE!!”

“Nope!” They both kind of laughed like it is a joke.

I leaned up as far as I could, so I could get a little of the heat coming from the vents up front. This way the air was not so cold and loudly screaming right at me from both sides. If you have ever ridden in the back seat when people have the front seat windows down, you know that you get fifty times more airflow than they do.

As I leaned up even closer and just chattered my teeth together, I wished I had thought to wear a coat. But, who takes a coat when you are just going to the club, just there and back? That is when I picked up on their conversation. I don't know exactly what Tommy said to bring up this line of convo, but I heard Kurt say, “That is why I picked someone like Amy. She is average looking, so no one will try to take her from me and she won't cheat. Plus, she'll put up with almost anything I do to her. I mean, she has put up with whatever so far.” They both laughed at this, as I sat and listened.

Now, aside from freezing in the back seat of a truck I had mostly paid for, after being at a club I paid everyone's way into, I just shut down and somehow made it back to the apartment. I pretty much fell directly into bed and slept. I don't remember the events

of the following day, or anything like that. All of those memories have faded. But not that ride.

I stayed dating and living with that asshole for about three more years. Tommy stayed a while, Tommy left, had another kid with another girlfriend, and actually came back to stay with us in our rent house a couple of years later after I found my real job. (I was still paying most of the bills.) Kurt did a lot of shitty things to me, including, I am sure, while I was stuck at home or at work, cheating on me on several occasions, although I was too dumb at the time to recognize this possibility. Finally we split and within the week I discovered he was dating a seventeen-year-old high school senior. He was twenty-eight and a used car salesman at the time. She was the part-time receptionist at the dealership, working after high school classes ended each day.

After the break-up, I still had sex with Kurt several times. Once while he was wearing a police-tracking device – you know, an ankle bracelet. Of course, I wish I could go back to that truck ride and blast some wonderful tirade at those scummy men, one of whom I loved more than I have loved anyone in my life. But, life never takes you down the same road twice. I did get a phone call from Kurt about a year-and-a-half after our break-up. He called to ask if we could be friends. Maybe meet for lunch. I distinctly remember that I told him, “You weren’t my friend when we dated, why would I want to be your friend now?” That pretty much ended the phone call, and I haven’t heard from him since.

Many years later, I drove home to visit my parents. Just outside of Rosebud, Arkansas, my cell phone rang. It was Kurt’s mother, who is still to this day one of my

close friends. She and I talked for a while and then she told me that Kurt had gotten married. I made all of the congratulatory statements a person is supposed to say, although I knew she was sad it was not me who would be her daughter-in-law. When I ended the call, I had to pull over on the side of the road. I cried for about fifteen minutes. I don't know now, nor did I know then, why those tears came. But they did.

## The Wild Child

The break-up was bound to happen. Wasn't it *Top Gun*'s Tom Cruise who in *Cocktail* said something like, "Jesus! Everything ends badly or else it wouldn't end!" He said this great line to the older woman who was begging him to stay, not to end their relationship. Tom made an intelligent point with those few words, and that movie is still some of his best work.

Kurt and my relationship had been going badly for a while and, by 1997, it was in tatters. I met him at a party in Conway when I was nineteen years old, in 1993. I wore a pair of denim shorts and a half top with flowered ruffles. I was a cute young girl, with a little too much interest in parties and beautiful boys. Kurt was so good-looking he took my breath away. I do not mean that in the clichéd way; it is not a poetic device. I could not breathe when I first saw him. I went back with him to his apartment after the party to

continue drinking, and our relationship began that very night.

He was so different from anyone I had dated. He was from Illinois, and was the first non-Southern boy I had dated. He was funny and sweet natured. He never cussed me or got on to me verbally, something my father had done for years. Kurt's words never hurt me – at least not at first. Once in the beginning of our relationship, we had gone to a bar and had drinks. I ordered something and it tasted like melted asphalt. I was nervous to tell him, but when I did, he simply stated, "Get another kind. I'll drink this one."

That one gesture meant more to me than I even want to accept. Once I entered my teenage years, I suddenly had to watch every word for fear of the reprimand that could come, and I was not used to mistakes being overlooked by my father. My father became the kind of man who, on the night of my senior awards ceremony, cursed me under his breath so only I could hear. As I stood up to accept my full-scholarship award from the University of Central Arkansas, he whispered to me, "Stand up straight, Goddam it." I walked to the stage with tears in my eyes, repeating over and over in my head to stand up straight, to not let the tears flow down my cheeks, since I knew if I cried and he saw it, I would be in even more trouble on the car ride home.

So these kind words from Kurt, which were no big deal to him, made me love him even more. I felt accepted, as though he cared so much that I could do no wrong. Of course, now that I look back on it, I think, hell, it was just a drink. It shows me how broken I was, and how I longed for a man to be kind to me consistently. Not anxiously waiting on the wrong word to send him into a rage. I found that in Kurt. Too bad he was actually a shit bag, but I wouldn't find that out until later.

I would like to paint him as a horrible young man, but he wasn't. I think in the

first years of our relationship, he did love me, too. I still have a card hidden in a drawer where he wrote the twenty-five reasons he loved me. If I can blame myself, and I can, I simply stayed too long. I held on too long would be more accurate. Once, as he walked down the stairs having told me we should break-up, I fell to my knees and tightly clutched onto to his legs. I begged. "Please. Please don't go." He didn't. Another time, in our apartment in Maumelle, we broke up for a week, and I came back to the apartment and fell on top of his lap, begging for one more chance. I kissed him and kissed him.

"You taste like smoke," he said.

"I've been so upset. I smoke all the time. I miss you so much." He let me come back.

The *Bare Naked Ladies* said it best, I think.

The bravest thing I've ever done  
Was to run away and hide  
But not this time, not this time  
And the weakest thing I've ever done  
Was to stay right by your side  
Just like this time, and every time  
I couldn't tell you I was happy when you were gone  
So I lied and said that I missed you when we were apart  
I couldn't tell you, so I had to lead you on  
But I didn't mean to break your heart

We dated for five years, lived together over three.

I had an engagement ring on my finger the night we finally broke up for good. In what little amount of peace I can throw my way, I was the one who made the final decision. I told him "If you're moving to another town for your job, I can't go with you if we aren't married. So, we'll need to break up."

He quickly agreed. Upon awaking the very next day, I was scattered and grieving, and tried to get the relationship back as soon as possible, but thank goodness Kurt would



not agree. He did continue to have sex with me occasionally, and even went so far as to find out the location of my new apartment and show up one day. But, he was relieved our relationship was over, and I started on a downward spiral that would last for several years.

After the breakup, Kurt allowed me to stay in the rental house we shared until I could find a new place. With his job, he could afford the rent on our house; I could not. However, his patience wore thin, and I received the phone call in which I remember he said, “Get the fuck out of my house. Stop dragging your feet.”

It did not occur to me, at that time, that my name was on the lease, and that I did not have to move as quickly as he wanted. But, I did. A friend asked me the other day, when we were talking about this, why a smart girl would not know she had time to find a new place. Why did I just up and move when he told me to? I guess the best answer is because staying there without him was tortuous, and I needed to get myself out of the way so he could move back in. I think his need to get back into the house (as he was staying at his friend’s) outweighed my need to find a safe place to move to. Why did I not think of myself first in this situation? I guess I was/am just not that kind of person. In many ways, I am simply weak.

I found a tiny duplex in a shitty part of town. I moved there. I could not afford the pet deposit, so Kurt got to keep our cat Molly. That taught me how real heartbreak is, not even keeping the fickle love of a cat close by.

Since my name was on the original lease, I received a phone call months later to notify me when Kurt moved to a house in Maumelle. He had left some pictures and furniture in the rental house, and if someone didn’t remove them, I would have to pay the

removal fees. I drove over to the rental house on a Thursday evening, and the landlady met me. She was nice enough to help with some lifting: she also recently divorced and empathetic. I cried when I saw the one picture in the bottom of a closet. It was a love design, with the names Kurt and Amy. He had left it there like actual garbage, like shit you don't even want to touch. I kept it for over a year, but eventually I, too, discarded it. Now that picture lives in a trash heap somewhere in Arkansas. I envision it surrounded by torn dolls and old roller skates. Things once loved, now rotting and melting in the Arkansas sun and buried alive under more and more shit each year.

After being in a relationship for over five years, I had no idea how to get out there and date again. I didn't even want to. For the first six months, it felt more like trying to keep from dying. I prayed I could die in a car wreck, or some such quick death. I knew I didn't have the willpower to commit suicide, but I had trouble with the amount of pain I had to endure every single second of every single moment of every single day.

Heartbreak. It was an apt title for the relentless pain in my chest. The strings around my heart sang out their pain and hurt, and the pressure of loneliness sank down upon me, buried me in bricks and rubble. I would rock back and forth in a little ball of crossed legs and arms, cradling myself listening to bluesy country music. One song in particular, I must have listened to over a thousand times. *If There Was a Way* by Dwight Yoakum. "I was just wonderin', if there was a way. To bring you back to me, anything I can say."

There was a lot of cigarette smoking as well. About two packs a day, after I got home in the evenings from work. My job was a blessing; it kept some normality in my life. I developed a schedule, a routine to make it through the week.

Monday through Thursday: Eat an apple for breakfast, if I could keep it down. Lunch was cigarettes in my car. Dinner consisted of a Snapple and the two aforementioned packs of Marlboros. Then take two sleeping pills at six p.m., fall asleep by seven p.m.

Fridays were a tad different. They included wine after work. Then the weekend would arrive. The weekends were the hardest. Time to fill. More smoking. Lots of sleeping. More rocking in the corner to the sad song. I thought several times that I was going crazy. I think maybe I did.

After the six-month period of complete and utter devastation, something interesting happened. I slept with Kurt a couple of times during the really bad part. He had even stopped by my duplex. How he found out where I lived was strange. But, the sex you have with an ex after it is over is probably the lowest form of self-abuse. The way a couple has sex and the way a man who is using a woman has sex, they are distinctly different, and the difference was not lost on me. He accidentally left his watch at my place once. I knew he had a girlfriend at the time, so I was tempted to show her the evidence. But, I was too scared of making him mad . . .

Eventually, though, he stopped coming around. Then, one day, I felt a little better. I had lost about forty pounds and was tiny. I started to go out with some single snaggles (definition – girls who you would never hang out with in public if you had any real friends to go out with). When you are newly single, you many times find yourself without any friends. Most of the friends you had were your couple friends, as in his and hers. So, finding someone, anyone, to go do single lady activities with required some digging. And, not all that you dig up is pleasant. But, beggars not being choosers, I ran with whom

I could. The most surprising thing to me was the amount of attention from men I got at first.

I had always believed that if I didn't have Kurt, I wouldn't have anyone. But, surprisingly, I attracted numerous interested men. The problem was, I was so emotionally defeated, I wandered into some strange whore world. I slept with men I didn't even find interesting. I flung myself from one brief two-week fling into another. I even messed with some roommates, hanging out with one for a few weeks and then moving on to the other. A counselor would surely say this was a result of low self-esteem. I didn't know what it was; I never allowed myself any time to self-reflect. I just didn't want to spend the nights alone anymore.

This time period was marked by the continued massive smoking, starvation, and the purchase of a cheap K-Mart bed-in-a-bag bedroom suit: leopard print with black accents. Kurt surprisingly one last time stopped by my duplex, and we had sex on that comforter. I thought it was a sexy bedroom. I even wore lingerie for him, something I had never done before. This was the last time he ever showed up.

Eventually, the flings stopped. I was worn out, too tired to go to work on Mondays. I could barely keep my eyes open during the day, the smoking was causing me to cough all the time, and I was too skinny. I might want to add I went blonde during this time, not my natural dark brown hair color. I think it probably looked okay, but I mean, who was I fooling?

Also during this time, I met a nice older lady, Karen, at work. She was seventeen years my senior and was recently divorced. We began eating lunch together every once in

a while. I stopped doing lunch in my car, and some semblance of normality came back to my workdays. I even began eating a real breakfast.

I still took the sleeping pills at night.

However my transition was happening, I was never fully aware. But, one day I went from this wild, strange Amy to being a bit like my old self. I began going out on legitimate dates. Another interesting phase, one that not all break-up ladies go through, I then entered the man-hater phase.

This phase was peppered with some notable men. The doctor, the high-up exec for a large firm, the bartender with the genuine heart of gold, the F.B.I. agent. So many others. I dated several men at a time, and always had the same conversation with each one on the first date. It would be at an expensive restaurant, one I could never afford on my own. There would be wine, delicious food, of which I still ate only a little. I discovered Pinot Noir. I went to sporting events and saw concerts. I would work into the conversation something about coming off of a bad break-up and not looking for anything serious. I just wanted to date and have fun. I did not want anything exclusive. I gave every date the same spiel.

During this phase, several men actually bartered hard to have me solely date them. I would tell them that I was not ready. If any one of these men did something too kind or considerate, it was usually the kiss of death in our time together. One was willing to fly me to Chicago for a Bears' game. He would of course provide separate accommodations. That was the last time I talked to him. The FBI man brought me some nice presents after being away for a while, that was his last date with me. I still have one of the t-shirts he brought. "F.B.I." it proclaims in giant block letters. Troy, a single father

who adored me, even said he would forego dating other women and just wait on me until I was ready for our relationship to be exclusive; he would just be exclusive on his end first. I dated him a while longer, but felt tired of his pleading and eventually ended that as well.

When I had time to reflect, and I did eventually allow alone time now, I thought it strange that the worse I treated these men, the more they seemed to like me. I would even categorize myself in many ways as a bitch, but I could not change myself at this juncture any more than I could have forced myself not to cry at the beginning, or not to have sex all the time for comfort in the middle. I just couldn't stand the thought of even caring for any of these men. I was not *there*. The hollow part of my soul was not ready

Somehow, I made it through this phase, and at the end, I had a string of wonderful men to think about. Now, I consider some of them real catches that I let get away. Of course, if I were myself, the attraction they felt for me most likely would not have been as strong. The old adage seemed to be true. Men like a bitch.

Gradually, I landed in a relationship again. Not a special one, and not one that would last. But, it did mark the end of my break-up self. The exorcism of my wildness completed. My demon of pain gone. I had gone through a ritual that was a trial by fire, and the woman who walked out of the coals and ash was a new me. I could look back on all of my time after Kurt with a sense of wistfulness. For the crying, rocking, hurt girl in the cheap apartment. For the friendless girl/woman just trying to avoid being alone for the night. For the woman who hated men and somehow gained a confidence that she might never attain again. She had lived for so long one life with Kurt, and she felt she had lived fifty lives in the few years following him.

How many lives does a woman have? As many as she allows someone (or herself) to ruin. And then, if she is extremely lucky, just one more —

## Maybe Too Much

Michael had two things about him that I couldn't tolerate. He put too much pepper on his food and too much penis in me. Let me explain.

Michael was a short man, about five feet, eight inches, and someone I had known in high school but we were never romantically linked – we didn't even hang out with the same groups of people. We dated later, in my late twenties, when I was teaching in Cabot, Arkansas, about fifty miles from where he lived, which was Heber because he was the kind of guy who didn't move away from his hometown. We met up one night by chance when my friend Jerri and I visited Heber to see my parents. Somehow, after a night of drinking at the local VFW, Jerri had gone home and I rode around and continued drinking with Michael. We ended up out by Sandy Beach, where I swam in the sun and skinny-dipped in the moonlight as a teenager. He parked his big, brown Dodge in the lot,



left the door open, and played Merle Haggard. We two-stepped on the asphalt and drank beer. It was a wonderful night. There was something magical about listening to Merle with the stars above me and the air just summer-right.

We started dating after that, and soon after had sex. I was astounded by the amount of penis he had. Long, yes. Wide, yes. Actually, I think it was the biggest penis I have ever come across in my penis escapades – and I have fortunately been across many, and many were quite large.

But, his was just too big. After our first encounter, sexually, I asked him how his ex-wife, a tiny woman, had dealt with his size. He assured me that she had gotten used to it.

I never could. We couldn't have sex with him on top; it was too painful. I simply didn't have the upper body strength to be on top – I couldn't keep that much of it from going in for that prolonged amount of a time. And, let's face it, I've never been one to work out or lift weights, so my arms simply weren't strong enough. Someone would have to have Michelle Obama arms to be on top of Michael. Trying to have sex with Michael was like trying to brush your teeth with two broken hands. No matter what position or angle, the pain was there. We usually did it with him behind me, both of us on our sides. It was never really good, because I couldn't get that into it – I was always in terror of too much penis inching its way into the insides of me.

Still, I continued to date him. He had a really sweet mom, and he made great money. One of our first dates was a weekend trip to Eureka Springs. He was thoughtful, sweet. Aside from his gigantic water tower of a penis, he also had some big country ways that I couldn't stand.

He hunted all the time: deer, turkey, duck. Ducks were his favorite, and he had a duck camp that he and some of his friends loved to stay at. It was a shitty trailer on acres and acres of land. Snarly trees humping their way up and down the brown and tan land, a few small ponds, no electricity. Boring. He continually talked about us staying the weekend out at the duck camp, but the idea of taking that much cock while on a mattress that countless other men and who knows who else has slept on just didn't seem like a good enough idea for me to accept the invitation. When he wasn't at the duck camp, or riding me around on a four-wheeler at the duck camp, he was talking lovingly about the duck camp. Again — boring!

Michael was the epitome of country boy. His spoken English was terrible, and then there was his pepper problem. Anytime we ate, and it was mostly out at restaurants, he would get his plate of food and immediately, without tasting it first, begin to coat it with black pepper. I mean, the entire plate, meat, sides, all of it would look like a black, pebbly mountain when he finished his pepperin'. I found this to be entirely ignorant. I mean, he couldn't help that he had a ten-inch penis, I guess, but the damn pepper!

Michael also found it annoying that I did not have cable at my apartment. On a teacher's salary in Arkansas, I didn't have a lot of extra cash, and therefore I didn't have things like cable or food two weeks after payday.

“Since I'm here so much, why don't you let me get you some cable,” he told me one afternoon as we were drinking and watching PBS. That statement floored me, reminding me of the time a guy I was casually dating offered to buy me a bigger TV set. What was it about guys and their need to help me watch more TV on a bigger screen? I mean, didn't they realize a woman might read books and listen to music?

For whatever reason, this cable comment was the last straw. I broke up with Michael, and I hope he is reclining at home, watching a million channels – probably all with Duck Dynasty on them – with some little woman cooking him food, piling on his pepper and taking his huge penis in her jumbo-tron sized vagina.

Then there's Greg. Greg and I started dating under not-so-moral circumstances. It was actually pretty shitty what I did to Heather, but honestly, I didn't really feel bad about it.

Kurt, the first real love of my life, and I had broken up a couple of weeks before, and I believed no man would be interested in me. Break-ups (for me) come with one added bonus, however. I lose a ton of weight. I am by no means a beautiful woman, but back in the day, when I was slim, I was pretty darn cute.

After my break-up, I spent a lot of time with my friend Heather. She was recently divorced and dating Greg. Greg was divorced, too, and very handsome. Over six feet tall, and I like my guys tall, he was funny and carefree and we were all friends. One afternoon I called Heather. I was lonely and feeling depressed.

“What're you doing today? I'm so bored.” This usually meant I wanted to get together and drink.

“I can't today, Amy. I have to work. Call Greg, he's off. You guys can go grab something to eat and talk.” Heather worked for an airline company, in booking, and had to work strange days and hours, at least compared to mine as a high school teacher.

I know that Heather made this offer for two reasons. One: she knew I was hurting and wanted someone to be there for me. She and her husband had been Kurt and my

neighbors for over a year when we were still in college, and she knew how devastated I was. Two: she trusted Greg and she trusted me.

I called Greg up, it was a Sunday, and we decided to meet up at Friday's for some food and drinks. Our conversation was wonderful, and we were having a great time. I was totally attracted to him, and decided to invite him to my place for some more drinks. He and Heather had been there many times; they even helped put together a table for me soon after I had moved in my new apartment. Good friends.

Once at my apartment, we quickly got busy making out. I don't remember how far we got, but I know it wasn't all the way to sex. I have no doubt within the next two or three meetings we got that far, because once we hooked up, we spent a ton of time together.

We knew that what we did was wrong, and Greg immediately said that he would break it off with Heather, which he sort of did, but honestly, I was in such a strange place emotionally, I didn't care too much. I just wanted to be around him and have a good time.

Greg and I hung out with each other a lot that summer. We drank and watched movies, rented at Blockbuster down the street. Sweet Greg never once mentioned my lack of cable, and we could drink and sex it up to local news as well as with a rented flick.

However, Greg did have two slight problems (if you don't count that he was a cheater), he drank way too much and he also had way too much penis.

Greg knew he was well endowed, and he had many moves that allowed our sex to be quite good. I still had to go to the doctor with a traumatized vagina. The doctor told me this was called Honeymoon Syndrome, and that it would pass.

Greg and I would go with friends, drink all day. He would be all cuddly, and eventually fall asleep—on the couch, on the bed, on the floor. It was a pretty good thing we had going on, until . . .

I had been getting calls lately from Heather. First, we weren't hanging out anymore. I kept coming up with excuses why I couldn't meet up with her. It was summer time, so work couldn't be an excuse. I came up with things like I had to clean my bathroom, wash my car, go visit my parents, go to the doctor – I just left off the part about the broken vagina. She would still call me and we would talk for hours. She and Greg had broken up, she told me. He still called. They would have lunch plans to get together and talk, but he would cancel at the last minute. She would call and I could hear the quiver in her voice, the worry. Had he met someone else? Why wouldn't he answer his phone?

Then one night, I was snuggled up on the couch watching *Dances with Wolves*. With commercial breaks included, I think its run time was six hours. Don't watch that movie on TV, just a heads up.

“What are you up to?” Heather asked.

“Not much, you?”

“Yeah, just . . . wondering why my good friend is fucking my ex-boyfriend!” She yelled over the phone. I felt my stomach tighten and I knew the time of reckoning was upon me. Did I mention Heather was almost six feet tall and could probably beat the shit out of me in ten seconds flat?

“Wha, huh, I'm, uh . . .”

“Shut up you stupid bitch!” Then, a second before she hung up, I could swear she said, “Why?”

Guilt, an apparently essential emotion in our species, worked on me that night. Of course, more than that, I think my need to move on from a drunk with a too large-penis had begun to seep into my heart-broken mind.

Was seeing Greg really worth all of this? Maybe it was just too much. Would this relationship really help me? I knew the answers. Sometimes in my life, the desire to have something will outweigh the need to have something good. However, by being able to take what wasn't mine, in a sick way – I am sure not anything about this time in my life was healthy – I had gotten something more valuable than gold. I had self-esteem. It came out of nowhere and smacked me in the soul. And like a great big throbbing penis, self-esteem can feel you up in places you never knew were hollow.

## Seven-Bean Soup

Arkansas, December 2000, was hit by an ice storm the likes of which few people had seen. Talk to anyone now who lived through it, and memories will spark and some story will come forth. Larger cities came to a screeching halt, and small towns deadened to any type of life outside the home. This was beyond childhood dreams of days off from school. Life without heat or electricity was the norm for most people for almost a week.

In Karen's house, the gas cook stove was the heater and we huddled around the dining table, drinking coffee (Karen) and tea (me) in the mornings and whatever alcoholic concoction we could mix up from the early afternoons until the late nights.

Even though our age difference was pronounced, single women like us can find much common ground, and a friendship can be forged that sometimes may last a lifetime. Karen was seventeen years older than I, but both of us were teachers, and single, and struggling financially to make ends meet. In the early days of that friendship, which

included the hardships of that winter frozen in place, we shared a time of frivolity and laughter that is hard to find in everyday life. The frozen winter would cause untold damage and heartache to so many, but in this time the two of us made memories we both think fondly upon now.

“Hand me that pack of matches,” I said to Karen.

“Are you lighting another damn candle? Hell, we won’t have enough to last more than a couple of days the way you’re using them up.” Karen was a witty, sarcastic friend. The banter between us was part of our friendship, and prickly words were more likely to be given than sweet kindnesses.

“Well, it’s dark outside and we need some more light. Besides, how’re you gonna get ready for your big date if it’s too dark to see?”

“I can’t believe he’s actually daring to drive on these streets to come hang out with me,” Karen said. “It’s about a forty-five minute drive under normal circumstances, but I have no idea how long it’ll take him tonight. He left around four, so hopefully he’ll be here by six.”

The he we discussed was a man, Craig, in his late forties whom Karen had met online and began meeting for drinks soon afterward. He had gravelly gray hair and a leathered face. He was slim in the way middle-aged men who smoke too much are, and his eyes were a faded, washed out blue. At one time, he must have been fairly attractive. Now, he was a notch above ugly. Not fat, not bald, and had a little cash.

On this icy night, the wind made no noise, so that when I walked out to the garage closet to find more candles, the night’s eerie silence made my ears ring. A cold, darker



than dark night, with only moon and reflection of orb on the ice, with no noise, no cars, no animals, no anything. It was an other world and too calm to be calming.

Soon, I blew in my hands and jogged back inside, two candles – one under each armpit – accompanying me in to the warmth of her house. We sat and waited on Karen’s company to arrive.

When Karen heard the crunch of ice and snow on tires, she jumped from her seat. Her hand, now holding a whiskey and water, flew to her mouth as she took a big gulp. Excitement and anticipation blazed from her eyes, and at that moment, she really was beautiful. A knock came from the door.

Craig entered and gave his hellos. We had all met before at Applebee’s, so it wasn’t an awkward grouping. Karen quickly offered him a drink, which he accepted. He had brought along bottle of rum. “Good for the cold,” he told us. We all drank and talked around the dining room table for a while. After about an hour, Karen set a pan on the stove and pulled out a container of Seven Bean Soup from the refrigerator. She was sure to open and close the door quickly, as without any electricity, she wanted to keep the cold in. She poured the brown concoction into the pan and turned the gas nozzle. A zip sounded and bright blue flames nestled under the pot. “Who wants soup?”

We all had a bowl. Karen and I had only drunk alcohol most of the day, and we were starving in a way that drunken people who finally remember to eat starve. One minute you are fine, the next, there is a yawning hole in your gut, needing, demanding food. We lapped up that soup quickly.

After dinner, Karen automatically cleared the table for us, and we settled down to the rum. No electricity means no TV or radio, so we began drunken bullshitting, a

Southern tradition, whether it be around a bonfire, around a pool, on a boat, or seated in the candle light of a table in a little rental house in Arkansas. We told jokes and laughed and it was a fun night. We smoked all of our cigarettes, but Craig said he had an old crumpled pack left in his truck, so I volunteered to go get them.

Upon returning to the house, I opened the door to see the two of them kissing. Like any good friend, I read the signs and simply took one of the candles and the cigarette pack and made my way down the dark hall to the guest bedroom. I fell into the bed, clothes still on, candle close by on the nightstand – still burning – and slammed into a drunken sleep immediately. Seconds or hours later, something woke me from my icy sleep. I had forgotten to pull the quilts up over me, and I was shaking on the bed. There, in the doorway, stood Craig.

“Karen’s sick,” he said. I could barely see him, just an outline of a man. The candle had burned down to a nub, and its light was just a glimmer of yellow from the nightstand.

I jumped up to help. “What happened?”

“She threw up all over the bed. I moved her to the couch, but now I don’t have anywhere to sleep. Thought I’d see if there was room for me in here with you.” He walked in through the doorway and stood by me, both of us by the bed.

“No. Go sleep on the couch with Karen.”

“Now come on. I want to sleep in here with you.” He was close enough now that I could see his face, the dusting of beard growth and his small smile.

“Don’t make me yell. I will wake her up and you can drive your ass home right now or you can go sleep on the damn couch.”

He turned and walked back to the living room.

When I awoke the next morning, Craig was long gone. Karen greeted me as soon as I walked out of the guest bedroom. She had a half-smile on her face.

“He woke me up to say goodbye. I told him I’d make him some breakfast, but he said he’d a lot to do at his house today. I got sick last night. Threw up Seven Bean Soup everywhere. Damn, I’m embarrassed. He put me on the couch and slept by me. He’s a sweetie, I think.”

This was no time for a witty comeback, a sarcastic phrase. This was a moment to just be quiet and nod. Friendships that last must boil sometimes, and sometimes they must simmer and let the goodness sneak out and submerge the other. I don’t know much about cooking, but I think that what it takes to be a good friend is sometimes just to shut your mouth.

## Summer Jobs

Most of my life, I earned money either teaching or waiting tables. The first three years of my first teaching job out of college, I worked at Tia's Tex Mex during the summers to make enough money to live. I always enjoyed the first day back at the high school from summer break. All of the teachers and administrators would be in folding chairs in the cafeteria, and we would play little games to catch up on everyone's summer. One question that always made me mad was "Who traveled the farthest from the States this summer?" And another was, "Who went on the longest vacation?"

I always hoped the principal would ask, "Who worked a second job and had to see the most people making out in the walk-in freezer?" Alas, he never did. However, being single and a new teacher, in a career field with mostly married women and men, I did

note that these people would not readily understand my lifestyle. This was many, many years ago. Now, most teachers, or at least half of the females, are divorced, so many of them probably know the lifestyle of second jobs; in my first years at Cabot High School – no one else did.

Waitressing. Let me explain the terminology. The politically correct term these days is the gender non-specific *server*. In my days of waiting tables, which go back to the early 90s, the word used was waitress. I find this fitting as a moniker that presupposes a sex in an industry filled with dirty old men (the customers) and dirty young men (the cooks). Most people would think it took a good memory and the ability to give fast, polite service to guarantee I made decent tips. But, that was not all it took. My experience was that it took incalculable presence of mind, unending patience, and the ability to let people who you do not know touch you and tug at you, snap their fingers at you. You must answer to “Hey, You” and “Miss” and “Honey.” You must laugh at dirty jokes and sexual remarks or, at the least, let them go unnoticed. You must accept the responsibility for mistakes, those made by the kitchen and the other servers with whom you work. You must tip out lazy bus boys and sexually deviant bartenders. You must be able to rake in thirty-five cents into your palm as if it were not thirty-five little daggers into your soul. All the while knowing you are making two dollars and thirteen cents per hour plus tips.

If you have never refilled Dr. Peppers or chip baskets, or thrown away five dollar kids’ meals with a smile as you noted the sixteen packets of opened and crushed crackers on the floor underneath little juniors high chair, you may not understand. And that is fine. However, I believe it is a real American rite of passage, and trial by fire, to work as a server in the food industry at least once in your life.

I did it. I sucked it up, kept my mouth shut, and took the jabs and the orders with as much respect as I could muster. I worked sick and hung over and tired, weekend nights and split shifts on Sundays. I had tips stolen and orders carried to incorrect tables by rookies. I did it in high school, in college, and those first three years as an underpaid teacher.

The last day I worked as a server stands out for sure. It was Tia's, the land of never-ending chips and salsa. I had worked there three summers, and miraculously, one manager was there all three. She was sweet and funny, and she looked like a shorter, slimmer Ellen DeGeneres. Tracy knew what a hard worker I was, and that I was dependable. I never called in sick or late, and in the restaurant biz, that is rare. She always hired me back each May, and I would work halfway through August. By this last summer, I worked the bar area mostly. There were about sixteen tables, and the patio had about ten. Usually, it was myself and the bartender waiting on the tables. Since I worked the day shift, ten a.m. till four p.m., there was not a lot of bar traffic, so the bartender could handle about as many tables as I did.

That day, we were swamped. It was a Friday, and the hostess, instead of going on a forced wait\* just continually sat people. I had at least ten tables, and everyone wanted me to hurry because they only had an hour for lunch. Two women, seated by the windows, were being especially rude to me. Sometime during the initial order, one of the ladies said to me, "I didn't know you people . . ." "I can't even remember what we were talking about, some sauce or cooking technique. What I do remember is that she called me "You people." I guess all of us waitresses were the same to her.

This hour-long travesty had me running to the chips bin, running to the soda fountain, grabbing orders on huge Tia's trays and telling people to watch their plates. "It's hot!" I told them again and again.

Sweat poured off of me, like any customer wants to see that. I think the bartender had about three tables, because he had a huge catering order he was getting together. As I was running by their table, the lady who had called me "you people" stuck her arm out and grabbed me by the shirt. I put my tray down and took a knee. "Can I help you?"

"Yes. We need our drinks refilled and some more chips as soon as possible. We only have an hour for lunch."

I sweetly looked at her and her friend, from my subservient place on the floor, with salsa already running into the knee of my black pants. Then, I let her have it. I think she took it for every person I had ever had to kiss ass for, for every person who snapped at me or physically grabbed onto me. I loved going off on her.

"Listen, Ma'am. I have a college degree; so don't talk to me like that. Do you have a college degree?"

Astounded, she started to make weird noises from her gaping open mouth. (Look, I am not condoning what I said her, but I was pissed, so please don't hold it against me.)

"Also, you see the number of tables I have here? You see how busy we are? I am the only one waiting on all of these tables. Do you think it was a good idea to come here if you only have an hour for lunch? Do you think that I can go faster than humanly possible just so you can have some more chips? By the way, the way your pants fit, I think you could go without the third bowl of chips and salsa, but that is just my humble opinion."

Before I could get another word out of my mouth – and I am glad she stopped me because there is no telling what horrible stuff would have followed, she said, “I’m going to speak to your manager!”

“Of course, sit right here and let me go get her for you.” At this point, I knew I was done. This would be my last day, my last minute as an employee of Tia’s. I walked casually to get Tracy and told her my table needed to talk to her. I escorted her to the ladies, and said, “Here she is.” I smiled and walked back to Tracy’s office, taking my apron off and getting ready to say goodbye.

Tracy came in about five minutes later, already having pulled someone from the other side of the restaurant (non-smoking) to work my tables. “You need to go home today and cool off. That was inexcusable.”

At this, I started to cry. Not because I was upset; it was relief. I could leave now. I knew I was making enough money teaching to work only during the school year and this was the end of the poor Amy who had to scrape and bow to make money (that is what I thought – I would learn later that a woman will have to scrape and bow many times in her life, but at that moment I thought I was free.)

“Wait. Stop crying. I’m sorry. Forget those women. Take a break, and I’ll put you out in non-smoking.”

“Tracy, thanks, but that’s o.k. I’m finished with this job.”

She pulled her hands up in her lap and made little jazz-hand motions, “No. No. You don’t need to quit.”



I told her I was finished with this, that the school year was about to start anyway, and that I appreciated all of her help and kindness over the last three summers. But, we needed to part ways.

Her last words to me as I walked out the back door were, “If you ever want to work here again, just let me know. You’ll always have a job here.”

I have never waited tables since.

\* Forced wait – even if there are open tables in the restaurant, the hostess will not seat people in them if there are not enough wait staff to give good service. This is why sometimes you will go into restaurant and there will be open tables and you still have to wait to be seated – you will most likely say to your dining partner, “They have tables right there” in anger or frustration. It is simply because you would get bad service, and if they put you on a wait, the experience will be much better.

I am on a forced wait now.

# Mythologies

Sharon Rogers lorded over the B Building at the high school. Her husband, Larry, was the superintendent, and she was the senior AP English teacher. Her manner bespoke royalty, and the one time I called her Sharon, she let me know that, professionally, it would be better to use Mrs. Rogers when I spoke to her. Of course, all the other teachers I met in my short time as a new teacher had offered their first names to me, as colleagues normally do. Even the principal, my superior, told me to call him Robert.

I called her Mrs. Rogers for the remainder of her time there. Sharon (and I will call her that now because it was asinine for her to demand I use any other moniker) did bequeath to me one of the best opportunities in my entire teaching career, the Greek and Roman Mythology class.

The first time I walked into her room, I was in for a surprise. She had decorated it all in purple. Purple baskets for turned in homework, purple plastic flowers on a shelf, purple folders hanging on the wall. “It’s my color,” she told me. Now, I was in her domain on some small errand or to ask a question. Honestly, I don’t know what possessed me to enter that room, but I did. As I looked through some of her graded term papers, and she lamented the poor state of student knowledge, I noticed she had counted five points off a paper for a student using the possessive Keats’ (note the absence of the second s after the apostrophe). I asked why she had done this. “Oh, it is incorrect to omit the s after the apostrophe.”

I hesitated briefly and then did the impossible; I tried to correct her. “Well, actually, especially with proper names, I believe it’s optional to use the last s. I actually find it preferable to omit it.” I don’t think I even made eye contact with her as I said this.

“You are mistaken. One must always use the s after the apostrophe.”

And that, my dear reader, was the end of that conversation. Feeling chastised and somewhat scorned, I hurriedly excused myself to get back to my own classroom. Later in the day, as I walked up the sidewalk that connected B building to the office, I ran into Sharon coming out of the library. “Oh, Amy,” she called to me. Notice her use of my first name. I guess while she found it incredibly unprofessional for me to use her first name, it was by all counts perfection for her to use mine – as she continued to do the entire seven years we worked at the same school.

“Mrs. Rogers. What can I do for you?”

“I was just researching that question you asked me. The answer is that with proper names, one may use or not use an s after the apostrophe to show possession. I wanted to

get back to you as soon as I could with the correct information.” She smiled all motherly down at me, as she was quite a tall woman.

I wish I could tell you that I had a smart, witty, blunt as hell comeback to this pompous woman, but I didn't. I am embarrassed to say to you, kind reader, that I said, “Thanks for letting me know.”

If I tell you now that that conversation still upsets me in some ways, would that make me an asshole of the hundredth degree? Or, does it say more about me than the story does about Sharon? That, sweet reader, is for you to decide. I just know that being young and new in a career field can make one feel powerless. Sharon knew, sensed somehow my inescapably wobbly self-esteem and fed on it like a shark to my bleeding leg. This is also the woman who offered me teacher clothes when I was struggling to make it on my skimpy salary, and who also brought me an inspirational book when I was going through a horrible time in my personal life. So, like all humans, she was not just one-dimensional. She was not just one conversation. I pretty much will always remember her as a bitch, but I know she grew to respect me as a teacher, and that led to her giving me the mythology class, a valuable gift indeed. I love mythology.

In sixth grade, I read the story of Echo in my Language Arts class. That story has remained with me ever since. The idea of loving something so much and being cursed to only echo his words touched something inside my young mind that never left. When I began teaching the stories of the ancient Greeks and Romans, I was interested to see the complexity of Echo's story. First, she was in love with Narcissus, not the most humble of men. He was in fact in love with himself, and drowns while gazing into his reflection in the water. Before his death, Echo had helped Zeus hide a love affair from his wife,

Hera, and Echo's punishment was inflicted by that most jealous of wives. Now, as an adult, I see Echo-girls and women all around me. Young girls and ladies who decide to take on the personality of their loves to make themselves the perfect fit. Echoing the man's interests or music choices as if they were her own.

Echo still lives out in the woods somewhere, and you can hear her repeating your words . . . She is eternally living as only a voice now that the rest of her has faded away. Fading away is something that a lot of women do as well. Sometimes I think I am fading away, the me whom I loved and cherished now only a hollow echo of my once beautiful, vivacious self. I am making a concerted effort to stop the fading, no longer echoing others' words but typing my own in blazing red and stark, cool blue across a page for other women to read. May my words echo forever.

Another of my favorite stories is when Paris was asked to judge a beauty contest. He was a handsome, sexy young man. However, had he used forethought (Prometheus could have helped him in this endeavor), he would have seen that choosing among three goddesses was a losing proposition. One would win, two would be out for blood – goddesses did not take rejection well. Hera, queen of the gods, offered him power. He was offered victories on the battlefield by Athena, goddess of war. Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, sensuality, and let's face it, sex, offered him the most beautiful woman in the world. His decision, to pick Aphrodite, led to the Trojan War, by way of Helen, whose face we all know launched a thousand ships. Paris's story does not resound so strongly with me, but Helen's does. Actually, the people she came to love, the Trojans, hold my heart. You see, like how most women swoon when they see a handsome man in

uniform, the Greek men had all longed for Helen before she married Menelaus. They had decided that when she finally chose her husband to be, the rest of them would have to agree to then protect that union, lest it be a bitter feud of dead suitors one after the other. She chose Menelaus, not too wisely if you ask me, and then as the story goes, eventually ran off with young, sexy Paris. Odysseus, now in happily married land with Penelope and their young son Telemachus, did not want to go with the Greek armada to battle Troy for the beautiful wife of Menelaus. He, that wily man, played as if an insane man, taking his oxen and plowing up his own harvest. The Greeks, however, wanting to test his sanity, placed sweet baby Telemachus in the blade's path. Odysseus had to snap out of the act and save his son's life. Therefore, fate or the gods set him upon his own many year quest.

For over ten years, men were away from families and jobs, Greece left to who knows what, while a bunch of Greek men went to get back the lovely and deceitful Helen from the muscled arms of her younger lover.

Paris' honorable brother Hector will always be the saddest of all the people in this story, whether he is a character of some great poet's imagination or a real man set down in history by that same poet. He is a hero who died for a bunch of bullshit. Like people do everyday now. Dead over a pair of shoes, a religious idea, a scorned love, a lost job, oil in another land. We humans pick our battles en masse and individually on some of the strangest ideas. Are we crazy? Are the gods still playing their petty games?

My best mythology student was Jake. He was seventeen at the time, a handsome, intelligent, popular football player who dated one of my yearbook editors, herself a great girl. Jake fell in love with mythology as I had. He loved the stories, the family trees, and

the powers. He especially loved how his knowledge of mythology opened up a new world to him in his day-to-day life. He would bound into class and recall for us some mythological reference he had heard on the radio or seen on a TV commercial. He was so intelligent and driven. A good young man who would go on to win my end-of-year Mythology award for the class. I still remember after the semester tests were turned in that third period, before the bell rang for lunch, our class had a bowling competition with some pillowy Chuck E. Cheese nerf-like bowling pins and balls. I laughed more that thirty minutes than probably the rest of the year combined. Jake's team won. I had envisioned a future for him that could rival the gods. He would be a loving husband, a good father, a trusted friend to the people in his life. His career would be successful, whatever direction he chose to take. When I knew him, he was a Christian and in love with sweet, pretty Meagan. I was overjoyed to know them both. I can still see his face. About six feet tall, light brown hair, a few freckles, a strong jaw, straight teeth. He was most definitely the sweetest, most amiable young man I have ever had the honor of teaching.

I don't know why he killed himself four years later while in college. I don't know any of the details. I contacted Meagan, but she didn't know many details either, as they had broken up years before and barely kept in touch. Yet I wonder all the time, why? How did this happen? Why? There was so much potential in him. If I only knew then what would happen, I would have done anything to help him. Was he upset even then? I can't imagine that he was. What transpired, what could have broken his soul so that he wanted to leave this world? Do we ever know the inner soul of a person? The battles they rage and lose? What happens when they are inside their own bottles? I knew him only for

a short time, but I know the world missed a great man. I hurt for his family, and I hurt for him.

The gods, they can be cruel.

Sharon Rogers retired a few years before I left my job at Cabot High School for Japan. I wonder about her sometimes when I see my copy of *The Purpose Driven Life* that she gave me. She ruled our building and the English department with her royal purple and her self-involved belief in her own majesty. Once her husband retired, she fell through the clouds into the world of the rest of us teachers, and she only stayed a year or two after that until she retired.

No one who works there now even knows who she is. The students do not remember Jake. They have become stories I think about sometimes, a mythology of my time at Cabot High School.



## The Wedding

I believe in signs. I believe in coincidence. I don't exactly know whether I believe things are meant to be or happen for a reason. These statements you hear a lot over your lifetime. The three-year old dies of cancer: "God wanted her with him." The girl who is raped by her cousin and becomes pregnant: "Everything happens for a reason." I mean, if I get right down to my bones about it, I don't think everything happens for a reason or as part of God's plan. I do believe in God. I believe we are probably just put here on this hurling, twirling rock and left to our own devices. Our decisions have consequences, acts of extreme horror happen, and accidents occur. They are just accidents, pretty much.

Saturday night, May 27, I was the designated driver for my small group of friends. This was one for my record books because I was never, ever the designated driver before. We were going to Riverfest to see Dwight Yoakum perform.

Riverfest is a big deal in Arkansas.

Once summer is upon us, down by the Arkansas River, at what is creatively named Riverfront Park, a four-day festival takes over the downtown area. There are tons of bands, mostly ones that were really cool twenty years ago, and a few headliners that are presently cool. Beer and food vendors set up, and it becomes a four-day, four-night drunk fest. Surrounding the park area are the numerous bars that have live local music, plenty of locally brewed beers and jumbo corndogs and pretzels with the big, snowflake sized salt. Thousands of people come out, buy the Riverbucks, get busy drinking, partying, and standing in line at port-a-potties.

My girlfriends were definitely buzzed as we walked along the sidewalk. Dwight was scheduled to go on stage in about an hour, and we were all hot and ready to find someplace to sit down to cool off. We decided to mosey over to the Underground Pub, a pretty cool downtown bar usually, and on a Riverfest night, a packed house for sure. They could get a drink and chat up some guys, and I could find a Sprite and sit in anticipation of seeing Dwight, who still to this day is my favorite country artist.

As I walked up to the bar to order my Sprite, a drunken man fell into me. "Whoa, please watch out," I said to him.

He just burped and walked away. Normally, in any bar on a Saturday night, you will run into your share of drunks, but during Riverfest, intoxication takes on a new meaning, and it's hazardous just to walk.

As I was ordering, I saw one of the tallest men I have ever seen leaning over the bar at the other end. There he was in a white military uniform, and he took command of the room with his size and stance. I remember thinking, he is so good looking. I noticed he had dark circles under his eyes, and if not for those, I thought he would be gorgeous. (I would later discover his dark circles were hereditary – but I did not know the mystery of his genes at that time.)

Grabbing the Sprite in my hand, I walked over to his table just as he sat down. “It’s really not safe here. Do you mind if I sit with you guys? I mean, in your uniforms, I feel I’d be safer than out on my own.”

“Sure.” He and his uniformed friend said in unison.

“Okay if I bring my friends?”

“Sure.”

We all settled into bar chat. They were here tonight running the Navy Flight Simulator. Upon hearing that, I knew they were Navy men. I didn’t know much about the military, but I knew those were the people who mostly went out on ships. (Now that I have been a part of Navy life for many years, I think the idea of being out in a ship is one of the most paradoxical ideas in our world. One is free of land, sailing, going from one exotic locale to another. However, when one is on the ship, the cramped quarters are atrocious. Sailors are bottled up, one on top of the other. One goes for freedom and adventure, and gets it. But, at a cost.)

I asked Dan, the tall one who was by far the cutest, “Where are you from?”

“Canada,” he responded.

“I hate Canada,” I blurted out. The table erupted in laughter, but it was partly true. I’ve always had this thing about Canada; it seems like it isn’t really a country or something. Like they are just wanna be Frenchmen or Americans. I knew this was not true – at all – but Canada has been a fun country to make fun of, border or not.

My retort made him smile. The night led on to a decision of skipping Dwight, and since I was really starting to like this tall Navy man, I didn’t mind so much. After a little more talking, we all decided to go to a bar and sing karaoke after the Navy guys’ simulator shift ended, which was in about an hour. We said our see ya laters and met up later that night.

At the Karaoke bar, Dan and I were hitting it off. We were at All-Stars, a bar about two miles from my apartment. With the change of venue, I decided I could drink. I had left my car many nights at All Stars, so I knew I could let one of the guys drive me home if I needed. We all drank and did the stuff people do at hole-in-the-wall bars. Dan and his Navy buddy even did their own rendition of *You’ve Lost that Loving Feeling*, and we all cheered like high school girls.

That night was the night I met my husband, Daniel Little. What is interesting (to me, at least) is that he was not supposed to be running the simulator that night. He was supposed to be running it on Friday night and having the weekend off. The reason he wanted the weekend off was so he could drive to Mississippi and see his (current-at-the-time) wife and son.

Dan’s wife had filed for divorce about six months before I met him. Because of all the damage to the area she lived in – Katrina damage – including the courthouse, most everything on the docket was backed up. This included any claims that had to go through

the courthouse, which at this time was a giant tent. However, even though they were divorcing, I think Dan was still driving there every now and then to see his son and have sex with his soon-to-be-ex wife.

The redeeming aspect of it all was that Dan told me that first night that he was married. He explained it as best as he could, since I was pretty much sitting on his lap waiting for a kiss. But, before he would kiss me, he told me that truth.

We began dating immediately, and it truly was the most romantic courtship of my life. Dan was attentive, fun, had enough money to take me to really nice places on dates. We saw each other every day; I spent the night at his house every night – even though we weren't having sex yet. We would talk all night and then he would get up and go to work. We would meet for lunch; it was great. I was on summer break, so the timing couldn't have been better. He did romantic things for me and was a wonderful cook. I truly felt protected, taken care of for the first time in my dating life.

Dan told me he loved me before his divorce was final. Of course, in his defense, it took over sixteen months from filing to finalization of the divorce. I remember he was drunk in my car, we were driving to some friends' house, and he turned to me and said, "I didn't want to tell you this yet, but I can't keep it inside. I love you."

We moved in together after about six months of dating, and within the year I had an engagement ring. We planned on marrying in July (a little over a year since we met), since his divorce would be final in June. We hit a snag when his parents came from Canada for the divorce hearing. They came in June and stayed living with him until

November. When they first arrived, I was living with him. Even though we were engaged, I knew his Baptist father didn't approve, and to be honest, when Dan was (is) around his father, no one else really exists. It became a fact that I was not really involved with anything, from meal planning to the temperature of the thermostat. I moved out, ending the relationship.

Dan and his father helped me load the U-Haul, and when the day arrived for me to leave, Dan was begging me to stay. However, I had plunked down almost two grand on deposits and rent, so I was moving. I told him that I would think about the possibility to continue to date, but for the time being, we were broken up.

I remember walking in Wal-Mart that first day in Cabot, having finally moved to the town where I worked after ten years of living thirty or more minutes away. I thought to myself, as I looked down at the engagement ring, I'm going to be alone. That thought scared me. I think I knew then that I would probably let Dan back into my life. I don't think I was actually missing Dan, The months living with his parents had poisoned me, along with the fact that we postponed getting married in July because we were going to elope. You cannot elope easily if your parents are living with you and know your every move.

Soon, we did move into a relationship again. This time, however, I had my own apartment and Dan had to make the effort to come see me on my terms every evening. We planned to marry as soon as his parents left for Canada, which we found out would be Nov. 3, 2007. Dan booked the flight, booked the rooms, even booked the wedding package – Wedding Package B, which was a good deal and provided lots of nice extras

for a couple on the cheap. We were going to Vegas. All I had to do was bring a dress and some gambling money.

The day of the flight came, and I had taken off one week of work. We were going to spend five days and six nights in Las Vegas. Dan was slow going getting ready to leave for the airport, and I was getting pissed. When we finally got there, the clerk told us that we had arrived there too late. We had to be at check-in at least thirty minutes before all domestic flights. I started crying. It was a sign, I thought to myself. I told Dan. “See, you wouldn’t listen to me. It’s a sign; take me home.”

Dan did some redirection, and got us on another flight. We ended up going to Minnesota for a layover and then on to beautiful, exciting Las Vegas. There we married. Outside of a Howard Johnson motel, with a waiting group of Scotsmen in kilts behind us. (There are always lines to get married in Las Vegas.)

Now, looking back, there were so many indications that Dan and I were not a good match. His dependency on his father, his blind obedience should have shown me that there would be problems later on in our marriage when it comes to his family, especially the hold his father has on him. I think, also, the speed with which he made decisions should have been an indicator that he moved too fast – in almost every aspect of his life. Dan is a decision maker, but not a thinker, and this has lead to lots of financial problems.

I think what blows my mind the most is that if his simulation day had not been changed, I would never have met him. If I had not been the designated driver that night, I would have been drinking and flirting with all those men who bumped into me and would

probably never even have made it into the Underground Pub for a Sprite, but instead hung with the crowd at the beer tents.

If I had read that missed flight as a warning, and maybe it was, then I would not be married today. I am not saying that I am miserable, because I am not. I am not truly happy right now either. My relationship is not satisfying and I believe down to my toes that a real marriage is supposed to be more than what we have. I wonder if many couples are like us, and I just don't know. Many people hide their inner souls, and maybe no one talks about these things, at least not to me.



## Siren Wail

I watched the meteorologist on the television warning us that the tornado was now driving itself down Highway 38. I knew that it was almost upon me, and that the siren wail was the final warning to take shelter. The old storm shelter was awaiting me in the backyard, but too many memories of dark, damp spider holes of shelter kept me from taking that route.

Finding shelter was not new to me. I had grown up in Heber Springs, Arkansas, next to a large lake. Without fail, the tornadoes in the area would find their way down the path that led to the lake and fly off over it into the distance. Arkansas tornadoes are not the long, tubular ones from Wizard of OZ; they are short and fat and remind one of a squat funnel – not unlike the one the Tin Man wears atop his head.

I jumped from my chair and ran to get my sweet dog Buddy. I quickly scooped him up, and we made our way to the bathroom. I left the door open to hear the television and got into the bathtub holding my dog and my cell phone. Buddy, sensing danger and being a dog, quickly leapt from my arms and jumped from the tub and ran into another part of the house. I said a quick prayer for him and waited. The meteorologist said that the storm was four minutes from Deer Creek Subdivision, and this I knew to be the grouping of houses mere blocks me.

Then, the electricity went off, and his voice stilled. I was huddled in the tub with the light from my cell phone. I knew that it was four minutes until something would either happen or not. I prayed for the or not. I shivered in the plastic tub, alone, knowing that Dan was in Memphis on business, probably already into a second hour of sleep. I watched the cell phone's screen as the first minute ticked by. Slowly, I prayed, a mantra over and over, to be safe, to have the tornado miss this house, for protection for my dog and myself. Another minute ticked. Two more to go. No real thoughts were in my head, the vortex of a tornado that might bear down on me and my little dog, too, had sucked any thought from my brain. Another minute passed.

Looking at that iPhone screen, ten forty-four, knowing that at ten forty-five it would be upon me or not, I waited. Then, ten forty-five, then ten forty-six, then more minutes, just waiting to make sure. Finally, after ten minutes, I slowly moved out of the tub and went to look for Buddy. Within minutes of my leaving the bathroom, the lights and television winked back on, storming my house with visions and sounds – the tornado had passed my area, and there was not another coming behind it. Relief swallowed me, and we soon turned in for the night. In the morning school would be closed, as the high

school where I worked had sustained a small amount of damage and some roads were littered with debris.

My friend and colleague Linda would pick me up around eleven that day for a lunch to celebrate the day off from work, and as we drove up Highway 38 into town, I would see the destruction that had hurled itself my way before the tornado had picked itself up and whooshed into oblivion, millions of particles of wind and air and dust and wood dissipating into nothingness.

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In memory, with the first of the siren's piercing wail, my family and I head to the crawl space under our house. First, we must go out the front door, then walk down our porch steps. We make a sharp left and march quickly in single file – me grasping the shirttail of my mother, until we round the corner and my father hunches down to unlatch the small door that leads to the crawl space under our house. One by one we crawl through the green door which is nestled on the bottom side of our small house – the side that faces the lake – then under the flash-lit air. We all look at each other as my father begins to speak. Our commander leading us once again.

Living next to the lake, in the center of Arkansas, on what my parents called the mini-tornado alley, was never something I thought of as strange. I grew up ignorant of the fact that some children in the spring and fall months were not terrified and sleepless many times a week as tornado watches flashed on the television screen. Tornadoes, and crawling under the house for protection, were natural parts of my growing up. I did not know the horror of hurricanes or tsunamis, though later I would. In some primal place deep down, I know nothing is as random and calculating and fearsome as a tornado.

Once, when I was around twelve years old, there a tornado warning siren blasted through the air on otherwise warm and clear day. Most tornadoes occur in an eerily green atmosphere, a color that falls somewhere between yellow and green, in windless vacuums with little to no rain. This day, it was still and airless, but the color of the environment was more normal than most times I have witnessed a tornado. Tornadoes are like family in Arkansas, they pop up for no reason when you are sometimes least expecting them, or send an advance warning of their visit only for you to sit and dread their actual arrival. This day, a Saturday in early May, was a pop-in visit for sure. My father and I heard the siren as we sat in the living room. My mother hurried from the back of our small two-bedroom house, probably from her bedroom where she would fold clothes fresh from the dryer – laid out on her old, clean quilt atop her always-made bed.

The same scenario played out again a couple of weeks later. However, this time, as my father waited with us under the crawl space, he decided he would go out and look at what was occurring outside. I decided to go with him. Grasping his hand once outside and standing straight, we walked to the front of the house. There, before my amazed eyes, I saw three tornadoes driving down our street. The first, larger than the following two, was a pyramid of triangularly, as wide as it was high. It was a dirty, dusty brown color and stayed to the street as if it had a driver. Then, when it came to the bend, it just continued on its straight course, finally out and over the lake. The next two twin tornadoes were smaller than the first, but still horrific to see. They, too, followed the momma twister out over the lake. In a matter of seconds, I had seen my first three tornadoes, and they haunt me in tornado dreams even now. We were that close to a vortex

of killing destruction, while I stood in the still front yard air with my daddy, our mouths agape and heads upturned, watching together, unable to move.

But move one must, especially when spiders are involved.

My grandmother Seymore lived only a few blocks from the elementary school in our town. On the occasions when our town would fall under a tornado warning, the teachers would line us up and take us into the halls to assume a tornado position. However, if a watch was ever called, my mother would usually race to the school, check me out, and we'd head home to wait and see whether we needed to take shelter. One such spring day, as my mother was driving me home after the intercom had called my name for checkout, the sirens started blaring. We had to take shelter immediately. She veered over and took a tight turn and we sped to my grandmother's house. Flinging me out of the car, she pulled me into the small house and we grabbed my grandmother and hurriedly headed for the storm shelter. Once inside the hole, my grandmother lit a lantern. At first, I thought the ceiling was reflecting water, and I couldn't understand why it seemed to be moving. Then, at the same time as my mother put the visual and the facts together, we both screamed "spiders!" The ceiling of the underground shelter was working alive with them. Black and shiny, eyes reflecting light upon eyes reflecting light. I don't know whether it was my imagination or not, but I still remember the feeling of small bodies hitting my head and shoulders. My mother and I raced out of the shelter faster than we had raced in. My grandmother, who had birthed thirteen babies, most by herself, tying a crying newborn to the bedpost and walking two miles for water once – immediately after giving birth – stayed in the storm cellar. She was not afraid of spiders. She was afraid of tornadoes.

Years later, we would live in Japan, my husband away on deployment in Thailand, and I would receive a call that he was taking emergency leave. His parent's house – the one I had lived in for three years and huddled in the bathtub for those long minutes, had been badly wrecked by a tornado. Later, after Dan had flown half way around the world to help his parents, I learned that the neighbors (country neighbors are farther spread out, but much closer than their city counterparts) Jim and Shirley had lost their house entirely. They had survived, but at eighty-two and seventy-eight years of age, they would have to rebuild. Jim had lost almost all of his cows, and by the time I went to visit Arkansas that summer, the sweet couple were still living in a small camper trailer while the rebuilding of their home was completed. Shirley had suffered a stroke in the intervening months and was a shadow of herself. Later that summer, my mother-in-law called to tell me that Jim, burning some of the downed trees and debris still left in his pasture, had been burned badly. Shirley was taken to a nursing home while he was hospitalized. He never returned to his newly built home – one he and his wife only lived in for two months. The tornado had miraculously spared them, but in taking their home, had taken Jim's life and Shirley's mental capacity. She is still in a nursing home in Searcy and does not even know her own children. Her two daughters now rent the house up on the hill by my parents-in-law for nine hundred dollars a month. Jim had mended the cow fences, but no new cattle came to live.

Of Jim and Shirley's two beloved dogs, a car killed one when Jim was in the hospital fighting for his life, and the other now resides under the porch at my in-laws.

They feed and water her; she is the only one from her family who made it out of that storm's path safely in the end.

Now, she waits.

Like me.

## A Dark Period

I know myself well.

That is not to say that I am the same me I was in my twenties or even early thirties. Two events happened in 2008 that I believe were the catalysts to bring about the new me. To tell you the truth, this me I don't like as much. She doesn't have as much fun as the old me. She is resentful and bitter. She cries more, but she knows herself. And knowing you are sad and bitter and a muted picture of your old self is the saddest part of all.

Once, in my late twenties, I had an in-depth psychic reading over the phone. The psychic was a friend of a friend of my mother's. Now, my mother's friend was really into reincarnation, past lives and relationships merging again and again through time. She once had an abortion because she and her family had a trip to Disney World planned. She



aborted the fetus believing that soul would re-enter her life when it so chose. This whack job friend of my mother's recommended her good friend to do my mom's reading. My mom instead gave me the reading, as I was young and in another kind of hopeless, going-nowhere relationship and slightly unsatisfied with my life. (Ha. I once found my life slightly unsatisfying. The good old days. Oh, to be young, healthy, single, self-supporting and slightly *unsatisfied*.) My mother had given this psychic friend all my important dates and numbers so she could compile my chart and then I was to call her in about a week to get my in-depth reading.

Now, if Present Version Amy were to make this call, she would do it with a notebook and a pen to take detailed notes. The old Amy just curled up on her couch – the only piece of furniture in her apartment – and made the call. The call to find out her future.

Future. That is an important word.

— “I’m doing it for our future.”

— “Don’t give up on this promising future.”

— “We have a future.”

— “Without an education, what kind of future can you have?”

— “I am saving for the future!”

— “Hail Earthlings! We come from the distant future.”

I once read an article – probably from a self-help forum in a magazine or something that spoke of three types of people. People who lived in the past, people who

lived in the future, and people who lived in the present. Statistically, the smallest group by far were those who lived in the present, in the now. The author of the article begged people to change and to become present-livers. Those who focused on the past were resentful or grief-stricken, wishing to alter or relive the past. Those who lived in the future were always worried about what might happen or longing for something to happen, anything to avoid living now. They just waited for life.

I immediately thought to myself (damn!) that I did spend all of my time worried about the future. I made life choices based on fear. Doing what I thought would best protect me. Or, so ready for tomorrow to get here, that I sleepwalked through today. Miles Davis had the right idea when he said, “I’m always thinking about creating. My future starts when I wake up every morning . . . Every day I find something creative to do with my life.”

I feel I’ve skipped many opportunities to create. I once skipped an art class because I was going to the lake the following day. I was about eight years old. My mom told me if I missed one class, I could not go back. In my excitement for the following day’s beach excursion, I balked at going the day of my art class. I just stayed home in anticipation of the next day. The logic is lost on my adult self. Miles would have handled it differently. Me, I just wish I could paint well.

I remember my father getting a new little fishing boat once when I was about ten. I don’t remember one trip on the boat. Not one. I do remember every day that winter and early spring asking, “Can we go fishing today in the boat?” Or, plaintively screeching in my ten-year-old voice, “It’s never going to be boating weather!” I must have anticipated the fishing for months, yet not one memory of the actual fishing remains. I can still see

that gray boat in our garage now, parked over on the far left side, waiting much more patiently than I could for the warmth of early summer and recreation.

This one memory is a classic cliché. I repeatedly dreamed of a wedding day. I played house since I am able to remember playing as a young child. Then, once older, I dated, I cried, I wrote in diaries . . . someone who *couldn't wait* to get married, who just knew that life would be better with a big house and someone to help with the financial burdens of living. I was someone who never enjoyed relationships because she was always thinking, “Is this the one?”

The psychic told me many things that afternoon while I sat on the end of my taupe couch. Most of it, I simply don't remember. My mom has since reminded me that the psychic predicted I would not remain in the relationship I was in at the time (I didn't), and that I would marry a man in uniform within the next five years (I did. Dan is in the US Navy. Interestingly, we married in November of 2008, about five years after that prophetic phone call).

What I do remember as clearly as if I just hung up the phone, is that the psychic told me that in a couple of years from the date we talked, that I would go through a dark period for at least ten years. I distinctly remember asking if I would “bounce back” after the dark period. She said yes, but that I would never be the same again.

I actually believe my dark period began in 2008. First, in July of that year, I had my thyroid removed. This has caused several major physical changes in me. The most life changing is that I can no longer really drink alcohol. I was always a lover of beer-drinking and bullshitting, wine and whining with girlfriends, and tequila and taking my

clothes off. No more. I can't even drink now without puking, and the next day is horrible. I used to be a really fun partier, but no more. I mourn for that me. She was hilarious and fun and enjoyed a good time.

Also in 2008, later in the fall, I moved to Japan for three years. Japanese people live in fear of fire. Their homes, nestled one on top of the other, down little alleyways and up mountains, could blaze to the ground in minutes. The walls made of paper, the flooring of grass. No fireplaces, just little kerosene heaters in each room to keep me warm in the winters. The total, overwhelming culture shock sent me into a spiral it took the first year to climb out of. Then, the strangest thing happened to me. I tell you now, I don't know exactly how it happened, but those last two years in Japan, I completely changed from an extrovert to something much more akin to an introvert. But, that really doesn't do it justice. Honestly, those last two years in Japan were more like my slowly becoming a recluse.

I would work during the week. Happy I had a nice workplace social life during the workday. I would go directly home after work and stay there. Go to bed early and do it all over again. I would be all alone for the entire weekend. (At this time my husband was out to sea three-hundred-plus days a year, so he was never home). I quickly began to immerse myself in a weekend routine. I would go to eat at a little Japanese restaurant by myself.

Then somewhere along the way I might take a walk by myself. Then I might go watch movies on my computer for the remainder of the weekend. Or, I would sleep fifteen hours a day. Or, I would read nonstop. But, I never did anything socially with anyone. For two years. This from the woman who used to go to a party or a club at least

one night every weekend, and always had a best friend to hang out with 24/7 during summer breaks from teaching. I had gone from someone totally dependent on having someone else there for company, friendship, enjoyment, whatever, to someone who only really hung out with herself. It is crazy to look back on now.

How does someone change that much?

I now ponder the word “period” and its definitions. It can mean a time in one’s life. A period of depression, a period of transformation, a period of reformation, a period of delusion. Most distressing of all, a period can also be a signifier of an ending — the grand yet simple punctuation that shows a reader that a thought has come to an end.

I do hope that this dark period of my life will end within the next three years. My math tells me that timing would be about right. I realize my strangeness, though. I have never been one to know when I was truly happy. With myself, happiness was always kind of something that I would look back on and think, “Boy, I was happy then!” However, I sure know when I am not happy. And, it seems like unhappiness, wait, that is not the right word. It seems that the lack of happiness, the void of happiness, is the place I am in now. I am in a vacuum of less-than-contentedness, and I feel stuck here. Is this my dark period?

Although I do not believe in reincarnation, it does strike me that all through one’s life, we do tend to reincarnate into different versions of ourselves. Maybe this dark period will go. Maybe I have not even begun to enter it, that this time is only a precursor to worse times ahead. Maybe the psychic reading was nothing more than a self-fulfilling

prophecy. Some idea I clung to as I saw my life become more mundane and less interesting.

Maybe.

When I think about my life, it doesn't bring a smile, only a pondering of choices I know I should make. I hold my dogs, my canine fur babies, and love on them. I think about possibilities that await me in the future, which new location the Navy will place us, after Oklahoma. Mostly, I muse over the why. Why did I allow all of this to happen? Could I have stopped the dark period, or was it fated to come my way no matter what I tried to do? Could I stop it now, if I am in it? Would an attitude change make a difference (this I think I have mastered — wearing a smile all the time). A student asked me this year how I stayed happy all the time. Her question made me laugh out loud and pat myself on the back. At least my dark period isn't seeping out of me like sewage.

The part that is the darkest is that if I can change this all, I don't really know where to start. When you are in a dark room, you have to just stand still and hope the lights come back on. If you're scared, exist in fear like I do, what else can you do?

# Tsunami

As we munched on our Texas Cheese Fries at Chili's and talked about our plans for that Friday night, which would include going to the gambling center directly above the restaurant, Dan and I heard a cacophony of cellphones begin to ring. Dan's phone vibrated and buzzed from its place on our table. He picked it up and spoke for less than a minute. When he placed it on the table and turned to me, I knew something was wrong. Even after he would leave that night, I would not really comprehend the devastation and catastrophe, that understanding would only come days later. And with it, fear and anxiety, mine and my family's back home in Arkansas.

In March of 2011, Japan suffered from one of the worst tsunamis on record, and the Fukushima Power Plant went into a meltdown and began to leak radioactive water. I think it happened about six p.m. Japan time, which was our time then. When Dan got the

call, neither of us knew what was happening. We knew he had to be on the ship by nine p.m. After that phone call, nothing would be the same for either of us for the remainder of our tour in Sasebo.

Dan was on a forward deployed ship during our time in Japan; that meant he was out to sea at least three hundred days a year. Gone for months at a time, back in home port for a week and then gone again. We married in November 2007 and moved to Japan the following fall. For a woman in her thirties who had never lived outside of Arkansas, that move proved to be devastating. Culture shock, as it was described to me in our indoctrination class, seemed interesting and something you could study. I quickly learned that culture shock is real and digs down deep into your bones and holds there. I think a strong person could probably fight it off, but I was not a fighter, and I let the shock curl its stinging tendrils around my heart and soul and just hung on for the ride.

When the tsunami hit, culture shock had finally become a part of my past. I had managed over two and a half years in Japan, and my routine kept me from total disaster. As a matter of fact, Dan and I were readying for our move back to the States in a little less than three months, and I was finally seeing this hard time coming to an end. He actually thought that he'd be at home with me most of those last days; with this new crisis, he was not.

Within days of his leaving for the natural disaster aid mission, the news had reached the States. I started getting frantic phone calls from Arkansas, and friends were shooting me e-mails telling me to get my ass home in no uncertain terms. I kept telling people that I was a long way from the fires at Fukushima, as far as from Little Rock, Arkansas, to St. Louis, Missouri. Everyone kind of thinks that Japan is one small place,



but it is a chain of numerous islands, and I was far south. When I was able to get e-mail communication through to Dan on his ship, he told me that they had no Internet access, no yahoo, just e-mails coming through. I knew that must mean the Navy didn't want them reading all the information online – some factual, some not. We had very little Japanese media information coming through on our end, but the Command did do some public announcements keeping us up to date. In America, there was a frenzy over this horrible meltdown, worst-case scenarios flying every which way, and in Japan the opposite was happening. Little information was leaking down to the civilians. Japan is quiet and shy, keeping secrets close to its heart, proud and purposeful.

I did hear about a village not far from the nuclear plant that was basically cut off from the rest of Japan. No one could get in and no one could leave. The rumor was that the entire town was radioactive and that it was a lost cause. I don't know if that was really true, but the stoic ways of Japan would lead me to believe it was.

In the waiting room at the on-base dentist, I caught the military news channel doing a broadcast on the devastation. A picture of a dog huddled next to its dead canine friend, unwilling to move on, brought me to tears. The stories of the men who worked around the clock at the nuclear plant who knew that they were awash with radioactive particles but still raced to stop the run-off and leaking. Their families knowing they would never return home. Those were the only newscasts I have ever heard where the people are on suicide missions. We heard their stories and thought them heroes. But, it never seemed to me like it was as close as it was to my actual physical location. I felt safe.

After a couple of weeks, the Department of Defense School just north of mine was evacuated. We teachers knew it could be our school next, but with the news coming down to us, filtered through the military, we were always reassured we were safe. I didn't bet on an evacuation, and I didn't want to give up my job those last months and just move back to the States, even though that is what my parents wanted me to do. My mother's calls at first were crazed. "You have to come home now. Get a ticket today. It's all over the news. You're not safe." I talked her down, explaining that no one was leaving Sasebo just yet. That what little news we had pointed to our safety. The real danger was far away.

I actually think the anxiety level I had was rather low, as I really never felt unsafe after those first few days. I knew Dan's ship was in the fifty-mile radius of the danger zone, and I knew he was taking anti-radiation pills. He was fairly calm about it, so I guess that kept me calm.

He described the mornings on the ship, the helicopters getting ready to take off to drop supplies in danger zones. It was northern Japan, and there was snow each morning on the deck of the ship. He said it was pretty and white, but it must have been radioactive. He would stand drinking his morning coffee, looking out at the snow-capped mountains, knowing that the United States Navy was doing everything in its power to help survivors and keep the danger from getting worse.

This may sound strange, but I am glad that I was in Japan at this time. I was scared when it all went down, and now it is easy to say I stayed calm. I know I cried and worried, but I saw a country work tirelessly to heal itself. Japan is an island country that was given barely anything from the earth. It is a country that has made so much from so little. The people work harder than any I have seen. The street sweepers work with smiles

on their faces and as hard and as fast as they can. The servers run to tables, yet would never accept a tip. They work for wages, why would someone tip them for good service? If they work, they will give good service. That is the Japanese way.

You don't tip your taxi driver; his job is to drive you. School children come home at dark, or after. Kindergarteners ride a bus to school, each consecutive year after that they walk. Simple pleasures are appreciated, and work is something you do to the best of your ability. This is a beautiful culture.

I think about why the Japanese are such hard-working, determined people. I think it is because they had to be. Their country is small and has limited resources, yet they won't let that hold them back from the global community. They don't eat to excess, but they work to excess. Every job. Every day. They school themselves to excess, and they sometimes give of themselves to excess – I know many did at Fukushima. God bless their souls.

# Zombie Apocalypse

My zombie preparedness backpack includes a few plastic water bottles, several lighters, some nuts and crackers, a few protein bars, a couple of flashlights and lots of batteries – and my Synthroid and lip balms.

I am a huge fan of *The Walking Dead*, both the television series and the graphic novels. I wrote my final research paper in my Young Adult Literature class on George Romero and the rise of Zombie pop culture in the United States. For two months, I immersed myself in everything zombie. Those ideas, they worked their way into my brain. I was infected with zombie fever, you could say.

When I was in seventh grade, my group of friends lived on Carmex. Let me rephrase – we used Carmex a lot. We didn't actually eat it, although there is no telling

how much of that lip product's ingredients were transferred from our pouty adolescent lips to our tiny stomachs. The little blue tubs would be stashed in our purses or in our backpacks, and every so often, one girl would pull hers out, dip a finger into the blue tub of yellow goo, its smelly mixture of sulfur and mint, and apply liberally to her pouty lips. Everyone else would follow. I did this for over nine months, and what it did for me was to make me a lifetime lip balm addict. Did you know that if you use a product that replaces a bodily function (like eye drops, nose spray, lip moisturizer) that in some cases the body will stop performing the function and therefore you will no longer be able to carry on *without* whatever product you were using in the first place?

For me, that was Carmex, for which I then substituted Vaseline, and now have gone petroleum-free with Eos. The point is, if I don't use some kind of lip moisturizer, my lips will crack. At night, in the winter when the heat is on, I awake to Angelina Jolie lips with a split straight down the center of my top lip. A split that won't heal by the next morning, when it all happens again. This silly act of belonging in the seventh grade has made me a lip balm-toting cripple for now and evermore. That used to be the first thing I thought about when traveling. Do I have my lip stuff? Now, I keep one Eos ball in every purse and in the car, another by the bed . . . One problem is my dog Roxy loves the smell and when she finds one within her reach, I later find it on the floor, its round egg shell chewed to bits, and its creamy center of petroleum-free balm eaten and in the intestinal track of a mischievous, yet happy, puppy.

After a thyroidectomy, I am life-dependent on my Synthroid, a pill that only a doctor can prescribe and only a pharmacy can fill. Every morning I must take my medicine so that my body functions properly. Now, if I miss a pill for a few days, I may

notice some small changes. Nervousness, fatigue . . . if I were to go without it for a month or two, I would have increased weight gain and be very, very tired. However, at some point, my body would have to have the Synthroid or it would shut down. My very metabolism depends on that purple pill. I would, in fact, at some point soon after have major complications and die – that pill must be taken to sustain my very life. Now, cracked, bleeding lips don't measure up to death – my Synthroid addiction must be met – this time with a drug I can only get at a pharmacy with regular prescriptions.

So, the nervousness and anxiety I used to have about carrying a salve for my lips has been replaced by the always-present knowledge that I must have enough Synthroid to keep myself alive. Really. Death will come without it.

Back in November of 2012, when I was making my list for my zombie-preparedness backpack (laugh here if you must, but with December 2012 looming and my vast knowledge of all things zombie) I started to think: If the world as we know it breaks down, how will I get more Synthroid? I immediately made a doctor's appointment to discuss this problem.

Dr. Casey was nice enough when I explained my dilemma. She did not laugh nor did she give me the news I wanted to alleviate my anxiety. See, it seems that Synthroid has a short shelf life. I could not stockpile six months of the purple pills. She could give me a 90-day prescription, but I would not be able to get more than that because the medicine would not be potent after a short period of time. In other words, ninety days was as much zombie apocalypse time I could get out of one prescription. And, if the

dreaded day came let's say forty-seven days into my bottle, I would have only forty-three days left of the life-giving purple pills.

“My diabetic patients worry about this same thing,” she told me. Of course, she did not mean a zombie world takeover with human-hungry monsters roaming the earth. But, in Oklahoma, where tornadoes and winter freezes are common, she said that some of her patients who needed insulin to live worried that they might need medicine if a natural disaster struck. “I told them that the fire department would get the medicine to patients who were in life-threatening positions until things opened up again. There are plans in place for such disasters,” she confidently told me. All the while, as I sat on the white papered bed in the small examination room, I thought, well, that is not gonna help me. There will be no ambulances running when zombies are infecting the entire human population. But, I guess the medical procedures for natural disasters don't include Zombie Plan A or B. I took my ninety-day prescription and headed for the door.

In a zombie apocalypse, I would be relying on my wits to find a pharmacy that was A.) not overrun by zombies and B.) still stocked with the correct medicine and dosage on the rambled and torn-apart shelving (because other humans would have made it there before me). It wasn't a great plan, but it was my plan.

Another problem I feel I will face in the zombie apocalypse is how to handle my dogs. Charlie and Roxy are pretty chill, but Buddy my Chihuahua is a barking mess of a loud ass dog. Even now as I type this, his high-pitched, squeaky, obnoxious bark is piercing my right eardrum. This would be a zombie beacon that could be heard throughout my neighborhood. The dogs (even if I could get them not to bark) would not

be able to keep up if we had to vacate the house stronghold. The possessions I most value, my doggie babies, would not last in the apocalypse. I know this to be true. I would probably have to leave them in the house when I go out on the road to hunt for other groups of survivors. I could try to have them come with me were I to go by car. If I were on foot, they will have to stay behind. I will leave them plenty of water and food; the rest will be up to God.

Once a girl who kept at best two gallons of gas in her car at all times, I have now gone to keeping the tank full all the time. You see, one won't have time to stop at the local convenience store for a fill-up while cruising at sixty miles an hour through herds of the undead walkers. With a full tank in a car that gets decent gas mileage, I just might be able to make it out to a safer locale. My husband has a monster truck (a Dodge that sits extremely high off the ground) but it is always on empty, and it would be easier for the herd to push over onto its side. Yes, I will stick with my Hyundai Sonata in the apocalypse.

My car had two-gallon jugs of water in the trunk. Recently I have decided to move those to the back seat. I might not be able to get out of the car to retrieve them if a zombie herd is close by. If the water is not in my car where I can get to it without leaving the car, then it might as well be in some far off lip balm factory in California or China.

Now, at this time, you might be thinking, "ummm . . . Amy . . . you know zombies aren't real. You know they are make believe monsters like Dracula and Frankenstein, right?" Well, my friend, and you are my friend if you are still reading this, you could not be more right. You see, they are like vampires and medically reanimated creatures. They are all possible, if not already alive. Frankenstein, that dude is around right now. Go to



any scientific research facility that works with stem cells and cloning and you will find the secrets that are hinted about in medical journals. Scientists are creating life now, in 2012, and have been doing so for many years. I mean, people are walking around right now as you read this, with a dead person's eyes, or a dead person's liver. Or HeLa, that immortal cell of Henrietta Lacks, cut and dissected for the millionth time. It is a scientific reality; we use body parts or make body parts in America and the world today. Vampires, those I am not so sure about. They *may* not be roaming the earth at night, but can I say that for an absolute fact? No, I cannot. Then there is Area 54 . . . I don't know what those aliens ate, but . . .

So, the fact that at some time zombies could shuffle the earth is one hundred percent reasonable. To say otherwise is just plain dumb. Read any good science fiction from the Fifties or Sixties and compare those fiction texts to modern science and technology of the last twenty years and see how much was prophetic – then we'll talk. I mean Ray Bradbury's *The Pedestrian* is all but absolute truth now and, in a few short years, will be our reality.

Overall, though, the problems associated with the zombie apocalypse are too many to overcome. Can I be prepared enough? I don't think so. I don't even know the specifics of the zombie of the future. Will it be able to think? Will it be able to plan? Will it be able to run? Do zombies like the smell of lip balm? If so, we are in more trouble than we thought!

Some humans will survive, and what is wrong with hoping and planning to be one of those few? The lucky ones, the favored ones, the blessed ones, I don't know who they will be. I just hope I will be one of them. Lip balm and Synthroid prepared.

## Perfect Aim

Only two men ever called me a cunt to my face. The first was my boss at an Italian restaurant. His name was Steve and he had a crazy eye. You know, those people who have normal eyes, but one just looks a little to the side. My first love, Kurt, had beautiful green eyes. When he would get really drunk – and we dated through college, so that was a lot of the time – he would get the crazy eye. Once, at the apartment he shared with two other guys, he was so drunk he threw a dart at my head. It barely missed me and went into the wall behind my head. He also broke a picture over his head once, so I don't know if the violence was particularly aimed at me, but you get the idea. I loved that good-looking man for over a decade, dated him for five years, and still creep on his Facebook page occasionally. Steve, he always had the crazy eye.

Steve, the owner of the Italian restaurant in my small town, didn't really like me. I think it was because I was dating Jason, the guy I graduated with who lived at Steve's house. A couple of years later, Steve would hold Jason at gunpoint for almost a day at a local government office. It was on the news. I think he might have even gone to prison for that, but I had moved on and didn't pay much attention when all that was going down. I had harbored thoughts, like a lot of people in my town, that Jason was Steve's lover. I don't know whether they were lovers when I dated Jason, but the arrangement was weird, and I couldn't date someone whom I had that kind of doubts about. I never had sex with Jason, so I know on some level I was scared of the fact that what I thought was possible might really be the truth.

One day at work I had taken an order out to one of my tables and the man insisted that he had ordered steak, not chicken. When I went back to tell Steve, who cooked along with Jason, that the order was wrong, he gave me a steely glare with his eyes, one normal, one crazy, and said, "You stupid cunt!" I walked away and could not believe an adult man had just called me that word. I don't think I had heard that word uttered aloud before, and it sure had never been directed at me. It stung but really it just pissed me off. I hadn't done anything wrong. I had taken the order correctly. The customer had either changed his mind or misspoken, but I was the cunt according to Steve. At nineteen years of age, a word like that can either run like water off your back or nestle in and freeze to ice in a crack. The cold fingers of that ice stayed with me for weeks.

The other man who called me a cunt has done so on three occasions. That man is my husband. In the first years of our marriage, he did not say such hateful words to me. I know the reason he does it now; he wants me to see that he is willing to pull out all the

stops to hurt me. The word doesn't hurt, though. What infuriates me is that he is willing to pull that garbage word out of the recesses of the landfill of Navy vocabulary he has and hurl it at me like a bomb. He wants the word to hurt, but it is the fact that I am married to a man who would use that word as a weapon that hurts me. I am sometimes pissed at myself that after the first time he used it I didn't pack my bags and leave. The strangest part about his use of the word is that there are no distinguishing reasons for his using it. I can't even remember the details of the three specific arguments that have spawned his use of it. He doesn't have a crazy eye or any other special feature indicating insanity, so in my mind, there is no excuse. At least, there is no excuse why I ever stuck around to hear it the second and third time. (Of course, that crazy is on me.)

When I started dating my tall Navy husband, he used the word G-D a lot. I hate that word so much; I can't bring myself to type it on the page. I told him within days of our dating that if he wanted to date me, he would have to stop saying that word. He did. He liked me enough to respect my wishes and keep from saying G-D. He went years without saying it in my presence. I hear him say it on the phone sometimes to his recruiters, but that is part of the Navy vocabulary, and I don't care. However, in the last year or so, he has pulled G-D out of his arsenal and flung it at me. He knows that I can't stop him from saying it to me. He knows when he throws that bomb, it will always land on its target. I wonder how I became his target.

He is quick to say he loves me. Those words come out at the end of every phone conversation we have. Those words slide and fall like water down a drain, easily. The words someone picks up and takes aim with, those are the ones that matter.

## Shoveling Shit

I have a Chihuahua; his name is Buddy. He is probably the closest thing I have in my life to a soul mate.

Most of my early twenties (years before I got Buddy) were spent teaching at a conservative, southern high school. One of my neighboring teachers, Marsha, a middle-aged woman with wiry red-orange hair sprinkled with pin-straight grays, was a real animal lover. She had four pets, endowed with people's names, Timothy, George, Clyde. One Collie, I guess he was special. He received a more suitable pet name: Dondie. Marsha was nice and could read and speak Middle English like it was Standard, or so she told everyone. She wore Medieval garb to class. The kids made fun of her. The teachers did, too. She was my first run-in with someone who loved pets as much as most people love children. I did think she was a wacko. I thought this for several reasons, not the least of which was the animal love. The stories, the pictures. The doggie birthday parties.

Today, if she were on Facebook (but I am sure she is not – she couldn't work a computer to save her life) she'd be the lady with all the profile pictures featuring her dog. If you need an example, just troll through your friends for a while. You'll see as many poodles in sweaters as you do babies. I'll admit, my page has several pictures of dogs with reindeer antlers. Come on, they're so cute.

Long after I had ascertained that she was a little off, I found out that she had unsuccessfully pursued a high school senior many years before I started teaching at that particular school. If the incident had taken place in today's society, I am pretty sure she would have been fired – at the least. This tidbit of news just added to my overall theory that she was bat-shit goofy.

Now, after years and thousands of miles, I still think she was a whack-job supreme. However, I don't think it is because of her love for her animals. I think she was a lonely, middle-aged, unattractive woman. I believe she was hopelessly unsocial, and that she longed for true love. She tried to find something with a teenager, and that I will never understand or condone. She needed attention, she needed love. She received it from the only family she had – her pets.

I know that unconditional love. I have it now as a pet owner of a spunky black and tan Chihuahua named Buddy.

Tuesday evening, nine thirty p.m.: I drive up to my house in my shiny silver Jeep. I walk up the dark walk, once again Dan forgot to leave the porch light on for me. I flick through the keys on my keychain — finding the correct key — and finally unlock the door.

The interior of the house is dim. *Pawn Wars* is blaring on the eighty-six-inch projection screen that powerfully hangs over the rock fireplace. Before I can close the door behind me, here comes my love! Buddy runs up to me. He is so excited that his body twists in upon himself, making his little torso a C. He squeals in a way only a Chihuahua can. He implores me to pick him up with his short barks, his two-foot high jumps. He is so excited to see me he almost pees where he stands. It is pure excitement he feels as I return home from school. I lean down and pick him up and he and I go out onto the patio to sit. I light a cigarette. We talk about my night. I maybe sing to him. We go back in.

I go to my office and do school work for my graduate degree; he follows. I wash dishes; he hangs at my feet. He and I spend the rest of the night together. *Pawn Stars* blares in the background. No one else notices I am home. Dan eventually sloughs off to bed. Buddy and I play computer games, watch *Mob Wives*, eat a snack. We go to bed around midnight. (I hope Dan is sleeping on his side, not on his back, so I don't have to hear his snoring.) Buddy likes his space when we sleep, but sometimes if I am lucky, he lies on his side and we snuggle.

Whether I am an animal-loving crazy or not, I guess that is a matter of opinion. But, when it comes to my Buddy, I just smile when I think of his pointy black ears and his balding head. His shiny black lips and the little swirls of tan fur that curl around his hind legs. He is older than I in human years, lazy as all get out, bossy as hell, spoiled rotten, a picky eater, and my most trusted companion. He is always ready to follow me anywhere I choose to go, and he never wants to leave me.

Damn, I love that dog.

In the years in Oklahoma, before I had my full-time teaching position, my husband left for work before eight a.m. Buddy and I slept until around nine. I'd get up and feed him, then he went out to pee and poop in the little fenced-in area around the back of our house. One of my classmates informed me it is called a dog run. That is where Buddy went at nine a.m., noon, four p.m., seven p.m. and ten p.m. every day. Every day I shoveled a small, brown turd or two over the fence and into the back yard. His little nuggets are small, so I picked them up weekly from the yard beyond the dog run. I have started to ponder on this. I shoveled the shit for a couple of reasons. First, I don't want Buddy stepping in it or sniffing it or god-forbid eating a little. I also want him to have a clean area to walk around in. He and I go for walks around the neighborhood, too, but this special fenced-in space is his area. I shovel the shit because I love him, and who am I to leave it there? Am I too good to shovel shit? Never. I do it all the time.

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Marsha's dog Dondie is long dead; after many surgeries, she had to put him down. Timothy died of Leukemia. She now dates a man who strangely resembles her. She pays his rent, his truck payment. She works two jobs and also teaches summer school. Five years ago, she told me she owed over forty thousand dollars on credit cards. She lives in a small orange brick duplex that smells like cat pee, and she is a hoarder. She attends the town's small Church of Christ every Sunday by herself. Her boyfriend likes to sleep in. I haven't seen her in years, but the last time I saw her, she was talking about her twenty or so outdoor cats.

"Marsha, how do you feed them all?" I ask.

"I have a system. They wander inside sometimes, too."



“What about shots, vet bills?” My eyes must be huge.

“I have eighteen with all their shots. I still have to get the money for the last two.”

“Do they all have names?” I don’t want to talk to her anymore, so I see someone walking outside her door. I make an excuse to leave. “I’ll see you next time I’m in town.” I know I probably won’t. I’ll probably avoid any chance run-ins in the future.

“So good to see you,” she yells after me. I have already walked down the hall.

At this point, I could point out my fears. I could tell you what I am afraid is happening to me. I could tell you all kinds of stories of how I act like a seventy year-old and enjoy being in my pajamas by five p.m. I could. But I won’t. I’ll go grab Buddy up from his spot barking at me by the office door. I’ll quit typing and go talk to him on the bed. I’ll tell him that I love him and that I am sorry I have been so busy typing at my desk. He will lick my hand and look at me with those soft brown eyes.

I love you, they say.

# Home

Driving down the highway to my house in Guthrie from work the other day, I started thinking about the often-repeated lines about home I've heard all my life. Home is where the heart is. You can never go home again. Home is where you go and they have to let you in.

Thinking of home and all the places I've lived proved hard for me. I'll list them here:

- First home (I can barely remember this one; we moved when I was three)
- Family home
- Dorm room

- Apartment (with at least three roommates at any given time, dubbed The Commune)
- Old house (with two roommates: Shannon and Amy)
- Apartment (first time to live with a guy, Kurt)
- House in Jacksonville with my first true love (still Kurt)
- Duplex (alone after heartbreak)
- Condo (with one roommate)
- House (with newly divorced roommate)
- Apartment (alone)
- House (with boyfriend and future husband, Dan)
- Apartment (after break-up with boyfriend and future husband)
- House in Cabot (with husband)
- Japanese house (with husband)
- House in Oklahoma (at present with husband)

I don't know the statistics, but I would bet that I have called more places home than the average woman. The funny thing about it is, really none of these felt like home after I moved out from my parents' family home when I was eighteen. Even the house I live in now, my husband's and mine, with a thirty-year mortgage to prove it, doesn't really feel like home. And when I travel back to Heber Springs to my family home, that doesn't feel like home either.

As surely as I can paint you a picture of the different phases of my life, I could color code each to a particular home. And, more accurately, each home could reflect my

relationship status with other people. My first home had two green doors off the living room. The only furniture I remember is a wooden rocking chair where I once rocked a dead dove my father had brought home from a hunting trip. I sort of remember an old linoleum floor in a tiny kitchen with an old four-legged table. That is where my mother and I stuck Frankenberry stickers out of the cereal box to my face before mom noticed that the stickers were not supposed to be placed on skin. The removal of those pink stickers at about two years of age I remember. Sitting at that little table crying while mom pulled the stickers from my soft cheeks . . .that is all I can bring up from that house.

I could draw you a picture of my childhood home, the family home where my parents still live. The green garage door, the concrete porch, the two tiny bedrooms, the one bathroom. The living room and kitchen. The hall with the loud attic fan. The fireplace where we used to roast marshmallows on Saturday nights. The recliner my father would sit in at night to watch TV, usually with me in his lap. I lived in that home for fifteen years. It was around one thousand square feet. Now when I go back, it is my parent's home. I feel comfortable there, but it is not my home.

College dorm rooms, and I had two, were never homes. They were rooms I shared with literal strangers and stops along my way. Once I moved into apartments and houses, I thought of them sometimes as homes, but not for long, and now I do not think of them that way at all. The bedroom of one will merge with the bedroom of another, and I can't tell you color of walls or numbers of rooms. They have all just moved around in my brain, making up one big places-I-used-to-live memory. This seems natural to me. This seems like an organic way for a person to move from one placeholder to the next on her way to adulthood and whatever will be home. The thing is, I don't feel like I am at home.

It seems true to say “I’m going to my house.” It doesn’t feel true to say, “I’m going home.”

Where the hell is home?

Could it be that once a person has moved so many times and been so many places that home is a construct that cannot be held or found? Is home really where your heart is? If so, is it my heart that is missing?

I divide my life into stages and most of them revolve around a man in my life at that time. I am no psychologist, but although it is true, it is probably not healthy. As I ponder what it means that I don’t consider my house with Dan to be my home, I feel that is probably not a good sign. The trouble is, how does one truly find home? I know at some soul level that I may never have a place that I feel is home. I may live in houses and condos and rooms and RVs, but may never find myself home once again. This puzzles me and alarms me slightly. But, in a way, I accept it as truth and don’t let it bother me.

Recently one of my acquaintances began talking about buying a house. “Don’t do it!” I screeched at her. “It’s too much trouble. Rent some place. Don’t put down those roots. Don’t bottle yourself up. Be free.”

Dorothy from Kansas once said, “Oh, Auntie Em, there's no place like home!” Maybe happiness is not having a home. Maybe it is something more. The problem is, I don’t know what it is. I think the first step is maybe deciding to get fired up. I am going to stop being all right with containment. I can get up off my sad ass and go find it

## Comes the Dawn

Many years ago, I received a letter from my mother during a particularly trying time in my life. My first real love, Kurt, and I had broken up for good. Here is the poem she found and sent to me, copied at her local library. She mailed it along with an encouraging letter when I was twenty-four years old.

*Comes The Dawn*  
*by Veronica A. Shoffstall*

After a while you learn the subtle difference  
Between holding a hand and chaining a soul,  
And you learn that love doesn't mean leaning  
And company doesn't mean security,  
And you begin to learn that kisses aren't contracts  
And presents aren't promises,

And you begin to accept your defeats  
With your head up and your eyes open  
With the grace of a woman, not the grief of a child,  
And you learn to build all your roads on today,  
Because tomorrow's ground is too uncertain for plans,  
And futures have a way of falling down in mid-flight.  
After a while you learn  
That even sunshine burns if you get too much.  
So you plant your own garden and decorate your own soul,  
Instead of waiting for someone to bring you flowers.  
And you learn that you really can endure...  
That you really are strong,  
And you really do have worth.  
And you learn and learn...  
With every goodbye you learn.

I live in a beautiful place called Oklahoma. My Arkansas friends mostly refer to Oklahoma as the Dustbowl, or the Plains, or tornado country. I know it as the point on the globe with probably the most beautiful sunsets in the world. Almost every night, if you look out on my back patio, you will see the most awe-inspiring sunsets. I have tried, and failed miserably, many times to capture with a photograph, the oranges and reds and pinks that splash the sky from as far as my eye can see in all horizontal directions. It is as though God took his hands and smashed cranberries and tulips into the pinkest of cotton candy and flung this pretty mixture across the sky for me to see. The warmest, most dazzlingly bright colors of comfort and peace. This is the place I find myself in today.

The sun plays an important part in my life. I am addicted to floating out in the pool, drinking in the hot rays of summer. I love wearing sunglasses as I drive Highway

33 to my house from the Indian casino I frequent far too often. I have a tattoo on my right side — just below my ribs — of an ancient sun, to always remind me of the warm days of my youth in Arkansas. Being from the South, I will carry a connection to heat and sun with me for all my days. The greatest punishment I can think of would be for my husband and me to be transferred to Alaska – where the sun disappears for months at a time.

The sun visits me often here in Guthrie. When my husband rescued two dogs in the spring of 2012 I was upset. I knew my life would drastically change. I already was the proud parent of a high-strung, impetuous, barky Chihuahua. Now, I would have the added responsibility of two new dogs, both of whom were not house broken and were riddled with health problems. Those first few weeks of having the new dogs radically changed my routine. I would have to get up out of bed around five thirty in the morning to let the new dogs outside. Buddy, my Chihuahua, could have easily slept with me until seven a.m. I disliked getting up so early, and I did not appreciate the way my life had changed. I was resentful of the unasked for responsibility, and also at the fact Dan had made this decision without consulting me.

The sun sent me a sign one day early into this new routine. I had briefly let the dogs out, and I ran back inside. The moon was shining brightly out back with the dogs, but as I happened to glance out the front door, I saw that the sun had already arisen. That shocked me. I was, in my house, directly between the old night and the dawn of the new day. Me, Amy Little, smack dab in the middle of two completely different days, two completely different worlds: old and new. I started to enjoy those spring mornings, drinking my Irish Breakfast tea and smoking my Marlboro Ultra Light, all the while being able to see the moon or the sun at my whim. I did not voice well the symbolism to



my mother as I tried vainly on the phone one day to explain my thoughts about this Oklahoma sky situation upon which I had stumbled. I knew in my heart that I would grow to love those two dogs, and I knew that I was on the brink of some big idea or catharsis. I just wasn't sure what it was.

Roxy and Charles are now my fur-babies just as Buddy is. Some days I awake truly in love with my husband, with my life. Some days I want to run away and never look back. I do know that on some mornings in this barely known state of Oklahoma, I am caught between two days. Between heavy night and unblemished dawn.

Even though I have a mental and emotional connection with the sun, I also have close ties to the moon. The lunar ball of rock may in fact have a physical connection to me, as many people seem to think that like the pull on the tides, the moon pulls on us. I used to dream looking upon that cream orb of one day being an astronaut. As a little girl, I wanted so badly to go to space camp. The funds were never close to being there, so it was a dream never fulfilled. As an adult, I know that I would in no way enjoy a rocket ship ride to the moon. With age comes certain certainties, and I am certainly no astronaut. With spot-on self-diagnosis, I believe myself to be at least a part time lunatic. This is no disparaging thought; it simply is my truth. After years of going on and off of anti-depressants and anti-anxiety meds, I now have relaxed into the tides of Citalopram. I think it helps me. I have also purchased some new blush, which is supposed to help the wearer be happy. I wish I could call myself bipolar because the writer in me would love that symbolism. Alas, I am not.

I worry sometimes that I will die before I have the chance to read all the books that I want to, never mind the new ones coming out daily that I will soon add to my list. I jokingly tell people that my best memories all come from books. Honestly, I don't know how much of a stretch it actually is. Most likely not much.

My dad told me that when I was little I could not be read to enough. When words would come on the television screen, I begged, "Daddy, read them to me." He would oblige. I don't think he could read the words quickly enough sometimes, and he might have made up a few here and there. But he knew I had a hunger for the words, and that was something new to him.

My dad, born in the cold December of 1932 in a town named Ida, Arkansas, was never one to hunger for words. He hungered for playtime and jokes, dirt and sticks, time away from school. All things most little boys loved in the early 1930s. School was never an important aspect of his young life, and by the seventh grade he was ready to hit the real world, and the real world in Ida, in 1943, was the pulpwoods.

My mother was an avid learner, and she did enjoy school. But as the daughter of the town drunk, and a poor one at that, with three younger siblings at home when their mother ran off with the town's Baptist preacher, school had to be left behind. She made it to the eleventh grade, and wanted so badly to stay in school. She had three older brothers, but none could or would bring her into their own families, and she needed to stay at home with her father and Uncle Bobby, Aunt Judy and Aunt Patsy. Patsy would even live with my parents later for a few years, when there really was nowhere else for Patsy to go at fifteen. My mother and her three younger siblings were left to the wind, and decades

later, when my grandmother returned to our hometown, it would be my mother who cared for her for almost twenty years.

Where my mother didn't have the schooling, she did have the love of a good romance novel, and I believe that was my model for reading in the home. She also let me go to the library a lot and bought me my first series: The Sweet Valley High books. Soon, though, Elizabeth and Jessica bored me and I entered the worlds of Stephen King. I went on to an attic with flowers and a talking lion, and Heathcliff's brooding love. In the eighth grade I fell in love with Rhett, and I never looked back.

Hearing my eleventh grade teacher read "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" aloud to my class sealed the deal as far as I was concerned – there was no better job in the world than that of a high school English teacher (I still hold that to be true). Whenever I am lucky enough to teach American Literature, I always read that short story aloud. It's the best.

I, myself, have wanted to be a writer for as long as I can remember. My Smurf novel, written long hand in pencil when I was eight, kept me occupied for months. Hopefully, in the intervening years, my topics have improved and my craft has been sharpened. I simply think it would be the coolest fucking thing in the whole wide world if some people read my words and it meant something to them. To think I may one day write a really wonderful short story or a moving collection of nonfiction, well, that sets me dancing through the halls, holding tightly to one of my beloved dogs — my canine fur babies — and singing at the top of my lungs.

The problem is, most everything I do now takes place in my head. I relive memories of childhood and teenage years for the nostalgia. I think back on my twenties

and early thirties because I had so much damn fun. Now, life is pretty much at a standstill, so I write. I think the act of writing is my way of trying to make sense of all the shit up in my head. I'm always looking for a way out, out of my head, out of my sense of depression, out of my present life. "Hey, Amy, you're forty," I tell myself. "How much longer are you going to stick this out?" Then the next day, I'm laughing at my husband as he does the naked white man dance. This involves swinging testicles, and is humorous. But not attractive.

Whenever I am sad, or thoughtful, I remember. I remember the boy who had his sweet heart broken when I was sixteen because I just knew there was more out there in the big, wide world. I think about the most handsome man I have ever known, who lives three hours away who begs me to just give up this life and run away with him. But usually those kinds of thoughts get me too jumpy, too scared, so I think about the water at the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, or Scarlet thinking she would worry about life tomorrow, or a short story read to our class by some long ago high school English teacher who loved stories as much as I did, and do.

My story, my real story, started out pretty damn good. It stayed good for a long time. That may be all I get. I don't know. But, damn it, I want more. I want something that is within my reach if I can just find the strength to pull my arms out of this straightjacket I've found myself in and go for it. Sadly, I may have to stop living the lives of others in wonderful books. I need to truly start living my own.

I think this is the time for me to begin again. Counting what matters. Getting away from my same problems and my same routines. A rut is not built in a day. Someone

or some force of nature has to work on that ground for a long time. The deeper the rut is, the harder to climb out.

My story, it's not yet finished. I hope with every keystroke I make, that I can write my way to a fantastic ending. I'm typing away now.

The countdown to leave for Alaska has begun. We leave in less than four months. I hate cold weather. Dan and his father have decided to do a Do-It-Yourself move from Oklahoma to Alaska. I was not a part of those deliberations. As a matter of fact, when Dan was first offered the Alaska post, the Master Chief told him to talk it over with his wife. He did. I said "Hellnohellnohellno! I will go anywhere but there. Don't take me where it is cold. I did Japan for you, take me somewhere warm."

The next day he told the Master Chief that I was on board. We are moving to Alaska on July 1, 2014.

Valentine's Day, at work at the high school, I let my students sing love songs and we played a bunch of sappy videos on YouTube. When I heard some of those lyrics, I was moved. I could feel the pull of the universe telling me . . . Amy, you don't have to go. Amy, there are other options. Amy, things happen for a reason.

I think I'll end up going to Alaska with Dan anyway. It's hard to change course.

I am not in the dawn of my life, but I am by no means in the night of it either. I have grappled for several years with the idea of happiness and what it will take for me to achieve it steadily again. I know that my dogs are my children and my pain is small compared to many people's. As I type this I have a chunky wiener dog clacking away at his little piece of rawhide bone that hangs precariously between the states of solid and

liquid. I have an uber-hyper puppy jingle-jangling throughout the house, her collar and tags clinking away with every keystroke I make. I have my nine-year-old Chihuahua crying to sit in my lap, and then when he is there, hanging on my right forearm with all of his body weight to gaze out the window in my office, causing many typos. I know in their hearts, I am the moon and sun.

And now I remember back at home, when I was so small, simply bending down on one knee to put the sticks down. I felt the cold burn of the coals on my right knee. I could not get up from the fire, but someone came and saved me.

I think it is now time to realize my search for a savior is not what I thought it was, or who it was. When I need a savior, my search should be quick. My savior should be me.