

BLOOMING: A MEMOIR

By

COURTNEY LUND O'NEIL

Bachelor of Arts in Global Studies  
University of California, Santa Barbara  
Santa Barbara, California  
2010

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing  
University of California, Riverside  
Riverside, California  
2014

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
May, 2022

BLOOMING: A MEMOIR

Dissertation Approved:

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Prof. Sarah Beth Childers, Dissertation Adviser

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Dr. Janine Joseph

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Dr. Lisa Hollenbach

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Dr. Lucia Cicioll

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my wonderful family for all your love and support. I owe the privilege of being able to pursue a Ph.D. to you. My children, husband, parents, sisters, brother, in-laws, grandparents, and friends: I'm a better writer, scholar, and person because of your presence. You mean the world to me.

Name: COURTNEY LUND O'NEIL

Date of Degree: MAY, 2022

Title of Study: BLOOMING: A MEMOIR

Major Field: ENGLISH

Abstract: *Blooming: A Memoir* is a work of creative nonfiction about trauma, the body, faith, motherhood, nature, and disability. It's a story about how the first year of motherhood can break open the rawest parts of a body, a mind. The story, experimentally structured in the life cycle of the orchid, is told in three sections: The Bloom, Dormancy, and Rebloom. Nature serves as an act of faith, to hold onto, and make sense of the past as the persona comes to reimagine the future.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

When I sat down to write *Blooming: A Memoir*, I contemplated how to effectively craft this story. I wanted to find the right container for this narrative, one that allowed me to use an image to inform the structure. To find the structure, I turned to my surroundings. At the time, I owned many pots of orchids—the household ones sold at local grocery stores. Over time, the orchid had become a source of faith, focus, and understanding in my personal life. When I believed change to be difficult, I'd watch the plant bloom, lose its petals, go barren, and then branch a new green stem. Healing and adapting were paramount to the plant's survival. During the time of my brother's illness, and in pregnancy and early motherhood, I sought the orchid to teach me about growth. Sometimes growth was ugly or unexpected, and not always in a straight line. But in the imperfection of the orchid's bloom, dormancy, and regrowth, I found deep meaning about how to live in the world. The orchid's life cycle became the entry point in which to best tell this story of motherhood, illness, family, faith, and disability. The plant made sense as a container for the manuscript as it offered the space to focus on the elements of craft I most desired, such as a non-linear structure, persona construction, metaphor, imagery, and lyricism within the narrative.

In this critical introduction, I'll explore my approach to constructing voice and persona in relation to narratives of trauma and motherhood, discuss narrative structure and layered temporality, examine metaphor and imagery, and offer my approach to larger social issues

around birth and motherhood. I'll examine these topics and elements of craft in comparison to other memoirs, craft texts, and theories situated within this writing tradition about memoirs involving motherhood.

### **Voice and Persona Construction in Memoirs About Motherhood and Trauma**

Voice aids in the authentication of persona construction in creative nonfiction books about motherhood, trauma, loss, and illness. In *Blooming: A Memoir*, I craft a warm voice through the narrative, a voice that is inviting. This grows out of a love for my brother, Gavin, and his life, and this tenderness grows outward, for my family, nature, animals, and journey through motherhood. However, I balance out the warmth to allow room for a more “beastly” voice to appear during moments of heightened emotion. I borrow this term “beastly” from Mary Karr in her craft book, *The Art of Memoir*. She asserts voice in memoir should be both “beautiful and beastly” (38). This is evident when the younger persona in Part Two of *Blooming: A Memoir* is wiping down menus at her restaurant job, another server approaches to tell her a sad story of losing his brother. After the server is done, she struggles to process the experience: “I thanked him for sharing his story, but on the inside, I wasn’t thankful. I did not feel equipped to bear his trauma when I could barely swallow my own. Was I now the public dumping ground for really sad brother-death stories? I hoped not.” This moment addresses what Karr conceives about voice: that it should showcase a range of emotions, both the charm and dark side of a writer. Karr argues, “The secret to any voice grows from a writer’s finding a tractor beam of inner truth about psychological conflicts to shine the way” (36).

The voice in *Blooming: A Memoir* never turns from the body, and the history and memory the body holds. This voice construction is a blend of both Mary Karr’s and Nancy Mair’s theories on voice. Nancy Mairs, in *Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer*,

articulates what has steered her to think about her own voice. She asserts, “A critical consciousness about gender and language has informed my literary voice” (36). Mairs claims that we can only write from the body we have. Voice construction in relation to the body occurs throughout the manuscript, and can especially be seen in the delivery room, when the persona is giving birth. During the final moments of labor the voice describes the trauma and quickness of the final moments: “A short, plump man in his seventies ran through the door, no introduction. Scissors pointed toward the heavens, held high in his hands. Then, he daggered the blade points down. And sliced. There was a vacancy, a whoosh; a violent, bloody split.” There is attention to authenticity within the voice, without turning from the body’s experience. The ideas about voice that Karr and Mairs present are true for *Blooming: A Memoir* and for memoirist Emily Rapp Black in *Sanctuary: A Memoir*.

In her memoir, Rapp Black’s voice is crafted in relation to trauma and motherhood. After her son Ronan’s passing, Rapp Black suffers, and describes a moment of the push and pull of this trauma: “My life was in free fall...At night I tapped a handful of Xanax into my palm, then forced myself to return all but one pill to the bottle” (6). During her pain, she has a new child with a new partner. She relays, “Just as trauma and grief unmake the world, love remakes it” (25). Love becomes part of Rapp Black’s voice, and her path toward realization. The path leads her to the doorway of two motherhoods: one, where a baby is dead, and another where a baby is alive. Voice and persona are developed based on this fact. Voices shaped around trauma wrestle with how to manage memories of the past, while attempting to make sense of events in the present.



Throughout the text, the persona in *Blooming: A Memoir* must learn to stand in two doorways, two identities. Sister, mother. The ending of *Blooming: A Memoir* offers this path of love and realization:

It was enough to see a hawk slice through the blue of the sky and trust it was no longer at battle. It was enough to pass by doors, knowing what lived inside, and walk past, anyhow. It was enough to know that the beauty was not only in the bloom of the orchid, but in the in the slow cycle of change. What I did know: the pain of the past no longer had to hold me. The beauty of life rested not in what I could see, but in what I chose to see. Years later, I would look back at my time in early motherhood, look back at life with my brother, and realize, we were always blooming.

This section is the final moment in the book, where the persona of both sister and mother converges on the page. The voice in this final section comes to mature and understand pain through a lens of hope and love. The warmth and inviting voice is observed in the final section of the book because the persona has fully come to understand and internalize her brother's illness, her delivery, and the unknown future of their lives.

In the memoirist's task of crafting voice, they must first internalize the subject matter they wish to explore. In her craft essay "Crafting Voice" in *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*, Jennifer Sinor asserts that creating a strong voice requires "internalization of subject" and "vulnerability in approach" (58). Sinor goes on to explain "internalization of subject" as the confidence that comes from a deep, full understanding of a topic (59). This truth about the persona coming to understand "blooming" has been fully developed and fleshed out through vulnerability and voice construction. By the end of the book, the voice has matured, and is less a voice of innocence, as portrayed in Part Two. Through

*Blooming: A Memoir*, the voice ebbs and flows with the more reflective, all-knowing voice in the first and third section, and uses a more innocent voice in the second section, occurring in the past. I wanted the reader to understand the past from the voice and persona construction of who I was during that time. I made this choice consciously because I did not want to overshadow what the current persona knows in the present strand. The voice in *Blooming: A Memoir* derives and builds from this fully explored internalization of subject, as evident by the ending's truths that have been realized for the persona.

In *Blooming: A Memoir*, voice and persona construction work toward a path of realization that deepens over time. Although there are overlaps to both persona and voice, the persona is the speaker, carrying and crafting the voice on the page. In the first section of the book, the persona is a sister and pregnant woman, in the second section the persona is sister, and in the final section, the persona is a mother and sister. The first and third sections of *Blooming: A Memoir* showcase a more reflective persona, and the persona in the second section is one of innocence. In the third part, the reader can see the innocence lost, for example, when the persona attempts to save baby bunnies. She seeks her mother's aid, but her mother refuses to stop helping because the pain of bunnies aspirating in her hands is too much. A reflective persona emerges in that moment in the text, realizing this truth and difference between herself and her mother. All three sections of *Blooming: A Memoir* work together to develop the persona over time.

According to Vivian Gornick in her craft text, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, a persona is the "truth speaker" in a creative nonfiction text. The persona goes inward to pull out meaning and is the narrator that pulls from the self "to organize a piece of experience" (17). The persona seeking out truth in memoir is what the reader engages with throughout the

text. Gornick asserts that the ability to make readers believe they know who is speaking is “the trustworthy narrator achieved.”

The persona in *Blooming: A Memoir* is one who has experienced trauma in childbirth, and this trauma catapults her back to the past to reflect on trauma she experienced when her brother was a newborn, placed in hospice care, and newly diagnosed with the rare illness Aicardi-Goutières Syndrome. This split is most evident after the persona has given birth. After the persona in *Blooming: A Memoir* has given birth to her child, she searches the room for the baby, craving to meet him, and hold him:

I craned my neck, body still voraciously shaking, scanning the room for my child, but I couldn't spot him. The male doctor sat in front of me, telling me to push, again. The placenta lingered inside, an empty bag of something like me. Quickly, he said, as he needed to sew me back together. Fix me. But it was too late to stitch what was broken open. A blood galaxy surrounded me. I was nowhere, everywhere.

The splitting in this final section of Part One signals a physical splitting of the body, as well as a splitting of the persona. The next section takes the reader back in time, about ten years into the past, when the persona's brother is a newborn baby. The choice to move to Gavin's birth scene is strategic. The point is to show how the past lives in the raw state of the persona in the labor and delivery room. The splitting also speaks into the question of identity which can accompany memoirs about motherhood, grief, illness, trauma, or loss. Birth scenes in memoirs about motherhood and trauma offer rich scenes to craft this split in persona.

Trauma and time influence the evolution of persona in *Blooming: A Memoir*, working together with moments that involve complex emotion in relation to the body. In “Weaving Past, Present, and Future in Flash Nonfiction” by Nora Elia Cantú in *The Rose Metal Press Field*

*Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*, the author discusses how memoirs effectively move through time. The past can interweave with the present strand in a narrative to create a “disorientation and dislocation within time” (108). This can be done successfully by writing the main plot in the past tense, which is done in *Blooming: A Memoir*. This motif of time travel within the present strand is established in the beginning of *Blooming: A Memoir* when the persona learns the biologically assigned sex of her child. She leaves the dark room where the ultrasound is performed with waves of shock and fear. Her husband asks her what is wrong, and she responds that she doesn’t know. However, directly after the line of dialogue she uses interior monologue to describe her feelings more clearly. She reflects on the year of 2007, when she was nineteen. Her mom had given birth to a fourth child, Gavin. This was her only brother, and two other sisters were between them. At six weeks old Gavin began to experience a debilitating illness. At first, he was misdiagnosed as having Meningitis. It was not until he turned four months old that he was properly given the diagnosis of Aicardi-Goutières Syndrome, a rare leukodystrophy, which is a genetic disorder affecting the white matter in the brain. Doctors predicted that he would not live past his first birthday.

The persona explains, reflecting on the past, “When Nick and I entered the car, I realized it wasn’t that I was unhappy that we were having a boy. I was deeply afraid. Although Gavin survived—he was about to turn nine—the disease left him physically and mentally disabled, unable to talk or walk. I was afraid of the illness that infiltrated him as an infant, squeezing his body, causing wreckage and suffering.” In this part of the text, the reader understands that her body has recorded the last encounter she had with a newborn boy as one of trauma and fear. In this scene, she relives sensations of caring for her infant brother when he experienced 104-degree temperatures, loss of autonomy in his body, and seizures.

Fluidity through time naturally aids persona development in narratives around motherhood and trauma. The birthing person may remember something else in the past, as if they are pinballing through time and memory. In his craft essay, “Traumatized Time” in *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, David McGlynn turns to psychiatrist Dori Laub when expressing ideas about trauma in memoir. He exclaims that when a memoirist writes about trauma, one is not merely living in the past. The person with trauma lived through an event that did not complete, did not have any closure. The body is vulnerable because trauma, according to McGlynn and Laub, has no clear endpoint (115). This affects the craft choices to weave past events of trauma with the present strand in the text.

In *Blooming: A Memoir*, I am concerned about the ripple effect of trauma on mothers and bodies. The traumatic moment of birth will become a moment without an end. The persona splits to a place in the past, to hold a baby. A different baby. It’s the scene of her brother being born. A scene where she can enter a calm labor and delivery room after her mother’s birth:

When my brother was born, almost ten years before, on June 22-, 2007, I inhaled him, searching his skin for the smell of new life. Cradled in my arms, in my mom’s hospital room, he was the size of a small football. Rocking him, I took a photo on my flip phone of his already blue eyes, his pouty petite lips. I clicked send, sharing my new brother with all of my friends.

The birth of the persona’s brother is mostly a wonderful experience. Gavin arrives swiftly yet breaks his collarbone during the delivery. However, when the persona arrives in the room, this is only briefly mentioned. Joy is represented through the act of the persona holding her newborn brother for the first time. Where the previous section ends with the emotion of craving to hold her baby, in the next section the craft choice is made to place a baby in the persona’s hands. This

choice to place these two scenes next to each other helps secure the foundation of two personas. The persona of mother and daughter is one in search of truth about illness, motherhood, and events of the past. Trauma and the body's memory is explored in Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*. In the text, she discusses how the brain changes when experiencing trauma. When trauma enters the body, "the parasympathetic nervous system gets frazzled. The body doesn't know where to look for a safe space of calm and comfort" (73). In Edwidge Danticat's *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story*, she speaks about how trauma and tragedies are not fixed events, suspended in the past. She explains, "We are often told not to compare tragedies, but how can we not when we experience them in the same body and with the same mind?" (55). This question is provocative and powerful to consider, especially when contemplating memoirs about motherhood, illness, and trauma. Memoirs about the body, and stories about bodies that produce bodies, echo Danticat's question and Bessel van der Kolk's explanation of trauma.

### **Narrative Structure and Layered Temporality**

I have often been drawn to memoirs that employ innovative and exciting structures to best move through time. In *Blooming: A Memoir*, time travel occurs throughout the manuscript, as memories flash up for the persona. However, the structure also allows for two strands to naturally work with each other. The ability to move fluidly through time organically coincides amongst narratives involving forms of trauma. In his craft essay, "Traumatized Time" in *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, David McGlynn asserts that the magical quality of creative nonfiction is its ability to move and travel through time (113). The orchid became my container, my structure to write this text because it offered a natural configuration to move through time. The orchid's life cycle began as the entry point in which to best tell this story of

motherhood. I decided to follow an ABA structure. The first and third sections of the book take place on the same timeline, following the persona from pregnancy into new motherhood. The second section dives into the past to showcase life with the persona's family and Gavin, ten years before. This literary choice to use layered temporality was inspired by *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest* because of how effortlessly Strayed does this throughout the narrative. The present moment of the hike often pinballs her back to the past to reckon with a memory of trauma, pain, grief, or confusion. In *Wild*, the hike serves as Strayed's container. It's the situation guiding her forward. The story is her reckoning with the pain of the past, and the loss of her mother. According to Gornick, the situation is the literal material of the book, often the context or circumstance, and the story is the emotion that preoccupies the writer, which guides the changes within the persona over time. Another text that I read during the time I planned the structure of *Blooming: A Memoir* was not a contemporary memoir, but a modernist novel, *The House in Paris* by Elizabeth Bowen.

*The House in Paris* is written in ABA structure, following a present, past, present narrative. The structure moves from a young boy waiting in vain to meet his mother, Karen, for the first time; the past, which reveals the trauma Karen faced becoming a mother; and a return to the present, where Karen chooses to not meet her son. The reader understands through the construction of this structure that Karen makes the choices in the present strand because of events from the past. The layered temporality in the novel allows the reader to see how the past infiltrate's Karen's present regarding motherhood and trauma. After I read this novel, I wanted *Blooming: A Memoir* to follow a dual timeline narrative to demonstrate how the past has a continuous pull on the present. The structure of *Blooming: A Memoir* heeds the orchid's bloom,

dormancy, and rebloom. This craft choice allowed me to dive deep into scenes of the past to guide the reader in better understanding how they affected the persona's journey.

The past comes to haunt the persona in *Blooming: A Memoir*, and she is no longer able to not face it once she enters the labor and delivery room. Everything she had feared or suppressed has nowhere else to go. The knocking of the past on the persona's psyche is what helps the narrative move throughout time. In the delivery scene, the persona experiences flashbacks of when her brother was sick and when she found out the biological sex of her child. These flashbacks and moments of vulnerability allow the reader to move through time, ten years before, in the section after the delivery scene. Hindsight and vulnerability are used to develop this journey. In *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again* by Sven Birkerts, he observes that the memoirist uses hindsight and reflection to craft coming-of-age stories. Insight allows the memoirist to abandon chronology and linear narratives. Coming to understand one's story becomes a large part of the story itself. He declares, "The question is not what happened when, but what, for the writer, was the path of realization" (44). This path helps develop voice and persona construction as a story moves forward.

A similar haunting of the past occurs in Rapp Black's memoir, when the persona finds herself at the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge in Taos, New Mexico, brimmed with complex emotions about the prognosis of her dying son. She feels intense pain of not being able to control her emotions, but finds the will to continue, no matter how difficult that is. This acknowledgment of a will to live helps catapult the narrative through vulnerability.

A pivotal moment in *Blooming: A Memoir* where vulnerability and the will to live is expressed in conjunction with layered temporality, is represented when the persona gives birth. It is the scene that sends her back into the past for many pages, for the second section. In



*Blooming: A Memoir*, the persona feels out of her body at the end of the birthing scene. The persona relays: “I tried to enter myself. To erase the chaos, the pain, I needed to go inward and stop hovering above; quiet the mind, focus on the breath. I used the technique of visualization to get through these ten minutes.” Soon after, this choice of holding on for life, for hope of a pleasant birth is erased when a strange doctor enters the labor and delivery room. The shock, the vacancy, and the split allow an organic moment for the narrative to move through time.

The shock of a mismanaged childbirth to aid in layered temporality is also found in *Inferno: A Memoir of Motherhood and Madness* by Catherine Cho. The structure, fragmented and non-linear, blends the past and her life growing up with Korean traditions with the present, and her stay in a psychiatric ward in New Jersey. The book has no chapter numbers, allowing the formless structure to move like a river through the persona’s mind. Each section takes place at various points in time. Later in the text, the reader learns of the details of Cho’s unplanned C-section. The reader witnesses the images of violence from the delivery that scatter across her mind. After the persona in *Blooming: A Memoir* has her child, she searches the room for the baby, craving to meet him, and hold him after her birth. Time remains something malleable within the narrative, allowing for the persona to dive deeper into the past. Similar choices are also made in “The Girls in My Town,” the title essay in Angela Morales’ collection. During Morales’ labor, she uses her labor and delivery as a place to jump through time, using myth, and tales of other mothers. She tells the reader of stories that mothers in her community would share, stories of La Llorana, the “Wailing Woman,” and a story of a student who has a baby during the semester and brings them to the final exam. In this essay, mothers are connected through an invisible string, a thread to help the writer move through time.

In *Blooming: A Memoir* the persona becomes interested in getting to know the past stories and traumas which made her mother, who is the foundation of her shared experience in motherhood. When she is a new mother, she sometimes feels herself walking in the shadow of her mother. So much of the past seeps its way into the present. The persona comes to quickly understand this about herself, which drives her to consider how the past infiltrates and affects her mother in the present. We all come from another body. The body of a mother creates life. Mother and daughter relationships offer a dynamic web of possibilities to interrogate. The task of writing about such a relationship, as Sven Birkerts contends in *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again*, takes “work.” Memories may flash up interchangeably for the writer, giving the life of the relationship between a mother and daughter a unique internal shape. The hunger, the desire, to do the interrogative work of such a relationship sends the memoirist on, as what Birkerts defines, the path of realization (61).

In *Blooming: A Memoir*, this path sends the persona and her mother to her mother’s hometown in Illinois. For the persona’s mother, one of her defining coming-of-age moments was when she was the prime witness on a national murder case. She aided the police in helping catch a serial killer. Her friend and co-worker, Rob, was the murderer’s final victim. The choice to add this part of the persona’s mother’s past is to showcase what Danticat suggests: “We are often told not to compare tragedies, but how can we not when we experience them in the same body and with the same mind?” (55). The persona desires to understand the events which made her mother, just as she comes to understand the events that have formed herself.

### **Metaphor, Imagery, and Lyricism**

In *Blooming: A Memoir*, metaphor provides a deeper meaning into the narrative. The image of the orchid presents possibility for new growth, but also darkness, the image of death,

and the beauty of turning inward for new life. My hope is that readers leave the manuscript with their own definitions of blooming, as the persona comes to see blooming occur not just within the orchid, but within her brother, herself, and her family. According to Mark Doty in *The Art of Description*, “the words stand for the thing itself, something the word is not” (76). He asserts, “we breathe metaphor, swim in metaphor, traffic in metaphor—and the verbs in those three phrases illustrate my point” (76). The verb allows a maximum effectiveness of language and metaphor. A metaphor may connect the mundane with the disparate. Figurative language affords the reader a certain texture of experience in search for meaning in a text. Doty believes that good description is fueled by a “hunger for the world” (84). He says, it’s the need to “taste, to name, to claim what’s seen, to bring it.” And what we are drawn to describe is not always celebratory, always beautiful, but often it is ugly and baroque and oppressive. This is part of hunger, the drive to lay texture to a life on the page and reveal a crumb of meaning for the reader, to fulfill their own hunger.

In *Blooming: A Memoir*, the persona focuses a lot on the natural world. This is evident, of course, in the observation of orchids, but also the outside world as well. Using description, the persona asserts her acceptance for all that has come before, and all that is yet to come. In her parents’ backyard, the persona spends a spring morning with her brother and child:

I scooped Bennett out of the swing and sat both boys in the double-person swinging bench. I pushed, and the boys cheered in glee. The morning dew dried away and hawks flew overhead to their nests, back home. There was so much wonder in the simple act of being, of breathing. With these two boys next to me, I could have lived in this moment for a lifetime.

The truth the persona experiences is one of joy and beauty, which helps her experiences of trauma exit, and live below the surface. Thinking and feeling calls back to how the writer sees something. Doty states that how one looks at something requires vigilance. Doty avows that the “more accurate and sensory the apparent evocation of things, the more we have the sense of someone there doing the looking, a sensibility at work” (45). Like imagery, metaphor allows the writer to impose meaning. Metaphor is what Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola state to be the “pumping heart” of literary writing in *Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction*. In nature, the writing will often lean on lyricism to form description. Gavin’s name means “Battle Hawk.” Hawks, being, and breathing are meaningful to the text’s truth. The image of the hawk also speaks back to nature as an important theme in the text, specifically with the metaphor of “blooming” as the text’s central metaphor.

A central metaphor can serve as an image for the reader to hold onto through a creative nonfiction text. In *Blue Nights* by Joan Didion, the memoir opens with the metaphor of “blue.” The book begins with a sentiment on the color in relation to physical place: “In certain latitudes there comes a span of time approaching and following the summer solstice, some weeks in all, when the twilights turn long and blue.... This book is called ‘Blue Nights’ because at the time I began it I found my mind turning increasingly to illness, to the end of promise” (3-4). For Didion, blue is the image that holds the sadness and uncertainty of losing her daughter, Quintana Roo, to illness. The trauma of the illness and ultimate loss, creates the persona in *Blue Nights* that attempts to hold something, anything.

Similarly, in Cho’s work, imagery related to the concept of hell or “inferno” begins in the moments leading up to the persona’s admittance into a psych ward. During the early fog of postpartum, Cho cannot shake the color red. The reoccurring image: the doctor’s arms “dripping

in blood.” This image echoes one of violence, a perspective of trauma related to the person given the power to shepherd the baby out of the womb. After the persona in *Blooming: A Memoir* has her child, she searches the room for the baby, craving to meet him, and hold him. Color is used here too, to illicit a certain mood of caution from the reader in *Blooming: A Memoir*. The persona recalls the scene: “A blood galaxy surrounded me. I was nowhere, everywhere.” *Blooming: A Memoir* uses red to relay the scene by the choice of using “blood galaxy” to describe the setting. Lyricism and image speak back to another within this scene, specifically with the final line of the first section: “I was nowhere, everywhere.”

In *Blooming: A Memoir*, the metaphor of “blooming” takes on lyrical significance around the orchid’s will to live, which then reflects, too, Gavin’s will to live. The orchid is an image of hope, a place of faith. Through multiple seasons, the persona watches as the orchid transitions. When the orchid seems as if it is dead, months pass, and the plant branches a waxy new stem. The life cycle of the plant is a mirror for the persona to both reckon with the past of her brother’s traumatic first year of life in hospice care, and her distressing entrance into motherhood. The orchid’s ability to grow a completely new stem from what appears to be nothing is one of hope for the persona in *Blooming: A Memoir*.

When the persona’s parents call her in *Blooming: A Memoir* to tell her about her brother’s diagnosis, she is completing Spanish homework before class. She hangs up the phone call with her parents and rides her bike to class, trying to remain present in the world, although time feels as if it has stopped. The stopping of time that best presents the lyric mode for the persona:

As my teacher doled out a lecture, I dreaded Spanish class ending. Each new conversation, each encounter would bring me closer to Gavin’s death. Closer to a

goodbye when there wasn't a long enough hello. Closer to an extra small shiny black casket. Closer to a funeral service with a blown-up picture of a baby at the front of the church. Closer to losing everything I believed. Babies lived. Babies weren't supposed to exit early. In class, we were learning *el pretérito*, the past tense. Life as I had known it only existed before the phone call.

The approach to lyricism I take in this scene involves the construction of anaphora, imagery, and the theme of temporality and tense in relation to "*el pretérito*." In Eula Biss' craft essay, "It is What it Is," in *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, she describes lyricism as organic to the way she thinks and feels (195). In this scene, the reader can lyrically understand how the persona feels by the description within the scene. In *Raising a Rare Girl: A Memoir* by Heather Lanier, imagery is crucial for engaging the reader with an illness, Wolf Hirschhorn syndrome, they may know little about before arriving at the book. Lanier's lyrical approach to research is also crucial, when she learns the facts, like 90% of those diagnosed with Wolf Hirschhorn syndrome experience seizures, or mortality rate is around 34% in the first 2 years of life. Her response is lyric: "The windows were black, and the ground cracked beneath me, and the Internet glowed alien blue with its surreal news" (61). There is emotional power in describing the scene through color and imagery.

### **Social Issues Surrounding Birth and Motherhood**

One of the important tasks I wanted to complete when writing *Blooming: A Memoir* was to speak into social issues surrounding birth and motherhood. Within the manuscript, these topics emerge throughout the text. For example, during the persona's pregnancy she is tested for the same illness her brother has. She discovers she is a carrier. But she chooses to not test her unborn child. She is already four months along and she wants to meet the child growing inside of her

regardless of what answers exist in DNA. Life with her brother has shown her frightening parts of childhood illness, but also, through his prognosis, she becomes an ally within the disability community. She comments on the difficult choices mothers must make with genetic testing in pregnancy. In the text, before she gets tested for Aicardi-Goutières Syndrome and other syndromes, she approaches her complex emotions authentically and relays: “A life is a life, but that knowledge did not mean navigating choices for the unborn is easy.” She confronts the ethical and complex issues the medical system places on pregnant people by having these tests conducted when the mother is well into her second trimester.

Toward the end of the persona’s pregnancy, after spending much of her care under government funded Medi-Cal, her OB-GYN lets her know he will not be attending her delivery. She is upset but feels she shouldn’t be. Throughout her pregnancy care she felt like a number pushed through a system, not a dynamic human in an appointment room. This commentary illuminates the problematic nature for those receiving prenatal care on government funded health insurance. Medical practitioners may treat birthing parents differently, based on their socio-economic status during pregnancy. This feeling the persona has comes to a head when she gives birth, and the strange on-call doctor enters the labor and delivery room. My choice to include specific details about being on government health insurance is to spread awareness that all birthing people need proper, trauma-informed care. My experience during pregnancy and the postpartum lacked the whole body and mind care I needed.

In my postpartum period, I experienced flashbacks and night terrors related to both the traumatic birth, and by reliving times when my brother cried as an infant, with the onset of his illness. Although I would not know it at the time, I was experiencing symptoms of Postpartum PTSD. At the 6-week checkup, I hoped the nurse who conducted my check-up would help me

come to understand my experience. I filled out the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression form, which could diagnose me with postpartum depression or anxiety, but I did not feel like I had either of those. During my visit, I was pushed through a system not meant to support me. I tried to explain to the nurse that I was experiencing feelings of reliving my birthing experience that would keep me up at night. The nurse said I might have a slight case of depression; I could see someone if I wanted. She spoke with one hand on the doorknob, on her way out of the room. No one checked on my postpartum health again. I was never formally diagnosed. It wouldn't be until three years later, when I would learn that postpartum PTSD existed.

Social issues surrounding birth and the postpartum period are important topics to grapple with, to help inform birthing people and society. In *Inferno*, Cho chooses to spread awareness for postpartum psychosis, something that has not received the same level of attention in American culture such as postpartum anxiety or depression. During Cho's recovery, she reads compulsively about postpartum psychosis and joins a forum of other women who have experienced the illness. She explains that "for most women, postpartum psychosis occurs a day or two after birth. It was unusual...to occur when the baby was already a few months old" (232). The latter is the fact for Cho. The persona then shares her official diagnosis, which is stress-induced postpartum psychosis. The most heartbreaking fact she finds is that in the U.K., where she also calls home, she would have been admitted into a mother-baby unit and not separated from her newborn in a psych ward, like she was in the States. This social commentary is crucial for readers to gain a wider cultural understanding of issues surrounding birth and motherhood in America.

The pressure to breastfeed becomes another issue for the persona in *Blooming: A Memoir* as she struggles to produce enough milk, as written about in the third section of the book. A



scene when she realizes there may be a problem is when she nor anyone else can console her new child:

When I arrived home from the social services office, I scooped Bennett up to breastfeed. He chomped and sucked away, leaving my nipples puffed and cracked. It seemed like he was getting milk. When I squeezed my nipples, thick milk exited. But that night, we experienced one of the worst nights yet. The night my dad was there. Bennett would not sleep, would not stop crying. My dad and Nick took him for a drive after he nursed. My dad said the driving calmed me when I was a baby. But when they came back, he was red and shrieking, tears drying on his cheeks. Nick begged, “Let’s just give him a bottle.” The hospital had sent us home with one, a Similac ready-made formula tube. But I remembered my mom, how she breastfed for years. I deeply and truly believed the female body was capable of keeping a child alive if it was able to develop one. I didn’t know how wrong I was.

Much of the rhetoric surrounding birthing mothers in Los Angeles, California, where I delivered revolved around “breast is best” language. I wished I had received more vocal support for formula, as I would have not resisted using formula. I hope my journey can reflect, for other new mothers, that nourishing a baby, in whatever manner that entails, is the best choice for both baby and mother. In *And Now We Have Everything: On Motherhood Before I Was Ready*, Meaghan O’Connell addresses the rhetoric around breastfeeding. She describes websites as labeling breastfeeding as “best” for the baby, while also being “hard” work. The persona in this memoir says she found guilt motivating, and initially she did not question if her body could produce milk. There is danger around a constructed belief system that breastfeeding is the primary and optimal way of feeding when the safest method is to feed the baby. It’s important for

contemporary memoirs about motherhood to address social politics of motherhood, to highlight diverse rhetoric that may come across as dangerous for new mothers.

## **Conclusion**

*Blooming: A Memoir* is a contemporary memoir that hopes readers come to see new ways of growth and adaptation through the natural world. Although the persona finds this motif in the orchid, I hope this can be extended to what the readers finds meaningful in their own lives. In the writing tradition of memoirs about motherhood, illness, loss, trauma, or grief, the success of these texts relies on voice and persona construction in relation to trauma and motherhood, layered temporality within narrative structure, metaphor, image, lyricism, and commentaries into larger social issues surrounding birth and motherhood. *Blooming: A Memoir*, is incorporated into this writing tradition of contemporary memoirs about motherhood including but not limited to *Sanctuary: A Memoir* by Emily Rapp Black, *Raising a Rare Girl: A Memoir* by Heather Lanier, *Inferno: A Memoir of Motherhood and Madness* by Catherine Cho, *Blue Nights* by Joan Didion, *The Girls in My Town: Essays* by Angela Morales, and *And Now We Have Everything: On Motherhood Before I Was Ready* by Meaghan O'Connell. Each of these texts wrestle with motherhood through the lens of loss, trauma, illness, or grief and arrive at a form of reconciliation and place of meaning. Truth and trauma work together in these texts, amongst these personas, as they make their journeys through motherhood, the past, and the future.

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# **BLOOMING**

a memoir

By Courtney Lund O'Neil

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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

My mom says our family doesn't have a crest, but we have a flower: the orchid.

The orchid is a creature of reinvention, creativity, perseverance. When I gift the flower to a friend I tell them to not give up on the plant when the flowers begin wilting, dying, dropping. One by one, all blossoms will fall from the stem; a pile of paper endings. This is a natural cycle of all flowers. But usually when a friend finds this particular flower supposedly dead, they think it's dead-dead. Many think they've killed it.

I tell friends to not give up on the flower once the stem has folded then faded from vibrant green to brittle brown. The orchid can grow a different branch, sprout new buds, and bloom again. With the right light, water, and love, the orchid is limitless in its blooming. If properly cared for, the orchid can reinvent itself for multiple seasons.

Over a decade into caring for orchids, I realize humans are similar. We go through our own trials, our own seasons, our own periods of darkness. In periods of dormancy, we may think we may not grow a new stem, bud a new identity. But we can. We do. We must. Our life relies on the spiritual mystery of growth, of resilience, transformation.

Should you ever need a reminder of how powerful your life is, head down to your local Trader Joe's and pick up an orchid. You will see the miracle of this flower's rebirth. And when you discover this wonder, remember: we all bloom again.

This is my story, of how I came to believe this to be true.

## PROLOGUE

“Today is not going to be a good day,” my mom said. It was October. She wore a navy cotton turtleneck and sat on a yoga ball, bouncing in the center of the living room. Her eyes were dry in the way only an over-abundant amount of crying could make them. I wouldn’t yet understand her pain, her grief, her hope, her faith until a decade later, when I would become a mom myself. But now, during this moment, on this day, there was no tomorrow. No future. No dreams. Only my four-month-old brother, Gavin, collapsed against my mother’s chest. Fevers rolled through his body, searing at 104 degrees. His lips, pink and blazed, a side effect of temperatures without an off button.

But in my mom’s arms, he was at peace. She squinted out the window, a brief escape from the wrath inside our home. My eyes followed, stopping at a purple orchid perched on a side table, by the window, a gift from a family friend.

Beyond the scope of the living room, scattered with empty morphine bottles and used syringes, apocalyptic snowflakes tumbled through the streets. In the driveway, the Suburban, once a metallic blue, was now a desolate grey, covered in a thick layer of fresh ash. San Diego was in a state of emergency as rampant wildfires scorched nearby homes and the countryside. News reporters nervously chattered in the background: the fires were so large, they could be seen from outer space. My mom clicked the TV off.

Gavin’s body was now molded to her own, like dough. Within the silence, we were forced to talk. Her mother was dead, her half-sister was absent, her father was 2,000 miles



away, her husband was at work, and my younger sisters were at school. I was twenty, old enough to understand that my mother was not herself, old enough to understand something had gone gravely wrong. At age forty-five, with a surprise pregnancy turned nightmare, she had no one. I was here, though, I told her, quietly, standing in front of her. My eyes locked on hers. *I can help, talk to me.*

She returned my gaze, too weak to smile.

“The Monster is here,” she said.

The Monster was the name she’d given to Gavin’s mysterious illness. An illness so rare, no American doctors could name it. A London doctor was the one to phone my mother on Halloween weekend and give her the scientific name of The Monster: Aicardi-Goutierés Syndrome (AGS), a diagnosis for her son. No one knew much about the illness, but we knew the tricks The Monster liked to play. It snuck in through the trap door of Gavin’s brain and electrified him from the top of his head down to his pinky toes.

I bit my lip and fixated on my brother. His paperclip thin fingers, fragile neck, all the skin peeking out from his baby blue onesie, showed his sickness. The warped skin faded from a milky translucent color to pitchfork red. His foggy blue eyes opened, unfocused, and gazed off in diagonal directions. Drool spilled from the corner of his mouth and onto his chest. I walked over to him and placed my hand on his forehead, my attempt to connect. He was right in front of me, but I felt a million lives away. At the touch of my hand on his skin, he jolted, arms flung into his belly, crossing like a T. rex.

We were told that Gavin, my only brother, was dying.

Part I

# THE BLOOM

**The Present**

“It will take all your heart, it will  
take all your breath.”

– **Adrienne Rich**

# **A Boy of My Own**

In a Marshall's bathroom stall, I whispered bad words to the open, frigid air. My fingers trembled as I squatted over the toilet and peed all over an over-priced pregnancy test. This one was a Clearblue digital kit, supposed to tell me positive or negative in black bold letters. I'd bought it in secret and thought getting my answer would be easy enough. Turns out: not so easy. The urine damaged the test, revealing no words on the digital screen. Hence, the quiet cussing. I wanted my twenty dollars back. Next time I was buying the CVS generic brand. I tossed the stick in the feminine hygiene waste bin. I washed my hands, exited, and met my husband, Nick, who was in the Marshall's shoe aisle. He didn't know I had taken a test.

"Find anything?" I asked, bumping my left shoulder into him. A friendly and awkward cue to tell him I was here. Nick was only an inch or two taller. We were one another's opposites: my long blonde hair contrasted with his dark; his yearlong tan shined next to my pale glow. We were in Marshall's because he needed a new pair of dress shoes for his first clinical rotation.

“Not really,” he said, picking through the sea of leather and Nike. It was May, and we had officially tried for a baby only a month before. I wanted to be a mother but wanting was not the same as doing.

We were not financially ready, either, but after eight months of marriage we wanted to start trying. We were the proud renters of a cute albeit small apartment on the outskirts of Los Angeles County, and we had no real savings. Nick was in graduate school for Physical Therapy, and I was an adjunct instructor and restaurant server. But we were in love. And we knew conceiving might take a while. It took my parents a year to get pregnant with me.

I was twenty-eight. My Facebook feed was filled with friends my age undergoing IVF. Needles lying on tile floors in the shape of a heart. Women posting images of their bruised stomachs on Instagram. I expected us to have the same luck.

“My period is late,” I said now, swallowing all the air in the store. I was tattooed by the fear of everything that could go wrong with a baby, a mother, a life. My nerves clawed me, and I blurted, “Can we go to CVS?”

Nick wrapped his arms around me. He had been wanting a child since I met him. He was one of those guys who would get on the floor with a kid to build impromptu Lego towers or pretend he was riding an invisible escalator behind a kitchen countertop to make them laugh. “Of course,” he said. “That would be amazing if you were.”

After choosing the cheapest option available, I stealthily slipped the test onto the check-out counter. The CVS employee scanned the box, looked at my wedding ring, then slid the cardboard package across the counter back to me. I recoiled my hand into a fist. There

had been times before Nick when I had bought other tests, no ring on my finger. I felt judged. “Need a bag?” the employee asked.

“No thank you.” I snuck the box into my purse. “But wait, I’ll take this too.” I tossed a bag of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos across the counter.

“Do you think you are really pregnant?” Nick asked as we left.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe.” I thought back to the subtle signs that may have signified a pregnancy. First, there was the dream in which I rocked a newborn with strawberry blonde hair. I didn’t know if the baby was mine, but I assumed she was. Then, there was the smell of coffee. Every morning Nick went to school, he put on a pot. Normally, the coffee registered as a chocolatey, cocoa bean smell—it wafted in the background of my mornings. Suddenly, the coffee became the forefront. Whenever I exited the bedroom, the smell was intoxicating, as strong as pesticide, but in the best of ways. I hadn’t known what to think of this sensation, so I dismissed it. But now, I questioned if my senses had become heightened—a sign of conception.

On the reverse side of the test box, I read that the tests were best taken in the morning. “I’ll try tomorrow,” I told Nick. “When I first wake up.” Visiting Nick’s parents, we stayed with them in their little cottage house next to the cape in Massachusetts. We shared a bathroom with them, too. I worried about that. The test could get me caught and I was too nervous to explain a possible pregnancy to his parents. I don’t know why I was so nervous. Maybe it was the newness of it all. Motherhood made me feel like an intruder, basking in something not yet earned. A child playing dress-up without asking. A door I had not yet entered. Or maybe, I had. Either way, I divulged a plan: when it was still dark,

I'd scurry to the bathroom, without making a scent or a sound, and complete the test. Correctly.

The next morning, it rained. A perfect ambiance for my plan—a background noise that sank people in their beds, deeply slumbered. But I couldn't actually be pregnant, I thought. It took people months and years to become pregnant and I wasn't special. I slid on tattered gym socks and tip-toed across the tile floor, into the bathroom, shut the door. I pulled the box out of my sweatshirt's front pocket and quietly tweezed out one of the two tests, tore it open, then took a long breath. A very long one. I was not messing up this time.

I placed the pink lid over the cotton swab containing the liquid full of answers and set it on a tissue on the bathroom sink. I waited for what felt like three hours.

When I studied the test, there weren't two distinct lines calling out my pregnancy. There was one, yes, signifying the test had been administered correctly. A shadow of a parallel line stood next to other one. Like the line was buffing through a foggy morning car window. I sighed, wishing I had bought the \$20 digital one because at least I'd be able to read clearly "Pregnant" or "Not Pregnant."

The next morning, I tried again, on May 5<sup>th</sup>. I followed the full-proof plan, waking before everyone and watching the second test slumber on the counter. When I looked for the sign of pink on the second line, the color was sharper, the pink a shade brighter. I was pregnant? I felt like I was going to puke.

I wrapped the test in a Kleenex on the nightstand, told Nick to look there. The rain landing on the skylight in our room was both delightful and dizzying. Nick was thrilled when he saw the positive result. Since we did not visit his family often, we decided to

break the news earlier than we might with others. He slid the test in the oven and asked his parents to check on something baking. An echo of delight filtered through the home, and I thought maybe I had arrived through the doorway after all.

For dinner that night, Nick and I said we'd cook. A celebration. I inhaled cumin, coriander, and the fresh scent of lemon as I cooked pinto beans, Spanish rice, carne asada, and pollo asada. It was Cinco De Mayo. As I stood at the stovetop, stirring beans, Nick wrapped his arms around my waist, and I remembered back, to ten years before, when I had lost my virginity at a high school Cinco De Mayo party. I always wished I could have that night back. A do-over. Like I could replace the past, cover up everything I no longer wanted to remember.

My body felt light walking through the airport in Boston. But it also felt like something to monitor, protect. I pushed my cell phone in the front of my sweatshirt pocket. Nick noticed, told me to put the phone in my backpack instead. A fetus was growing in me, I was reminded by his small comment. I told airport security I was pregnant and received the gift of skipping out on the security line's X-Ray funnel. Something I could not see, something so breakable, was part of me, walking with me. I couldn't wait to get to our tiny bean home, curl up on the couch, let the cat purr on my lap. Momentarily forget about so much protecting.

When we arrived at our apartment in Los Angeles, I opened the blinds, let the light in. Our cat, Brea, jumped up on the windowsill to greet me. I pet her as she scratched her head on the stem of one of my orchids. Wild orchids are typically perennial, finding home

in the sun every spring. But the houseplant versions have their own cycle, their own unpredictable schedules. In their tameness, they are wild.

Near the largest window, I kept a handful of pots I'd collected. Two were in full bloom, purple and pink petals blossomed. And a fancy-potted white one Nick had gotten me for a past birthday was in the early days of sprouting a new stem. This stem and I seemed as if we were on similar journeys of change.

At fourteen weeks pregnant, Nick and I decided to find out the biologically assigned sex of our baby early. Since I had a dream of a girl, and I have three sisters, and Nick has one sister, I felt it had to be a girl. The only boy sibling between us was my brother, Gavin.

The ultrasound tech's office was in a peeling, old building in town. The room we checked into had no windows. At the reception, we paid \$25. The procedure was not covered by insurance, but we figured we could afford that reasonable sum to find out a few weeks early.

A young woman invited Nick and me into a dark room. I lay back in a bed and lifted my shirt. My body tensed as the cold blue gel glazed the skin of my pregnant belly, which looked bloated, like I had a little too much to eat at lunch. I anxiously squeezed Nick's hand. In just a minute the flat-screen TV that took up the far wall of the room would project the image of our fully formed tiny human and her reproductive parts. On the wall, a baby moved, fluttering. A black and white grayscale of life.

"I just need one more angle, then I'll know for sure. But I have a strong idea of what your little one is," the ultrasound tech said. I could tell she was used to putting on a show for couples; the reveal was supposed to be this great surprise, a spectacle.



I thought about interrupting her, telling her I'd changed my mind. Nick's forewarning on our drive over, that there was still a fifty percent chance we were having a boy, resurfaced. Before I could say anything, she was ready.

"You're having a boy!" she cheered.

Nick's mouth split into a surprised smile, and he grabbed me, cheering with her. The whole thing felt like a strange sporting event, a surprise touchdown thrown. I caught the pass, but wasn't looking for it. "Can you believe it?" He kissed me and began weeping. Happy, untainted, beautiful tears.

I began to cry with him, but my tears were different. I choked on them, panicking. The room teetered and swung. They were burning tears of shock, of alarm. The ultrasound tech must have noticed because she said in an uncomfortable, softer voice, "Little boys are great."

"Of course," I said. And I was honest when I said that. But I hadn't mentally prepared for this news. I quickly slid off the bed and ran out of the room while Nick collected the ultrasound images.

As I waited for him in the hallway, I tried to catch my breath, but my mind and heart had fissured. Still frames of my brother, Gavin, erupted. I time-traveled—or rather plummeted—to when I was a college sophomore. My parents called to tell me that my 4-month-old brother had a leukodystrophy that slowly atrophied the brain. I flashed back to memories of when he was placed in hospice care and given a year to live. I dropped out of college to be home with him, to have moments with him, in the short life he had been prescribed.

I pressed a palm to my forehead and found the stringy pieces of hair that had fallen out of my bun. They were wet, tangled. I felt like I was in a fever dream. Nick appeared, looping his arm around me, unaware of what was happening in my mind. He was quiet as we walked to the car, maybe a little upset. Wondering why I couldn't be cheery, just like he was. *Trust me*, I wanted to tell him, *I want to know why, too*.

Once we arrived at our black sedan, I stared upwards, inhaling the smog-crowned Los Angeles air as my mind moved through disturbing scenes: my brother shaking in my mother's arms, his lips a petroleum purple, sick, fragile from a disease that calcified parts of his brain. Then there he was, ghostlike, lying limp in my father's arms after a grand mal seizure.

Confused, Nick asked, "What's wrong? You should be excited." His voice cracked my daze, and I slid into the warm summer car. "This should be a happy moment." I was happy, but I was anxious. Nick knew about these times with Gavin, so he would understand. But I couldn't find an order to my thoughts to speak.

"I don't know what's wrong," I said, waving him off. I felt bad for not sharing in with his joy. I felt joy underneath this panic. When Nick and I entered the car, I realized it wasn't that I was unhappy that we were having a boy. I was afraid. Although Gavin survived—he was about to turn nine—the disease left him physically and mentally disabled, unable to talk or walk. I was afraid of the illness that infiltrated him as an infant, squeezing his body, causing wreckage and suffering.

A boy represented so much. A boy represented my brother.

# **Babymoon**

I sat in a busy, small waiting room. The rolling belly sweat compounded by each passing minute. There was a fan on, but no air-conditioning in the OB-GYN's waiting room. I'd been to this doctor's office a few times and each time I grew to like it less. I had found her through a listing in the Los Angeles County Department of Social Services (DPSS) office. Once I found out I was pregnant, I drove down to the DPSS offices to enroll in government healthcare. I was grateful to live in a state that provided healthcare for pregnant women who did not have access to health insurance, although I did not know how vastly different I would be treated, as a woman on Medi-Cal.

In the waiting room, there were about ten other people. Some had been waiting for over two hours. The waiting was tiresome, but I just assumed this was what it was like in every doctor's office. Most of these expecting women were young and Latina and seemed to be gestating their first child like me. But, there was one mother who had about three other children with her. They climbed on her and would lose their sandals occasionally, giggle, then strap them back on their feet. The mom would call her little girls

over in turns to tighten their pigtails. She braided them with a swift, graceful hand. The door opened, diverting my attention, and there stood Nick, arriving at the appointment as planned during his lunch break. He walked over and stood next to me, as there were no other seats. We waited for over an hour, cutting into Nick's anatomy class, in which he was learning to dissect a human body.

"Courtney," my name was called by a medical assistant. She weighed me twice. The first time she said I weighed 135 pounds and I told her that couldn't be right. I hadn't weighed that little since high school. She had me stand back up. "157 pounds," she said. I nodded, that sounded more correct for my 5' 8" athletic frame. The doctor took her time to get to me, and she was swift once she arrived. She placed her wand on my belly, and we heard the fluttering heartbeat. Nick and I squeezed each other's hands in delight. It was always a relief to hear the thump of life inside.

We had been quiet up until this point, not letting the small calamities at the office bother us. After the doctor finished the ultrasound, she let my shirt fall on my stomach, onto the cold gel. A paper towel, handed as an afterthought. She fidgeted in the room when she was not speaking, always looking to her wristwatch for the time. She never remembered a thing about us, let alone our names. But today I was flustered, not only because I had the gel on my shirt again but because she hadn't properly ordered my genetic tests. I had to beg her for blood tests, and resources, so I could be tested for AGS, something she'd never heard of.

"I'll get to it. And then I'll see you every two weeks," she said, ushering us out of the room. As she spoke to us, she was already behind a counter, near the medical assistant

who mistook my weight, a herd of women's bodies sweating on the other side of the door I was about to grasp open, to leave.

Nick and I followed her out. "Why do you think she needs to see me so often?" I asked Nick.

"I don't know," Nick said. "You're not high risk. If anything, you're quite healthy."

At our next appointment, Nick asked the doctor why she recommended I see her so often. The appointments cut into my teaching at the local Christian college, Azusa Pacific University, as well as my part-time shifts at Le Pain Quotidien and The Red Marlin, where I waited tables.

"You are a Medi-Cal patient," she said. "You shouldn't care. You don't pay." She said she ran a business. She said she booked three people every fifteen minutes, that was twelve patients an hour. Now I realized why people waited three hours to be seen. The more we came in, spending whole days in her office, the more money she could make.

Then she followed up, as she was quickly sliding her wand over my belly, checking the baby's ultrasound image on the screen. "Why do you care anyway? You've never worked. You don't pay taxes."

Nick and I looked at each other, in disbelief. I told her I worked three jobs. I had been paying taxes for fourteen years.

"Oh, that's rare."

We left and I told Nick I never wanted to go back to her baby sweatshop.

Later, I called my mom, who used to deliver babies as a doctor, to tell her about our experience. And she said that was medical malpractice. I should seek out a new doctor, immediately. Although my mom had a good job, she and my dad could never

afford to bail me out by purchasing my insurance. My brother's medical bills cost more than college tuition and never went away. There was a sliver of me, a selfish corner, that wished I could ask, wished I could have an easy reel out. But I had become used to doing things on my own.

I called around town for other OB-GYNs who took Medi-Cal patients who were pregnant, but I quickly realized the ones with the most stars on Google and Yelp did not take patients like me. Finally, I found a doctor who had over three stars, 25 minutes east of where we lived. Nick looked him up Dr. Alwan and found out he had a lawsuit filed against him for stealing a credit card reader from Costco. "I need someone," I told Nick. I was desperate.

When I walked into Dr. Alwan's office, it looked very different from the one I'd run from. He had fake flowers, granite-esque countertops, chocolate leather sofas. The nicer office helped me to forget about the strange case of the stolen goods from Costco, and I chose him as my OB-GYN. He was also quick with me, never got to know me or what I did. Definitely never remembered my name. Everything was business here too. Sometimes, one of his nurses would remember me and I'd feel seen. But Dr. Alwan did what I needed the most and ordered the rest of the genetic tests for me. I moved onto the next phase, the one I was most nervous about.

Over the years, a few more doctors had become aware of the Aicardi-Goutières Syndrome. One lab in Colorado was now testing for the disease. When I was able to receive my genetic testing for AGS, I was over four months along. At this point, it almost seemed too late to test the baby, but my mom told me I needed to. It was the responsible choice. I hadn't

once considered a terminated pregnancy. It was a responsible choice in case I needed to prepare.

I waited for my name to be called at Pomona Valley Hospital. I tried to avoid the thoughts inside my head—that I might carry a disease that could potentially eradicate my tiny miracle—by nervously thumbing through a pamphlet handed to me by my new genetic counselor. It was something many new moms-to-be were choosing: 23andMe.

23andMe is a genetic test that screens for an ocean of things. So many things we could unintentionally pass onto our brewing babies. The list seemed endless as my eyes scanned through the many unsolicited genetic recipes, like Multiple Sclerosis, Cystic Fibrosis, and Tay-Sachs. I shut the pamphlet, unable to get through the rest. I knew a baby who died recently of Tay-Sachs. A friend of mine had just found out she was a carrier of Multiple Sclerosis from her 23andMe exam. The news made my friend terrified, quiet, not wanting to discuss the news any further. I wondered if it was possible to know too much.

Earlier in my second trimester, I'd been coerced into taking a Down syndrome test—doctors in California were requiring mothers to be screened at least twice during pregnancy. When I got the call that my results came back normal, I exhaled in relief, even as I felt like I wanted to reach out my hand to the women who got a call telling them their baby had an extra chromosome. I wasn't sure what society and medicine expected us to do with this information. Disability was not easy, not something a book or pamphlet could teach someone to accept, learn more about. Disability was another word for lifelong advocacy. A life is a life, but that knowledge did not mean navigating choices for the unborn is easy. Whatever decision a parent had to make required a shedding of the ego,

to either terminate a beautiful baby or move forward. Both decisions, impossible. But decisions were being made by parents all the time. Decisions we hushed, decisions we folded away in secret drawers. Why did society expect such a quiet, shameful type of suffering with these types of decisions? I know that's how I felt: alone, small, and landlocked from all the women who had come before me while thinking about the possibility of my child having an illness or disability.

My mom thought I had nothing to worry about, though. "Someone else already took the hit for you," she liked to reassure. Both parents must be carriers. She thought there was no chance both of us would be a carrier or have a baby who had AGS. But what if she was wrong?

The odds of two people who also happen to be AGS carriers finding one another in our vast world and then procreate together are about one in a million—lottery odds. It would be unlikely for the same thing to happen again; Nick and I would also need to hit the one in a million. I understood her reasoning. But the thing about odds is that someone always takes the pot. Someone is always that one in a million.

My name was called, and in the appointment room I realized now how cold everything felt. My skin, the seat, the strap tugging at my arm, helping the nurse find the flimsy strings of my veins. "Are you okay?" she asked.

I closed my eyes as the needle entered my arm, counting down from ten. The nurse made sure my name and date of birth were correct on the cryptic tubes of fresh blood. I nodded, yes. This was my blood, my answers.



“Now the wait begins,” the nurse said. My genetic counselor entered the room and told me the blood had to be sent to Colorado, and I should know more in the next couple of weeks. She said she would call me.

“Thank you,” I said. I didn’t cry even though I wanted to.

The idea for a babymoon came up when Nick and I were invited on a summer road trip with my family to Tahoe. They had been convinced to join one of those strange time-share programs where they could use points to stay in different hotel-like properties across the country.

Nick and I said yes to joining them. After hanging with my family in Tahoe, we would travel through Oregon and Seattle, and begin what we titled, “The Great Pacific Northwest Babymoon!” We would drive down from our apartment in East Los Angeles to San Diego, so we could leave before dawn, trekking north. I trimmed any dry old roots from my orchids, nestled on the windowsill, then splashed a dash of water on them. They did not need much. The fancy white one had sprouted a waxy green branch. Baby buds popped up on the stem, giving it a soft, bumpy texture. The cat took her place in the cat carrier, and we loaded up the car, locked the doors, and headed to San Diego.

When we got to my parents’ house, we packed the two cars: the blue Suburban my mom called “Big Bertha,” that was close to surpassing 200,000 miles, and our black Nissan Altima. Not yet named. My younger sisters, Danika and Sydney, parents, and Gavin planned to ride in the Suburban; Nick and I in the Altima.

Gavin sat on the sidelines, in the front lawn, watching as we packed. His way of helping was being present. He was stationed in one of those soft Dish chairs Target sold,

the kind perfect for dorm rooms. The chair was suitable for Gavin because his body could sink into the center, making it difficult for him to fall out. His green bean legs dangled off the edge, toes pushing into the ground. He was getting tall, all legs. And he was the only one in the family who naturally kept thick curly hair, the color of sun-kissed snow. He was a taller and healthier version than when he was an infant. He was in much less pain now, and he often wore a smile, always electric, always on.

Throughout the years, my relationship with Gavin had evolved. I did not fear him now like I did when he was a baby. In the beginning, I was so afraid of losing him, worried of getting too close. Afraid I would not be able to survive my grief, my family's grief if and when he died. Disability brought its own delights and challenges, and our relationship now revolved mostly around joy. Giggling and dancing, holding him up to swing a baseball bat. But I never knew how much time I would have left with him. His new prognosis gave him until age ten, and he was nine at the time of this trip. As my brother approached double digits, the urgency to enjoy every moment with him amplified.

The next morning when it was still dark outside, we scurried around, preparing for the trip. I ate a bagel; at this point I was an eating machine. When everyone was sleepy and loaded except Gavin, my dad quietly made his way up the stairs to gently scoop him up and carry him to the car. My dad was a lifelong swimmer. He carried his strength in his shoulders and had thick gray and blond hair. His son's 40-pound body, the length of a surfboard, hung limply over his shoulders down the flight of stairs. My parents never had a day-off from heavy lifting.

Big Bertha was stacked with bags. Everyone was always only allowed one carry-on piece of luggage, except Gavin. The trunk was mostly filled with Gavin's survival gear: his

walker, his wheelchair, his stroller, his dorm-style chair from Target, his life vest for swimming, his immersion blender to purée his foods, and his epilepsy medication. Each had its own life-sustaining function.

Once we sat Gavin in his car seat, I rubbed my hand on his chest, my way of saying goodbye to him. He smiled back at me with his curious blue eyes, which peeked out past his blond curls. “We’re going on an adventure,” I said. “I’ll see you soon.” He cooed, telling me goodbye in his own language.

Two hours into the trip, and we made our first stop. Both cars pulled into a boisterous McDonald’s at a crowded truck stop. We stood in line for steamed McMuffins and greasy hash browns, all except my mom who carried Gavin by his armpits and bounced him to the bathroom. She did not believe in putting Gavin in diapers. “He’s nine,” she would say. “He can be a big boy and wear big boy underwear.” She never let Gavin’s disease define him, and what he was capable of. Instead, she would ask him, “Gavin, do you have to go potty?” and Gavin would either smile, which meant *yes*, or nod his head for *no*.

About ten minutes later, the two emerged, all grins. Meaning Gavin peed. A win.

Driving up Highway 5 was an endless horizon of dried out farmland, lone cattle fields, filled with the evaporating stench of sitting summer manure.

On road trips, my dad didn’t like taking many stops. He wanted to get there. My family never ate or rested at rest stops, but rather used them to practice sprints as we ran to the restroom and hurried around for food, rattling off our orders from the dollar menu like we were bidding at auction. So, when our second stop was at a full-fledged grocery store, I could feel the heat of agitation coming from my dad. The women in our family

predictably chose this stop. Walking through a grocery store on a road trip, a high-class luxury. Although he never said he was annoyed—he is a Midwesterner—I could only imagine what he was thinking as my sisters, my mom, and I tinkered around the megamall of pit stops, ignoring the unspoken family rules while standing in line for sandwiches at the deli counter and browsing the chip aisle. Nick waited in the car. It must be a guy thing.

While we meandered, my dad hulked Gavin over his shoulders to take him to the restroom. When they emerged, my dad said, “No go!”

After our over-extended puttering was done, we piled into the two cars and continued on our way. My mom tried feeding Gavin his pureed lunch of broccoli and steak that she’d heated up at the pit stop, but he barely touched it, letting it slide down his chin onto his neck. She packed extra rags just for this.

When we were about two hours from our destination, just passing the famous Mt. Whitney that Nick and my mom hiked a couple summers ago, Big Bertha’s air conditioning hissed. Then died. The outside temperature crept close to 100 degrees. Inside, it was turning into the Mojave. My family rolled down the windows, and they were fine for the next hour, like dogs sticking their heads out in the hot desert wind. But my parents were worried. If Gavin were to overheat, he could get sick and seize.

After the temperature surpassed 100 degrees, my dad called it off. We decided not to continue our drive until we found a place to fix the A.C. We stopped at a nearby O’Reilly’s Auto Parts store to see if they could help. As it turned out old Berth had a belt break, which apparently was bad, unfixable at a simple auto store. There would be no A.C. and the blue whale would have to relinquish the very hot Gavin to Nick and me.

We shimmied the luggage and food that took up our back seat into the Suburban so Gavin could fit his car seat in the Altima's second row. My mom and my two sisters argued over who would ride next to Gavin, to re-frost, as there was room for only one more. "Well, if he gets a seizure, you're in charge," my mom said. It was enough to scare both of my sisters back into air conditionless Big Bertha. Gavin's seizures were terrifying. He turned pale, his body went stiff like a board, and he'd throw-up as his eyes stared off in varied directions. No one could prepare for a seizure, and they had to be handled with composed caution, so he did not aspirate.

The four of us, Gavin, my mom, Nick, and I continued the windy, air-conditioned trek to our destination. When we were about ten minutes away, a strange smell emerged from the back seat.

"What's that?" I asked. I covered my nose with my pillow.

My mom turned to Gavin. "Gavvy, do you have to make a stinky?" Gavin started laughing and pulsed his legs. "Uh oh!" My mom said. "Pull over!"

Nick made a quick turn into a random shaded parking lot. My mom investigated, and sure enough there it was, a copper nugget, peeking through.

"Hurry, it's coming," she shrieked, while laughing. My mom would have to deliver the tennis ball somehow, someday, as there was no restroom in sight. "Do you have a plastic bag?" she asked, swiftly.

I searched through the items at my feet. "No! But I have a bowl!"

"Give it to me!"

I shoved my old salad bowl that was crusted with ranch dressing and leftover pieces of spinach into her lap. "It'll do!"

Gavin cackled, as the three of us made a cheer squad around him. His medications made him constipated; sometimes he wouldn't pass a bowel movement for three days. So, whenever he went, it was a blessing, a celebration—like watching the ball drop on New Year's Eve.

*Ten, nine, eight.*

“It's coming!” my mom yelled.

*Seven, six, five.*

“Push!” I told Gavin.

*Four, three, two.*

“Ahhhhhh!”

*One.*

Suddenly, the prize dropped into the salad bowl. We praised Gavin's release and laughed. Almost like a real-life delivery. I wondered if my delivery would be filled with an equal amount of joy.

The humor we found in these moments always surprised me. Gavin's life wasn't always funny, so humor was a choice we made. Humor was the high we chased; it pushed out storm clouds of pain, questions we would never have answers for. If we allowed the pain of my brother's uncertain life to crush us, if we focused more on what he couldn't do rather than what he could, we would never survive.

As I carried the salad bowl to the trash, I tilted my head up, peering through the oak trees. The sun reminded me we were no longer a family only falling apart, like we were for so long, when Gavin was younger. But with a baby on the way, I wondered what our lives would be like with a second boy. A boy that had the chance to have AGS like

Gavin, if I found out I was a carrier. A dark duplicity circled these moments of relief, of hope, as the unknown circled ahead in the distance, like a hawk scouring for game to prey.

When I returned to the car, Gavin was bubbling over, laughing, as he enjoyed being the center of attention. We applauded with him. Around us, his family, he could be his true self—no matter how “different” he was to the outside world. With us, he was safe.

We spent the next week in the pool, barbecuing, cozying up on the couch to watch movies, and playing Rummikub. When it was time for Nick and I to head off onto our Pacific Northwest babymoon, just the two of us, we were thrilled. My mom had been sleeping on the floor in the bathroom on a blow-up bed, so being there felt like we took up too much space. Gavin slept in the master bedroom with my dad. Sometimes, although our family was a safe space, it could feel like I was out of balance in the pockets I inhabited. As a pregnant woman, I felt like I was taking up a lot of room. I was also becoming emotional. One night, my sisters and mom poked fun at a name I had picked out—Brady James. They sipped watermelon margaritas and belly laughed saying they could hear themselves say, “Brady James, go off and scoop the poop-y” in a hackneyed southern accent. Normally, I could join in on the banter, but I was strung tight about the phone call coming. A phone call that would possibly require me to decide.

When the phone call came, Nick and I were on our road trip. We’d already spent the night in Bend, Oregon, tried Voodoo Doughnuts in Portland, camped near the Bridge of the Gods, and checked into our Airbnb in Seattle. “Is this a good time?” my genetic counselor asked. With that question, I already knew the answer. I was a carrier of AGS.

And I shut down, my body slumped into a bed that was not my own. I listened, as she peeled back the next steps, the options.

Option 1: Test my husband. If he was a carrier, the odds of our tiny human having the rare disease that would destroy his brain were 1 in 4. We could choose to test our baby, if indeed my husband was a carrier, by sticking an extra-long needle into my womb to pull some facts from his amniotic fluid. But I was informed this test had about a 10 percent chance of miscarriage. The total cost of all these tests--not covered by Medi-Cal insurance--was thousands of dollars that we didn't have. By the time Nick could get his blood drawn and shipped off for an answer, I'd be five months along.

Option 2: Do nothing. Hope for the best. Be prepared for the worst.

The genetic counselor asked if I was still there.

"Yes, I'm here," I lied. I was neither here nor there. My eyes focused outside the room into the streets of a suburb in Seattle, catching on a rainbow flag whipping in the wind. I wanted to put a speaker to my womb and play a recording of me saying sorry over and over to my baby. I didn't want to win this lottery. The familiar heat rose up from my belly. Being pregnant had made me a portable sauna. But this was a different kind of heat, a heat I'd worked hard on putting out. I touched my protruding tummy; the baby fluttered around, doing somersaults. My heart whispered, *I love you*.

I tried to hold it together, be courteous and gracious. I thanked her for the call, her time, her truth-bearing skills. I'd let her know if we decided to move forward with the test. A test for my baby, to find an answer about his genetic sequencing. But I hung up knowing I wouldn't call her again.



The truth was, I wanted to meet this tiny gift growing inside of me. I wanted to love him, all of him.

# 3

## Walking Sideways Up the Curb

During a mid-December check-in with the OB-GYN, he goosed up his fingers and inched a gloved hand inside me. He'd done this act enough times now that I only squirmed a little. I was thirty-seven weeks along—around the same time my mom's body liked to go into natural labor for her four unmedicated births. If there was a time I wanted to be just like my mom, down to the pinpricks of her fibers, this was the time. My mom was the queen of birthing and mothering like a wild warrior. She breastfed for a decade or more, all of us combined. She lost the baby weight. A triathlete. Fluent in Spanish. Cancer survivor, losing two toes on her left foot from melanoma. A physician; smart, kind, generous. She had come from hardship, low-income housing in Chicago, to southern California to live her own American Dream.

Although thirty-seven weeks was no longer prime, as it was in the late eighties, I wanted this party started. I was 6 pounds, 1 ounce when I was born, and that seemed like an okay (if there can ever be an okay) amount of meat to slide through my vaginal canal.

Dr. Alwan pulled his wet fingers out from me and said, “You are dilated 1-2 cm,” pulling off his gloves, smiling. “Cervix is 80% effaced.”

“Can you expand?” I asked, crossing my legs.

“The baby’s head is right there, ready to go.”

“I could have a Christmas baby?”

He looked right at me. “Only God knows.”

I didn’t expect this answer from him. I never heard him talk about God or faith, and how he parsed faith and childbirth. Did he believe God had a plan for all childbirths, all lives? This was something I still wrestled with, especially when it came to Gavin’s health as an infant. Surely God did not enjoy punishing babies. But, in this tense moment of my belly the size of a bloated pumpkin, his response calmed me.

I left the doctor’s office preparing for delivery. Nick set up the changing table. We packed our hospital bags. Locked the car seat in the car. We’d attended our birthing classes and were very good students, watching the DVDs on childbirth at our apartment. In our birthing class at the hospital, the woman in charge made things clear to us first-time parents: there was no such thing as an “unnatural birth.”

She swayed as she spoke, in her loosely fit clothes, “The baby comes out, that’s birth. That’s natural.” She spoke of the pressure mothers put on ourselves to not get medication, take the epidural, panic if we must get a cesarean. She warned against this panic. “You must always return to your breath,” she said.

When Nick and I left our final birthing class, we decided we'd get this baby out, hopefully before Christmas. My due date was January 9th. There was raspberry leaf tea to drink, spicy food to inhale, a mucus plug to lose. Dr. Google will tell you how to do all of this. But no one tells you toward the end of pregnancy that you can no longer wear normal bras because the wire cuts into your ribs. No one tells you pregnancy involves your participation in a kickball war, but from the inside only (and no kicking back). No one tells you without cliché how adorable and painful those baby kicks are at the end of nine months; how the foot can rise up, making your belly look like a clementine-sized alien is attempting to chainsaw through your melon stretched skin. All pregnancy was a contradiction. Getting the baby out: possibly the amplest ambiguity of them all.

In my head, though, I had already planned my birth: no meds, absolutely no meds. Women had been doing this birth thing without an epidural for thousands of years; I could do it too. Pain was tolerable, something that passed like a wave. I'd broken ribs after being flung off a bucking horse, I'd been kicked in the stomach during my high school water polo days, and even as a child I enjoyed testing my pain level. We had these terrible plastic covers for the carpeted stairs and on the flipside, there were fangs for spikes. I'd turn this plastic with the spikes up, walking over it again and again, proving to my younger sisters I could take it all. All the pain. I was my mother's daughter. I was going to get this baby out—and I was going to do it now.

An internet mom friend recommended I try something she called "walking sideways up the curb." I had to message her back on Instagram for clarification. Can you say that again? Send a video? I could only picture myself falling sideways off the curb.

For my first try, a few days before Christmas, I did my morning chores of folding blankets on the couch from too much Netflix the night before, feeding Brea the cat, and splashing some water in my garden of orchids. After I was dressed, I slid my tennis shoes over my swollen socked feet and went outside. The leaves hardly changed in southern California, but by now, the temperature had churned some green leaves to various shades of marbled brown. I walked toward the first curb outside my apartment complex and placed one foot on the curb, one foot off. I was walking at a diagonal. I stomped my right foot down on the concrete ridge, lifted my left foot off the street, pushed it forward twelve inches or so. I repeated this movement for ten minutes, until I hit the end of the block. I thought maybe I wouldn't be in labor soon like my doctor hinted. The contractions did not come. "This is dumb," I said aloud, to no one, to the birds.

I tried to enjoy the moments of the ferocious baby kicks. I read books to my unborn baby, hoping to ignite intelligence, and bonding. I uttered the name Nick and I'd chosen: Bennett. My tongue lingered on the double n's; uttering it, a meditation. The urge to nest in the apartment, a widely held belief in the pregnancy community that labor was near, hadn't settled into my pregnant heart, either. I didn't need Dr. Google to know this phenomenon was more than hormonal, but instinctual. Most animals experienced the phenomenon of nesting. As a child, I witnessed bunnies pulling out the fur from their stomach with their teeth to make a wool-warmed nest for their babies. I witnessed hamsters shredding tissue paper and wadding it into a fortress, where they burrowed below, delivering new babies. Women supposedly had the instinct to clean, too. That was our peak nesting. We were supposed to enact a raging spring cleaning of prepping,

scrubbing, decluttering. But I did not have the urge to ruin a good toothbrush to scrub out some old bathroom grime. I began to wonder if something was wrong with me.

On Christmas day, there was no baby. The bump was there. It was shiny and beautiful and firm. My parents, sisters, and Gavin drove up from San Diego to spend the day with Nick, the bump, and me. They had their own ideas on how to get this baby out.

Soon after they arrived, we drove to a local park and brought the only item my family needs at the park: a Frisbee. My dad was the Labrador Retriever of catching Frisbees. On his birthday, Father's Day, a day at the beach, a spare moment in the backyard, his idea for a good time involved a Frisbee. It probably didn't hurt that he was quite good at the sport. We never played in a way that involved score-keeping. Instead, Frisbee was about the freedom of letting go, sliding the disc out between two fingers, zipping it singularly straight into the hands of the person waiting to catch. We thought maybe the Frisbee could get Bennett out. He'd realize we were having fun and want to exit early. Save everyone a drive.

The wind licked the water's edge as the ducks gaggled around the shorelines, pondering if we brought them food. Luckily, my mom always brought some sort of snack for Gavin. His favorite, Cheetos Puffs: light, low choking hazard. When the tip of his tongue brushed against the highlighter orange crisp, it would ever so slightly dissolve, and he swallowed the sweet, salty bite. Sometimes the second halves of these puffs went to the ducks, who also liked the taste.

“Coming your way, Pokey!” My dad flung the disc next to me. Pokey was the nickname my mom and dad called me when I was a baby. My mom stopped calling me Pokey when I was a child, but my dad never stopped.

I ran toward the disc, belly shaking as I hobbled. I hadn’t tried to run in months. And even if this was just a few steps, it was near impossible. The disc skipped through the blades of grass. “Darn, I missed it!” I bent down, holding one hand under my stomach as support, the other hand reaching to scoop up the Frisbee.

I flew the Frisbee toward Sydney, and Nick, who also played with us. Sydney was the baby of the family before Gavin, for almost ten years. She cherished childhood friends, soccer, and theater. Sometimes I still called her “baby” when I called out for her. She had strawberry blonde hair, light freckles, almond-shaped eyes, and she had grown up too fast when Gavin was sick. She was only nine when he was born. Now, she was nineteen. My mom sat with Gavin stretched out on her lap under the shade on the peeling wooden picnic bench. Danika sat with her, holding Gavin’s hand. Danika and Gavin had a strong bond, their own love language. It had always been like this. She wasn’t the best with her words, but Danika was the best at showing her love with a head scratch, a hand hold, a hug from behind. Danika had a petite frame and was shorter than Sydney and me. She had bright blonde hair, and nickel-shaped eyes, and she was often a second hand for my mother. At twenty-four, she had moved back home with my parents to take prerequisite courses for dental school. She held high standards for her career goals and enjoyed having a bit of fun along the way. I could tell she was really excited about becoming an aunt. She’d cried with excitement when Nick and I told her we were pregnant.

After my dad successfully caught my return throw, I hobbled over to the shade with my mom, Danika, and Gavin. “One of you go play, I’ll stay with Gavin,” I said. “Right, Bubba? Soon you will have a playmate of your own, someone closer to you in age.” As I said this, the kicks erupted. I told Gavin he had to feel. His hand stiffly folded over itself, and I gently massaged it, then opened his palm, placing it over my shirt to feel the kicks.

“Aaaa-Haaaa!” he laughed.

“Soon, you’ll be Uncle Bubba.”

Our eyes locked. The same eyes I stared at almost a decade before, those fighting eyes, that battled through fevers and needles of pain. The eyes that knew how to see the good in a world that could deeply disappoint. I pushed the edge of my teeth into my tongue to not lose it in front of him. Worlds and lives, beginning and ending. A sister to turn mother. A brother to turn uncle. Under the silver-pink sky, a new life would soon begin. Everything painted in chrome, a motherhood so real, barreling.

After the park, we drove back to our apartment. Nick made a ham and my mom brought up a tray of scalloped potatoes she had prepared back in San Diego. My dad steamed some asparagus and re-heated some hollandaise sauce he had prepared. We had a Christmas tradition of this meal, and everyone loved leftover ham and potato sandwiches on King’s Hawaiian rolls.

Since we did not have a proper table, people scattered: at the high-top table, on the couch, on the floor. My parents brought the blue yoga ball, where my dad liked to sit and feed Gavin. But my mom fed him tonight on the couch, and my dad would sit on the ball later, to give Gavin his oral medication. My parents forgot his food emulsifier, so we used



a cheap blender to mix his Christmas meal. It worked, kind of. It was chunkier than we'd like, but when he coughed, my mom gave him water and dabbed his mouth with a washcloth.

After our meal, my dad covered our coffee table with little candies from Christmas morning stockings at their house: Reese's Santa Clauses, Dove dark chocolate, tubes of red and green Skittles, Nut Goodies, and opened boxes of See's candies he and my mom received from work. Then it was the gifts.

Danika and Sydney had each made me homemade crafts with nautical themes for Bennett's room, which was still in progress. Syd had painted large wooden letters, BJO, Bennett's initials, with a blue-grey, decorated with sunshine and sailboats. Danika had crafted a large sign with BENNETT in wood lettering, resting above a blue anchor. Nick and I dreamed that one day we would make one of those cute Etsy/Pinterest bedrooms for our unborn child, but those rooms were pricey. Five girlfriends from my college had all chipped in and sent us a changing table-dresser hybrid. We had an affordable Playskool basinet for him to sleep in. Nick and I did not yet possess a real crib; we had a desk in our second bedroom for Nick's schoolwork and my writing. We also had boxes of books and papers that we never seemed get unpacked. The gifts were gorgeous, and I hoped, might kick in the nesting my body had yet to register.

When we were done with presents, the question remained, "So when do you think he's coming?" Danika was the one to ask. She touched my stomach, and I felt delightfully huge, like a cute and happy pot belly pig. But she loved touching my belly, waiting for those kicks to punch under my skin.

"Maybe tomorrow? Maybe a few days?" I don't know.

“All you girls came by now,” my mom reminded us.

“That must have been nice,” I said.

“It’s such a long day,” my mom said. “But holding you, holding you all, made all the pain worth it.”

On the day of my due date, I had an appointment with my OB-GYN. I sat, legs open in the awkward bed-table hybrid. I couldn’t bear to watch him shove his arm up me one more time. The art in the room made me feel nauseous. But I stared at them instead of the strange man inching his hand inside me, a man who still did not know my name. The gloved hand, an intrusion; the art, a reminder of how pathetically generic my medical care had been. The patient room art was plastic, white, eighties-era watercolor prints of curvy women, nature paintings with no emotional resonance. A shadowy sunflower opening. This was the type of art that sold for \$1 for at a dead person’s yard sale.

“So, what happened to being ‘ready to go’?” I asked him, while looking at the nurse in the room. At this office, I had been given a choice to keep a woman in the room with me, and I always chose this nurse. She was a loving Latina mother, smarter and kinder than this doctor who set the rules, who’d stolen from Costco for Christ’s sake. She would ask me about my teaching and writing, and I would ask her about her family.

“We never really know when it comes to due dates,” he said. “We just give our best guess.”

It seemed like the whole medical establishment was one big guess. He pulled his hand out. “4 cm dilated, on the right track, but we are going to need to monitor you. What hospital are you delivering at, again?”

I took a tissue from him and wiped the goo away. “Pomona Valley,” I said. There were two main hospitals in the vicinity of where I lived. His office happened to be across from a different hospital, a hospital where Medi-Cal would not let me deliver. It was like school districts; I was forced by the government to go to the hospital closest to my apartment.

He paused. “Oh, I don’t really deliver there.”

I bit the inside of my lip. “Who will deliver me then?” The drive was only twenty minutes from his office, surely it could not be that big of an inconvenience. I had expected he would be there when the big day came.

“You are a Medi-Cal patient?” he asked, and I nodded. “Whoever is on call will deliver you. But you can text me if you have any questions.” He wrote down his cell phone number on his card and handed it to me. At the very end of all this, I was left with a pen-stained bent business card. I was furious, but too tired, hips too sore, stomach too hungry to rage. I was grateful for the care throughout my pregnancy, but I felt alone at the end.

A few days after my due date, the hospital I was set to deliver in had me come for fetal monitoring. I did not know any of these nurses monitoring me, I did not know any of these bulging mothers sitting next to me, our feet kicked up like we were all getting a pedicure at a deranged nail salon. After my shift of monitoring, a nurse unhinged the Velcro from my stomach and told me to come back and set my next appointment, a week after my due date.

There were consequences of babies staying in too long: shitting in the womb, to name one. The baby could inhale their own feces and become quite sick. I was not going to put my baby’s life in danger in this way. I’d do it all. Pump to stimulate my breasts,

drink the raspberry leaf tea, eat all the labor-inducing junk, walk sideways up the curb. I'd pray, I'd watch the white orchid on my windowsill.

A flock of pots of orchids lived by my window; all in different seasons of bloom and dormancy. Some looked dead but were merely resting. Some were at the end of their blossoming, dropping purple petals for the cat's pleasure. She enjoyed pushing them off the window's ledge to the floor. My wild white orchid was midbloom. There were some flowers awake, others attempting just breaking free. At the very end of the main stem, a stubborn bud was slow to see the light. I monitored it in my final weeks of pregnancy and tried to manifest the final bud to bloom. There was this feeling, deep down in my core, that told me this baby would not come until the orchid split open, completely.

# 4

## Splitting

Three salsa bowls slid in front of me. “Thank you,” I told our server at a Mexican restaurant by our apartment complex. At this point—nearly a week past my due date—I did not care about acid reflux. I did not care about calories. I did not care about anything but not being pregnant anymore. Salsa and spicy food remained one of those things, like the million other things, that were supposed to initiate labor.

Nick sat across from me, with a cool beer on the table. He snuck a chip into the salsa bowl closest to him, and I took a break from snacking to take a long sip of my pint-sized water. “This could be our last date before the baby,” I said.

“I hope so,” he said, laughing.

I brushed the condensation that covered my fingertips on the turquoise napkin. “I hope so too. This feels like being called last at the buffet line at a wedding,” I took another chip, scooping it into the thick red salsa. “No one wants to go last, but someone has to.” I didn’t know why a wedding buffet analogy was the best I could come up with to explain

this sensation to him. Surely, going over one's due date was more complex, more shadowy than eating dried-out pesto salmon over a bed of over-cooked rice pilaf.

Scooping chips into bowls of salsa was the one thing I had not yet tried, in all the labor hacks I read about online. But, alas, here I was, gorging salsa.

At the table in the Mexican restaurant, I ordered enchiladas and Nick ordered carne asada street tacos. He took a picture of me clutching my stomach. I looked at the photo and saw a swollen face. But I also saw an easy Friday smile, pleasantly tired. Insomnia had begun seeping in, apparently prepping me for the sleepless nights ahead. I captioned the photo on Instagram: "937483 weeks pregnant."

That night, no contractions. Some Braxton hicks, maybe, but painless. Nick and I walked by the lake the next morning, the same one we played Frisbee at with my family only a few weeks ago. For an early dinner, we went to the donut shop where I ordered an Apple Fritter and picked up Panda Express next door. Then the baby stopped kicking.

I nervously texted my doctor who I wasn't even sure was my doctor anymore since he would not be delivering me. He told me to go to Labor and Delivery at the hospital, now. Someone needed to monitor the baby for a heartbeat.

Panicked, I asked Nick, "What if the baby is not okay?"

Nick stood in the kitchen and poured me a glass of orange juice. The sugar was supposed to get the baby kicking, wake him up. But I was worried, chugging the orange juice while leaning against the counter. "Everything will be fine," Nick said. "He's probably just sleepy. Maybe he has his days and nights backwards."

I brushed my eyes, grabbed my hospital bag, the two printed copies of my birth plan and jumped into the passenger seat of Nick's car.

The white orchid had bloomed its final bud sometime that morning or maybe last night, I couldn't tell, I just knew it was here. I was surprised I missed it, beginning to wonder how much time I was spending in my mind, not in the present of the room, the apartment, my body. But there she was. Fully awake. The last procrastinating bud. Wild white dragon petals alive in the light, the plant a stature of feminine strength, of beauty. The petals clipped my vision as I walked out the door.

We checked in at the hospital and a nurse ushered me into a temporary bed and strapped a seatbelt to my belly, explaining that I was 5 cm dilated and this baby was coming.

I called my mom and told her I was in labor once we settled into our room.

"Can you come up tonight?" I asked her.

She was on the other end of the line, in tears. She told me she was so excited, but she couldn't drive to the hospital tonight. "Ginger's gone," she said, softly. "And I held her while she took her last breath." Ginger was my mom's brown mare, a skittish Missouri Fox Trotter. Growing up, my mom shadowed her dad who worked at the racetracks in Chicago mucking the stalls. She grew up poor and dreamed of having her own horse. Now her mare was gone.

"What happened?" I asked.

"She had a heart attack in my arms."

She told me she'd had a couple beers and wouldn't be able to drive up. She was grieving, but deep down I wanted her with me as soon as possible. Every woman who enters a hospital needs an advocate. Women die in hospitals. Not every woman who walks into a hospital leaves, breathing. Relying on strangers to take care of you at the most heightened moment of your life is scary. I had Nick, but my mom knew birth.

After I hung up, I told Nick about Ginger. He said he was sorry, and I wondered if there was some omen or significance to her unexpected death. I hoped her loss of breath was not a forewarning for me, my own breath. I hoped this loss was not preparing me for something grander. Throughout my life, my family always had many rescued animals from bunnies and birds to cats and dogs. When you learn to love so many animals, each death is its own mini lesson in loss. A preparation for another storm season ahead.

A nurse woke me every 30 minutes throughout the night and into the pit of next morning to walk down the hall. “It’s supposed to speed up labor,” the nurse proclaimed. I’d hobble out of bed, slide my slippers on, and wrap a fuzzy blanket I’d brought from home around my back to cover the open slit of the blue hospital gown. I shuffled down the hallway into delirium.

These zig-zag walks were the beginning of the very long end when it came to sleep and nourishment. Because I was not allowed to eat, I daydreamed of the double entrée Panda Express meal of orange chicken and string bean chicken I’d eaten before coming here. These ice chips and near-zero calorie Luigi’s Italian ice and lukewarm beef and chicken broth were not giving me the type of fuel I needed for the most difficult task I was about to come up against.

At this moment, I had no idea of how warlike things would become. Food would be the last thing on my mind as I entered the second fourteen hour stretch. Before this, I’d wildly underestimated what it meant to bring a child into this world. The birthing classes had us gently lean up against yoga balls, rocking. They encouraged us to fill a sock with rice and lavender essential oil, for calming effects. They told us *all* births were natural.



Everything I'd ever encountered—from films to this birthing class—made pregnancy, labor, and delivery seem like a holy trinity, a rite of passage.

I foolishly thought that because I was semi-healthy (minus the extra eating habits I'd picked up) I could do this. I was an athlete growing up. I could kick some ass in women's water polo and dagger my toenail into another player's shin as she titty-twisted me. I could be a bulldog. But this, nothing could have prepared me for this.

Most things about my ideal labor slipped away with the double printed copies I handed my intake nurse when I arrived on Saturday. I had typed our birth plan in December, stupidly excited for this day to come.

*Birth Plan: Nick and Courtney O'Neil*

*December 2016/January 2017*

*Pomona Valley Hospital*

*-Preferred: Natural vaginal birth. C-Section only in case of emergency. No epidural. If necessary, oral pain meds only.*

*-To relieve contractions: walk around, use lavender sock, massages from Nick, birthing ball*

*-Baby delivered by Dr. Mark Alwan*

*-Delivery: Nick and Courtney's Mom in room, along with nurse and doctor. Filming and pictures OK.*

*-Baby to be born in dim lighting.*

*-Nick to cut the umbilical cord.*

*-Place baby on Mom's chest immediately after birth. Will be breastfeeding.*

*-Nick to give baby his first bath.*

*-Name: Bennett James O'Neil*

*All family and friends allowed in after delivery. ☺*

The next day, on Sunday around noon, my mom arrived, cheery, leaving her grief over Ginger at the door. This is also when the nurses told me my labor was moving too “slowly.”

Since my doctor was not there to guide me, I asked nurses and my mom and Nick what they thought every time a nurse asked me about a possible medical intervention.

No one wanted me to have a C-Section, so nurses recommended Pitocin to speed things up. The first of many medical interventions.

My choices were supposed to feel like mine, but they never really did.

A major scientific reason women develop postpartum mind, body, and spirit complications is due to a traumatic, out of control childbirth. I would not know the risk my runaway birth could be taking on me in this moment, however. Traumatic side effects of medical interventions and the dark sides of birth were hardly shared. Mothers hushed these stories, pushing them away from the light. A danger to all mothers. The shadowy crevices of the postpartum period were like bats secluded in a shed, not allowed the freedom to show their faces, to fly.

The Pitocin dripped through a needle into my arm, a lazy trickle of liquid power. Suddenly, the machines next to me showed contractions moving off the charts: mountains with sliced off peaks. My body went into overdrive. I moved from feeling like a natural being, in heightened human pain, to non-human. I felt like a dark comic book character, the pain was a villain. Maleficent trains began smashing into my body. I screamed, shook, and this is when my breathing began to waver. Nurses pumped Demerol into me, a mediocre medicine, to slightly calm some of the pain. But it accomplished nothing. Nick asked someone to warm up my stupid lavender rice sock, and he massaged my feet, my mom held my hand. The nurses then suggested the epidural. Or rather asked. “How about an epidural?”

My mom told me to not get the Evil Epidural before all of this. She didn't call it evil and maybe she never even told me not to get it, but she said I did not need it. She had told me about paralysis and down the road complications from the elongated needle.

Something could go wrong, but wasn't something already going wrong? Nick echoed earlier conversations, "You said you didn't want one." The epidural lived for the weak, I had made myself foolishly believe. Since my mother never needed one why would I?

Oh, but I would need one.

I didn't turn to God for strength in my 20<sup>th</sup> hour of labor, I turned to medicine. The hunger of my pain was so pointed, and my brain so delusional from hours upon hours without food, I said, "Give me the Epidural!" When the anesthesiologist inserted the needle the length of my forearm into my back, a shower of shame doused my head.

At first the epidural did not take any pain away so the doctor came back, pumped more poison into me. I became paralyzed from my breasts down—a cozy dream. Too doped up to be concerned. I fell asleep for what felt like hours.

When I woke, I was in and out of lucidness, strapped into that same bed, stealing a glimpse of TLC's *Say Yes to the Dress* reruns playing on the TV hoisted above me. My dad dropped off Jack in the Box dollar menu tacos to my mom and Nick and me. But I couldn't have them. He and my siblings checked into a nearby hotel.

Mom said I was too pale. "You need some salt." She looked to the door to make sure no one with scrubs on was entering before sliding pretzels into my mouth.

I crunched. "I can't feel my legs." I smashed my fist into my right thigh. "What if I need to move? To change positions?"

She squeezed my hand. "It's okay. You will push when you have to."

During the twenty-eighth hour, the epidural no longer worked properly. A nurse turned off the epidural, yet my body remained frozen, immobile, while I was still able to feel all the pain of each contraction in my core.

Deep after midnight, the foggy stars shined above the hospital. We had entered Monday. Nurses came in and told me the baby's vitals were dropping and so were my own. An oxygen mask was stickily strapped to my face. My legs were propped up in saddle stirs.

"You need to start practicing your pushing," the newest nurse said. She was the youngest one I'd had assigned to me since being here, named Nurse Jordan. So many women had been in and out, tiny fragmented angels. This one had pink frosty lips and an amber blonde ponytail. She seemed too young to be the person to get this baby out, but she was here, willing, pushing me, and I was grateful.

"I cannot feel a thing down there," I told her, concerned.

"Pretend like you're pooping, try to push that way," she said.

A little shocked, I tried that kind of push and I received a positive response in return. "Great, he's getting lower, I can see his head."

But this back and forth style of pushing went on for hours. He never dropped low enough. It was my mom who looked and said he was stuck, tilted sideways. Trapped under my pelvic bone.

"He's at a diagonal," she said, calling Nurse Jordan over.

I squeezed my hand into Nick's palm, sweating, my shaking increased. "I can't do this anymore. I want to leave. I cannot do this anymore."

Minutes would pass and I would forget to breathe. I floated above my body, seeing the scene below. A woman feral in pain, forgetting to breathe, unable to kick, arms thrashing, an untamed animal. A woman wanting an exit button, an escape, but the only escape she would truly get was when she entered her body to push again.

At 1:50 AM the only words I heard were “Breathe for Bennett!” as I plummeted back into my body. I opened my eyes and took a quick sharp breath. Beyond the hill of the oxygen mask resting on my face, both Nick and my mom were ghostly with fear. My eyes moved to my legs. They were bloated and gorilla sized. Wild and heavy and useless. Nurse Jordan flipped my body around like a flaccid three-thousand-pound fish with the help from Nick and my mom. “His head is really stuck,” I heard her whisper. “It’s too late for an emergency C-section.”

*Where is the doctor? Call someone in here.* These were the only words I could get out. Then I heard someone yell, “Get the NICU!”

“Call the doctor, or else I’m delivering this baby,” my mom called after Nurse Jordan as she ran out of the room. “I’m calling now,” she said, and the door swept shut.

My mom had been mellow, patient, not her strong physician self. But when she grimaced at the red beeps on the apocalyptic moon-colored machines, and turned her ears up, I knew something was very wrong. My baby’s heart rate was dropping, quickly. And so was my own, every time I escaped, fringed from above, withholding my breath.

When you reach the end, it is true what people say. Everything from the past pops like balloons in your face. I thought: I should have seen it coming. Right when I found out I was having a boy. Each time I had an ultrasound, I wanted a retest. Each time, the sex was checked, the technician always said boy. *BoyBoyBoyBoyBoy.*

Nick had asked me “Why aren’t you happy?” I couldn’t answer. “I don’t know,” I repeated, trying to figure it out myself. *Idon’tknowIdon’tknowIdon’tknow.* Then, minutes before what felt like the end--

Gavin.

Gavin as a baby. Healthy and happy and thriving. Then sick. All in the turn of a few weeks. Life was that quick. Life could give you the dream, then steal it back, strike the dream with a burning stick. Now that my baby was about to take a first breath, the fear he might be dying already was a shotgun in my ear, deafening any other possibilities.

After my mom told me she was pregnant with Gavin, I began to have nightmares. Dreams of monsters, opaque and horned, stomping through my imagination, waking in a cold sweat to stare out into the Pacific Ocean from my dorm room. I felt something was wrong with my mom's pregnancy. But I kept quiet. Maybe the nightmares were just anxiety. Maybe they were something more.

On a warm June afternoon, in between my freshman and sophomore year of college, I got the call. I was in the middle of restocking overpriced blouses at my summer job at Nordstrom's. It was my mom on the phone. She said to hurry: I could *watch*. The blood, the screaming and all the gore that accompanied childbirth. Which absolutely exhilarated me—I was not afraid of the horror of the world, or so I thought. Leaning into things that scared me, but had nothing to do with me, was like a game. How much could I take? I knocked the pile of clothes over as I left and sped home to pick up my little sisters, to drive them to the hospital to meet our new brother.

“Let's go!” I said. Panting, running through the front door I smelled the salty, bubbling pepperoni. My sisters had been cooking a frozen pizza, and we pulled it out early, jumping in the car with slices on plastic plates. Once we arrived at the maternity ward, and rushed through the door to the delivery room, my mom's smile formed a crescent moon, as she sat straight up after delivering her son, our brother. *We had missed it*. Gavin had broken his collarbone during delivery, but he was going to be okay, my mom said. A

*healthy boy*. My sisters and I arranged ourselves like preschoolers, in a circle, waiting our turns to hold him.

I kissed my brother who was cradled in my arms—our miracle boy. He was perfect, looking exactly like my two sisters had—glittering cloudy blue eyes, a pad of slicked blond hair, a dime-sized nose. My dreams for his life blossomed. As I ran my fingers through his hair that night, I fell in love with the luscious smell of new life: a mixture of Johnson and Johnson shampoo and baby powder.

2:00 AM, in the midst of my son’s birth, I tried to recall that smell of a newborn baby, fresh from his first bath. I wanted that with my own son. The smell, something I could hold onto, in between the darker images: the fires, the shaking and seizing, the propane-fueled fevers, the shrieking and praying, the battle of trying to save a dying baby. A vortex of danger and grief and love over my brother’s life, dialed differently than any life I’d ever held.

In the sanitized hospital room, under blinding fluorescent hospital lights, this past life heaved, splitting me from the inside out. Unstitched.

About twenty women were in the room now—the church of NICU—watching, praying, ready hands. The baby’s breathing dipped and slowed. He was in danger.

My mom slapped the mask on my face. “Fucking breathe! You have to breathe.”

But she didn’t see the film reel spitting in my subconscious.

I pressed my face into the lavender sock wrapped around my neck and screamed.

2:18 AM. “I can see him!” My mom exclaimed, her head down by my thighs. “Do you want a mirror? To see?” No. Absolutely no. She squeezed my left hand. Nick was on my right. I felt a pop in my hip, as Nurse Jordan propped my legs up in a new position.

“I’ve broken my hip!” I yelled. Great right at the end of childbirth, I’ve broken a bone. A huge one. Someone told me the on-call doctor was on his way. If I could hang on, for ten more minutes, I would meet this baby inside me—who had been kicking my ribs and keeping me up at night. Who I already loved. Wildly.

I tried to enter myself. To erase the chaos, the pain, I needed to go inward and stop hovering above; quiet the mind, focus on the breath. I used the technique of visualization to get through these ten minutes. I pictured what my child would look like. What kind of hair he’d have. His eye color. Probably dirty blond hair with blue eyes. I was blonde with blue eyes, but that was recessive. So maybe he’d look more like Nick. Brown hair. Brown eyes. It didn’t matter. It never did. He needed to come out, looking like he looked, kicking and screaming.

2:22 AM. “The doctor’s here!” Nurse Jordan shouted. The women made a semi-circle around me, ready to save this boy, bent sideways between my bones. A short, plump man in his seventies ran through the door, no introduction. Scissors pointed toward the heavens, held high in his hands. Then, he daggered the blade points down. And sliced. There was a vacancy, a whoosh; a violent, bloody split. A grape baby with a lifeline looped around his neck swiveled out. The man snipped the line, untangling the child and a delayed sharp scream cut through the room. He handed the baby to the NICU women. Nick did not get to cut the cord. I craned my neck, body still voraciously shaking, scanning the room for my child, but I couldn’t spot him. The male doctor sat in front of me, telling me to push, again. The placenta lingered inside, an empty bag of something like me. Quickly, he said, as he needed to sew me back together. Fix me. But it was too late to stitch what was broken open. A blood galaxy surrounded me. I was nowhere, everywhere.



Part II

# DORMANCY

**The Past**

“Everything that disappears  
disappears as if it is returning  
somewhere.”

– **Tracy K. Smith**

## This Side of the Rainbow

When my brother was born, almost ten years before, on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2007, I inhaled him, searching his skin for the smell of new life. Cradled in my arms in my mom's hospital room, he was the size of a small football. Rocking him, I took a photo on my flip phone of his already blue eyes, his pouty petite lips. I clicked send, sharing my new brother with all of my friends. But I was also afraid. I was afraid of the nightmares of monsters canvassing my dreams; I feared my primal-like jealousy. I was nineteen, away from family for the first time at college. I had always wanted him, a little brother, but I craved to be seen completely by my parents, too, especially now that I navigated the throes of college. This phenomenon was not novel, but normal sibling jealousy. I knew this feeling would fade, but in this moment, I wished he had been born earlier, when we could have all been in the house together. I was worried Gavin and I would be lives apart, since there were almost two decades between us. I could have been his mother.

My dad scooped Gavin from my arms. His smile plastered with pride. I studied my dad as he bathed my brother, changed his diaper, and I was amazed by this act. Of service, of love. Of my parents doing it all over again. My mom had two miscarriages after my

youngest sister Sydney, trying for number four. And now here he was, bright as the summer sky. My mom chose his name, Gavin, because it meant “Battle Hawk.” At home, she collected a vase full of found hawk feathers, her favorite bird. If she could have a magic power, it would be to soar.

Gavin came from one of those oops-I-guess-I’m-not-menopausal pregnancies. She wanted a fourth child, but thought she was too old. She was 45. My dad was 49. They conceived my brother on the night they dropped me off for college in Santa Barbara. With three daughters, they longed for a son. After they moved me into my dorm room and the rosé sun fell over the Pacific Ocean, they checked into the Marriott, drank champagne, and made love.

The two pregnancy losses before Gavin were traumatic. For one of them, my mom and my dad were hiking up a volcano in Maui, when she started bleeding. The other one happened when she was still delivering babies as a family practice doctor. For this pregnancy, she was five months along. As she ushered a new mother to push, the woman kicked my mom, killing the unborn baby inside. A freakish scenario. An immoral accident. She was left with two subtractions. There was so much lost during a moment like this, no language for it. A mother moving a new mother into motherhood, only to lose her own child. My dad picked me up from high school field hockey practice and told me, “We’ve lost the baby,” as he sniffled, bringing his tee shirt up to wipe his face. At the time, I did not understand the scale of this loss. I had connected losing a fetus to being in a small car accident, something I could not embody unless I was in the accident, too. The real magnitude of losing a baby didn’t register because motherhood had not touched me yet.

Bringing Gavin into this world really was a rainbow sized miracle.

For the next six weeks, there were many moments when the rainbow's gift was gold. Golden hair, golden hours of sweet milk and naps, golden dreams of a future full of boy. Rocking him in the rocking chair, letting his gums gnaw on my finger in between feeds, became one of my favorite things to do with him. But at six weeks along, everything golden stained red. An untamed ocean barged the house, no lifeboats on board.

It began with the fevers. 104 degrees. There was a myth that scorching hot fevers could trigger brain damage. This is not a scientific fact, but a fear held in the bodies amongst mothers across cultures. Mothers knew fevers were a danger siren, forewarning the body an intruder was near. But Gavin's intruder was far from being named. My brother's body was hurting itself. At the time though, no one knew this. American doctors assumed everything else, anything that could have entered his body to make it burn. The first assumption was that my mom had given this sickness to him. In the backyard, there was a feed shed, in which she would enter to feed the horses hay. One doctor told my mom it could be the hantavirus. She probably rubbed up against mice feces in the shed, forgot to wash her hands, touched her son, brought her breast to his mouth to feed, and now her son was sick, an inhalation of mice shit. Her fault.

Other guesses: herpes, even though my mom had never contracted it, another was incest, that maybe my parents were cousins. Another fallacy. The most commonly held fear was that my brother suffered from bacterial meningitis. Mouse feces or herpes were a couple ways to contract such an illness. However, bacteria could enter someone in any of the body's sliding doors. It was enough to drive a person mad, retracing every interaction, every sleepy night, drowsy morning, scouring the days, hours, minutes, for an answer. Praying for someone, somewhere to pin the blame. No one wanted to go to the

proverbial jail that was infantile illness with the blame pointed at them, a gun to the forehead. You did this.

So, we kept praying, kept hoping he'd feel better. The fevers would go away.

But on every Wednesday, a new fever arrived, right on time for its appointment. Like calculated clock work. Fire torched his body. The wreckage would be unfathomable.

A rift began forming between my parents. My dad was sure this would all go away. Some of my mothers' friends told her this, too. This was just some bad bug. An unlucky stretch. But my mom did not agree and felt from deep in her soul there was something terribly wrong with her son. One August day, a friend of my mother's visited. She held Gavin and his whole body dangled, a damp dishrag in her arms, not sturdy like the football he once was. She felt for his heart rate, and it sung dangerously low. "Kim, he needs to go to the hospital," she said. My mom ran for the phone in the other room, dialed 911. And thus, began her descent into living at Rady Children's Hospital, her new postpartum campsite for the summer of 2007.

Gavin was continuously tested, as if his body were a microbe in a petri dish. Poked and prodded at every turn, he became a subject to study. He had more spinal taps than any child or any adult ever should, more brain scans and MRIs than the average human has in their entire lifespan. Blood was sent through postal mail in ice chests to medical specialists around the country. Surely someone out there in the most medically advanced country in the world would tell my mom what was wrong, give her an answer to the Wednesday fevers that took a part of him every week they checked into his body and overstayed.

Thus, began the fringe, the shredding, the breaking of our family: The Lucky Lunds. That was the nickname my dad had given us before Gavin arrived. Both my parents had faced their own bad luck as teens and children, both becoming motherless at young ages. Together, they'd get the whole healthy family, the lucky ones. My parents worked hard to give their children a good life. Their motto was: The Best Gift You Can Give Your Children Is a Good Marriage. But a sick baby disrupts that rule. Changes all the rules. There is no such thing as a good marriage when a baby is sick.

The golden baby breaking was something I'd never anticipated. The story of very sick babies did not show up in my English courses' book lists, in films, in other friends' lives. Regular families experienced job loss, divorce, heart failure, poverty, house fires, automobile accidents. No one I had ever met slowly lost a baby to an ugly Oz-like illness.

I didn't know what to do, how to express feelings I had no language for, no preparation. Why was my mom gone so many nights at the hospital? Why was my dad gone, too? How had summer turned into the worst season? What had really happened to my brother? Had I given him the illness, sticking my bony knuckle in his mouth to suck on? I began the slow journey of turning on myself.

At home I had nothing to do but work my summer job as a hostess at a restaurant in downtown San Diego. I quit my job at Nordstrom's, no longer able to stomach the women willing to spend \$200 on a sweater while my brother remained ill. Other peoples' excess no longer remained something I wanted to fit in around. My family and I would never be like other peoples' families, especially not ones who swayed around at Nordstrom's like nothing in the world was wrong.

When I was a child and my mom was going through her cancer diagnosis, she cut off her hair. She made the choice not for chemotherapy, but to have some form of control over her body. A mole between her toes had been kissed by too much sun, and she would be getting two toes removed. She took me into the bathroom and pulled down her severed ponytail from the top shelf.

“Here, hold it,” she said.

I thumbed the thickness wrapped in the rubber band.

“Why did you cut it?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” She cried.

Looking back, I know exactly why she did. Hair was a part of her body she could control.

With my mom now living in the hospital with Gavin, I wanted to express solidarity of pain with my mother.

My hair became a vessel for expression.

In the salon chair on a weekday morning, a woman ran her black cat nails across my scalp, relaxing me. And then, a snip. She handed me my blonde ponytail. I brought it home and tucked it into a plastic shelf in my room, keeping it inside an old shoe box. When my mom was back home, I’d show her. The ponytail would be my offering, everything I could ever know. An encroachment, an entrance into the adult world of pain. Or, at least, my attempt to try and let her know I saw her pain, I felt it too.

Toward the end of summer, still without a diagnosis, my parents wanted to pretend that one of them did not live at the hospital. They spoke in private about wanting to give me a birthday celebration, no matter how different it would be.

My birthday, September 11, had been injected with a shadow of darkness since 2001, the day America crumbled. Frontline workers inhaled dark smog burrowing from decimated sister towers. Americans jumped to their deaths. The dust lived in New Yorkers' lungs, a slow uncurling death. When the trade towers were hit by the planes, I was in eighth grade English class. My mom picked me up early from school, along with my sisters. She was worried the California coast would be next, specifically in San Diego where we kept missile-firing ships and tankers, figurines off the board game *Battleship*.

My dad called home from the hospital asking me if I wanted to get Italian for my birthday. My sisters were in the other room watching TV, and I held the black cordless house phone in my hands.

“We don’t have to,” I said.

“Get your sisters ready and I’ll be home around five.”

At Bucca di Beppo in downtown San Diego, a photographer ushered us in front of the lit-up restaurant sign. All of us smiled. Later, inside the restaurant he tried to sell us the picture. My dad, not normally one to buy such an overpriced trinket, bought the \$10 photo. An empty chair lingered next to him. He said, “Your mom will come.”

But she did not come. I twirled my spaghetti into the marinara sauce and looked at the photo. The four of us huddled together in front of the red lit sign. A cheesy holiday background, somewhere in Italy, perhaps. My hair, unrecognizable in its shortness. My dad, tucked in shirt, Ken doll hairstyle. Sisters, tow-headed babies in summer cotton hand-me-downs. We looked like we had just stepped off a Carnival Cruise.

“This is great,” my dad said.



“How is it great?” Sydney asked. “Mommy and Gavin are not here.”

To change the subject, block the conversation from dipping into the darkness at the deep end, my dad offered, “Who’s up for some ice cream?”

“Can we go to the hospital?” I asked.

“Not tonight,” he said. “Maybe tomorrow.” I took the photo from the checkered plastic table, slid it into my Roxy purse, and wondered how the saddest people in the restaurant could still be so good at smiling.

# 6

## El Pretérito

October brought new beginnings. Even though life at home had stopped, the school systems never did. My sisters and I were back: fifth grader, freshman in high school, sophomore in college. My pink Razr buzzed on the wooden desk in my dorm room. I dog-eared a page in my Spanish textbook and glanced at who was calling, my mom. The few times we had spoken in the last month, it was about Gavin. The last update had been that his blood was being shipped all the way to London. No American doctor knew what was wrong with him.

The phone continued to vibrate in my hand; I thought about clearing the call, calling back. Fear and the phone became laced, like DNA. My fingers flipped the phone open. Something told me to answer this one. “Hello?”

My mom’s voice stuttered on the other line. “Hi honey.” Then she cut out, short of breath, sniffing on the other side. The phone rumbled and exchanged hands as my dad took over. “Hey Pokey.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, as I penciled in an answer to my Spanish homework.

“Do you have time to talk? It’s about Gavin.” He was cool and calm. He’d trained his whole life for tough conversations, as an administrator in education. “We got a CT scan back from the doctors today.”

I took a deep breath. “And?” There had been CT scans before, revealing no answers.

“He’s been given a diagnosis.”

The turkey sandwich I had eaten for lunch began rising in my stomach.

“It’s not just bad meningitis?”

“No, much worse.” My dad’s voice fissured. “Gavin’s CT scan showed some calcification growth in his brain.”

“What do you mean?” Sweat swam over my skin, blanketing my body.

“Gavin has developed a terminal illness.”

I pieced together the two words *terminal* and *illness*. An illness that initiated an end. People commented that they saw their lives flash before their eyes when they experienced an outer body, near-death experience. It wasn’t my life I saw, but my brother’s, or the one he wouldn’t get. Images of faceless, ghost-like creatures flooded my brain: my handsome baby brother with floppy blond curls hugging us, his family; a boy playing baseball; a young man holding his diploma; a man picking out a wedding ring.

“What do you mean, terminal illness?” I lashed back, pushing the images away.

“Gavin has developed brain damage. It is part of his illness.” My father spoke very softly now. My mom listened in. I heard her crying in the background.

“It’s a disease called Aicardi-Goutières syndrome,” he continued.

“Aicardi what? Can you spell it?”

My hands were so sweaty that I could barely hold my pencil. They shook as I wrote out the word, mustering an incorrect spelling. Something to Google later, I thought. My brain grew thick with fog, like the early mornings in Imperial Beach, the small beach town where I spent my childhood, when I was the only child. When life was simple, easy.

“The doctors in London have given Gavin one year to live,” my dad said, choking on every syllable, as if a knife sliced down his throat at each utterance. “He has been placed in hospice care.”

The fog faded. There was blinding clarity.

I let the words linger and ring in my mind. A fire alarm went off throughout my entire being. But there was no one to put it out.

“I have to go. I’ll call you later,” I said, and then hung up the phone. I looked at the time. It was 12:50.

I jammed my books into my backpack and rode my red beach cruiser to class, late. Scurrying into the Spanish classroom, I slumped into a desk in the back of the room.

*Permanent brain damage. A year to live. Aicardi, what?*

I hadn’t learned much about rare diseases in my education, but I knew brain damage was not a good thing. I didn’t know anyone with it, but I knew what the brain’s role was in the body. The brain, the operator, was the pilot in the plane, the conductor in a symphony, the teacher in a classroom. Without a healthy brain, the rest of the body could resort to an undoing, an unhinged chaos.

As my teacher doled out a lecture, I dreaded Spanish class ending. Each new conversation, each encounter would bring me closer to Gavin’s death. Closer to a goodbye when there wasn’t a long enough hello. Closer to an extra small shiny black casket. Closer

to a funeral service with a blown-up picture of a baby at the front of the church. Closer to losing everything I believed. Babies lived. Babies weren't supposed to exit early.

In class, we were learning *el pretérito*, the past tense. Life as I had known it only existed before the phone call.

When the teacher announced that class was over, I stared at her and smiled like it would be the last time I'd see her. I wanted to tell her everything that had just happened. I felt alone. Like I had been punched in the face, kicked off the planet, and forced to start a new planet, Sisters of Dying Babies. Population zero. Well, no, population: three.

I rode my bike to Keg N Bottle, the local liquor store, bought cigarettes, and smoked one on the back steps outside of the sorority house, where I was living for my sophomore year, the worst place in the world to live when your whole life implodes. I slid out a cigarette and lit up. Cigarettes were not my thing, but I thought maybe they could lend me a hand of control over my own mortality, my own demise. If my brother was not omitted from stepping out, well, then neither was I. My friend Kelly joined me for one. She was taking a break from studying for our Oceanography midterm.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

I couldn't tell her—not yet. Living in a sorority was like living under a microscope. If one person knew, everyone knew. And I couldn't explain it to forty young women when I couldn't explain it yet to myself.

"Nothing," I replied. I inhaled then started coughing. I put the cigarette out and covered my eyes, dizzy.

The weekend after Gavin's diagnosis, I went to every social event I could. Partying, putting on make-up and tight dresses, was my short-lived escape. Escaping became like eating

dessert for dinner, nightly. Escaping became the only plan. I didn't know how I would be able to stay here in Santa Barbara, four hours north of San Diego, at a university that resembled more of a Neverland than the public research institute it was known for. I needed a plan, something to have me face what was happening with my brother, but I froze like the vodka smoothies I had for weekend lunches.

When I felt a little bit brave: I Googled. I needed to know everything about Gavin's illness, Aicardi-Goutières syndrome. Most infants, I found, did not show any symptoms of the disease at birth. However, some were born with a combination of various problems like an enlarged liver and spleen or elevated blood levels in the liver enzymes or abnormal neurological responses, leading a doctor to believe that the infant was fighting off a viral infection—however, there was no virus to be found.

Remembering all the misdiagnoses, I cringed and closed the browser. The Oceanography midterm crept near, and I needed to study for it and my other exams. Something about studying oceanography felt so luxurious. Selfish even. I could not get myself to care about the intricacies of the ocean: its sand, pH levels, inhabitants. The ocean became a romantic notion I wanted to walk into, not read about.

Three days later, after the midterm, I walked into my Oceanography lab and Alice, the teaching assistant, passed back green scantrons. She set mine face down on the desk. I turned it over, a red number circled on the top revealing a grade: 37 percent.

I turned my scantron face down again, embarrassed. Not only was I failing at coming up with a plan, but I was also failing at the only thing I knew how to do right—school. Doing well in school was all I had, and now I had lost my grip.

After my classmates left the lab at the end of class, I stopped to speak with Alice, to try and salvage my grade. As if this were something I could talk myself out of. I approached her, nauseous, eyes twitching.

“Hey Alice—” I said. I fumbled with the scantron in my hands. She appeared to be about five years older than me, mid-twenties, a PhD student.

“This grade, is—the worst grade I’ve ever received,” I said. “I’ll fail out of the class with this grade.”

“Well, you could’ve asked questions before the midterm,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I wanted to hide. But then, my words plunged. “I have this brother...who I think is dying...I couldn’t take my mind off that to study for the midterm.”

I blurted everything. About Gavin, the fevers, the sliding away, slipping out of his own body. I thought she was going to look at me like I was a serious mess. But she gave me a hug.

“You look like you need a smoothie.”

Then she confided that she had experienced a similar situation. She lost a parent in college and took a leave of absence.

“It’s normal. Things happen to people and families that are out of anyone’s control. The best advice I can give is to go be with the people who need you most. You can make up the missed quarter in summer school,” Alice said. Finally. An answer. Medical leave. To go home.

I ran from the science building and slammed down onto the closest patch of damp grass I could find. I sprawled out on it with my face turned up to the foggy, grey Santa Barbara sky. Throughout my entire short life, I tried to be put together, organized. I was

a Virgo. A planner. An imperfectionist with perfectionist tendencies. I fixed things. I slid into the middle of arguments. I cleaned up the mess.

I picked up my phone, took a deep long breath, and called my mom.

There was so much I wanted to tell her but couldn't. She had wanted me to stay at school, no matter what happened to Gavin. After he was diagnosed, she had written me a letter, detailing the best gift I could give her and my dad was to do well at school.

She picked up the phone and all I could get out was, an "I'm sorry." A breath. "I can't do this. I can't try and be normal at school while this is happening at home. It's too hard."

"I am proud of you for lasting this long," she said.

After the phone call I stood up, eager to move. My legs carried me like old stilts, as I pushed my bike slowly back to the sorority house; I wondered how I'd break the news. I decided: I wouldn't. I'd slip out, hopefully never see anyone again.

A couple of days later, I was packing the last of my bags when I saw my dad in the doorway of my room. He had come to pick me up.

"Hey, Pokey," he said.

I jumped, startled by his voice. "Daddy, you know there's no boys upstairs," I said, jokingly, and gave him a hug. He watched me flit around the room as he broke the news that San Diego had declared a state of emergency. A warning. A pulsing metaphor. Fires were burning in seven counties and over one million people had been evacuated. Our home on Butternut Hollow Lane was on track to be evacuated next, and we needed to get there soon.

"Don't pack too much," he said. "You will come back."



Anxiously, I slid some of my clothes back in my closet, not convinced I'd ever be able to survive what I was about to enter. Not convinced I'd see the dress with the spring daisies again.

# Bad Things Happen to People

As we neared home, my dad woke me, reminding me San Diego had been declared a state of emergency. In the seven counties where the fires burned, over one million people had been evacuated. When he turned left on Butternut Hollow Lane, our street, I saw it for myself. Ash blanketed the cars, the pavements, the towering thin palm trees. The whole world had gone gray.

I opened the car door, sandal soles rubbing into thick fragments of burnt tendrils on the charcoal driveway. I grabbed some bags and walked through the house, straight to the backyard to say hi to the animals. I couldn't yet face my mom, my brother.

In the horse corrals, we had Ginger, the brown Missouri Fox trotter who would die when I was in labor, and her companion, a white miniature horse named Skittles. Next to the horse corral sat the chicken coup, with a comical cast of different hens. We also had three cats named Bella, Roxy, and Hawkfood. Hawkfood was given her name because

when she was very young, we rescued her from a pool of oil from underneath a station wagon. She was aggressive, probably mad at the world. So we said, hey why don't you just go be hawk food then. Eventually, with love, she became cuddly, just like the rest. The three dogs jumped all over me. Sasha, my beagle, licked my face. The others, Brutus, the Chihuahua mutt we rescued on a trip to Tijuana, and Maddie, our other beagle and Sasha's daughter, followed and swirled around me, weaving a cocoon. For a moment, I felt welcome and warm.

While petting the dogs, I looked at the late summer garden my mother liked to plant, all brown, brittle, wilted sunflowers; gauged squash; abandoned watermelon, never picked.

When I saw my mom for the first time, her eyes were sunken in, hanging, as if she'd been crying for days. Gavin wrapped in her arms. A homemade blanket secured him.

"Hi Sweetie," she said. She pulled me in for a tight hug, with Gavin squished between us.

"Hi Momma." I pressed my cheek into hers as we embraced.

"Do you want to hold him?" she asked, after she stepped back from our hug.

He was beautiful, bundled in the knitted blanket, but I was scared to hold him. I inhaled. "No, it's okay. Maybe tomorrow," I said, afraid of waking him, doing more damage. I looked past her at the table of orchids, all appearing to be dehydrated, dead, as if the proverbial internal fire had already left its damage, when so much burning was still to come.

I carried my bags upstairs and sat down on my bed. I looked around the room at the happy pictures of my high school friends and me, the swim and water polo trophies,

and an old framed family photo. Sydney and Danika came in my room and gave me a bear hug on the bed. I held one of them in each of my arms. They did not seem to know; I wondered what they did know. I guessed this was our secret—my parents and me. I wasn't sure if I wanted in on this secret. But either way, the secret, a diagnosis, could not be forgotten, not be undone.

The next day, I woke, startled. By the floral comforter, by the blue ocean walls. My childhood bedroom in November, not the room in the sorority house. The alarm clock said I should be getting ready for class, but alas, here I was, cocooned. I wondered if people at school would notice that I'd slipped away. I wondered what this horizon of hospice would bring.

Downstairs, my mom sat at the computer desk, typing. Gavin was bundled like a baby eggroll on the couch. His aura, angelic. But my mind pestered, prodded me to see him with a dusty gray cloud above. That's what I had been told to believe.

The house was soundless, except the soft drumming of my mother's typing. My dad and sisters continued living, dashing off to work and school, where my mom's life had stopped. Mine had too.

She looked up from the desk. "Good morning, sweetie."

My arm looped around her. "Good morning. Gavin sleeping?"

She told me to be quiet, he was slumbering, a rare gift. My mouth tightened, fearful of looking at him, seeing all of him. When I left for the fall semester, he'd been sick. But I'd hoped he would get better. I hadn't breathed him in as someone who wouldn't see a second October.

She pulled glasses off the cliff of her face. “He’s in a lot of pain today.” Her body turned toward him, talking to me sideways. “He was up all night so I dripped morphine into his mouth. It’s the only thing that will help his pain.”

“What kind of pain?” I pulled on a string, unstitched from the hem of my oversized T-shirt.

“His brain. Every time a calcification forms in his brain, it hurts. Like being struck by a cattle prod.” An electrocution. Sleeping was a pain hangover.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, inhaling.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I wish there was something we could do.”

“If he were an animal, he would be put down by now.”

The pain, she explained, was out-of-body, other-worldly, canons imploding in a fragile body. I thought back to our white horse, Sierra, who was put to sleep because of her pain, right in the backyard. Her body blew up, unable to manage the food inside, gastronomical. Bad colic. As an eighth grader, I was told not to watch. But I watched. I watched a two-thousand-pound dead body dragged across the dewy morning grass; limp hooves, matted salt and pepper mane. She had been alive, bloated in pain, then dead. A relief, a haunting.

My eyes settled on Gavin, focusing on the rise and fall of his chest, alive.

“Good thing he is not an animal,” I said. I knew she was not being disrespectful, but translating, thinking in pain scales. For my brother, his pain was a twenty out of ten. When animals were in life-ending pain, we took the pain away.

“Our job is to keep him comfortable,” my mom said. “And get him healthier.”

She had not been defeated in the way I had been; she hung by strings, but those strings were strong. *Healthier*. An after, a second October.

Walking away, I exhaled. I could already tell that talking about Gavin for the rest of his short life would be full of hackneyed, half conversations, where no one had the right words. Maybe silence was better.

My feet trailed off to the kitchen, pinching the fridge door open. Inside, Tupperware upon Tupperware piled that did not belong to my mother. Food on food. Cooked, presumably, in someone else's kitchen. Some, cooked in factories, prepared to preheat in plastic black troughs.

"Help yourself," she said, from the computer, typing.

"What is all this?" I took out a full tray of cold, saggy red enchiladas.

"People drop off food. Neighbors. Sydney's girl scout troop."

Food. The symbol of knowing, the sign of care. At the time, I hated the food. Food made the disease, the inevitability of a soon-to-be dead infant so real, so hauntingly real. I couldn't stomach the food, so I shut the fridge door, put the tea kettle on instead. The tea belonged to my mom.

I leaned against the counter, wondering how I would be of use for the months to come, how I would fill this stale awful air. "What are you doing at the computer?" I asked, as it looked like she had found something to occupy her unusual alone time.

"Sending an email to another mom of a child with AGS," she said. "I'm asking if we can talk, sometime soon, hopefully."

“That would be great.” There were only about 200 cases worldwide, and the only doctor working on the disease, Dr. Crowe, lived in London. He gave my mom some names of other mothers, other families battling the baby-stealing illness, too.

“We are in a boat without a paddle,” she sighed, half to herself, half to me, to no one.

On the other side of the house, I peered out the window into the garden, my dad’s rose bed. The red petals poked out of green thorns, speckled with thin ash. When I was a child, my dad taught me to tend to roses, how to trim them. Cut the branch, strengthen and clean the stems. He would enter his roses in competitions, and one year he told me I could enter my rose in the children’s competition. One snip of a stem, I placed the red bulging beauty in a slim bottleneck glass, handed it to him. But he accidentally entered mine in the adult’s category, and I was awarded a paper medal, third place. I remembered the look on his face, so proud. A winning red rose. If only we still twirled around that moment, those moments. Red roses, paper medals.

“The car’s packed in case the fires get close,” my mom said, interrupting my daze out the window.

I walked back to the kitchen and turned the stove off. “They won’t get us,” I said, pouring scorching water into a coffee cup that read *I’d rather be golfing*. “The ash just makes it look like they will,” I finished, burning my tongue, sipping too early.

“I hope not, I’d have to let the horses loose on their own,” she said.

I pictured the fire moving through the ¾ acre of our backyard, snipping at horse’s tails, bunnies bouncing aimlessly through dark soot, and chickens screeching from their coop with diamond eyes of fear. I imagined myself caught in the midst of the fire trying to

guide the animals to safety; an octopus-armed woman, grabbing, gathering, guiding. I couldn't watch them die. When the fire would get too strong, I'd realize I couldn't save them after all. To try and save myself I'd jump in the pool and hold my breath underwater.

"Yeah, I hope not," I said, cutting off the image, cupping the mug of tea.

She took a break from her email and grabbed two cards from the counter and placed them in front of me when Gavin started to cry from the couch. "Read these while I get your brother. Thirty minutes; that's the longest he's napped," she said.

The sympathy cards had piled, pillaged, monumental in their obstruction. The counter littered with cards, torn envelopes, and plastic syringes.

I slid my fingers over the rectangular cards, instead of trailing her to his cries, offering to hold him. When he cried, I feared that way he looked: face red and blotchy; lips purple as they quivered; eyes black holes of sand storms; fists clenched tight as if they were rubber-banded shut; body, wilting. No longer the June baby with the golden skin and glowing hair. Sometimes his left leg would shake until my mom held it long enough to stop. Everything was a reaction to the strikes in his brain, poisonous pain sailing through each frazzled nerve ending.

She didn't understand why I didn't want to hold him, couldn't help him. I was afraid to love him, afraid to lose him. Afraid of it all.

I picked up the two cards that sat on the table in front of me. Reading sympathy cards and obituaries would slowly become my morning medicine, words of death, calming. The first card, addressed to my dad from a co-worker at Valhalla, the high school where he was a vice principal, read:



## MYSTERY

“The Journey of life is so beautiful that it needs no destination.”

October 29, 2007

*Dear Sam,*

*Your news today has the staff reeling. We all grieve with you, Sam. When a journey has a paradigm shift like this, it must seem impossible to get your footing again. Fathers have so much put on them. You must feel so forlorn and helpless, but this mystery will be enshrouded. Great gifts come with great adversity. I'm so sorry your family has this sadness. Divergent grieving trolls around creating havoc and confusion so that nothing seems like it will ever be the same, or same again. Through it all you will teach your girls a lot. Gavin is such a beautiful baby - a miracle, and a mystery. I will pray for all of you.*

*Love, Kate*

I slide the card back inside the envelope. Adversity seemed so easy for outsiders to comment on. How wonderful adversity would strengthen a family, how easy and strong it would make us all. But would it? At the time, how could anyone know? Adversity was something people liked to talk about after the fact, a hot topic on college admissions essays. But it deserved a more complicated observation.

Second card, addressed to my mother, read:

Find Strength.

*Kim, My Dearest Friend,*

*When life put its challenges before me, it felt comforting to know that those who mattered most to me truly understood the journey that I was faced with. I believe*

*that's when God gave me YOU. As I did some research on Aicardi-Goutières Syndrome, I've come to realize just what a challenge you, Sam, and the girls are facing. God blessed you with Gavin because you are who you are. It was your love that carried me through the days that I thought no one cared. You are not only a blessing in my life, but one that I've gained my strength from. Now God has blessed you with a special little soul to share your love and strength with; someone that will NEVER know what it's like to be without it. God is TRULY good!*

*Please know that my heart is with you through every moment of everyday. The miles between us may prevent me from holding you through the tears, but certainly does not damper my love, thoughts, and prayers for you. I am ready to walk this journey with you - all you have to do is call and I'll be there!*

*I love you, Crystal – Feel Peace*

I finished reading and set the cards down, unsure about my supposed takeaways, except people were also sad, for us. For Gavin. But shared sadness could not keep someone living. And although sympathy cards were an easy target of critique, at the same time, the cards were something light, a flicker of warmth. Although cards could not present my family with a miracle, a cure. They were lifeboats, devices that would weather and decay, but small pockets of oxygen. Saying, breathe. I'll hold your chin up; take a breath, baby.

I wondered about faith. I was a Christian, a spiritual person. Each night I prayed to God. But I was angry that my only brother was sick. I wanted to keep my faith, like the core ingredients of a past down recipe, believe in a plan in motion. Believe the God I loved

would love my brother enough to keep him here, healthy, give him a second birthday, give him more.

My eyes moved to the living room. My mom bounced Gavin up and down on a deflating yoga ball. His head craned backwards as he cried with fiery cheeks and amplified eyes, but with each bounce, his cries waned. There was something about the motion that soothed him, momentarily. I looked at my mother's eyes. They were tender and bloodshot. I wanted to hug her, cry with her. The home phone rested by her feet. She carried it around with her, hoping someone would call with an answer to her prayers. A call that would change the narrative.

On my walk over to share space with her, become who she needed me to be, a book stopped me, slouching on the counter, where my dad kept his keys. A magenta-trimmed book called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. In my hand, the book was shrill, light. Flipping through it, I wondered what my dad searched for in these pages, sought after. An answer? The book, written by Rabbi Harold Kushner, was a boding forewarning that bad things happened to all people. Good people included. Suffering, a sort of connective tissue between us all. The book tackled the book of Job, the story about a man who was tortured by the devil, who never lost his faith in God. Kushner demanded his reader to take up less space, less anger with God. He suggested that perhaps God was less intervening than some people hoped.

I slid book back on the counter. The book gave me one thing, like the cards had too: clarity that I was not alone in this feeling of spiritual confusion. At the time, I understood this journey with my brother was not only a fight, a brief malleable life to

capture memories of the eight months he had left, but something spiritual. My system of faith would be tested, transformed, for better or worse. This, I knew.

I joined my mom in the living room. I was realizing that bad days outperformed the good days. In fact, I was not sure any day was a completely good one. Good parts, good pieces, yes. But complete good twenty-four hours, no, no, no.

Gavin rested his head sweetly onto her chest as she held him cautiously in her arms. His young skin blistered with heat, a symphony of destruction on stage inside his body. “The Monster is here,” she reminded. I cringed with sadness, maybe anger. My brother was not the monster. No child is ever ever ever a monster. But an illness, an illness can be a fucking monster.

I walked over to my brother and kissed the top of his head. So much I wanted to do, to say, but no language to trigger, stimulate my tongue. So instead, I sat on the carpet, next to my mom and my brother, and I rocked. Arms looped around my knees; body pressed into the carpet, held down by a bitter gravity. Sometimes sharing space with what I could not beat was all I had, all there was to hold.

A few days later, Judy, the hospice nurse, stopped by the house to weigh and measure Gavin. She told me her job was to make sure he was comfortable as he reached the end. Zen-like. She asked if I had any questions. I responded, “no.”

After Gavin was measured, weighing less than he should, the nurse left. My mom, Gavin and I decided on an uncommon outing: Babies ‘R Us. Before it no longer existed. It would be the store where I would register nine years from this day. Belly bulging, I would

not forget this day, the day my mom and I tried to normalize this life all under the glow of purple bubble letters.

As we slowly walked toward the gliding double doors, cumulus clouds hung in the air. This store represented so much that went against the rules of Gavin's life. It represented Beginnings, not Endings.

We walked down the baby boy aisle when a dolled-up woman with a small child propped in the front of her cart stopped and stared. Her eyes dagged Gavin, and made a face that said: *What's wrong with you?* I wanted to scream at her, her uninvited gaze. Scream at her showered hair; not like my mother's hair with throw-up stringed through it, up into an electrocuted bun. Our two shopping carts move past each other in slow motion. Two worlds not combusting, colliding. Once we passed my mom said, "Her child was about Gavin's age. If Gavin was normal, he'd be sitting up like that baby, too."

It was the first time I'd seen an outsider's reaction besides Judy's. Gavin *was* different: he folded his hands close to his chest, was frail instead of plump, and bended in a supine position. He couldn't sit up, use his hands, legs, or kick his feet like the other baby had. I felt like a steak knife was jabbed into me, into us.

My mom's fingers traced the stitching on baby boy's onesie she pulled from the rack. Her fingers wandered over a baseball and glove sewn on the front. Her lips trembled, tender and achy. "I'm so sorry, Gavin." She squeezed him. "You'll never get to play baseball and run and play like the other boys." He looked into her eyes and smiled. She kissed him all over.

I wanted to join her, and kiss him all over, too, but I couldn't. The feeling was like trying to scream in a dream, and nothing comes out; my body felt useless. I processed these moments agonizingly slow.

When we returned home, I craved fresh air, nature. Lacing up my running shoes, I looked forward to time outside of the house, to escape. I decided to go for a run around the golf course by our house. A 3.3-mile loop. Where ordinary people ran as part of decompressing from their ordinary lives.

The golf course's clubhouse and a small pond marked the halfway point on the trail, 1.5 miles in. At this small pond, wild ducks and geese gathered. I had memories of when we moved to Bonita when I was in fifth grade. Bonita was Spanish for "pretty," and about fifteen minutes inland from the city, the beaches. The weather was hotter in Bonita, missing the morning waves of marine layer fog. My mom took us to the pond first. We brought stale white bread and tore it off in pieces and tossed crumbs to the hungry birds. I was afraid of the geese. They snipped at my toes. But the ducks, I loved.

My body moved past the ducks and geese crouching in the thick-wired grass when I heard someone call out.

"Hey. Hey you!" I looked up and noticed a group of middle-aged men standing with their visors, khaki shorts, and beers next to their golf cart waving me down.

They were hitting on me, I thought.

I patted down my shorts, adjusted my sports bra, and made a disgusted face toward the ground as I ran past them.

“A baby duck is hurt over here. We almost ran it over. And don’t know what to do with it,” one man said from the crowd.

I stopped running, began walking in the direction of duck. Looking back, they were probably hitting on me and this probably was just a cheap pick-up line. But I was desperate to help—something. At first I didn’t notice the ball of fluffy feathers, but then I saw her, huddled behind one of the man’s legs. Her feathers, coffee colored. She was about the size of my fist. I scooped her up, her body floppy. If I held her too tight she’d crumble beneath the pressure of my fingers. I examined the baby duck and noticed her left eye.

“She’s missing an eye,” I said.

The golfers circled around me.

“In fact, she is,” one of the men added.

“Who has a towel?”

One of the men handed me a white golf towel. I gently scooped her up and wrapped her tight in the towel and clutched her close to my chest.

“I’m taking her with me. She’ll die out here.”

“You are a good person. The man upstairs will be looking out for you,” one said.

I smiled without my teeth and walked the 1.5 miles back to the car to drive back home. I kissed her head. She smelled of dirt and car oil, soft as a new stuffed animal. When I was little I’d daydreamt of one day having a duck to call my own. I dreamt I’d put it in one of those flowered plastic pools my dad brought home from the Home Depot.

“Messenger, I’ll call you.” And that was her name. She was a message that somehow and someday there was hope God was on my side, our side, my brother’s side. At the time, I wanted to sink my eyes into the glow of signs, if they were real or not, I didn’t care. I

hungered for something tangible to shake me, something in nature to show me we were not alone.

I walked through the garage into the backyard. Everyone lingered in the house but my mom. She stood outside by the white horse corral, filling up the water troughs. The air hung with wet, fall manure.

“What’s in your arms?” she asked from the hill.

“A baby duck,” I yelled.

“A duck? What am I supposed to do with a duck? I’ve got enough people and animals to take care of.”

“It’s my duck, you don’t have to do anything.”

“Bring it back to where you found it. You girls get excited for a minute then forget about them.” She was talking about baby animals. At the golf course I’d found a rooster once, excited to rescue it, but my mom made me get rid of him as we woke everyone up each morning by his crows.

She pointed to the coop where the chickens and rabbits lived. She had a point. But this time was different. I told her the story about finding it, and how it was missing an eye. She was the one who led me by this animal rescuing example—always saving cats, dogs, and birds, bringing them into our home until they found their owner or were healthy enough to fly away.

“Let me see.”

She walked over and examined Messenger. I thought saving something might be good for her, too.



“Well let’s set up the cage,” she said. It only took her a second of holding the fluff of brown feathers to be smitten.

“Yes!”

She went inside the garage to grab an old dog kennel. I sat crisscross in the spiky grass, letting Messenger explore her new world. She waddled a foot away before running, and flapping her tiny wings back to my lap.

“I wonder when we can put you in the pool,” I said, stroking her head.

My mom walked back with the dog kennel. “Let’s put some hay in here.”

I handed her Messenger and walked into the shed to grab some hay. I loved the earthy, rustic smell and feel of hay; hollowed crackling tubes. Roxy, our brown Calico, was sleeping on one of the old saddles. She jumped down and flirted with my feet and rolled on her back. I scratched her belly, soft and warm.

“Come out here. You have to see this hawk,” my mom shouted.

I walked out of the shed hugging a bundle of hay. I saw the hawk above with its stout beak and confident stare. My mom tilted her head up toward the trees, toward the light, and made a screeching noise, “Kaaaaa.” I loved that about her. Her inhibition. Her tenacity to connect. She loved birds, animals, landscape. Whenever she saw a hawk she thought of Gavin, our Battle Hawk. I did too. I had a hawk sticker on the bottom corner of my laptop. It was fading, and peeling off, so I covered it with tape. Whenever I opened my computer I saw it, and pressed it down with my thumb and thought of Gavin.

We were finishing up Messenger’s temporary home, when Danika opened the back-porch door. “Mommy, Gavin is up. He is crying,” she yelled from across the yard.

“Tell your father,” she shouted.

“He said it was your turn.”

Danika went inside. She turned to me. “I get my alone time for thirty minutes. That’s it? He gets to leave every day.”

She stomped her mucking boots back toward the house. I scrunched my nose. I didn’t want our moment to end. Motherhood demanded dark stretches and pulls of attention.

# 8

## A Burning

The fires that burned and warped the hills outside our house seemed to have made their way into our home. A physical and metaphorical flame. And there was no rescue team, no firefighters to put them out.

So, we all hid, all of us into our safe spots, where the outside world couldn't touch us. My dad spent his time tinkering in the garage and at work as a high school Vice Principal. Danika stayed active in high school soccer. Sydney hung out in her bedroom, reading *Twilight* novels. I started going to the gym and working part-time at a restaurant downtown when other family members were home to help with Gavin and my mom. We all burrowed into something. All except the matriarch, our mother. She had no escape.

I was concerned about my mom because of what she'd shared me a few days before. It was clear she needed help, needed something. A break. A breath. A light. During the daytime hours, when it was only us, she confided in me. Feelings. Thoughts. Ideas, raw and unfiltered. A few days before, we both stood at the porcelain kitchen counter. I remembered she was occupied with paperwork, and I was distracted; enthralled with unpacking my new groceries from my Trader Joe's, fulfilling my new identity as a vegan.

Before leaving school, I had recently finished reading *Skinny Bitch*, a no-nonsense manifesto on veganism. To be honest, it was an eating disorder posing as a lifestyle-diet book. And I swallowed it. When I was almost done unpacking my new treasures, I noticed my mom's eerie stillness. Her shoulders hunched, slouched over the pearl countertop, as if her whole body had lost stability. Eyes remained deadlocked, staring down at a bright yellow notebook with a dark sticker in the top right corner. In thick black letters, the sticker read: DNR.

At the time, I had no idea what she was doing, so I tried to make small talk. "Mommy, I'm turning vegan," I said. I thought about telling her how it was good for the planet, and animals, and me—but truthfully, I didn't care. What I really wanted was control. Of something. Anything. But she didn't respond. She kept staring at the yellow notebook while I put away my sprouted bread, soy yogurt, carrots, hummus, tofurkey, and organic peanut-butter cracker sandwiches.

"What are you doing?" I asked, changing the subject, as I paused to snack on a carrot.

"DNR. Do you know what that means?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Do Not Resuscitate." Her eyes fell from her face, as each word slipped from her tongue.

I put the tofurkey down.

"I signed Gavin's rights away today," she said. "If he's choking or seizing and not breathing anymore, this sticker tells paramedics not to save him."

I put my hand on hers. The hills of her hand wrinkled and worn. She squeezed mine then let go, her limp hand hanging in my palm.

“I want this to end,” she said. “It’s not fair to him. Or to me.” She looked at the Spanish tile, the ceiling, the cabinet behind me. Her eyes moved everywhere. It was as if she had lost something. Her body shuddered and she swiped at a tear dripped down her cheek. And then more started to plunge.

“But—It’s okay,” I said.

“No,” she said, sniffing. “It’s not. I’ve been thinking lately. One of these days I’m going to drive off the Coronado Bridge with Gavin. That would be an easy death,” she said. “Or I’ll drive us to the middle of the desert for a slower one. We could await the end together.”

I backed away from the counter that divided us. The space we shared felt like it was shrinking, the white walls caving in. She looked over to my little brother, now crying on the couch. “Anything would be easier than this.”

I arrived home from the gym a few days after the event in the kitchen and walked in on my mom and dad staring at each other from opposite couches. As soon as I stepped in, their gazes turned quickly from each other to the white walls surrounding them. It was clear they weren’t speaking. I could hear my mom’s pasta sauce popping and bubbling on the stove, filling the room with an aroma of oregano, garlic, and tomatoes.

“Am I interrupting something?” I asked. A rubber band of tension pulled between them. I looked to my mom first, but she didn’t return my eye contact. Her eyes excavated;

instead of answering my question, she looked down at Gavin who was asleep in her lap, secure in his blanket.

“Hi Pokey. Back so soon?” my dad asked, faux-cheerfully.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. Something big swelled. The sour taste of the air gave it away, as real as the smell of Gavin’s rags that we used to clean his throw-up.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” my mom said. She said it in a tone I had never heard. A tone that sounded deflated, dead. Her face puffed, bloated from pinpricking pain, that I barely recognized her. Like she had exited herself. A shell and shadow.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I’m leaving for Kathleen’s house in the morning with your brother.”

I think I scoffed. It was over a ten hour drive up the coast to San Francisco where Kathleen, her college best friend, lived. The drive would be impossible. Gavin didn’t travel well in cars. He shrieked, became carsick, developed fevers, and if my mom drove, there would be no one to help him, help her. There was no way the two of them could make it on their own.

“You can’t do that,” I said. I looked at my dad for some help. But he refused my eye contact now too. Instead, he stood up, and snatched his keys and wallet from the counter.

“I’ve got to take Danika to soccer tryouts,” he said, angrily.

And that was that. He walked out the front door, gently closing it behind him.

I looked out the window into the backyard, the place I’d continuously return, to find my footing, fleeting healing. Then smell of burning pasta sauce filled the room and I looked back to my mom, eyes carved, sadness a terrific ferocious friend.

“I’ll get it,” she said. She stood up and turned the burner off.

After turning off the stove, she was back on the couch, both of us in our own heads. The memory of her dark thoughts circled me. I wondered if they circled her too.

I rubbed my face with my forearm and whiffed the smell of post-gym sweat. The obituary section of the newspaper rested on the coffee table, next to the orchids. Orchids were my mom's extended offspring. The table was cluttered with orchids that looked dead. Flowers had wilted and fallen. Stems were bent and hollow, roots were dry and stringy. I grabbed the newspaper, a comfort to read about dead people who no longer had to deal with the hell that was living.

After my eyes scanned all the death stories available to me, I realized I couldn't let her run away. Couldn't let her be a face in the local newspaper. If she were to leave to Kathleen's, she'd maybe never return. I grabbed a wildly patterned couch pillow and placed it over my stomach, which snarled with hunger. I felt like I was starving. Each day my new "lifestyle" made my clothes hang more loosely off my body. The pillow had lines going every which way like an abstract Picasso. Various purple hues crisscrossed with black and gold ones. I traced the edges with my fingertips, and felt a hole, most likely chewed open by one of the beagles, spilling out the inner white contents. I tried again to convince her not to leave.

"You're the mom. You have to stay," I said.

"I can't do it alone anymore, honey," she said. "Your father is not engaged emotionally or physically. With Gavin or with me." In "normal" motherhood, many mothers feel like their partners did not match them in labor. But this was no normal new baby phase.

“But what about me?” I asked. “I’m here.” I began to feel like the pillow that rested on my lap: abstract and with a growing hole.

“Gavin’s not your child. He’s his,” she said, glancing down at Gavin. He was awake, but the Monster lingered. His limbs hung flaccid at his sides, and he stared off to the corner of the room. He had become like a third arm, part of her, always.

My thoughts ran in desperate circles on what I could do to convince her to stay. Sydney and Danika needed her. I needed her. We all did. But it didn’t matter what we needed. She was breaking, disintegrating. The illness had broken her too. I interrupted, “I’m only trying to help. What do you need Daddy to do? What do you need *me* to do for you to stay?”

She must have sensed my desperation, my fear, because she paused to think about my question before she answered.

“Well. To start, he needs to learn how to give Gavin a bottle.”

Earlier this month, an Occupational Therapist had dropped by with a Haberman bottle. It was for babies who had low suckling reflexes and helped them slowly take in dripped milk. The Haberman bottle was keeping him alive.

“Fine,” I said. I had a shot at fixing this. “I’m going to talk to him.”

She just shook her head. “Whatever you want honey. Good luck.”

I knew her feelings were projecting at my dad, who was trying his best, his own way. A bottle would not fix everything, but in her mind, it would help.

With her half-hearted permission, I ran upstairs to take care of some things. First I texted my dad, “Offer to take time off from work. Help Gavin learn how to take a bottle. It’s the first step—and a greatly needed one.”



Second, I called my mom's half-sister, Aunt Karylee. I told her what I knew about my mom's dark thoughts. I didn't want to be the only one who knew. Frightened, she called a counselor to come to our house at 3 PM for a family meeting.

While I waited for the counselor, I sat in my high school bed, not wanting to go downstairs. Guilt did that; it made me want to hide. I prayed and rehearsed how to tell the truth about my mom. Would I blurt it out in the beginning? Would I wait to the end, and tell the counselor in private? I couldn't control Gavin's disease, but I thought I could control my family, somehow. I would make it all better.

Deborah, the social worker, who was the counselor too, arrived on time. She looked over-caffeinated with jittery, anxious eyes, and she smelled of cheap vanilla perfume. She sat with the six of us in the living room we never used, which was now being used quite often. These types of doomsday meetings were perfect here. It was on the other side of the stairwell. Before we'd only used it for holidays, cheery times to get together and sit by the fireplace. Since being home, this was the first time I'd seen my family together in the same room.

"How are you all doing?" she asked, beginning the awkward conversation. None of us had ever seen a therapist before Gavin, so it felt sort of comical, like we were on a reality TV show. No one knew how to act. We needed some producers to guide us.

I looked around. We looked fine. Cheery. What kind of people looked cheery when there was a sick baby? Danika and Sydney smiled politely. My dad cracked a joke instead of answering the question. Gavin hung on my mom. I stared at her, wondering how this would work.

“We’re not doing well,” I said finally. “You may not be able to see it, but we’re kind of suffering here,” I said.

We spent the next twenty minutes talking about how Gavin’s disease had affected us individually. Sydney started with her story.

“I don’t really know what’s going on, but I’m sad. I cry a lot and it makes me more sad when I see others cry,” she said.

Since Sydney was the youngest, she often got lost in the shuffle of appointments and practices. She was still so young.

When it was Danika’s turn to talk, she cried, too.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with Gavin, but I cry all the time,” she said.

Her cry sounded like the cry I used to have as a child when I fell and scraped my knee. It was a delayed cry; as if shocked she was crying at all. She choked for air between her words and tears. Danika didn’t cry often. She bottled up her emotions like our dad. She wasn’t like Sydney, our mom, and me who sometimes lacked a filter.

I put my hand over my mouth because for some reason listening to Danika made me giggle. She cried like a hyena laughed.

My parents both brought their shirts up to their faces to wipe their eyes. They hadn’t seen us girls open up like this yet. We had not been given the space. But we had all been cracked, exposed. Cheery couldn’t hide the truth. Like the pillow, our inner contents poured from places no one could see. When it was my turn to talk I felt heat swelling inside my abdomen.

“And how is this affecting you?” Deborah asked.

I took a deep breath. “I’m scared.”

“It’s normal to be scared with a rare disease like—”

“No,” I interrupted. “I’m scared because my mom has thoughts of leaving, exiting this world. With Gavin next to her.”

The room went silent. My mom shifted uncomfortably in her seat and Deborah pushed her glasses closer to her eyes.

“Girls, time for you to watch TV in the other room,” my mom said. Dad waved them out of the room.

When Danika and Sydney left, they both frowned at me. I told Deborah what my mom had said. Deborah scribbled notes quickly in her notebook. She held the cap of the pen in her teeth, not to miss a word. I told her about the bridge. I told her about the desert.

My mother’s face went blank, as if in her mind, she was already in the desert. Dad uncrossed his legs; his complexion had turned ghost-like.

“Kim, is this true?” Deborah asked.

My mom took a moment to respond, coming back from the desert. “Have I thought about it? Yes. Would I ever? Absolutely not.”

Before Gavin’s disease took over her life, my mom was the happiest person I had ever met. She was positive, upbeat, brought out the best in people. She was strong, too; she had already survived several trials, and lived to tell about it. At sixteen, she had been the prime witness at the trial of serial killer John Wayne Gacy; he had murdered her co-worker, and she was the last one seen with them. My mom helped the cops solve the case. No one had equipped her for that, but she survived. Later, she beat cancer, and then lost her mother to cancer a couple weeks after having me.

All of her trials brought her closer to God. She would tell me that when she had nothing, she had Him. But now, I wasn't so sure. This was her biggest test. Before this, through every event, she always wore her suit of armor. But this time was different. Her armor had become chipped, rusted, less efficient. I thought of the horror film my dad had said that we were starring in. Now I saw the film unfold.

By the end of the meeting, my mom seemed to have convinced Deborah that she had no intention of hurting herself, and that going to Kathleen's would be this sort of necessary vacation. I still hoped she wouldn't go.

After I was done talking, and the attention shifted to the tension between her and my dad, I ran upstairs to get ready for work. Off went the t-shirt and jeans, replaced by black work pants, and a black tank top with a big goofy red lobster in the front. Changing clothes made me feel better, it was like changing costumes. I painted on heavy black eyeliner over my red-rimmed eyes. With enough eyeliner, I was invisible. I wanted to save my family, and at the same time, run away from it all.

I'd started working as a hostess at Rockin' Baja Lobster, a cheesy Mexican restaurant downtown San Diego. It was a decent job and I was thankful for the work, the small chance to not act in a Hitchcock at home. After finding a parking spot, I walked up to the hostess stand where I smelled the colonized American-style pinto beans and rice simmering in the kitchen. Abby, a bubbly friend of mine from high school, was already there.

Abby brought out the mischievous child in me. We had to entertain ourselves during slow nights, when we stood outside praying for customers. Downtown San Diego was always bursting with people during baseball season. Petco Park, the Padres' baseball

stadium, stood and only a few blocks away, drawing crowds of drunk, hungry people to the restaurant. On baseball nights, we'd be on a forty-five-minute wait for a table. The restaurant roared with excited fans and sports television. Abby and I ran around sweating, pleasing customers with hopes of their return. But by the time the first inning rolled around, we'd be empty. The customers were off to the main attraction. The San Diego convention center had a similar effect. It was three blocks away, which provided a full restaurant during lunchtime. The winter nights were dead. They were ours.

The bright fluorescent lights of the Hard Rock Hotel across the street clouded my mind like a Hollywood dream. When guests lingered at the hostess stand to flirt, often asking Abby or me what we did besides *this*, my answers always changed. "I'm going to study medicine," "I'm going to be an accountant," "I'm a model...haven't you seen me on that one TV show?" "I'm writing a book" was also a favorite. It didn't matter what I said. All that mattered was that I wasn't a college dropout with a terminally ill brother.

When the managers weren't looking, we super-glued quarters to the sidewalk and laughed when people tried picking them up without any luck. After the dismal counseling session at home, I hoped Abby had something fun planned.

"What are we going to do tonight?" I asked.

"Liz is here tonight, so probably not much." Liz was the only female manager. The male managers let us get away with anything. A power we abused, joyfully.

"Oh bummer. Great way to end my day," I said. I flinched at how depressing that sounded.

Abby changed the subject. “I was talking to Noel about Gavin. He said he had a story for you,” she said. “You should talk to him.”

“What? What did you tell him?” I asked. To tell the truth, I was annoyed that my safe place, where few people knew the truth about my family, had now been contaminated.

Before she had time to answer, Noel, one of the servers, came up behind us. He was a short man, standing a little over five feet tall, about the same height as Abby. I towered over both of them. Noel and I had never been friends, exactly. He did his job and I did mine.

“Abby told me a little about your brother,” he began.

I cringed. I looked down at him cumbersomely, and tried to search for something to do.

“Oh yeah,” I said. I started wiping down menus. “What did she say?”

“She told me how your brother is really sick, and how hard it is for you and your family. What does he have?”

I looked up from the menus, exasperated. Explaining it was like trying to teach a foreign language I hadn’t yet learned.

“He has this really rare disease. It’s hard to pronounce. It’s called Aicardi-Goutières Syndrome. I haven’t decided if I pronounce it in a Spanish or French accent,” I said lamely, faltering my words. “It’s a genetic disease that only a handful of kids in the world have. It causes brain damage.” I paused.

“So will he be okay?” Noel asked. The million-dollar question.

“I don’t know. Every day is a guessing game and research project,” I said. “Ask me in eight months.” I chuckled a little. I realized I was acting like my dad. In eight months he’d be dead, or close.

“He’s just in a lot of pain and really sick,” I added. “He’s in hospice care so that might say something. I don’t really know.”

“I’m so sorry, Courtney. You and your family are in my prayers. I thought I’d share my story with you. It’s not the same, but...maybe it’ll help,” he said.

I kept wiping down menus.

“I lost my brother,” he said.

I looked up.

“When I was nine, my dad was backing out of the driveway and ran over my four-year-old brother and killed him,” he said. “My mom blamed my dad for years.”

I looked at him in shock. “I’m so sorry,” I said. “I can’t imagine.”

“Yeah. No one can. It took many, many counseling sessions and two babies later to kind of move on. But...you never do, not really. And through it all, somehow, my parents stayed married,” he said. “In a way, what happened brought my family even closer together.”

I looked at him dully, tenderly.

“You take a lot less for granted after something like that,” he said.

“I bet,” I lied. I thanked him for sharing his story, but on the inside, I wasn’t thankful. I did not feel equipped to bear his trauma when I could barely swallow my own. Was I now the public dumping ground for really sad brother-death stories? I hoped not.

Soon we got a customer, and Noel pranced away. I was annoyed that my truth was no longer mine anymore, that it had leaked into my hideout. I put the stack of clean menus back in the host stand and checked my phone. I saw that my mom had texted me.

“Not going to Kathleen’s,” it said. I exhaled.

I arrived home late that night and didn’t get a chance to thank my mom for staying.

The next day, we didn’t talk about what happened. I held Gavin, my mom went for a walk. After lunch, I ran to the mall for a quick errand. When I arrived home, I felt happy how everything turned out after the social worker left. But that feeling faded quickly. I opened the front door and looked past the foyer to the left: the living room we barely used was occupied. A woman I’d never met sat there talking with Sydney. She wore all blue with a tight bun perched on the top of her head. I took a second glance because the woman looked like a cop, but her dress shoes told me she wasn’t. When Sydney saw me enter, she snuck a wave and forced a grin. I suspected Sydney would grow up too fast because of Gavin’s illness, I suspected this would shapeshift us all in ways we couldn’t know.

I wondered where my mom was. I walked through the living room and into the rec room with a TV that covered half the wall. She didn’t like the big TV, often referring to it as “the devil,” but regardless, the room had become her battlefield—a sort of a second bedroom for her and Gavin. This was where she most often fought off the Monster, performing her own exorcisms. Blankets and pillows covered the suede beige couches. Plastic syringes, bottles, and plastic nipples, strewn across the floor. The plastic syringes to drip medicines like liquid morphine and Ativan into Gavin’s mouth.



When I saw her, she was draped in all black, funeral attire. Statuesque, she stared out the ash-covered window, speaking loudly into the home phone.

“You need to get home now!” she said into the receiver. “I can’t believe this.”

She had to be talking to my dad. I looked at Gavin in her arms. He was shrieking. I put my hands over my ears and wanted to scream with him. His shrieks clawed my body, making me physically ill.

The tricky part about Gavin’s disease was that at times he looked like any child his age, especially in his sweet face. Whatever damage was happening in his brain was not visible. That was, until a bad episode of the Monster came. Afterwards, Gavin’s motor skills decreased and his limbs turned to limp noodles. He stopped making eye contact, making it even more impossible to connect. He was a good breast feeder, but these days he was getting worse because he was close to no longer being able to suck and swallow. My mom didn’t want to give him a feeding tube, not yet at least. If the day came when he could no longer eat, she said she’d let nature take its course.

“This is ridiculous! I’m calling Hospice and getting the woman fired!” she said and hung up the phone.

“Who was that? Who is out there with Sydney?” I asked.

“That was your father on the phone,” she answered. “Sydney is talking to a woman from CPS.”

“CPS?” I asked.

“Child Protective Services,” she said, practically shouting. Her face was engulfed with anger. Her fists were clenched, tight, ready to swing. “She came over before Sydney got home from school.”

“Child Protective Services?” I whispered, half to her, half to myself. The words stung. *What had I done?*

My mom’s mouth pulsed. At the time, I could not reckon with the anger swirling in my mother’s body. I was handling my own sort of shame. But looking back, this was when my mother became a person. Not just the hero, the one to do anything to save her son, her family. But someone more complex with dangers, with powers. An unruliness grew in her, one I would come to know.

“She came saying she’d received an inquiry or something, to come and make sure Gavin was safe. She said she’d just come from Danika’s high school, and was now here to see the baby and talk to Sydney,” my mom said.

The phone rang. It was Danika.

“Hi sweetie,” my mom said. “She asked you what?”

She spoke to Danika for a minute, then hung up the phone and turned to me.

“I can’t believe that woman. The nerve. Danika said she pulled her out of class and asked her how she was feeling, with a mom at home who was trying to hurt herself and with a brother in hospice. Danika didn’t know Gavin was in hospice care. Now I have to explain to her what hospice is.” Now she was actually screaming.

“Does she want to talk to me?” I asked. I thought I could explain the situation, get us out of this mess.

She began picking up Gavin’s medicines and milk bottles from the floor, shushing and bouncing him to try and quiet his staccato shrieks.

“No. You’re over eighteen. She said she doesn’t need to,” she grunted.

What my mom had told me the week before had sent me into a fear spiral. I couldn't fathom losing her to the Coronado Bridge, to the dried-out desert. But I never thought I'd be getting my family in so much trouble. Now I knew I would have to redeem the situation because I had caused it. But how? I felt nausea lumping in the back of my throat. Seeing her so upset made my stomach unsettled. I ran to the bathroom and hung my head over the toilet.

When I exited the bathroom, I found her and Gavin in the other room, speaking with Sylvia, the CPS worker. My mom's arms suspended my brother, midair as she drifted, tilted in fumes. If he ever heard someone yell, it was like a drill into his heart, or maybe his head, and he would be set off like a grenade. For hours. Both of them were burning.

"So, you didn't mean what you said?" Sylvia asked.

"It was just dark humor," my mom said. "The baby is in such agony. But I didn't mean those things. I have no intention of hurting myself. I have three beautiful daughters. I have him."

She took a breath. "I'm doing the best I can." She looked down at Gavin and brushed her fingers through his blond hair and kissed his forehead. The kiss relieved him, momentarily. He needed what we all needed, love.

"You seem to be doing an excellent job maintaining him," Sylvia said.

"You try it," my mom said, a shift in tone. She held out Gavin to Sylvia, gesturing for her to take him. Sylvia's face went blank.

She looked at my mom, and perhaps saw herself. A self she would probably never want to see. A mother doing the best for her child, but one who was susceptible to the darkness that childhood illness brought. There were no words, besides a goodbye.

Because through my mom's eyes, I think Sylvia knew her truth—that she never actually wanted to hurt Gavin, or herself. Instead the opposite was true: she wanted to save him. Save all of us.

But my mom's emotions were on high volume. As soon as Sylvia left, she looked to me, her confidant, the one who had given her away. "That woman is so getting fired. I'm making the phone call right now," she said.

Dad walked in the door, holding his lunch bag, wearing a blue tie.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"Don't pretend like you don't know. You did this," she shouted at him. "We'll talk later."

My mom walked outside with Gavin, out to the horses. Animals and nature, medicine. I stood there confused as to why she was blaming my dad when she ought to have blamed me.

He turned to me, "What was that? Do you know what's going on?"

"Don't worry about it. Everything is fine now. It was just some confusion," I said. "But it's not your fault."

He put down his lunch pail and went upstairs to change, something he did every night after work, but now he was spending more time up there, avoiding my mom.

I wrestled with this day, the image of CPS, the fumes that fused out of my mother, my family melting like raw sugar in my hands. But I didn't have an answer. I was not yet a mother. So I climbed the stairs to Sydney's room, to check on her. I knocked on her door

before I came in. Her room reeked of sweaty shin guards, and dirty clothes. Several of her *Twilight* books were scattered across the floor.

She rested on her stomach, on the old white carpet, working on something. I put my arm around her. “Are you okay?” I asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said. Sydney was sensitive, like me. But I doubted she had a clear idea of what was going on.

Sydney was focused, scribbling on a piece of printer paper with a black Sharpie.

“What are you working on?” I asked.

“A contract,” she said. “For Daddy.”

The next day, Sydney posted her paper contract in the kitchen for my dad to sign. My parents’ marriage would pull and suffer for the years to follow. Much was kept on low volume, a slow drip existed between them. At the time, I felt bad for my dad, for my mom turning the tables on him, when deeply I knew everyone was trying their best. Whatever that best looked like. Everyone was burning, the heat matching the fires burning only fires from our house. The secret of our suffering now out amongst all of us. We gasped for our own breath, jagged oxygen to bring us somewhere that felt like home.

# 9

## Funeral Funds

“Is this enough?” I asked my mom, who folded laundry nearby. I splashed a few droplets of water into each orchid pot, about six of them, hues of lilac, sapphire, white. They rested on the corner table, wedged between two slouchy purple couches, couches that would be traded out in a few years for burnt orange ones. My days had evolved into helping where and when I could. Laundry, lunch, a walk around the block, errands, caring for plants, feeding animals, attending hospice meetings.

“Just a little. Not too much, or you will drown them,” she said, walking upstairs with fresh clean clothes bundled in her arms. Gavin, on the couch next to me, watched atop a fluffy blanket.

“Thanks,” I said, eyeing the splashes drumming each root. Over the summer, the flowers had been in bursting bloom, but now, they were stale, gritty, fading. My mom told me orchids needed good light. Not too much, an attention to orchids required a bit of neglect.

When she walked back downstairs, I asked, “You sure these are still alive?” Some of the roots were still so thin, slowly disintegrating. I asked a lot of questions because I’d kind of ignored the orchids before Gavin. But now I wanted to learn to care for them.

“The process is slow, but the plant will grow a new stem and rebloom. New roots will shoot out too.” She pulled dead leaves and pinched off decaying roots, pillaging debris into a pile in her palm.

“The orchids keep me going. I know you will love them one day too.”

The orchids were in a hibernation, moments upon moments of deep dark solitude.

Orchids had been my mom’s sacred flowers. She liked lillies, her and my dad’s wedding flower, and sometimes roses, but she never talked about other flowers like they had inner worlds. Orchids had souls.

On the first Saturday in December, my dad pulled the Suburban out of the driveway toward the freeway. The fires had faded and Gavin was nearing six months old. Midpoint, on the road to The End. We were on our way to Gavin’s Benefit. In part, it was going to be a celebration and baptism, but also a fundraiser. The money donated would not be for my brother’s college; it would be for medical expenses, for funeral expenses.

The car remained full and silent, except the windshield wipers brushing away rain. My hands fiddled with my digital camera. Outside, a rainbow appeared over the small mountaintops. I rolled down my window and took a picture, inhaling the smell of fresh rain. The roads were wet like the dramatic, sad scenes in movies.

Gavin, who rested in his car seat next to me must have felt the velvet slick of chilled air. He began crying.

“Gavin, Shhh,” I said, trying to calm him, rubbing his shoulders and legs to ease his muscles from throbbing.

“Let’s play some music,” she said. “Gavin loves his music.”

Mozart’s *Requiem*, came on, and Gavin’s cries fizzed out, quiet.

I closed my eyes. When I opened them again there was a double rainbow parked beyond the horizon. On the day of my parent’s wedding day, a rainbow appeared when they walked out of the church, after saying their vows. My parents told me it was representative of my father’s mother watching over them, sending her blessing, since she died when he was eleven. When my mom’s mother died a few weeks after I was born, they decided to believe the same for her. A double rainbow meant two dead mothers’ blessings. I looked to the front of the car. My parents were holding hands, wearing their gold bands. They must have seen the rainbows, too. They were still learning to navigate this new landscape of parenthood. They tried not to show too much after the CPS visit.

We pulled into the country club’s half-full parking lot as the sun began to set. Lavender and bitter tangerine laced the sky. Women walked around in semi-formal dresses with heels and the men adorned ties and suits. I made sure not to lock eyes with anyone.

I wasn’t the only one nervous. My mom, breathing heavy, darted across the parking lot. “Sam, I need to have some sort of home base. Gavin can’t be around all these people the entire night. He’ll get Monstery.”

I was afraid the Monster would show itself tonight.



“Laura set up a room for you over there.” He pointed to a corner hotel room, across the lawn. Laura, the woman to suggest such and plan an event. Everyone wanted to help, and we were grateful, but receiving the help felt itchy, starchy to receive.

“I’m coming, too,” I said. I was not ready to partake in small talk about dropping out of college or give the eldest sister commentary on Gavin and hospice.

“If Courtney’s going, I’m going too,” Danika added. Sydney followed.

I flicked on the lights in the hotel room, our hideout. A gift basket full of pretzels, crackers, cookies and beverages sat on the bed, and there was a rocking chair in the corner for my mom and Gavin. I walked to the bathroom to look in the mirror, prepping before heading to the banquet hall. Danika and I twisted our curls and applied sparkly pink lip-gloss.

“Come on you guys!” Sydney yelled from the other side of the closed door. “Mommy needs to use the bathroom.” Sydney had evolved into the caretaker of my mother when the rest of us abandoned her.

“I’m coming,” I said.

I walked out of the bathroom, momentarily forgetting where I was. Then like it often did, reality settled. I looked at Gavin, rocking in our mother’s arms in the rocking chair, and my shoulders and chest went from confident and straight, to slouched and pouty. The breast pump rested next to her, which she now had to use frequently because Gavin had lost the ability to breastfeed on his own. The disease had stolen his strong sucking reflex.

“How’s he doing?”

“Tired. A little cranky.”

“Well, he looks like an angel,” I added, and bit my lip. As far as I could remember, I hadn’t cried in front of her yet, and it had been over a month now since I withdrew from school. But looking at Gavin so fragile, so beautiful, I fought the tightness building around my mouth. She had changed him into a loose satin white gown for the baptism part of the evening. The cloth hung past his toes and swam over his thin body.

“Want me to hold him?” I asked while opening a bag of pretzels.

“That would be great,” my mom said.

She quickly swigged her Diet Coke, stood up, and handed me Gavin. Gavin was always attached to her. He became fussy when others held him. I put my arms out and took him. She walked into the bathroom with my sisters.

In my arms, I held him, a full, delicate embrace. I was afraid he would start shrieking, so I took a seat in the warm rocking chair and stared into his wandering blue eyes, to connect. He stared back at me, silent. Eyes, mysterious wells of a spiritual Spartan.

I felt grief for keeping my distance from him. I felt grief for him being sick, slowly fading. But something about this moment, this night all for him, I felt a shift in my heart. The air, no longer thick, but delicate, durable. Our heartbeats sung the same prayer. A tear glazed down my cheek, landing on his forehead. I gently wiped it off with my thumb. In his river-glass eyes, I saw him. Not sick. Not dying. But pure. Loved. I told him I’d fight. For all the time in the world.

“I love you, baby,” I said. “I’m sorry it’s taken me this long.” I kissed his forehead and smiled. He flickered his eyes back at mine.

The banquet hall was decorated with Christmas greens, whites, and sprinkled with baby blue. It could hold over two hundred people had tables stacked with plastic-wrapped gift baskets for the silent auction. There were donations of beachside getaways, rounds of golf, jewelry, restaurant gift cards, massages, and more. Luxuries of a life and pleasure outside the walls of our home. Guests signed in at the front of the room, next to a blown-up photo of Gavin when he was a few weeks old, the picture from his birth announcement. On the right side of the room was the bar, and in the front of the room was the stage where Gavin would be baptized later in the evening.

Slowly, the room filled. I double-checked the centerpieces, as I had put them together the night before. Then, I walked over to my mom, Danika, and Sydney who stood with Gavin outside on the patio.

“Hey you,” Laura said. She had been a friend of my mom’s for years. Laura was her office manager when she still worked as a physician at Sharp Memorial. Now I think it had been almost seven months since my mom had been out of work. She had gone on bed rest two months before Gavin’s birth because her pregnancy was high risk.

Laura was dressed in a fitted black dress, with her blonde hair resting neatly on her shoulders. She seemed so delightfully on another planet. Hinged, together. I felt a bit jealous of her emotional freedom. I gave her a hug and thanked her for putting so much work into this night.

“Should be a good night. We’ve raised almost thirty thousand so far in donations. After people bid on the silent auction, we should reach forty.”

The baptism began after dinner had ended and the last plates were cleared from the tables. Gavin, in my mother's arms, was the center of attention. In the front of the room stood my parents, a pastor, and two witnesses: Michael Evans, Gavin's godfather who was also my mother's longtime spiritual guide, and the husband of my mom's best friend, Kathleen, who could not be there. At center stage, Gavin was at peace, curious eyes scanning all the eyes watching him. The pastor recited some words and sprinkled water over his head, brushing it through his hair. Gavin was baptized Methodist.

After the baptism, Michael Evans invited my dad to speak. In one hand, he gripped his speech. In the other he held a toy, one I remembered from childhood. It was a wind-up gadget that played an instrumental version of "Over the Rainbow" from *The Wizard of Oz*.

"Good evening friends and family. Thank you for coming out tonight to support our special boy, Gavin." My dad looked at his boy. "I wanted to start off by sharing the story of this toy. This toy has been passed through the family for twenty years. The girls enjoyed winding it up when they were younger and singing along. Now it is Gavin's turn. I'm surprised the thing still works." The crowd laughed. "But I am glad it does. This is one of the few things that eases Gavin when he is in tears and in pain. When he hears the music, he stops crying." He turned the knob and held the toy up to the microphone. The room quieted. People started crying to the lullaby about something, somewhere over the rainbow.

I looked at Gavin, now situated across the table from me, cradled in my mom's arms, still in his beautiful baptism gown. Smiling in his own Gavin way.

My dad continued, “Thank you for showing your love and support tonight. We can’t give Gavin a regular life, but we can give him a comfortable one, with lots of love.” His cheeks flushed red; his eyes pinched. “Huh, Bubba?” He wiped his eyes as he made eye contact with his son. “Thank you.”

The room erupted in applause. The MC took back the microphone.

“Thank you, Sam. Very touching. Is there anyone else who would like to come up and say a few words?”

I could not escape the words my mother’s half-sister, Aunt Karylee, was mouthing to me. She wanted me to go up and speak. I glanced to my parents. My dad stood behind my mom with his hands resting on her shoulders. She sat in the chair in front of him holding Gavin. They were nodding for me to go up to the podium. *What?* I looked behind to see if there was someone else. Couldn’t be me. This was not planned. My dad had weeks to plan his speech. How was I supposed to go up there and say something moving? My speech would be unmoving, disorganized. I had never given a speech. But, the speech part of the night was about to end, and the slideshow would come on, and that would be it.

Something inside said, *Go*.

As the MC was about to move on to the slideshow, I stood up and walked to the podium. My heart was beating. My brain was racing, outlining in bullet points, and bolding important words I could say, all the while panicked that I wouldn’t be able to speak at all. I took a deep breath, and stood behind the podium. I smiled, and tried to lock eyes with as many people as I could.

I spoke.

But If you asked me exactly what I said in those first few minutes, I couldn't tell you. I couldn't remember. I know I spoke of a few life lessons I had learned. I repeated my father's lesson, "Always try your best." I must have heard those four words a million times growing up. I explained I had learned that there was no other way. I also spoke of my mom's faith that Gavin was here on this Earth for a purpose. Even if our only job was to love him with the small life he had been prescribed. And although the family therapist I now saw told me, "Shit happens," we had to have hope that at the end of this dark tunnel there would be light.

"I know we will get through this. Perhaps such special people were blessed with a special child because they could do it," I said. "They have the support."

"Take a moment to look around," I said. "My family is surrounded by love. Without everyone here tonight, and without everyone who has been supporting us since we found out about Gavin's illness, we might not have been able to come this far. There are no words to describe my family's gratefulness. So, thank you."

The energy heightened. People stood up and clapped. My cheeks glossed raspberry red. I looked at my parents and Aunt Karylee. She was giving me two thumbs up. My dad grinned, and my mom grinned too. We were good at smiling, like I remembered, but so much felt like a performance. I wondered why I couldn't just say: home is hell, what's happening to my brother is unfair. But the folks in the crowd probably already knew that. We put on smiles of gratitude.

I took a seat. The lights dimmed and the picture slideshow came on. There were pictures from June: Gavin wrapped in a blue baby blanket, the month he was born; from July, a happy baby in Sydney's arms, before he got sick; from August when he still looked

normal, but was sick inside; from September until now, head shots taken from Mom's cell phone, the moments in between the waves of sickness. There was one of Gavin and me, the first week he was born. I had his cheek up to mine, smiling.

Nat King Cole's, "L-O-V-E" came on, blaring from the jazz band. Family and friends filled the dance floor. People from all different ethnic backgrounds and ages were fearless with their dance moves. People swung low, swayed their hips and snapped their fingers. Couples twirled. Circles formed, hips bumping, voices humming. Even Gavin had a nice time with Laura twirling him smoothly across the floor. His gums peeked through and his eyes shined with brightness. As I took part and watched, I felt as if I was in one of those movies where friends and family danced after a wedding, while the credits rolled. It was a time where everyone put everything behind them and just danced.

While I danced, I felt a trembling hand gently grab my elbow. She did not think I knew her, but I knew her quite well. It was Alma, one of my mom's friends in the neighborhood who never stopped believing that Gavin would see past his first birthday.

"Sometimes God sends angels down from heaven in the form of babies." She looked over to Gavin, glowing. "I think Gavin is one of the few."

## Silver Cradle

The mall, a landscape for slipping new identities into straight-edged shopping bags. A place to pack on a sunburn of artificial lights and polyester, to sip the energy of other people; but also, a place to be, a place for connection. A week before Christmas, my mom buckled Gavin into his infant car seat and drove to the mall. Just the two of them, an undisclosed outing to the rest of the family. She parked the car by Macy's then walked through the mall. Regular shoppers browsed for holiday gifts, but she didn't. She held Gavin close to her chest as she carried him toward one stop, and one stop only: Santa Claus.

She wanted to hold a memory of Gavin's first Christmas, his last Christmas. The mall photographer printed off over-priced photos of kids sitting on the mall Santa's lap. She knew this because she'd taken her daughters, years before. It would not be elegant or charming, like a ride on the Polar Express might feel, but it was something. A memory to forever remind her of whom she had loved and whom she had fought for in the summer,



fall, winter of 2007. The two waited their turn in line and when she arrived to the front, Santa chanted, “Ho, ho, ho. Merry Christmas. Who do we have here?”

“This is Gavin,” my mom said. She hesitated in handing him over to Santa. “He’s a little special and needs extra support when you hold him,” she said, posing her son.

Then Santa saw. The lava fear in her eyes, the forfeiture of breath, desperation and hope, palpating. This was not a regular mother standing in front of him. The first-time mothers who brought their children to see Santa couldn’t stop taking their own photos, couldn’t stop chanting for their child to smile. But not my mother. She sought something inexplicable. She sought hope, a Christmas miracle.

Her trip to the mall was for more than a photo. She needed someone to tell her this life was not as horrendous as she’d laid witness to. She wanted someone to tell her that her son would live.

“Hi Gavin,” Santa said. “Tell me a little about yourself.”

It spilled out, what Gavin battled, a fight to survive past his first birthday.

Santa’s white gloved hand wiped his eye. He propped Gavin up, who cooed in good spirits, resting on the red velour suit. “I’m going to take his story to my church. We will all pray for him.”

“Thank you,” my mom said, as the photographer snapped a couple photos. At the counter, she took out her wallet to pay, and Santa said, “Your money is no good here.”

The clerk handed her the photos in a square paper envelope. “Thank you,” she said to both the clerk and to Santa. He waved, twinkle in his eye.

Back at home, my mom found me hanging Christmas ornaments on the tree. “Take a look.” She handed me the envelope. I opened the paper and examined the portrait. It wasn’t the typical holiday portrait where Santa and the child both stared at the camera. This one felt natural, candid. No one looked at the camera. Gavin, in his red and white striped pants and “I Love Santa” long-sleeved onesie, peered down at Santa’s gloved hand clutching his. Santa looked down too, away from the spotlight. His gold-wired glasses sat midway on his nose and his eyes were slim. He seemed to be thinking, as Gavin opened his mouth jubilant, like a clam.

“He’s so happy,” I said.

“He loved it,” she said. “I need to put it in a frame.”

She walked off in search for a photo frame and I continued dangling ornaments on the Douglas Fir. Yesterday we’d drove down the road to the local pinery late last night. I’d waited until this morning to dress it, so the fresh branches could fall into a triangular silhouette. In my hand, I’d held a tarnished cradle, an ornament, my godmother, Cheryl, gave me. Before I could talk, before I could remember. My sisters had one, too. It was the one ornament we made sure to hang each Christmas ourselves. The cradle, silver, about the size of my fist, with my name and birthdate etched into the side. An empty cot, with a red bow glued on top. But years had passed, and mine was covered with an old film, rust. I’d licked my fingers, trying to smudge away the oxidation to uncover my name. The cradle signified my first Christmas, and the gift of its corrosion represented the Christmases it had survived. The years I had spent alive.

I dangled it on a pine branch, next to a framed pastel ornament of me at three dressed in a snowsuit, white beanie covered in hearts. I stood no higher than the countertop, smiling, holding training skis.

The cradle evoked a fear in me. I feared Gavin would receive the same cradle ornament this Christmas. The red bow, still perfectly glued on. I feared this same ornament would haunt me as each new Christmas snowballed into each new December. I feared the cradle would age alone, without him.

I had let my mind go to the dark place. To slow the spike, I sat down. Turned inward. When I had no one to talk to, I spoke to God. Was I supposed to simply believe that *God sends such tests and afflictions only to people He knows are capable of handling them, so that they and others can learn the extent of their spiritual strength?* A quote I'd heard and read a dozen times. But in this moment, I felt spiritually desiccated. Angry.

There were the facts: Gavin was ill and supposed to die. And there was another fact—more of a question for God, myself—when my brother passes, how can I live? How can I continue to breathe? To drive in a car without looking to the middle seat, the empty car seat? Is the pain of childhood illness one too great to withstand? Will I find strength, when I feel hopeless?

There were so many questions, and the answers felt galaxies distant. And there may never be answers, I understood. I had met people who could tune pain out better—it was as if they could make themselves forget. But everything in this life was a constant reminder. I wanted to scream from my bedroom out of the second story.

The color black is the darkest color, the color an infant absorbs in the womb, and according to Christian theology, the color of the world before God created light. It seemed that we had all fundamentally exited from darkness into light. And it also seemed we were not free from it, just by living in light.

I wore a lot of black during my time at home that winter. My mom worried about why I wanted black nail polish for Christmas, even though my nails were already painted black. I wanted to paint it all black. My shoes, my eyes, my life. A billboard to the world. Darkness lived here.

The next day, for a break, a good time, my mom, sisters, Gavin and I attended the Stein Christmas show. It was a performance put on by the school she once worked at as an Occupational Therapist. The students had special needs—ranging from varied cognitive, behavioral, and social abilities. My mom, Danika, Sydney, and I walked from the parking lot, past the playground. A couple of grown boys were riding their tricycles in a circle around the grey asphalt.

“Hi Jerry, hi Bobby!” my mom shouted toward them. They kept riding their trikes, and both shouted out in unison, “Hi Kim!”

I was amazed they remembered her. She hadn’t worked here—in what—a decade? She’d quit being an O.T. to focus on practicing medicine. At one time, she worked both jobs.

“I miss working here with these kids,” she said, turning back to Danika and me walking behind her and Sydney. We’d picked my sisters up from school. “We’re pulling them out and playing hooky today,” she had said to my dad earlier in the morning while

he ate his bowl of cereal. “As long as they don’t have any tests today or early next week,” he said.

We took a seat in metal folding chairs near the front stage. Gavin had on a white sweater with a sewn Christmas wreath. My mom wore a red sweater with a Christmas tree pinned over her left breast. The show began with a few Knock Knock jokes by the two MC’s, one a speech therapist, the other her student.

“Knock knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Snow.”

“Snow who?”

“There’s snow business like show business!” the student shouted, joyfully with a slur in his speech.

Each class performed a dance to a song. I watched them move across the stage, not like ballerinas would, but out of unison, uncoordinated. They were older, higher functioning versions of Gavin. Most of the kids could walk and had accurate range and control of their limbs, but many had indistinct speech, weaker eye contact. The lowest functioning students were secured in their wheelchairs. I took a sip of my coffee, taking in the moment. Although these humans, these children, may be seen as imperfect to the world, they were alive. They were loved. What I had failed to notice, before the end of the show, was that the room was packed to capacity with family members and friends of the performers. Halfway through the show, I inhaled a rush of hope that my brother could make it to this stage to perform, too. But that gasp of hope diminished as the show ended,

and the curtains closed. Grief moved through me, with the thought my brother may not ever get here, to this stage, any stage.

The lights dimmed. A slideshow of the students throughout the school year played to Billy Joel's "Vienna." My mom turned to me, crying. "It's too bad," she said. "He'd be so great up there."

For Christmas Eve, I took my sisters and the neighborhood kids to lunch, a movie, and the park so the moms could get their last-minute wrapping done. Later in the evening we had a late turkey dinner with my dad's silky homemade gravy. After, we attended a wonderful Christmas Eve sermon at a neighborhood church, that was not our home Methodist church. Sydney was part of a Christmas play. She looked adorable on stage, skipping and singing. And for an instance, being in the presence of my family felt warm. When we got home, around midnight, we each opened a present, and Aunt Karylee came over for treats and Champagne. The evening was lovely, at last.

I woke Christmas morning to Danika, jumping on my bed wearing her Sponge Bob pajamas. "Wake-up, it's Christmas!" I said I'd meet her downstairs.

Downstairs, my mom kissed and hugged me and wished me a merry Christmas then abruptly asked, "Honey, can you hold your brother?" She then ran from the kitchen into the bathroom. I poured hot water into my coffee mug, and then stirred my hot cocoa. I took my time before picking him up, watching the liquid thicken in my favorite beagle coffee cup. I knew I couldn't ignore him for long because he was crying, and the longer I waited to pick him up, the louder he'd become.

“Sure,” I said, my mom long out of the room. I looked down at Gavin in his blue bouncer. Gavin’s face was red, mouth full of stars, and fallen tears pooled in the collar of his shirt. I bent over, gripped my hands under his bony armpits, held his head and lifted him onto my right hip, bouncing rhythmically. I set my coffee cup down. I needed my other hand to support his head.

“Gavin, shhh.”

I patted his back.

“Gavin. Shh. Stop crying. It’s Christmas.”

His cries soon faded. I carried him into the living room. The Christmas tree was bright. Filled stockings scattered the fireplace and “Silent Night” played in the background. I could hear my mom beginning to heave in the downstairs bathroom, and the smell of sausage cooking on the stove filled the room with a smell I couldn’t find comforting. I walked over to the fireplace, gently brushed my fingers over Santa’s Christmas Eve plate and mug we left out the night before. There were half eaten cookies, and nibbled carrots. My mom and dad still consumed the majority of the goodies left out for Santa and his reindeer, because Sydney still believed. Next to the ceramic Christmas plate rested a letter addressed to Santa. It wasn’t a tradition for us to leave notes for Santa, so I quickly unfolded it, curious.

*Dear Santa,*

*I don’t want a lot of presents this year. Well, I want some so I don’t feel left out, but I wanted to ask you a question. Do you know any people up there who could help Gavin? He is really sick. He has a disease that few people have in the world, and many*

*don't live very long. I can't say the name because it's in French. That is the only thing I want for Christmas. I don't like to see my family always so sad, and was hoping you would know someone who could help. Please!*

*Sincerely,*

*Sydney*

*P.S. I am writing this really fast so sorry if its messy, but I don't want my mom to see it because it would make her cry.*

I set the letter down and took a seat on the couch, Gavin still in my arms. I scooped up a pink Santa hat and put it on my head, hoping it would be me in the spirit. Sydney's letter was a bitter truth no one had discussed prior to today. And we all felt the urgency and pressure of this Christmas, so much so that it made my mom physically sick.

I continued to cradle him and hum to him.

The Christmas ornaments that hung from the tree gawked. I thought of the gift Gavin would receive later, the silver cradle. My mom confirmed that Cheryl had gifted him one.

I held Gavin close to my heart, kissed his forehead, and felt myself go loose. My body shook as I held him, crying. Broken open. The image of the silver cradle hovered.

My dad came running into the room holding his spatula. Danika stared.

"Is everything alright?" my mom asked, exiting the bathroom.

"No," I cried. "I can't handle this Christmas."

"Here honey," my mom said in her calm voice. "I'll take him." She took Gavin from me, squeezed in next to me on the couch and held my head with her free hand.



“Don’t worry. Not all Christmases will be this way,” she said. And they would probably be worse, I thought. A baby gone.

When she held my head in her hands, I clung to her. I buried my face into her knit sweater.

When Sydney entered the room a moment later, still dressed in her fleece nightgown, she walked over to the fireplace, looking for her letter to Santa. When she found it, she scooped up the letter, examining it.

“Santa saw it!”

“Saw what?” my mom asked.

“The letter,” Sydney said.

“Let me see, bring it here,” she said.

Sydney came over and snuggled her body between us on the couch. Even my dad stopped cooking for a moment to come see. The six of us: Mom, Gavin, Danika, Dad, and I listened to Sydney read Santa’s response written on the back of her letter.

“Dear Sydney, don’t be sad. Santa knows about Gavin, and is working hard with the angels to make Gavin better. Keep being the great big sister you are. Be good. Love, Santa,” Sydney read.

I glanced at the letter. It was written in my mom’s handwriting.

# Hospice Graduate

After the disease revealed itself, a snow globe dropped and cracked our lives into a million pieces. Shards everywhere. Blood from the glass entering the pads of our feet. Scars from the aftermath. Once we tried to put the globe back together, we realized we couldn't. Our world would never return to a previous state.

I woke up in my high school bedroom on the fourth day of January of 2008 with a movie playing in my head. I placed my hands over my chest, inhaled, and watched the reel play. The day I came home to the decay of the garden, the burning and singing of the fires. Each day, a platitude of morphine and sympathy cards. Days zigzagging, in and out, witnessing my mother crack and age as my brother's body disappeared each time the Monster whipped through him. DNR paperwork stamped on the counter. Sisters, ghost-like, disappearing into the background. My dad, searching for a spiritual answer, in secret. Gavin. Beautiful, golden, and ablaze. Me, no longer afraid, but no longer sure of much, sure of anything.

Although I had tried to be there for my family, I could have done more, done better. I threw the covers off me and got up with a feeling that I had not fixed anything. Yet, I had to return to college, act as if it was fixed. Like we had figured out *how to keep a dying baby from dying*.

It was my parents' choice to send me back. I would've parted with college forever if the choice were up to me. Nestled up in town, I could've started a small floral business with my sisters, with money we didn't have. Nothing was more important than family. But my parents believed in an education. I wouldn't realize, until ten years later, when I would commit my life's work to education, how grateful I would be for this belief.

My dad moved me back into the sorority house on the Saturday before spring semester. Once we arrived, I gave him an extra-long hug. "Try your best," he said. "Ask all the questions. Sing all the songs." I laughed and rested my head on his shoulder. Those were the phrases he shared each morning he dropped me off for preschool. He kept the sayings going.

"You try your best too," I said.

School continued, the same as I had left it. Girls got drunk on weeknights, spent twelve hours on Sundays studying. I became quiet. The less I spoke, the less I had to share. I blended in, I tie-dyed shirts purple and yellow with friends, watched *Dexter* from my bunk bed, attended the frat parties, studied in the kitchen until midnight. I relished in the times to myself when I was alone. The two places on campus I could call my own: the pool, the beach. The water called me, the cold chlorine, the ocean waves splitting sand. Underwater and near the water, I could hold my breath for as long as I needed.

Back at home, my mom kept me updated. A family friend set up a blog for her to share Gavin's journey: HelpBabyGavin.com. I let myself binge her writing once a week. Some entries, I could feel her vibrating through the screen. Sometimes I felt she was writing just for me.

Like me, my mom looked for signs everywhere. A blog from February:

*So many good things to report for once.*

*Let me start with the 2nd LESSON LEARNED from this journey. The 1st being Love is patient, kind, and endures all things. Yesterday, the 2nd lesson came to me as a spiritual moment.*

*Let me first review the history of Gavin's name. It came to me one day last December as I was watching TV and the producer was "Gavin" I knew then, the baby I carried was a boy to be named Gavin. It turns out Gavin means "Little Hawk" from Native American lore, I knew hawks were messengers. Hawks soar.*

*So yesterday's lesson was about soaring. As you know, we have struggled with car seats, swings and buggies. Our recent attempts at buggies included the simple parachute style. It was so beautiful yesterday, and G having such a good day, I thought why not try it. But in the past I have always been on a mission to take a "power walk" and cover some ground, feel like I have accomplished something for ME. Yesterday, we circled in the street, under the shade of our beautiful tree. The warm sun (it is 70 here), the fresh smells of spring, the roosters, woodpeckers, and many other birds, it was tranquil. Three neighbors stopped to chat and say hi. The lesson learned: one does not have to always move forward, cover ground, power walk to enjoy life. Just soaring around, in front of my own home with my little hawk was heavenly, simply heavenly. :)*

*To top that off today is his 3rd day of natural pooping. His appetite is back.*

*The day followed with an unusual spiritual experience. The gentleman who came to tow the Suburban (dead in the driveway...it never ends, this test) was Foxtrot from Anthony's towing. He kindly asked if I would be needing a ride to the dealer. I went on to explain, no, and that the baby (in my arms awake) was not well. He asked his name, and I told him. He commented that it was an unusual name.*

*"What does it mean?" he asked.*

*"Little Hawk."*

*There was a hawk, at this same time in the tree across the street.*

*He replied, "I am Native American, and Hawks represent messages/messengers from God."*

*I told him I am aware of this.*

*He continued, "My grandmother and mother believed when I was at an early age that I had healing powers. They called me Coyote Hawk."*

*He then proceeded to request permission to lay his hands on Gavin and offer a blessing. Of course, I obliged. What a journey. Then, within 15 minutes, Gavin's godfather called and insisted on coming over, bringing lunch, and praying with us. A peaceful day followed, with a warm Jacuzzi and good sleep.*

Then I clicked on another. And another. They weren't always full of hope.

*Monday*

*We have been battling the Monster again. I, myself, took quite a whipping last night, along with Gavin. I think, the clock said it was 1250 AM when my teary eyes tried*

*to focus. I had tried over and over to try to get Gavin to take a bottle. He would suck a little and sputter it back out at me. This went on for almost an hour. Finally, with my t-shirt soaking, my spirit broken, my son exhausted, I sobbed out loud, cursed god and gave up. This scenario repeated itself at 4AM. Today I am beaten. Gavin finally took 4 1/2 oz. at 7AM. I sighed relief. He is jumpy and distant.*

After I allowed myself bingeing blog sessions, I'd push out all the air in my body, press my fingers into my stomach, until I was empty.

Toward the end of spring semester, I arrived at Statistics class early, opened my laptop, surprised to see an email from my mom. The sun blared through the classroom windows, and the room smelled of chalk and old Subway sandwiches. I tapped my pen on my desk. This was big news, she wrote. Dr. Crowe, in London, had performed more bloodwork tests, and concluded that Gavin had type 2b, one of the various forms of AGS. New research was being done on the disease, since so little was known about it. Dr. Crowe expressed that type 2b might mean a longer life expectancy for Gavin. He couldn't predict or know but he suggested ten years now, instead of one.

I left the classroom to call her.

"Can you believe it?" she asked. "Ten years."

I exhaled. "I cannot." The hard work of medical interventions such as the special bottle, the therapies, the hope, the faith had helped us arrive at receiving this news. Getting the further diagnosis of 2b did not mean something bad couldn't happen to Gavin. Children with AGS aspirated during seizures, failed to thrive when they could no longer

eat. Children with AGS still died unannounced. It would take work to keep Gavin healthy and safe. But it was hopeful and worthy work.

I walked back into the classroom and the statistics lecture commenced. For once, I looked forward to Gavin's first birthday.

On a warm June day, the local San Diego hospice team came over to our family home for a photoshoot. They wanted my brother to be the new cover boy for our regional hospice unit. The boy with the golden hair, a hospice graduate. He hadn't passed away, but his time had expired with hospice services. Even if my brother never graduated sixth grade, high school, college, he had graduated one thing. The whole thing, to me, was strange. It was like nose-diving off a cliff in the car but surviving. I felt ill.

My mom and dad took showers, cleaned up, and dressed Gavin in a light beautiful blue sweater and white cotton pants. They held their son as the photographer posed them, however one was supposed to pose the graduate of a death order.

On June 22, 2008, Gavin turned one. I remembered the day he was born, how he slid out of my mom, broke his collarbone mid-flight. How we were told he was fine, healthy and aglow. I remembered the smile of pride on my parents' faces. I remembered all the dreams that were born that day, the dreams that shattered when he became sick.

When I moved back home for summer during Gavin's first year celebration, my parents did not seem okay. It was like they had been shaken on a bad carnival ride for twenty-four hours a day, for twelve months. Now they were stepping off, unable to walk, unable to stand upright. On the morning of Gavin's birthday, my mom could hardly keep

her attention in the present, without disappearing into her head. While she changed Gavin's diaper on the changing table, she walked away for a moment, forgetting. She zapped out of her trance when she heard shrieking, not Monster cries, but surprised ones. Gavin had flipped off the changing table, landing on his head. On the carpet. She turned and saw Gavin, a crumpled heap. In a panic, she called out. Danika entered, calming her.

She said, "Mommy, I've never seen you cry like this." My mom held Gavin close to her, waited for time to pass, as only it would tell. In case the fall had caused additional irreversible damage. Hours later he was the same old boy. Not one mark, no change in his visual expressions, and he kept that endearing smile he was getting better at making. He ate and drank and never threw up.

The thought of losing him was humbling. My mom had never imagined her son playing by rolling around. He had not mastered rolling over, or much mobility. Hospice was a small dark storm cloud that had followed us through the past eight months, but in his fall, there was some hope that he would roll over one day, move his body on his own. But still, she felt horrible. I couldn't snap her out of herself for the whole day.

My dad and I baked a boxed vanilla cake with vanilla frosting for Gavin's birthday. We stuck a number one candle in the center. My mom said she did not want a party, she was too sad for that. And she didn't know how to celebrate her child. The placing of Gavin as AGS 2b offered relief, but the deeper diagnosis also came with a new prognosis. The brain damage caused by the Monster visits, when the illness over-stayed for all those months, had caused irrevocable damage. Dr. Crowe told my mom her son would not walk, not talk, not ever eat solid foods. But he would live.



None of us knew how to react. At least during his hospice days, we knew why we were fighting. For fifty more years. For a beautiful life. We didn't know we were fighting for this, which, at the time we deemed as a half-life. A tenth of a life. A boy to live to ten. A boy who would be disabled, but we couldn't yet see how. As a baby, it was hard to tell.

While my dad grilled, I walked Gavin over to the pool, something we had in common, our love for floating, of watching the slick surface of water. In the valleys of this journey, when the Monster did not check in, Gavin was happy. He liked tickles, music, fart sounds, and peek-a-boo. He was so there, and yet he was not. His physical body could still not move and shift how he wanted. I could see him, at times, beginning to look to his right hand, which was his weaker of the two, and wear a face that said, *why aren't you moving where I want?* A boy who wore his emotions for people to see. Unlike the rest of us, he did not hide much. The best movement he had gained was in his legs; they were the strongest parts of his body. Over the past couple of months my parents took him next door to use the neighbor's Jacuzzi. My mom believed the warm water helped ease his muscles and simultaneously strengthen them. He practiced kicking. Hoping one day, he'd use his legs and walk.

I splashed water across his toes and legs, and he giggled and cooed. I held him under his armpits and let his feet move around in the water. His smile, contagious. When he was proud, he'd let his head fall forward and laugh. *Look at me! I'm still here.*

As the sun hung halfway in the sky, after dinner was over, my mom held Gavin on her lap, and Danika, Sydney, my dad, and my mom's neighbor friend, Marcia, all sang happy birthday. We tried to be cheery, the kind of cheery we had been so good at when this all started. But it was hard to hold it together as my mom cried. She couldn't sing one

word. She choked for air as her son sat in her lap. He'd lost control of his hands and could not scoop his own hand into the cake, but he could communicate with his eyes. And his eyes opened as wide as the sky, entranced by the single flame. After we finished singing, my mom blew out the candle. It felt like her birthday, too.

“Here, Gavvy,” she said. “Try some frosting.”

She swiped my brother's fingers through the store-bought frosting and carried his hand to his mouth for him. He cooed. For this moment, the world tasted sweet

## Shaking and Seizing

But anything sweet doesn't last forever.

*Thud, thud.* The sound echoed through the first floor of the house. About eight months had passed since Gavin turned one and licked the sweet zing of frosting. Sydney heard the thud, the first to react. She knew what the double stomp meant: to run upstairs with a pile of dish rags, to help catch Gavin's vomit. A seizure.

After Gavin graduated from hospice, the struggles to keep him alive shapeshifted. The fear of not getting enough nutrients had been solved, to an extent. My parents blended his meals with an emulsion blender, three meals a day and one snack. They packed in whole milk and butter to enrich the caloric intake, as his body stayed long and thin.

Sydney ran through the kitchen, clutched open the rag drawer, yanked out five or more, ran upstairs to my parents huddled above Gavin. His body, sideways, on their carpeted bedroom floor. They set up a twin bed adjacent to theirs, so they could closely monitor him. When his body shook and my dad would jump out of bed, gently bring him

to the floor, try not to let any of the blended food coming up be inhaled. If he inhaled, he could die.

Sydney threw towels down on the carpet, scooping up the barf. My dad and mom held one close to his mouth, wiping any bits away. Then, a cry. A breakthrough from the seizure. Someone would time the seizure, too. Usually my mom, on her sports watch. The watch she used for jogging and swimming, when she was a different version of herself. If the time went past a minute, someone had to inject emergency anti-seizure medicine through his bottom. But my parents didn't like doing that, as the medicine would leave him empty for days, no tone, ghoulish-like and vacant. Over time, my parents had gone from working against each other within Gavin's illness to working as a team. As a team, they could do a better job at caring for Gavin, while also taking care of themselves.

"Thanks, Syd," my dad said, wiping his forehead of fear. My dad feared he would be the one to lose his son. Seizures were his to fight. Over the years, my parents had gone from working against each other within Gavin's illness to working as a team. As a team, they could do a better job at caring for Gavin, while also taking care of themselves.

We all had our own versions in our heads, of how we would be the ones to lose him. Not save him in the moment he needed us.

For Sydney, it was that she wouldn't run fast enough. Sydney stayed up late into the dark hours watching who knows what on television. She was the second string for saving Gavin from a seizure. I was at college when the weekly seizures began, shortly after he turned one, and Danika went to bed early, so Sydney and my parents fought in the cold hours of the night.

From college, I'd get a call the next day, I'd hear about Sydney's heroics. The fear my parents felt when he was choking and shaking simultaneously. I felt bad for everyone, and wondered what the trauma would do to Sydney, later in life. The fear and urgency of saving her single younger sibling. My mom's fear was still linked to the cries, his shrieks, that the crying itself could kill him. I knew this because my dad did not share the same fear. Each night he cried, she'd whip her body out of bed, rub his back, sing lullabies. There was no "crying it out" for her son. The cries damaged her, traumatized her, and because they injected her in such a vile way, they also injected me. The distanced pain slowly contaminated me, and I began to empty out from afar. Sometimes I felt like my mom and I were twins, or how I imagined twins communicated. Tele-kinetic. My time at home with her shifted me into a shadow of her. If she was shaking in fear, so was I, my emotions matched hers. For Danika, I was never really sure what she was afraid of. Perhaps, she was the bravest, most faithful of us all.

The nights were the darkest part of Gavin's life. It seemed as if part of the Monster tormented him in the dark. He'd cry every hour of the night. My parents unraveled as they lost sleep. They never got to grow out of newborn sleepless nights phase. The sprint had turned into a marathon, with no finish line in sight. No one with a microphone at the finish line, shouting that one day Gavin would not be in pain, not be encompassed by so much suffering.

Gavin tried rounds of epilepsy medications, voyaging for the perfect cocktail. And when we thought we had one, he'd go a few weeks, then a big one would hit.

A Grand Mal Seizure.

Like the time when Gavin was eight. My sisters, Nick, my dad, Gavin, and I attended the AMC movie theater in Palm Springs. My mom was not with us. She'd finally found an escape in the US Army and was on deployment. A family friend had given us two nights to spend at their timeshare. We'd spent the day in and out of the Jacuzzi and pool. Gavin roamed the hotel grounds in his blue walker, tip-toing along as one of us helped push and steer him. He laughed when he knocked into the foosball table at the arcade. Later in the day my dad held him in the jacuzzi. But it was quite warm. The heat, hard for Gavin. My mom was not there. She was diligent on not ever letting him overheat, and perhaps, off in the desert, we had.

When Gavin shook in that dark movie theater, we panicked, thinking this was the one. The big quake to shake him to the end. My dad flipped him sideways, and Nick hoisted his legs as we all ran through the fluorescent, popcorn-filled lobby toward the car through rare desert rain. We looked for the emergency seizure medicine we usually kept in the car.

But it wasn't in the glove box. My mom never went anywhere without double checking for that medicine. "Shit," my dad said. "Shit!" We piled in the car, holding Gavin on his side, in the second row, as he slid the car back to the condo in the drenched desert. The stars, guiding him. "Come on Bubba," he said. "Hang in there." The window wipers slashed, on over-drive.

Gavin's eyes folded inward, absent. His skin, yellow-pale, like the blood stopped flowing under the current of his epidermis. My dad rubbed his hand through Gavin's blond curls, the other on the wheel. I held a popcorn bowl by my brother's mouth, to catch

the barf. My sisters, Nick, and I each held onto a limb, a tug-of-war to end the seizing and shaking.

My dad slammed on the brakes as he tossed his son's body over his shoulder's, up the stairs. In the apartment, he slid Gavin on the cold tile floor as he rifled through the bags for the emergency medicine. Then, he injected the goo, to stop the Monster from taking his son.

Gavin's eyes came to, a large gulp of a breath, from minutes of no breathing. His lip quivered, and when we all sat around him in a circle, he cried. Tears of fear for what his body could do to him.

There was not only an emotional cost to keep my brother alive, but also a financial burden. My parents did not receive help from the government in the first few years of Gavin's life, so they quickly burned through the funeral funds. Gavin's medical needs cost more than keeping a child in college, year after year, with no graduation in sight.

The seizures made everything an inferno. A splinter in our family, a constant cycle of trauma, fear, relief. There were no safe days. Nothing good guaranteed. But somehow, through all that, we found the good.

Nick picking Gavin up, and shooting him through the backyard like an airplane; the time I streaked mine and Gavin's hair with blue, a sign of a true bad ass I told him; Sydney's snuggles on the couch, movies were their thing; Danika's strength in holding him, looping him on her back for impromptu piggyback rides; the summers my dad slid Gavin on his lap as they sloped down the big slides at the summer fair; my mom's ferocious advocacy for her son, for him to walk in his first blue walker.

Over the years, Gavin had many walkers. When Gavin was around four, he received his first blue walker. The one piece of equipment he could use to try and walk. The first time I remember us placing him in the walker, it was Thanksgiving. He giggled as he felt a taste of independence, standing in his walker in the kitchen. He'd catch the wheels on the kitchen mat and laugh. I took a video of Nick pushing him through the kitchen, *vrooming* around.

All the time Gavin spent floating in the pool and at Physical Therapy sharpened the muscles he had, allowing him to waltz in his own way. He enjoyed flying down the driveway, screaming in happiness. One time we dressed him up as Luigi from Mario Kart and he loved the feeling of zooming as a videogame character. I loved to see him not in pain. Those were the moments that made everything okay.

My favorite memory of Gavin in his walker was when he was nine years old, the ring bearer for my wedding. He had the rings strapped to the front bar of his blue walker and zipped down the aisle as Nick and I cried at the altar. In that moment, with my brother smiling, as he delivered the rings, I thought this world was a good place, a place we could survive.

But sometimes the outside world like to remind us of how Gavin was not like them. During a spring trip to the San Diego Zoo a girl stopped her mom to ask in a rude tone, "What's *wrong* with him?" pointing to Gavin in his walker. In those moments, I wished I hadn't been there to stand witness to how others sometimes saw him. The world, a far place from loving those appearing different than them. People like my brother had not yet shown up



in education, or mainstream media representations. This needed to change, and I hoped, one day, I could be there to see the world shift. See people see my brother through the lens of love. Witness people from across the country and world see my brother for his energy, his joy, his spirit, to see him for what he could do, and not what he appeared to be lacking.

The little girl at the zoo did not see him as a joyful young boy also watching the same cheetah run, but she saw him for what he lacked, what he couldn't do. Her mom pushed her daughter along, did not take a moment to allow an interaction with my brother. The mom's reaction saddened me most.

Every day of my brother's life was a hailstorm of grief and gratitude. Sometimes strangers reminded me of this. Each day he was closer to ten, we secretly worried how many days we'd have left with him. This intensity, this urgency to live, was not painted on him. It was drawn on us, though, on our insides.

This trauma tattooed us in different designs. Danika was kicked out of high school during her sophomore year, forced to change schools and attend the high school where my dad worked. Sydney retreated into theater, a place she could be someone new, someone happy. My mom joined the US Army, her long awaited escape, while my dad and a nanny watched Gavin at home. My dad swam, lived in the pool when he wasn't at home, taking home medals for the fastest swimmer in his age group. And I, well, I tried to understand my feelings, a little too much. Sometimes the pain of not knowing if my brother would live another day, a month, scraped my spirit to nothing. In college, I had a moment in good therapy, where my therapist taught me the saying, "Felix Culpa" which,

in Latin, meant fortunate fall. We could pull fortune from life's unfair hand. But I kept waiting and praying for a deeper fortune, for my brother to not suffer. Because many times, he still did. His face would cowl if he was left alone in a room, unable to follow the pack. His legs experienced frequent muscle spasms. He had multiple hip surgeries.

When Gavin had double hip surgery at seven, I suffocated. He became weak and thin, and it felt like a million little steps backwards. I wanted him to be healthy, free from attacks from the illness that planted in him.

Gavin would be nine when I'd give birth to his first nephew. In the hospital room, I'd be as close to understanding how my brother felt when his body abandoned him. My body would be shaking, impossible to halt. On January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017, according to his expanded life expectation, my brother would have exactly 165 days to live. Age ten. Throughout the years, I'd learn to successfully bury the pain of this uncertain prognosis. I'd chosen to view life as a place where bright things still lived. But everything I'd buried could not be contained. When my son would swivel out of me, a baby boy, with a whole untouched life ahead of him, my brother's life would split open, lucidly standing right in front of me. Floating in the apocalyptic room, I would see everything that had brought me here in this uncomfortable hospital bed, all the time I had left.

## Part III

# REBLOOM

### **The Present**

“And the day came when the risk  
to remain tight in a bud was more  
painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

– **Anaïs Nin**

# 13

## Dark

On the couch by the hospital window, my husband sat with his shirt off. I could see the slight hair on his chest, his brown nipples. Skin to skin. With a baby, our baby, handed to him under the shadow of the night, illuminating from the dark window. Nick smiled, looking at our son, then he looked at me and his eyes welled.

“Why can’t I hold him?” I asked the doctor. Jealous I wasn’t handed my son like I’d been promised. By movies, the birthing instructor, my mother. The baby was supposed to be placed on the mother. My friend Kelly once told me her about her sister’s birth. She said her sister was handed a lollipop, took the epidural like a champ, giggled as her baby slid out into the doctor’s hands. She took a lick of her lollipop, still in her hand. I was pissed there was no sliding, no lollipop.

The doctor perched below and peered his head to make rare eye contact. It seemed as if hours had passed and I had not stopped shaking, not physically able to hold my son. My hands cramped from gripping the side rails of this uncomfortable hospital bed. My hip ached, like it had snapped. The epidural still left me unable to move my legs.

Everything had exited my body: shit, throw-up, my baby, a milky way of blood and bodily fluid, the placenta. A red sea filled the blue tarp below me. This man, this stranger stringed me, like his old guitar. A wad of stitches, fifty or more encompassed the area my son had torn out. Cut out. A violent episiotomy.

“You cannot hold him until you stop shaking,” he said. “And not until I am done sewing you up.”

I called for my mom. I needed someone, something to fill me. She walked over, clipped my hand off the railing into hers. Her nostrils flared, telling me all I needed. She hated the man stitching me up too. But she wore her professional voice, told me a sandwich was coming. A turkey one. It was almost 3 am, everything closed. But someone had found solid food. No more red Jell-O or beef broth.

“How is he? The baby?”

She squeezed my hand. “He’s great. Over eight pounds, a big boy.”

The doctor stood up, spoke to the nurses, saluted me. A goodbye. And then, he was out of the room. I’d never see him again. In his mind, a job well done. In mine, a total invasion, an excavation. But when he left the room, my body slowed down the shaking. The room was filled with women nurses, my mother, my husband, and a baby. Our son.

My mom told Nick to bring him over, and a nurse trailed him. “Let’s get him to breast feed, alright?” she asked me, still a statement in the form of a question.

Nick took out his phone to take pictures. Later, when he would show me, I hated the way I looked. A baby with a hospital pink and blue striped beanie, cuddled up to me, attached to my nipple. My face was not the one I had anticipated. It was not love-struck

nor glowing. My face was pale, bloated with agony. My teeth were clenched, and my eyes rolled back, as if I was looking to the past, not the gift glued to my bosom.

The past would become a familiar grave to visit.

That night, we slept, sort of. Bennett was placed in a fishbowl next to me, a plastic bassinet. My friend told me she had her second daughter whisked away the night after she gave birth in New York. The nurses did that, so she could sleep. I asked the nurse on duty to take Bennett, told her I needed to sleep. But she said that was not allowed, this was against the California law. I felt like a bad mother, day one.

I was given more pain meds to manage the pain not halted by the other pain meds. A cycle of medicine and madness. Nick had to go with me to the bathroom, gush witch hazel spray on my stitched vagina, help with the blood without a plug, press over-sized pads together into mesh underwear. My body, a warzone. We shared steak the next night, a welcome gift from the hospital, for us becoming parents. The steak was chewy and overcooked. My dad brought the champagne, and it was good.

After dinner, Gavin entered the room with my sisters, his first time meeting his nephew. Now, he was an uncle. Uncle Bubba.

He pushed his blue walker up to me, and I took his hand, kissed it.

“Hi, Uncle Bubba, meet your nephew, Bennett.”

My mom scooped Bennett from my lap and placed him in Gavin’s arms as he stood in his walker.

Gavin said, “Aaaaah,” with pride. He brushed his mouth on Bennett’s cheek, to kiss him. Everyone took turns holding Bennett. And I remembered the day Gavin was born,

when we all took turns holding him. Kids waiting their chance in a semi-circle. Then I remembered the horror that followed. How naïve it felt, now, in retrospect. To trust the health and promise of a long-life, right from the beginning.

That night in the hospital, with my whole family there, a manifestation began, the beginning of a new dark period. Of reliving the past, dipping my toes not only into my brother's past, but also my mother's.

My mom brought a blue orchid to me on the night we arrived back at our Los Angeles apartment. Then she went home, off to work. The plant slid onto the windowsill with the others, nestled next to the white orchid that I had waited to bloom its final bud. The first week home with a baby was a whirlwind of food and couch and lying awake in the pit of the night.

For the first couple nights back, Danika stayed with us. She helped hold Bennett when he woke in the wee hours, over and over. He cried so much, I began to worry. She'd rock him, bring him to me to breastfeed, then take him back out to the living room. I was lucky to have her.

At our first pediatrician appointment, Nick and I were told Bennett had jaundice. A bad case, so bad that the pediatrician sent us home with a special light, to recreate the sun. Our son was a yellow lizard, and we needed to bring him back. Danika nick-named Bennett "caveman" during these early days because she said he preferred the dark, could not sleep well in the light.

The pediatrician also told us Bennett had lost weight, but this was normal. All babies lost weight the week after being delivered. Sometimes it took some time for the

mother's milk to come in. He asked me if I had considered formula, to supplement for now.

“No,” I said. “I definitely want to breastfeed.”

“Okay then,” he said. “We will weigh him again next time.”

It was a rare season of rain for those first couple weeks at home. Southern California rarely brought daggering pellets, but that January it rained almost every day. I slid on fashionable sunglasses inside while I held my son to the artificial sun in our home. Nick was back at school immediately following Bennett's birth. So, it was just me, and then my dad, too, who came up for a night after Danika left. I raced around town, to the Department of Social Services the morning he arrived, to get Bennett health insurance, and when I came home, wet circles covered my shirt. My milk had dropped, or so I thought.

When I arrived home from the social services office, I scooped Bennett up to breastfeed. He chomped and sucked away, leaving my nipples puffed and cracked. It seemed like he was getting milk. When I squeezed my nipples, thick milk exited.

But that night, we experienced one of the worst nights yet. The night my dad was there. Bennett would not sleep, would not stop crying. My dad and Nick took him for a drive after he nursed. My dad said the driving calmed me when I was a baby. But when they came back, he was red and shrieking, tears drying on his cheeks. Nick begged, “Let's just give him a bottle.” The hospital had sent us home with one, a Similac ready-made formula tube of fakeness. But I remembered my mom, how she breastfed for years. I



deeply and truly believed the female body was capable of keeping a child alive if it was able to develop one. I didn't know how wrong I was.

At the hospital, nurses told me Breast is Best. I never heard Fed is Best, which was something I wished someone would have said to me. Before I gave birth, I fell into a well of Googling how formula was a slow hill to slip down. No good mother gave formula. I wanted to be a Good Mother.

As the days passed, Bennett shrank, disappearing. Bones poked through crimped skin. I called my mom, in panic.

“I think something is wrong,” I said.

“Keep trying, it will come,” she said. Over and over. The milk would come.

I did it all. Each day I took Fenugreek and Brewer's Yeast and strange lactation medicine I ordered over the phone from Canada. I smelled like a walking bottle of maple syrup as a side effect. I drank Blue Moon. I ate French Fries (high fat diets were supposed to deliver more milk). I became fat. I nursed, I pumped, I latched my son onto me at every chance. But the more I did, the more he cried.

Soon, the single thought settled into me that he was crying out of pain of his own Monster settling into him. Not for lack of milk, even though to the untrained eye, this was true. Once this thought dropped its seed, everything went black.

Without me knowing, Nick began sneaking Bennett bottles at night, when I tried to sleep. But I couldn't sleep. The darkness brought nightmares back, of ten years before, when the Monster tainted my dreams. When the truth settled in that my brother was sick,

crying each day in pain. Every time my son cried, I heard my brother cry. The pitches morphed into one. A long electrocution of pain-sound.

Soon, Nick told me he had been giving Bennett Similac. At night, alone.

“Why would you do that?” I asked.

“He was and is hungry.”

I hated my body for not showing up. Doing its job. This small (but huge) failure winded me up, spun me to believe every fear in my bones. I loved my son, felt guilty for all I could not do for him. And even with formula, and the gaining of weight, he still cried. Each day began a wrestling match of getting him to sleep. I'd fight until 2 pm, blacking out our entire apartment, to get the ambiance as dark as possible, to calm him. Some days I would call Nick on the phone and shriek about how I could not handle it, the cries. The cries were bombs. Dropping in my mind, taking me back to visits from the illness, the Monster.

Bennett was baptized at three weeks old, our part in protecting his soul. Like we had done for Gavin, a decade before. The baptism was much different than Gavin's. It was not an event, not a benefit. Rather, it took place at a regular church service with the Methodist pastor who married Nick and me on Coronado Island. On the day of our wedding, it rained. A sign of a fruitful, long-lasting marriage. Three weeks into parenthood, I could not fathom what it meant to be a wife anymore. I was afraid of everything. When I held my son, I saw my brother's eyes, hollowed out by the pain and fever, gazing back at me in his loose-fitting baptism gown. I saw myself morphing into my mother, a ghost of her past.

The darkness in my mind whirled. I tried to look up what I was experiencing, put a name to it. The two options to exist in the world in 2017 were Postpartum Depression and Postpartum Anxiety. I did not feel like I fit quite well into those boxes. There was also Postpartum Psychosis. My body, my mind were not in a lucid state, but it was not quite those. It spun films. From the hospital room, from ten years before. The closest comparison I could come up with to this feeling was trauma associated with sex.

In college, I'd been assaulted twice. In those instances, my body no longer belonged to me. I had become possessed by others. When I went into new relationships, healthy sexual relationships, the fragmented vignettes would whirl. The memories of my body not solely belonging to me. It was difficult to keep my focus in the present because the past kept a strong hold. Kind of like a motherhood version of PTSD. I knew war veterans experienced PTSD. Me Too had not yet happened, so sexual assault involving PTSD had not quite entered the cultural conversation, either.

At the time, I did not think of PTSD being an option in a postpartum state. Sometimes I joked to myself that I was feeling some sort of PTSD. But neither the internet or health resources told me this could be a real thing. So instead, I battled the invisible beast in my mind, alone.

At my six-week postpartum check-up—with the OBGYN who did not show up to my birth because I was a Medi-Cal patient—I was handed a form. I was to check the boxes.

I had seen a similar form a decade before, when I checked myself into the student wellness center at Santa Barbara, when I was to meet my counselor who taught me “Felix Culpa.” When the grief over my brother’s life was so heavy, I could no longer function in the world. And now, with those stories looping in my mind, it was hard to breathe, hard

to live again. I read through the ten questions, and answered mentally, before answering with my pen.

*Do you ever cry for no particular reason? Yes.*

*Have you had trouble sleeping or eating? Yes.*

*Has the thought of harming yourself occurred? No.*

The form felt so formulaic. Some of the other questions I was asked involved my thoughts about my baby. I had nothing but love for my son. And it was not fair to him, I thought, that my mind clipped stories from the past, stitching them with the present. Creating a narrative in my head, that when I held my son, I saw my brother when he was sick, my mom when she was fragile. All I craved was a conversation. I hoped the nurse would ask me how I was doing.

The nurse read my form, told me I might have something, I could see a counselor or not, my choice. Slight Postpartum Depression and Anxiety, that was normal.

“I’m okay,” I said. The idea about finding a therapist and then making an appointment felt impossible.

Something that had thrown me over the proverbial edge was when my mom sent me a new Haberman bottle, same one she used to keep Gavin alive. When I opened it, I immediately slid it back in the box. One of my friends from high school had a baby boy on the same night as Bennett and he was having trouble latching, so I drove the bottle out of my house, to the post office to mail to her and baby Noah. The bottle, triggering.

At the appointment, I hoped the nurse was going to see something in me that I could not vocalize at the time. But she wouldn’t. No one would. At the time, in 2017, postpartum PTSD was not screened for at six-week checkups. Offices still used the dated

Edinburgh Postnatal Depression scale, a piece of paper with ten questions, to gauge a new mother's mind, body, spirit. No one ever checked on my postpartum health again.

These emotions came to a head when I had a vision, a blackout, while driving my car back to the apartment one day. Most days, I pushed my son outside, in the sun while I sipped iced coffee and drank in the wondrous sounds of the birds, the wind waving in the trees. The light made me feel good, the sun, a slice of freedom. But when we approached the apartment, when the cries amplified in that small space, I felt the recent and deep past. My mismanaged delivery. The deep yearning to hold my baby and not being allowed. The doctor stitching me. My sick baby brother crying in pain. These flashes of memory would all pop at once and my mind would go black and my whole body would shudder.

## Purple Room

When Bennett turned six weeks old, forgetting the past remained impossible. Memories of when the Monster slipped into Gavin as an infant sweltered. The Wednesdays. 104 degree fevers. I thought I had buried this time, this life. I had learned to deal with Gavin's unknown lifespan, the prognosis of living to age ten. I could handle the seizures, the unknown land of shaking. But there was something so raw, so un-worldly about that first year of his life that changed the chemicals in my body, darkened an arm of my soul. And something about bringing Bennett into the world was like a reaction, adding sodium chloride to an experiment, watching the foam escalate, a homemade volcanic eruption.

And it was not like I was simply afraid of Bennett having Gavin's illness, his own brain-disrupting Monster. That was untrue. I made a vow when I found out I carried the disease, I would love my son no matter how he turned out. Neuro-typical, disabled, or not. But I had not prepared to be totally encumbered and paralyzed by reliving the past.

I did not know how to stop the past from playing, of that first year of Gavin's life when he was a baby. I did not know how to verbalize these thoughts, share the images.

This time in my life, in 2007, was a secret shared with my family. I hadn't even shared them with Nick. The cheeriness my Lund family portrayed on the outside stayed with me, ingrained.

Also, Gavin's diagnosis as an infant was not something I accustomed to sharing candidly with friends. A girls' night of wine and charcuterie did not quite lend itself to stories about how my brother was supposed to die. But the ground I buried these emotions into no longer had a safe grave. They spread out before me like the morphine syringes and sympathy cards of 2007. My job, to pick them up, file the pieces.

There was nowhere to go but home.

When Bennett was four months old, we packed our apartment and moved south, into my parents' house. Into the house that my parents, Danika, and Gavin lived in. Sydney was away at college in Merced, California, on soccer scholarship. The decision to move home came soon after I had the vision of crashing. I knew, deep down, I needed help, community, but had trouble vocalizing this. I blamed the move on finances. It was not a lie. The truth was, too, we had run out of money. Because my jobs paid no form of maternity leave, and the small amount of California government maternity leave funds had melted away, there was nothing left. Perhaps, if I was in less of a state of splintering, I could have decided to put my son in a local daycare, go back to work somewhere to pay for rent. But, looking back now, I could not think that far down the line. My only plan was surviving. And I thought the only way to survive the past was to face it, in its present.

In the modernist novel, *The House in Paris*, by Elizabeth Bowen, a mother cannot visit her son, Leopold. Cannot bring herself to physically meet him. For reasons, difficult for her to explain, understand. Trauma from the past infiltrates all her decisions in motherhood. Leopold cannot comprehend this choice, no one can who is not a mother. Motherhood unhinges Karen, Leopold's mother. Karen is a mother who did not enter motherhood under a normal contract, experiencing her own form of trauma entering motherhood by those closest to her. When reading Elizabeth Bowen's novel, *The House in Paris* it is easy to cast Karen off as selfish. Absorbed. But I wonder, too, if this is because those casting judgements have not known what it is like to misinterpret motherhood, to enter in sideways, carrying pain in an old piece of luggage that will not snap shut all the way. When I first read the character of Karen, I understood how trauma from her past stopped her from being the mother she could be. Although I empathized with Karen, I did not want to be her. I wanted to walk into the flames, to transform.

A sixteen-foot U-Haul pulled us home to San Diego, the town I grew up in. My family still lived in the suburb Bonita.

At home, we pulled our luggage up the stairs, the three of us fitting into Sydney's room, painted purple. Nick would begin calling it the Purple Room, across from the Blue Room, my old room. The three of us crammed a bed, a dresser, a bookshelf, a Pack N Play, a changing table, and rocking chair into that small space.

When Gavin was a toddler, my mom and dad let the three of us girls paint all the upstairs. I chose dark blue in my room, which was now Gavin's room, across the hall from Sydney's room. Blue, the color of the deep part of the ocean. Sydney chose purple, a



shadowy lavender. The color of hope. And Danika chose pink polka dots and painted her ceiling sky-blue with fluffy white clouds. Colors of floating to joy. The three of us painted our shared bathroom, too. On the base, near the Spanish tile floor, there were daisies the color of battle blood. Behind the bathroom door, we painted a palm tree, memories of when we spent a summer vacation on the island in Kauai. When we hiked the Nāpali Coast as a family of five. One day, we wanted the good life, the beach life, again.

Sydney's purple walls were covered with memorabilia, the way she left them before leaving for college. Photos of friends in braces, an eighth-grade trip to Washington D.C., leaflets of the plays she had performed in like *Legally Blonde* and *Hairspray*. An obituary pamphlet from my grandpa Jim, my dad's father tacked above where we would rest our heads.

"Let's not take anything down," I told Nick, as he loaded clothes into the dresser. "I think it is best to leave it as she left."

It was not her fault that she went to college and had her room taken over by her older sister. I asked her, though, before we moved. She said, yes.

The reason we moved into her room and not my old high school bedroom was because Gavin had moved in. He had been sleeping in my parents' room for almost eight years when they gave him his own room. He kept my blue walls, my yellow *Endless Summer* poster. But added trinkets that ruined me if I stared too long. When he'd been sick as an infant, he was gifted so much. Paintings of his name, what it meant. Baby handprints pushed into white clay, then framed. A series of paintings of the adventures of Christopher Robin and Winnie the Pooh. He had about three prayer bears that played

varied lullabies of “Now I lay me down to sleep...”. I couldn’t stay in there too long in the beginning when we first moved back. But I wanted to slowly inch my way in, let the decorations of when he was a baby run through my blood, let them water me, so I could grow.

I walked downstairs, to find baby Bennett and Gavin both doing tummy time on the carpeted living room floor. The same floor where my mom performed her own kinds of exorcisms. Battling to keep her only son alive.

But the energy in the air hung differently than back then. Bennett rolled over and shook a rattle in Gavin’s face. Gavin laughed, and slowly moved his left arm to brush against Bennett’s head. Gavin, at nine, could roll over with extra focus. He could stand and tiptoe around in his walker. And he had a talking device, which barely worked and no one knew how to use but my mom, who was usually too busy, anyhow. So, most of our communication happened by us talking to Gavin. And he would respond with his eyes, his mouth, his limbs, whether they tensed or relaxed. Vocally, he could cry and coo and ahhh.

I had dreamed of these two becoming friends with each other, and the beginning stages of this friendship moved me too a different shade of tears. Joyful, grateful ones.

But the truth still lingered. Gavin’s life was limited. I didn’t know how long he would have with Bennett.

My mom believed time cycled. She said something bad had happened to her every ten years or so. In between that decade, nothing major occurred. This belief began as early as a teen for her, when her co-worker and friend Rob Piest went missing when she was 17,

he was 15. But up until now, I only kept track of her decade aversions that occurred while I was alive.

I was born in 1987, the same year her mother died. She received news of having melanoma, 1997. Gavin, born in 2007, sick in the same year, was the hardest news she'd receive. It was as if she and I were both holding our breaths for 2017. It was the year doctors had suggested Gavin would live to. At times, I thought this could be it. The year of the earthquake to shake him away. Perhaps, this was why my mother would spend most of this year gone. Her escape. To Texas, for boot camp with the US Army. Then in the fall, she'd be off to Honduras for four months. The present, a difficult place to live.

My mom believed in tracking signs over time. They reminded her of Déjà vu, like we were experiencing something we had before. Something we knew would come. Time became my obsession, infatuation.

At a wedding during that spring, my dad and I stood our turn in line for tacos. The best kind of weddings involved Coronas and a taco man. It was an outdoor wedding and the smell of cumin and lime wafted from the grill top. Everyone in my family was friendly, especially with strangers. We could talk to anyone about anything. Forever. And on this day, somehow, which I cannot remember why, we began talking with some strangers in line about the Midwest. Maybe because my dad and mom were both from that region. Maybe it was my dad to ask first. "Do you know John Wayne Gacy?"

The couple slowed their speech, turned their bodies toward my dad and me. The condensation on their beer bottles sweated off into the paper napkins lapped around the glass. "Of course," one said, as one always said.

“See my wife over there,” my dad said. “She helped the police catch him.”

And then the story would unfold. My dad would offer me to chime in too, as the secret history of my mom and the serial killer also became had become my history. Since I was little, she told me stories of how the serial killer chose her friend Rob, and how dark life became. How she would never forget.

Toward the end of the conversation with the couple, I looked to Gavin and Bennett. Gavin sat in his wheelchair, and Bennett, in his stroller. Bennett kicked his feet, which were slick and barefoot. And Gavin tried kicking his, to tap Bennett’s stroller. The sun slid in through the overcast sky and a wind whipped across the garden, where the wedding reception was being held.

“What a chilling story,” the man said.

“I cannot believe it,” the wife said. They both looked at my mother, who now had Gavin up on his feet, with her hand looped behind his waist, dancing in the grass. Danika had picked up Bennett, dancing with him, too. Watching my mother, in her pink floral dress dancing in the spring air, I, for once, wondered who my mom was. Who she really was.

## My Mother's Daughter

In between back-to-back deployments, sometime in June, I asked my mother about her diary. The diary she had kept as a secret object of her youth, one she said she wrote in, during the first dark time, when she was 17, in the year 1978.

“Do you think I can read it?” I asked. She and my dad were cleaning out shelving in the garage. The timing seemed right.

“I will have to find it,” she said. “I have not seen it in years.”

But within the hour, she had found it. Bennett was down for a nap upstairs and Gavin was eating lunch with my dad. Both of them swayed on the large blue yoga ball, as Gavin ate puréed sweet potato and grilled chicken.

I had been out of work since December and needed something to occupy my mind, my time. Gavin's birthday was approaching, the big 1-0. Reaching ten dipped me further back in my head to the past. Ten would require a reevaluation of his life. I needed a powerhouse of distraction. I felt like my mind was healing, but something about ten

changed the feeling. So, I pivoted into a whole other story: my mother. As a mother myself, I was curious about her journey into motherhood. How she handled darkness was different than me. She waded through darkness and chose not to see it, not to let it obscure her view. I chose to see it all. I hoped her diary would teach me another way to see.

The diary was covered in turquoise satin, stitched with cranes. She began the diary in the fall of 1978, a few weeks before Rob would go missing. Most of the details in the diary were normal, boring teenage thoughts. That fall, she dressed as a clown for Halloween, went to the movies, saw one movie where someone (she writes “the devil”) killed people while he babysat them. She would put an asterisk, \*, next to her boyfriend’s name, Corey, on days I assumed they kissed or engaged in some form of intimacy. She was a good student and many entries revolved around this obedience to school and sports. Studying for physics, doing well in swimming and diving, going to her job at Nisson Pharmacy, to work the cash register.

Her life changed forever, working at that store.

December 11, 1978, a snow-clad night in suburban Illinois. That evening, my mom, 17, and her co-worker, Rob Piest, 15, were working a typical night shift at Nisson Pharmacy. It was slow, normal for a Monday. Rob stocked shelves while my mom ran the cash register and developed a roll of film from the homecoming dance. My mom wasn’t prepared for the night’s chill, so she asked to borrow Rob’s favorite blue parka. He loaned it to her. And around 8 PM, when Rob’s shift was almost over, a large man trudged in and asked to speak with Rob out back about a summer job that would pay him double what he made at the pharmacy. Rob took his jacket back, went outside to speak with the man, and was never seen again.

In the pocket of Rob's parka, my mom had slid her film receipt. She had first tossed it in the trash but then had a feeling she should save it. She didn't need to. She worked there and the photos were her own. She'd developed plenty of rolls of film before and never kept one receipt. The act made little sense. But she followed the feeling anyway.

That night, Gacy drove Rob to his house to sign new-hire paperwork. But soon after stepping foot in the living room, Gacy showed Rob his infamous "rope trick," using a rope and stick to create a makeshift tourniquet around his neck. Then Gacy strangled him. The act would become one of Gacy's signature moves. Later, when bunkers of bodies would be found, the victims often still had the rope violently tugged around their necks. After Gacy yanked Rob's last breath from him, he meticulously folded Rob's clothes after undressing his limp, cold body and within the next forty-eight hours, tossed him in the Des Plaines River. He'd run out of room in his house to bury him.

Gacy had been meticulous after his murders, erasing every detail of a boy's life. But something slipped through his fingers after he prepared Rob's body.

In the days following Rob's death, his parents would makeshift their own manhunt to try and find out what happened to their son. They roamed neighboring forests with the family German Shepherds, stapling their ever-growing fractured hearts back into their bodies. Eight days later, the police were finally able to get a search warrant for Gacy's house because my mom told them he was the last person with Rob. When detectives roamed the ground floor of Gacy's house, the lead detective found my mom's receipt peeking out of a waste basket. He'd see my mom's name, Kim Byers, on it along with the address and telephone number of Nisson Pharmacy. Proving Rob was there. Gacy had denied any contact with him. The receipt would be the leading piece of evidence to

uncover the sardine stacks of bodies buried under Gacy's home, in his crawl space. And finally, it would put an end to one of the worst serial killers in American history. It would also make my mom the key witness on a national murder trial. After a fisherman found Rob's bloated wet body floating 65 miles away from home along the Des Plaines River in April 1979, she had to testify. *Yes.* That was her friend. *Yes.* Gacy was the last known person to speak with him the night he disappeared.

Instinctual thoughts led her through that chilled winter. She rode on her dreams, her hunches. The receipt's numbers, she had remembered.

On 12/18/78, an entry read, "I have a strange feeling something will happen tomorrow—call it women's intuition—because the stub I put in Rob's park pocket Monday night is number 36019." She circled the "19." She wrote down the number because she remembered it in her mind's eye. Feeling something would happen that day, and it was the day police found the receipt sticking out of the waste basket. She had predicted the receipt to be found.

I went over that portion in her diary over and over. Again and again. How could she know so much? It was like her *Déjà vu*, and that feeling of knowing something without knowing why.

I thought back to her pregnancy with Gavin. She had gone on bed rest in May. Doctors told her this was because she was high risk, being forty-five. But I thought something else was wrong. A feeling in my body. I'd have dreams of monsters, full of hair throughout their whole body, walking on two feet over charcoal mountains. I could see



the bend in their legs, the sensation of the weight of their stomp. The stomping felt like a metaphor for the pregnancy.

This intuition had roared in different, odd manners before the pregnancy feelings.

I remembered: the sunglasses, the truck, the tortoise.

One summer day after Gavin turned one, my mom, Danika, Sydney, Gavin and I went to the beach. To soak in the briny water, bury our feet in the whiskers of dried seaweed and sand. It had been our first time going summer that whole summer of 2008. And the beach seemed like the most appropriate place. We all had some affinity for the ocean. The ocean calmed me. Even Gavin had enjoyed it.

On that day, the tide swooped out and left a natural pool of water toward the beachfront. All of us laughed, splashed and found captured slick Sandcrabs in yellow pails.

As I body surfed, I had this strange thought. I knew I was going to lose my sunglasses, and I knew it was going to be on this specific wave. And I did. But I wasn't upset because I knew it was going to happen so I had a chance to prepare for it. I tried to find them, out of instinctual reaction. Nothing. I went back to where my mom and Danika were hanging out on the sand. I explained to them that I had lost my sunglasses and that it reminded me of something. The day before, two friends and I had shared lunch at Chili's to catch up. After we paid, we walked out to check out one of my friend's new blue truck. After we left, she drove out of the parking lot first, and then my other friends and I followed. As my friend in the blue truck made the right turn at the stoplight, my mind took a photographic shot of the turn, the truck. I was bewildered. The thing that bothered

me about it was that my mind only did this when it was the last time I was going to see something. The next day, my friend texted, she'd totaled her car. On that drive, away.

The first time I'd experienced this sensation was in elementary school. It was summer and my family prepared to leave on our annual vacation to the Anza-Borrego desert. As always, before loading in the car I made my rounds to all of the animals and said bye and gave them a little hug. I lingered at our 50-year-old Desert Tortoise, Jumbo. He seemed fine, but I had a feeling and my mind encrypted a clear photograph, to remember. At the time, the reasoning was unclear, as to why. But this feeling was confirmed when we returned after our weekend in paradise. We arrived home to the pet sitter standing in the garage next to an empty bag of dog food. It was crumpled at the top, and bloated, wet, at the bottom. I wondered why on earth was the pet sitter doing that? She asked my mom to be the only one to come over and the rest of us were to go in the house. I knew something was wrong.

It turned out while we were gone Jumbo had fallen in the pool. He sunk straight to the bottom, a rock to the chlorine-stained floor, and without being able to swim, he drowned. We didn't know how or why he fell in. He had survived this long with a pool in the yard. I quivered because that was the first time I realized I had this thing, this feeling that snapped a photo of the end.

But, of course, I knew a tortoise, plastic sunglasses, and a truck was not the same as a boy. A friend. Or possibly a feeling that my brother would be sick. Even if this was all true, what did it mean? Was it necessary to report, dig to find why we felt certain outcomes? Or perhaps, was it better to examine what helped?

When my brother was younger, I used to see the number 117. When he began getting sick, I was less interested in the last time I would see something, someone. More interested in if I was on the right track to see, experience life for the small split of a chance I had with my brother, the world. This came first, with the number. 117 would appear, mid-flight on houses, in phone numbers, on the clock, storefronts. Especially if I was having one of those harder days. One of those days I did not feel equipped, strong enough to live in the world, in the same world that filled so many with illness and grief. But when I would see the number, I felt oddly calm. Connected.

It became a bit of a riding obsession. Scouring online chat boards, I found others who also saw the number everywhere: in video games, films, angel numbers. I was nervous to dip into the woo woo of it all, but at the same time, what did I have to lose?

The first time I vocalized this feeling, that 117 was a good sign, not a bad one, I told my academic guidance counselor at UC Santa Barbara. Mr. Jones. He was a bubbly, effervescent, jazz-loving Black man. I could have sat in his office forever, for hours, always over-extending my visits. I liked him because he wasn't just about courses, picking the right major. He was about living. "I'm ready to do some of that," I said.

Mr. Jones was the one to encourage me to take a break after my undergraduate degree, travel the country, our own backyard. I would end up living out of a Nissan Altima the summer after I graduated, breathing it all in, hiking in Colorado, camping in Michigan, visiting Mother Goose's grave in Boston, eating beignets in New Orleans, exhaling after viewing the damage of hurricane Katrina. Mr. Jones helped me get there.

I told him about 117, the seeing it. He said, "Maybe it's a sign."

He turned his chair, flipped his trilby hat, did some typing.

“What are you looking for?” I asked, sipping a Frappuccino. I had brought him and me both one.

“Looking up bible verses, to see if it’s a message from God.”

He crumpled up a piece of paper and turned back to me. “Didn’t find much,” he said. “But I believe that is a message, a sign of protection. When you see the number, you are protected.”

I had been waiting for someone to say this to me. All along, I couldn’t shake the thought away: this number was either good or bad. Not both. Perhaps everything we chose to see could be good, maybe we just needed someone to tell us. And sometimes we need ourselves to do the telling.

Now, the number was less meaningful, or so I thought. When Bennett was late, and approaching the birthdate of 1/17/17, the numbers sucked me in, made me panic, like the whole silly number thing I had held so close when Gavin was sick bellowed backwards. Bennett, born a day before that date, still had 1/17 as his month/year combo. Instead of fearing this number, I remembered what Mr. Jones said. A strength, a blessing.

When Gavin turned ten, my mom wanted to throw a big party. A pool party with a piñata, barbeque bacon cheeseburgers, the whole shebang. His friends from school would come. He attended an elementary school with other disabled students. One of his best friends was Ally, a girl who would go around campus and tell everyone that Gavin was her boyfriend.

“I’ll make the invitations,” I said, with Bennett in my lap, still trying to breastfeed. I opened my laptop and placed a photo of Gavin wearing sunglasses, in his blue walker,

at the end of a finish line. Earlier this year, my mom, Gavin, and I walked over the blue Coronado Bridge, the one my mom mentioned wanting to drive off ten years before. We walked over that bridge, we did not drive off it. A good sign, perhaps.

The photo was at the end of the race, at the basin of the bridge. A medal looped around his neck in the photo, and he smiled with pride. A finisher. In a way it was so symbolic, of so much of his journey some people knew, but not all. He had reached ten, and I had a feeling he would continue to live.

The party was as delightful as it could have been. My dad grilled, and my mom blended him a cheeseburger with bacon. He loved it. Bennett, of course, in his own baby talk, asked to lick the spoon, too. Danika held Gavin upright as he swung at a watermelon piñata. We had vanilla cake, as Gavin stood in his walker to blow out his candle and make a wish. My mom, no longer crying, like she had ten summers before.

I waited for something to go wrong, a seizure from too much time in the sun, for Gavin to choke on something. But nothing came. The day was sweet, so so sweet. Friends of Gavin dropped by and floated in the pool with him, some with their own special lifejackets. Gavin had to wear his yellow life jacket up around his neck and lean back. It was enough to hold his forty-eight-pound body afloat. I bounced by on a noodle, holding Bennett under his arm pits. Letting the two boys float together.

The sun set, and we opened presents, and at the end of the night, we reflected on how far he had come. How far we had all come. When everyone left, it was just us, the core family. And then, there were tears, the reality still snuck in, most of us would most

likely outlive him, and so, it still seemed we would be both surfing the waves of gratitude and plunging under the thrashing of our minds, of the unknowing, forever, still.

## White Bunnies

“Do you mind watching the monitor?” I asked Sydney, who balled up in the brown recliner, watching *TLC*. She could be found here, frequently. Although this was my dad’s chair, I saw this chair as Sydney’s. The chair had been around for ten years now. My dad and mom won it at a Padres baseball game from Jerome’s, a local furniture store. They had taken Gavin to a baseball game when he was a little more than a month old. It was a hot day and his first major outing. Sometimes my mom would still blame this baseball game, being out in the heat of the day, for the start of Gavin’s illness. My dad had dreamt of a recliner in his home for his whole adult life, and now, right when his baby was about to become sick, he had one. When Sydney wasn’t in it, he could be found during midday, taking breaks from yardwork, with his feet kicked up, head pointed back, fast asleep. Sydney never slept though, this was her television and snack chair. She’d have multiple cups or plates on the side table, half-eaten bean burritos, a crinkled bag of Hot Cheetos,

Mac and Cheese, silver bowls once filled with her delicious homemade Caesar salad. I figured the monitor would not be an extra burden.

I needed some outside time, too. Some fresh air. After my mom let me look at her diary, I fell into this hole of the murders and case of John Wayne Gacy. I was engrossed by my mom's role. The case headlined every major newspaper in that winter of 1978 and 1979. In some of the books I read, I searched for her name to see if I could figure out what else this case did to her. Most of the details were scant in comparison to the feelings she wrote about in her diary. If the published books had the buns, her diary had the meat. Some stuff you wouldn't tell authorities. And what I really became moved by was Rob's story, his mother's story. How she had to survive her own son's death. It seemed unfathomable, but something my mom had become so close to touch in her own adult life. A major plot-point to be written into her own story of motherhood.

Better understanding my mom as a teenager and her role in the famous case had me realize the past would continuously find a way to seep through. And instead of running, I needed a stronger skillset to handle these feelings. I had God, yes. I prayed to God and I believed something out there had much more power than me. But sometimes, it was not enough. So, I really began looking to the natural world as a guide. Road signs. Sometimes messages dropped into our lives. That's how it felt when I brought a duck, Messenger, home a decade before. I needed something tangible to tell me I was being looked after. I was not alone.

I laced my tennis shoes, rubbed sunscreen onto my face, slid on a ball cap and walked out the front door. An airplane soared above, the eucalyptus leaves weaved, swallowtails soared. The sun was high, air light. About a minute into the walk, I heard



rustling in white oleander the bushes by the side of a house. I turned to see where the noise came from. In the brush, one white fluffy bunny bounced among twigs. It bounced out to meet me, eyes the shade of ruby red. Its whiskers brushed against my pointer finger, as I held out my palm. After making contact, it ran back into the white oleander, and then two heads emerged. Two white bunnies. “Hey little ones, are you lost?”

I rang the doorbell to the home the bunnies were near. A woman answered. “Hi there, are you missing any white rabbits?”

She looked surprised. “I’m not.”

“Do you know anyone nearby who might have lost some?”

“Not that I know of,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s just that some are loose by your house. I will bring my car back and load them up.”

I ran back home, my walk cut short. I found my mom in the backyard scooping manure from Skittles, the miniature horse.

“I found some bunnies up the street,” I told her. “Will you help me catch them?”

Loose rabbits were much harder to catch than anything else: a bird, dog, cat. They were often the most skittish. Dogs were the easiest, lost dogs who escaped their nice homes would jump in the car if we asked.

We loaded a brown cardboard box into the back of my mom’s black Mitsubishi SUV. My mom parked the car and we jumped out, calling for the bunnies. It took a few minutes of running to scoop them up. We placed them in the cardboard boxes. The reason I felt the need to save them (and not just say, continue on my walk, in peace) was because there were many coyotes in our neighborhood that burrowed in the hills behind people’s

houses. They had picked up a couple of our cats, Bella and Roxy, and some neighbors' chickens. At night, the wild dogs roamed the centers of streets. They'd howl and bark, a hunting song.

Back at the house, we made a home for the bunnies in an old cage we had in the over-sized chicken coop. The coop was the size of a single car garage, plenty of room for new friends. Before Gavin, we always had rabbits. One of the earlier memories I have of animal-saving was Penny and Snoopy, two rabbits abandoned at a park.

"I don't get why people dump animals like this," my mom said, as we gathered hay in our arms to set in the hutch.

"Maybe they were dumped after Easter," I said. "You know, two cute fluffy bunnies for Easter, now they are big, people don't want them."

She wiped her hands. "You are probably right."

It was awful, but sometimes people wanted the photo, then they were done.

Throughout the next few weeks, I passed my time by reading, holding Bennett close, attempting to keep the small bond of breastfeeding alive. The more he grew in pounds, the more formula he drank. I never got the milk like I hoped, after following lactation nurses advice of pumping endlessly. Something was wrong with my body I thought. The milk never came. And I felt shame for the whole thing. Shame, my body betrayed me. Shame I could not birth my son without so much bad pain medicine. Shame the early months were tinged with so much time in the caves of memories.

One morning Nick was off at school, and it was only Bennett and me asleep in the bedroom. Danika opened my door and whispered, “Courtney, wake up, come on!” Bennett rolled over in his Pack N Play. She waved me out of the room.

My eyelids peeled open. Since Bennett was born, I’d hardly slept through the night. The hours of 1 am-3 am were the witching hours of my mind. Although time at home had helped with the reel in my head, my body still heard phantom cries. Some real, some not. Sometimes, it was Gavin, crying from his room, and I’d walk to him, re-arrange his body. He couldn’t move his body in the night and wore braces on his arms and sometimes his legs, especially if he had just had a hip surgery. I’d fluff a pillow and put it beneath his thighs, uncross his arms, massage his tensed hands. Living at my parents, I kept my ears wide-open for two boys.

“Shhh,” I said. “Monkey is sleeping.” Monkey, the nickname I’d given Bennett when I discovered he had the energy level and joy of an adorable wild animal.

I threw the sheet off, and met her in the hallway. “What is it?”

She panted, having ran up the steps. She had on pink pajama bottoms, hand-me-downs from me that I received from our mom on Valentine’s Day years ago. She also had on an old UCSB athletics shirt, also a hand-me-down. “One of the bunnies had babies!”

“What?” I asked. “The white ones?”

“Yeah, those are the ones!” she said, the only ones we had.

“Oh my gosh,” I said, running past her. She trailed me down the stairs and stopped me at the kitchen counter. She showed me one, a wiggly purple baby, in one of the scoops we used to feed Skittles oats. “See?”

“Okay we have to go collect them, and the mom,” I said. I remembered back to a few weeks ago and did not remember one of the rabbits feeling pregnant. But they were both so large and fluffy, difficult to know.

I ran downstairs, slipped into a pair of over-sized mucking boots and ran out to the chicken coop, a large space where the bunnies also stayed. We let them roam free with the chickens instead of keeping them in the hutches. But now I worried one of the chickens could have pecked the kits dead.

White fur scattered the wet dirt. Chicken squawked, darting around the coop. Then I saw wiggles, like worms, all over the ground. Danika and I began feverishly plucking the pink babies from the ground, laying them atop of the mother’s white fur. The mom had blood on her fur and a bare, vulnerable belly. I caught her hiding behind the chicken food. Danika and I rushed the mom and newborns into the house.

Inside, we put a cardboard box inside a dog kennel, laying the kits atop straw and matted white fur. A nesting box.

“Do you think they will be okay in here?” I asked Danika. There were about ten babies in the box. All alive.

“Yeah,” she said. “They have their mom.”

But the babies were cold, so I covered them with fur. Within the first twenty-four hours, I pulled one cold body from the corner of the nesting box. It must have crawled to the corner, not plucked up by its mother to be fed. Then, another a few hours later. Within a couple days, two more were dead. I scooped one up, noticed ribs sticking out of hanging,

loose skin. Eyes peeled shut, unable to find the milk. “You need to feed them,” I told the mother bunny. But after a while it seemed like she either didn’t—or couldn’t.

Sydney and I drove her to the vet. Maybe something was wrong. The vet said, “She isn’t making enough milk.” He offered to take her to the back, load her up with a shot, to initiate lactation. I could have screamed, hearing this news. A bunny without milk. We weren’t so different.

We brought her home, and the milk still did not come. So, Sydney and I picked up kitten milk and syringes from the local pet store, to try and keep them alive. We patted bellies, fed milk to hungry mouths under heat lamps, throughout the day. Each day, another one dead. Until only three remained. Whatever trauma I had healed from regarding my own ability to not produce milk swirled in the kitten milk that spilled down my fingers, into my palm. The same shame soaked me.

I wrote a poem, some way to help reckon with the unbelievable probability.

Milk/Death

Bunnies, shrinking  
when mama bunny stops  
feeding or maybe never began.  
Each new sun, a cold pocket of purple  
life loses its breath, its way.  
The only way out is through  
but babies should stay a little longer.  
When three remain, my sister and I  
dribble kitten milk into slivered mouths,  
every two hours, rub evaporating bellies  
under hardly warm sunlamps, but

even we cannot save what we want.  
The babies fold over in our hands, gray  
to grit, a layer of me unwraps as I throttle  
back. Like her, I could not feed my baby  
like her, I have a bad body—  
a body with gifts that never unwrap.  
But for the first time, with limp bunnies  
cupped in my hands, I am no longer angry  
crazy in my shame, but grateful for  
our own powdered kitten milk, sticking  
cinnamon rolls on my son's thighs  
donut bracelets around his wrists.

A bad body. A bad body was all I could measure my internal response to the absurdity of finding a pregnant bunny unable to produce her own milk. Grateful for my own version, my Similac, for keeping my child alive. Grateful for much, but sad for cupping cold kits as they sank final breaths in my palms, under heat lamps.

After that, we separated the boy bunny, immediately, that week. The mama bunny did not interact with him, not that we knew of at least. However, so many people were in and out of the coop, collecting eggs, feeding Daisy the duck, also in there, and the chickens and bunnies. She must have gotten out, just once. Because a few weeks later, I felt her stomach, and it bulged, bloated with babies. When she gave birth, I prayed, hoped, screamed inside: have milk. Keep these babies alive. On the day they were born, I gave her slivers of apples, heaping servings of romaine, anything to give her the extra nutrients she would need. And as the days passed, the babies did not die. They did not turn purple,

fade to cold. But, they stayed warm, pink, then turned white, fluffy little babies, bouncing, hanging onto mama bunny's bosom. Drinking milk. Milk that kept them alive.

As my mom was beginning to plan and pack for her long deployment to Honduras, I noticed a shift in the house. Her orchids on the side table had branched new lime green stems, new thick buds forming. Mine joined hers, not far behind. I brought them home when we moved. The new stems were crooked, splintering the air, but they promised something new, something good on the way.

# The Hardest Question

Healing and forgiveness for my body came with the arrival of white rabbits with watchful crimson eyes. I would never have thought the path to self-forgiveness would have been found in such an odd second chance. It made me think about both of our first births, both filled with chaos. Her delivery room had been packed with a cast of characters, wild clucks of chickens, a hungry, nosy duck, a new environment. Mine, full of its own ensemble, and a doctor I did not trust. A doctor who tore me open without a forewarning, a greeting. How I wished traumatic births were more commonly spoken about. How I wished I could reverse time and hold my baby right after birth instead of shaking from the mismanagement. How I wished I could let it be.

And although, it seemed at least, I had solved my anger toward my body, questions of identity began planting themselves inside of me. I did not quite know who I was. I knew the obvious: mother, wife, sister, daughter, friend. Mostly, mother. And wife. But what else? This gnawing question of self-identity came crashing into a wall, or rather the water,



while at Universal Studios. It was a trip Nick, Bennett, and I took to celebrate Nick's birthday, which fell two days before our second wedding anniversary.

On the morning of our second wedding anniversary, Nick and I awoke to the sunrise in a bed that belonged to friends who had welcomed us into their Hollywood Hills home for the night. My mom had deployed to Honduras and would not return home until November. With her gone, I had taken over as house manager. I made sure the outdoor and indoor plants stayed watered, the animals were fed, that everyone cooked. For a while, it seemed as if only my dad and I cooked. For my sisters, Gavin, Nick, Bennett, and whoever was on duty as Gavin's nurse, usually Sommer, who helped nights, or Faviola, a family friend, who helped during the day. We'd roast bone-in chicken thighs over a palette of peas, lima beans, carrots and corn. Or sauté kielbasa on the stove top with yellow rice. In the mornings, I had grown accustomed to sharing coffee with my mom, and conversation. Without her, the house was quieter, lonelier. There were more spaces to think about who I was, who I wanted to become.

Hollywood presents its own landscape for enchantment, bright and shiny. For our first day in Hollywood, we decided to spend the whole day at Universal Studios, Hollywood. Nick had dreamed of visiting the Hogwart's castle. I had too. It was A Monday, the day after his birthday, the day before our wedding anniversary.

We spent the day at the park like kids, skipping and hopping through monumental delights. The day at Universal Studios tasted like freedom, from the froth of the Butterbeer to the wind whipping my hair on coaster rides.

Toward the end of the day, we spent the majority of our time taking turns riding the water-splashed Jurassic Park: The Ride. When the park had died down, we stayed for hours at the ride, until the park closed, as Bennett slept in the BOB stroller. While one of us floated under the prolific Brachiosaurus, past the wild Velociraptors, and beyond the knife-bladed teeth of Tyrannosaurus Rex into a tidal wave of cold water, the other watched the baby. Each time I floated past the dinosaurs and heard the Jurassic Park theme song, I looked up at the stars sprinkling a smoggy L.A. sky and realized what I'd been missing: an escape. From responsibility. From the muddled feelings I had about who I was in motherhood. In a motherhood measured by fear.

The next morning, we woke early with Bennett asleep close by. The sun sauntered through the windows, waking me around 6:30 am. It was our second wedding anniversary, our first anniversary as parents.

I rolled over closer to Nick and whispered memories from our wedding day: the rain that had collected that morning, which we chose to take as a sign of a fruitful, lasting marriage; the vows he had written on an old piece of paper he saved from the restaurant where we both worked and met; our first dance to Frank Sinatra's *How You Look Tonight*; our honeymoon trip to Costa Rica.

"Mmhmmm," he said, then turned over to look at his phone.

I rolled my eyes. And suddenly, my stomach hurt. I realized: We were not acting like the happy couple who shared our love story with anyone that would listen.

Before we were married—before we were even friends—we were coworkers who competed to outsell surf-and-turf at an overpriced hotel restaurant. One day during our

shift, I complained about my grungy, guitar-playing ex-boyfriend. Nick quickly whipped out the black book that he took guest orders on and asked me, “So what are you looking for in a man?”

I thought about it. “Tall, dirty blonde hair, blue eyes. Comes from a good family. And you know, someone funny. Like Adam Sandler.”

I paused, thinking about whether my answers came across as shallow and off-putting, since Nick had dark brown hair and warm brown eyes. Right after I said Adam Sandler, he closed his book and walked away. Then he turned around and silently mouthed, *I can be your Adam Sandler.*

The baby stirred in the Pack N Play. I waited for Nick to get him. I’d spent the last six months attending to Bennett. With Nick in school, I felt like I did more of the labor involved with caring for our son. Nick, meanwhile, continued to straddle between two worlds: by day, he took graduate school classes, and by night, he played with the baby. I was jealous. So much time at home left me lonely, and, if I’m being totally honest, resentful. I wanted access to my old world, too—and out of the fog of something that felt like Postpartum PTSD. But I didn’t have the guts to share my feelings of fear or confusion with anyone—including Nick. Instead, I waited for him to see through my facade.

Nick didn’t pick up the baby, continuing to play on his phone. I wondered whether we could give our son the gift of happily married parents. I knew we had the potential. Both of our parents remained married (mine, even through the crisis of illness) and Nick and I steadfastly promised to remain committed until the end. Six months into parenthood, I wondered if we had already reached that point. I wondered, too, why no

one ever spoke about the white-water thrashing a marriage takes when a baby enters a house. The “What to Expect” garbage is so surface-level, artificial. What I wished I had known was: motherhood touched everything. Marriage was no exception.

I inhaled my frustration and morphed it into a high-pitched “Good morning!” as I scooped the baby up to feed him.

Before heading back to my parents’ house in San Diego, Nick got out of bed and began packing our things into a Batman suitcase, a prize I won on the game show “Let’s Make a Deal,” which I went on in hopes of scoring a grand cash reward.

“Aren’t you going to talk about our wedding day?” I asked.

He looked disappointed. Like I had done something wrong.

“Stop trying to control everything,” he said. “I don’t think I can do this forever.”

“Do what forever?”

“This.”

“So, you want a divorce?”

“If this is how the rest of our life is going to be.”

“Well, I’ll divorce you first.”

I bit my lip and cringed, like I’d just swallowed poison by speaking the D word aloud. We had vowed plenty of times to never to joke or argue using the D word...and yet, here we were. The truth was: I didn’t want a divorce. I just wanted to spend time with Nick—alone. As part of my rebuilding, I wanted to start with him.

We loved Bennett fiercely, but it was clear parenthood had changed us. We’d morphed from two cute, fluffy black caterpillars to flapping, unwieldy butterflies—or, rather, wild killer moths. With unruly hormones and months without sleep, I had become

a wild *something*. Nick and I had only left the house together twice since the baby was born, and both times were at night when the baby was asleep. The idea of “dating” even after you’re married sounds nice, but for us, was mostly improbable.

I missed the version of us who dated. I longed for the sunset bike rides, the picnics in the park, the impromptu trips to Denny’s at 2 a.m. for the Grand Slam breakfast. I missed sleeping in late with no one to care for but ourselves. I missed the happy hour Pale Ales, the daylong waterfall hikes, and the Adam Sandler jokes.

We both used to make each other laugh. In the past, people at work called us the Two-Headed Monster. We finished each other’s sentences. No one believed we actually enjoyed spending 24/7 with each other. But we did.

Despite our D-word argument, I shared a photo from our wedding day on Facebook that morning. In it, the two of us looked out onto the San Diego skyline, surrounded by water. I captioned the picture with, “Looking forward to year 3,” with the engagement ring emoji next to it.

I wondered why I couldn’t just write: *My husband and I are driving each other nuts. I need to go back to work but don’t want to. I mean, I do, but I don’t want to miss anything with the baby. Nick’s grad school is hard. We just moved back in with my parents because we don’t have an income besides Nick’s school loans. We are on food stamps. We hope next year will be better—but who knows, right? Happy second anniversary. Let’s try and make it to year three.*

I think of the idea of marriage like a pristinely packaged product being sold on TV. Thanks to an advertising team, marriage is touted as something larger than life, as something that

offers the illusion of perfection. It's presented just as burgers are with sauce sexily dropping down a beautiful person's face. But when you go to the burger joint, you realize the lettuce is wilted and slimy green—so off-putting you wonder if it is lettuce at all. The smoking chargrilled burger is lukewarm, and the sauce is scant.

When I shared this realization with Nick, he responded with exasperation as he loaded some bags in his arms to take to the car. "You paint these things in your head, about how things are and how you want them to be."

"Don't we all?" I asked.

"I don't know," Nick said. "Your parents don't act like this."

"They've been married for 32 years," I said. I picked up the baby bottles to bring them to the kitchen to wash. Nick remained quiet. But I think we were both wondering how couples can survive a lifetime of this.

During the four-hour car ride home to San Diego, we remained silent.

When the three of us arrived home, my family asked what our anniversary plans were. When we said we didn't have any, Sydney encouraged us to try the Tuesday dinner special at the restaurant on the beach where she worked. It took some convincing since it had already been an awkward morning, but we decided it would, of course, be good for us. Leaving the baby with her and my dad, we set out to enjoy an anniversary meal by the water, one of our favorite places.

With a view of the pier and surfers catching offshore waves, we enjoyed a \$39.95 "Couple's Night Out" special, which included a bottle of wine, salad, and three appetizers. It was a deal we could hardly afford, but one we couldn't pass on. As Nick and I looked out into

the ocean, we were mesmerized by its blue hue. I once heard that the salt from the ocean can cure anything; just by looking at it, I felt the salty breeze settle on my skin.

At dinner, Nick gave me a gift: a white Brachiosaurus succulent pot. He knew the dinosaur was my favorite part of the Jurassic Park ride.

I traced my finger over the ceramic dinosaur's long neck. It felt like a symbol of my new-mom status—someone who pokes their head into everything because they're not sure where they belong in the world.

But then, I put my hand over my mouth, unable to stop laughing. It really was the perfect gift. And also, perhaps, felt like a sign: bend more. Be as flexible as this leaf-eating dinosaur. I thought back to the first summer Nick and I were together, when I'd moved away for graduate school and he'd drive up on the weekends. During one visit, he brought a handwritten card with quotes about change—and a mixtape CD full of songs with the word "change" in it. It was ridiculous—and perfect, just like the dinosaur succulent.

"I'm sorry about our fight this morning," I said. I told him he wasn't doing anything wrong, and that our baby was so loveable. How lucky I felt to have both of them.

"I'm sorry, too," he said. "I need to do better in those situations."

I placed my hand on his knee and told him it was okay. We were both getting a hang of this parenting thing, and I realized: we were doing the best that we could. I handed him his gift: a cooler disguised as a backpack. "Perfect for future picnics," I said.

Nick leaned in to kiss me as the sun began to settle over the Pacific Ocean. "I love you," he said.

"Love you more."

After the dessert, a chocolate flourless cake with ganache and fresh strawberries, dropped in front of us. I opened up to Nick. Maybe it was the sea breeze or the wine or the succulent pot, but something about it all felt right.

I scooped a delicate bite of chocolate, sweet bitter. “I need some help,” I said.

Then I went into details about how I needed more from him, with Bennett. And that I felt lost, unaware of my next move. Setting the spoon down on the plate I said, “I feel stuck.” I felt like a failure having to move home at age twenty-nine.

“Why don’t you go back to work?” he said.

“Where?” I asked. The waiter cleared out plates. The sun spit green, a flash across the horizon.

“Anywhere,” he said. “You can ask your dad, too.” He was referring to jobs in education.

“I cannot go back to a restaurant,” I said.

“You will find something,” Nick said, “You always do.”

He was right. In me, deep down, there was a fire. The fire felt almost burnt out, like it had been rained on for the past six months, but now, I began drying it, flicking my match close. I needed to glow, again. Before we took our last sip of wine and left the restaurant, I also shared the deeper problem, about how I had been reliving the past alone, on repeat in my mind. A fear so strong, it often took over. He understood. And I left feeling relief.

The next day, I emailed local universities inquiring about if they needed any adjunct instructors for English or Composition. I received an interview at a local Christian university, Point Loma Nazarene, and when they offered me one section of Composition, I took it without hesitation. The pay was terribly low. But it was something. I would start



in August. And while I waited, I decided to also work toward my teaching credential online, something I could do during Bennett's afternoon naps. My dad connected me with someone I could shadow to do my student teaching, in a college prep junior English class. And I would start substitute teaching, too. Soon, once August and September entered, it seemed as if I had figured it out. The biggest blessing was that an in-home daycare three doors down from my parents' house. The mother and daughter running it, Brenda and Graciela, had an opening, and I took the spot.

Bennett would start daycare on my thirtieth birthday. He was almost eight months old. When I dropped him off, I cried, mostly because he was so easy to drop off, curious about his own next adventure.

I thought about how I could work toward something meaningful, reteach myself strength, in a physical, spiritual, and mental capacity. I decided to sign up for a half marathon when I had never run over three miles. And I applied to a single Ph.D., program that sounded like a good fit. It wasn't like I had a ton of money to cast a wide net anyhow. Instead of focusing on the destabilized present, I threw my line out for the future. I wanted to be a strong role model for my son, like my mom had been for me.

The weeks leading up to starting my next chapter as a working mother, stepping out of the residue of those early months, came with its cast of obstacles. First, there was ecstasy in checking on those baby bunnies and witnessing their eyes open, watch them take their first bites of Romaine and dribble water on their chins and whiskers. They began hopping, and I thought, dear God, those are some of the cutest little things I have seen in a long time. During the last part of summer, I was in the middle of arguing with someone about

something, probably chores around the house, and I abruptly stood up and snagged my pinky toe on Bennett's bouncer.

"Shit!" I yelled.

It turned sideways, made a right turn off my right foot. Drool drooped from my mouth, and I fell to the ground. I guess I was going to have to postpone my half marathon.

In the Emergency room, the doctor shot pain medicine into my foot and said, "This is going to hurt!" then cracked my toe back into place. It had broken in half. I began that first day of teaching in a boot and on crutches.

When I drove away from the in-home daycare, entering my third decade, I cried not only because I would miss him, but because I was a bad ass who, regardless of crutches and the ugly blue boot, was moving forward. Doing something for me, regardless of the obstacles.

What I wished I'd known entering parenthood is that when a baby is born, a parent is also born. Like my parents who were born again as parents when Gavin was ill. Nick and I were operating on a different plane, but still one of great change. After our fight about divorce that one day, rather than simmering over our resentments and letting the daily stress build up, Nick and I decided we'd talk more. And he's shown up more, too, whether that's offering to bathe Bennett or putting him to bed or washing the bottles. Sometimes a hard conversation is what saves us from dipping back down, into the undercurrent.

## A Past Has Many Faces

While my mom was stationed in Honduras, my dad, Faviola, and Gavin took a trip to visit. Faviola, who has been helping Gavin since he left hospice care, was from Honduras. She had family there. She wanted to take Gavin and my parents to swim with the dolphins and show them around different cities. Gavin would love her country, she said, especially swimming with the dolphins. I was happy that Gavin was getting a vacation; albeit a far-off one. We worried that on the plane, he would have a seizure. Change of air pressure, no available microwaves to preheat blended food, no quiet room to sleep in.

But after a layover in Atlanta from San Diego, they arrived. Safely. And my mom was so happy to greet them, even if it was not the best of living situations for someone like Gavin. Here, there was no running water. She had to leave her bedroom and walk to a bathroom, and keep a jug of filtered water in her unit. But seeing her son, her husband, and Faviola brought her joy. Her time in Honduras had been somewhat traumatic. A plane had crashed near her office, and she ran out to try and save the people on the plane.

All but one person survived, which shook her. She was good at pushing away the trauma though, seeing the warmth of the people she loved, instead.

Within the first twenty-four hours though, the warm feeling shifted when Gavin had a grand mal seizure. He was pale and limp as a wet rag. My dad called me over FaceTime the next day, in fear. “He wouldn’t sleep on the plane,” he said. “He was too excited. And he barely ate for me. I had a feeling it was coming.” He wiped his nose. He showed the phone to Gavin, who smiled back at me and Bennett who sat on my lap. “Feel better, Uncle Bubba,” we said.

“He will,” my dad said. “Just have to rest for now.”

Gavin regained his strength in the quiet hum of the hotel’s A.C. unit. When he felt better, the four of them went to an island to swim with the dolphins. They texted a photo to the family, of my mom holding Gavin under his arm pits, with a dolphin kissing his cheek. Then another photo slid in, an image of my strong dad throwing Gavin in the air, his four-foot body of lanky limbs soaring against the backdrop of the southern hemisphere’s sunset. A blend of orange and pink oil on Canvas.

My mom returned from deployment in November. My foot had finally healed, and the bunnies were almost grown. We could not give them away fast enough. We were able to find homes for all of them except one, which we kept. When my mom returned home and saw the baby, she drove the male rabbit to get fixed. She did not want them to have anymore.

But one morning in early December, my mom woke me from my room, like Danika had in the peak of summer with the first litter. She said she found babies, scattered all over the coop. I jumped out of bed, Bennett still asleep. A third litter?

I met her in the backyard, and she said, “But the mama bunny didn’t make it.” She pointed out a dead white rabbit, in the corner of the coop, a dead baby hanging half inside of her, half outside. Blood abounded.

I put my hands over my mouth, horrified. “Oh my God,” I said.

Then I looked to the babies, dispersed, about four of them in total. “We have to try and keep the babies alive,” I said, re-traumatized from the hand feeding (and failing) I had undergone this summer.

My mom and I took turns throughout the days and nights to hand-feed the babies kitten milk. We tried to drop them off at local pet stores and shelters, but they would not take them. I did not want to be the one stuck with them, dying in my hands. But, each day, another one would die. One time, one died in my mom’s hands. Aspirated. It inhaled the warm kitten milk, choked for air. “I cannot do this anymore,” she said. She walked away and the rest died alone with me.

My mom had those skills. To walk away, compartmentalize, like she could do on deployment. Walking away wasn’t always a good thing. For example, with the rabbits, I felt like she was walking away from something helpless to protect herself. Where I was willing to be hurt again by trying to help tiny baby bunnies. It seemed, at times, I wanted to drink it all. Like pain and suffering were my morning tea leaves, something to read and analyze. I needed those skills of compartmentalization, especially now. I needed to be

okay with walking away, even if it was only in my mind. And I figured out the time to ask her. Rare stretched-out time of just her and me.

During the week before Christmas, my mom, sisters, Bennett and I flew to Chicago to visit my grandparents, her father and stepmother. Grandpa Buddy and Grandma Barbara lived on the outskirts of Chicago in a suburb called Deerfield. My mom had grown up close by, in Des Plaines, in an apartment complex that shared a single circuit phone. She had memories of walking a mile, each way, to school in the snow. And of stealing candy bars at a nearby gas station. Her youth made her, gave her the rough exterior to her delicate, kind interior. And the peak of that hardening came from when she was seventeen.

She knew I had been reading the books while she deployed, *Killer Clown* by lead detective Terry Sullivan and *Defending a Monster* by Gacy's attorney, Sam Amirante. I wanted to stand in and witness the locations that would transform her, and this was the time to do it. On our final morning of the trip, I asked her to come with me to the crime scene from almost forty years ago. I wanted to better understand my mother, with, perhaps, a hope to better understand myself.

The car flew down the highway. She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. In constant movement. For the thirty years I'd known her, she'd always been beautiful, confident, but rarely scared. She was usually chatty, but now she was quiet. Her breath, stagnant.

My gaze locked with the horizon of the Midwest, blanketed in gray. Gray strip malls. Gray sky. Gray highways. Illinois in the summer was resilient and green, but today

the state felt stark and distant. Perhaps, though, I was projecting. Death often felt gray. Unearthing of the past, even grayer.

When we pulled into Gacy's old neighborhood, my chest expanded, deflated. Up and down. We parked on North Pioneer Avenue, the street perpendicular to West Summerdale Avenue, Gacy's old street. We shut the car doors. Quietly. And walked to the middle of Summerdale. 8213 was the original address, where Gacy committed his crimes, but the town demolished the house and gave it a new number: 8215. Their attempt to cleanse the lot from its homicidal past. As if you could erase 33 boys so easily.

All of a sudden, the rumble of a car approached. I waved when I saw who it was, a mailman. He pulled over and smiled softly, in a way that felt warm. Safe.

"We're looking for where John Wayne Gacy's house once was. Is it this it?" I pointed to the house next door decorated with light up snowmen and Christmas lights.

I looked to my mom to see if she'd become mad I asked. She had told me not to speak with anyone, but I could not help myself. She nervously crawled her fingers across her face, scouring for hairs to pick. When she did this, I usually told her to stop or pulled her hand away, but today—I didn't.

"It's that one, over there, actually." He pointed to the brown mini mansion.

"Good luck," the mailman said, then waved goodbye and continued his route. The street was cold and dead again. We started to walk, and the only sound was the shuffle of my unfashionable (and un-protective) gray Ugg boots schlepping toward the right house.

"Something doesn't feel right," my mom whispered, standing close behind me.

I feel it too. The energy of this space.

There were no obvious signs of the boys at the house. I thought there might be a plaque or some sort of remembrance of the 33 boys, but nothing existed.

From what I could see: people lived here. It appeared evident by the closed blinds; a *Beware of the Dog* sign in the front window; an old Ford Probe parked in the driveway; a single tree, shooting up from the front lawn like a witch's hand. A tree that somehow grew in the same soil where the boys' bodies decomposed.

I moved closer. I imagined all the boys, whispered their names, that had crossed onto this land and never got to leave. I wondered what happened to their souls.

There was a pulsating, out-of-world energy wrapping around me. Suffocating, but also freeing. I took a few photos then turned around to look for my mom's expression, to see if she felt the same thing I felt. But it was clear she feels something else. Something dangerous.

"We shouldn't be here. It's too creepy," she spoke, quietly, backing away.

I wanted a ticket inside her mind, to watch her film reel spin images from the past. The past she lived in, and the past I imagined. She dashed toward the rental car and breathed heavily in the driver's seat. The engine roared. She said *get in the car*, in a tone that warned. Like a tornado was coming, swiftly, treacherously, and I was hanging back for too long to try and catch the drumming funnel.

I pulled open the passenger door, and I took a seat, clicked in my seatbelt, and turned on the seat heaters to defrost my body. The rental car smelled like a new can of tennis balls. The smell helped snap me back from my trance. My mom's foot dropped on the gas, escaping the whirlwind of energy, until we were out of the neighborhood. Being here opened something in her. A door she'd closed for almost forty years. There was so



much I wanted to ask. But it seemed like she was processing something herself. Instead of poking her with my million questions, I asked if we could stop by Nisson Pharmacy—her old place of work.

Nisson Pharmacy no longer existed. We walked into a liquor store, in a location my mom thought the pharmacy once was. A bell rang when we entered, and two women spoke Russian behind the counter. I walked through the short aisles and brushed my hands across the shelves with rum and tequila, wondering if Rob did his restocking here.

“Do you think this is it?” I asked my mom.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It was so long ago.”

We spoke with the two women and asked if they remembered Nisson Pharmacy. But they had never heard of it. We exited and walked through the mini-strip mall, pausing at a business double the size of the last. And my mom saw it, or rather felt it, in the double door glass entry. The same doors she’d walk out toward the rest of her life. It was Angel Town.

Angel Town was the private children’s school that replaced Nisson Pharmacy. The sign, painted in chunky large pale letters. *Angel* Town. We were safe here.

She walked to the front entrance, and nostalgically put her face to the glass. When she did this, she was no longer an Army doctor mom, a new grandmother. She was seventeen again, behind the cash register. Long dirty blonde hair, a gymnast, swimmer, and high school junior whose largest concern was acing her physics test. Then, she was crumpling the film receipt, shooting it in the waste basket, pausing to pick it up and place it in Rob’s parka pocket.

I pictured my mom that night, unable to fall asleep. Being questioned at school the next day. I pictured her, later, at the witness stand. It was one of the first pivotal moments in her life. The first of many.

On the drive back to my grandpa's, my mom brought up Gacy's old lot, and we agreed no one should live there. No matter how cheap or cleansed (which it was not) the land was. The town could make their dime somewhere else. All those boys deserved to be remembered. Not forgotten. My mom and I decided—if we could buy the house, we'd make it the memorial it ought to be. We'd have plaques for every boy. Their stories. Their photos.

As the car paralleled the Des Plaines River, I asked my mom, "Do you know where Rob is buried?" She did. She went to his funeral, where Mr. and Mrs. Piest gave her a plaque she kept in the rafters in our garage, for helping them put an end to their son's killer.

"He's in a drawer," she said. "In a mausoleum." She pointed out the window in a general northwestern direction. I thought about why Mrs. Piest chose for Rob's body to be stored above ground. Her son had been dead, floating in a thrusting winter river for four months. Gummy and ballooned and wet. I assumed she chose for him to be in a drawer because he'd be preserved. Nothing more could be taken from him. Elements could touch him. He'd never be wet again.

My mom let herself think about Rob. Her voice cracked, trembled. "He was just a *kid*."

My chest twisted. *He was just a kid.* We grew up thinking we'd get this regular, normal life. We'd make it into adulthood, have children, grandchildren if we were lucky, then die. We were not raised to think we were supposed to outlive our children, grandchildren, younger siblings. It went against the rules of the world but happened anyway. Somewhere along the way, the narrative broke. Gavin ingrained this understanding in me, and Rob's death had, too.

To not break, my mom viewed life as one long hallway. There were doors like Gacy's, like Rob's, like early days of her son's illness, battles with the Monster, that you just left shut. I, apparently, had not registered this lesson. All my doors seemed to continuously swing open. So, I sifted through objects in the room until my hands were blistered and painted with dirt. I dug until I thought I'd find the clue, the missing piece that would allow me to shut the doors for good.

She took a sip of her cappuccino and became distracted by the faded yellow arches we passed. It was the first McDonald's. And it was a museum now. She used to go here as a Brownie Girl Scout. There was an original sign up, promoting 15 cent burgers. We loved those burgers. My dad used to get them on Wednesdays when I was a kid, bringing them home, after spending a quarter on each one, the weekly special. He'd slice them into quarters, then leave them out on a cutting board for us to eat. My family had a name for this type of convenient distraction: squirrelling.

I told her she was squirrelling, making me squirrel too, and we both laughed.

But her Siri with a British accent interrupted by telling us to turn right, and pass over the Des Plaines River. She looked at the river as if looking into her own past. "And

why do people dump bodies in the river? To wash it away. Send it away. As if it didn't happen.”

I placed my hand on hers, looked out the window into the dark murky water. In a few minutes, we would be back at my grandpa's house. Bennett would be turning over in his sleep in the crib upstairs. My sisters would be having coffee and playing gin rummy with my grandpa and grandma at the kitchen table. There would be a plane to catch. Lives to live. Even though I wanted to sit in this moment, stretch it out with my mom, we had to end our time travel. During the trip, I saw that the past still lived in my mother's body. Just like the past still lived in my own. This fact made me feel comforted in a sense that I wasn't alone. I wasn't mad at the memories my mind and body had chosen to store.

# Christmas Miracle

So much hope lived in a Christmas tree. It carried faith in its branches. Love that glowed from those who stood close. Light, extended to strangers on the street. Christmas reminded me of the miracle of life. It was the story of loving a baby. My mom and I stood around the Douglas Fir, stringing lights. Today could have been an exact parallel, ten years before. I remembered back, to that time, a hundred lives ago.

On that glum Christmas Eve, we'd followed tradition: *Silent Night* played out of my dad's stereo, we'd put out sugar cookies and milk on a special porcelain plate and mug we used once a year. We'd left carrots for the reindeer, as they would be hungry too, after their long journey of dropping off gifts to children, who were fast asleep in their beds. Before we'd went to bed that night, Sydney had taken it upon herself to write Santa that letter. I'd remembered the feeling of that letter in my hand, written on a white piece of printer paper.

That Christmas morning tainted my view on the magic of the holiday because it's when I began to crack like a nutcracker snapped a chestnut. Although we tried to make

Gavin's first Christmas special, the other memories remained: my sisters panicking; my mom throwing up from a killer migraine, her heaves still haunting; my dad hiding in the kitchen, sweeping away tears when he thought no one was looking. And me, in terror of it all.

The spirit of Christmas was the celebration of a life—for a single boy. Jesus Christ. Born on Christmas day, Jesus was Mary's boy. A boy that would die too soon, come back, and be the world's gift. I wondered if Mary felt this way though, as it was all going down. Like losing her son was a *gift*. Because, from what I knew for sure: the pain we faced never seemed meaningful in any realm while it was happening. It seemed heavy and impossible and unfair.

I was afraid that when the angel of death came tapping on my brother's door, I wouldn't be able to forgive God or whoever for taking him. For not giving him legs capable to run. For not giving him the voice to yell, *help*. For never giving him a fighting chance. When we were told Gavin was going to live, I clung to a miracle: one day—he'd walk and talk and eat on his own. He'd be able to protect himself. But if I was honest, my belief that he would be miraculously healed had withered. It held on by shards, strings. The bible promised miracles performed by Jesus Chris: giving sight to the blind, lifting incurable diseases from the ill. But I'd been praying for ten years. When do you crumple your prayers, write new ones, move on?

What I hoped for myself: if my brother died, I would not drown in regrets. If I drowned, it would be in a reflecting pool of missing him. Of loving him. I would miss Gavin through every season. Every holiday. Every *day*. I'd miss the feeling, that—with

him—the world was a little more like ours. And feared how vastly empty it would feel if he left.

I unboxed the four silver cradles, hanging mine first. Then, I searched for Gavin’s silver cradle, which had begun oxidizing. He could not hang it up, but I was happy to hang it on a rich pine branch for him. My eyes pulsed as I slipped the ornament over the pine needles. “What’s wrong?” my mom asked.

“I remember this cradle,” I said. “And the year Gavin received it.”

“Who would have thought?” she asked. “Ten years.”

“I know,” I said. I took a seat on the couch, and she continued hanging porcelain balls, hand-painted from when us girls were children.

“It’s been a lot, this whole year,” I said.

She took a seat next to me. I began with the superficial, the items that hung on the tip of my tongue, accessible by language. “You being gone for so long, my foot.”

“You are tough,” she said.

“But also, I realized this year, that Gavin being sick, so young, really affected me. When Bennett was born, I was so afraid of him also being sick. It was like I was reliving the past, waiting for Bennett to be sick when he turned six weeks old, like when Gavin became ill.” She wiped her eyes, and had started crying.

“That time affected us all. I felt like a horrible mom forever. Like I did not give Sydney enough attention. Did not pay attention to Danika’s schooling. And you, having to be home and witness it all. The fights with your dad.”

“It was a lot. And we never talk about it. We never talk about how the past enters in, mixes up with the present,” I said, relieved to get the truth out.

We both had our Keurig coffee on the coffee table, amidst boxes of ornaments, and took sips at the same time.

“It’s a hard time to talk about.”

I nodded my head, joked, “Yeah, you think?”

“I didn’t think about it affecting your own mothering, but it makes sense.”

“So much of the past just played with me this past year or so.” I inhaled, feeling a bit lighter. “You said life is like a hallway, you just leave some doors shut. What if you open them?”

“It’s hard,” she said. “I have pushed so much away. As a survival mechanism.”

I nodded. “We are different in that way. I cannot stop opening the doors.”

“You have always been that way. Inquisitive, deep, curious,” she said. “It’s who you are.”

I said, “For me, I think there is power in talking about everything. It’s like its own form of healing or handling it all.”

“Of course,” she said. “We could all use a little therapy.” She laughed. “I find my therapy in nature, in my spiritual existence.” She paused. “Oh, and exercise.”

I laughed. “I know, I have not exercised in forever. I think that would help me, too.”

“You always need something to work toward,” she said. “Motherhood has taught me that. I sacrificed myself for so long when Gavin was sick. I realized I could not do that anymore, for anyone.”



The coffee empty, she suggested going for a walk through the neighborhood. We laced up our tennis shoes and walked and continued talking. I told her how I was in such a dark place and being here had helped heal me. I was ashamed to come home, but now, I was grateful.

Upstairs, after the walk, I folded clothes while eleven-month-old Bennett “helped” me nearby. And by help, I meant throwing neatly folded piles across the bed. One outfit included a onesie with “Baby’s First Christmas” etched into it.

I placed the Christmas onesie back in the drawer, for Bennett to wear tomorrow, for two boys to experience the magic and mystery of Christmas morning. On my way out of the room, I locked eyes with a poster of Gavin on the wall. It was him as a baby, from his benefit, when he was in hospice care. Sydney had hung it up on her purple wall behind the door as a souvenir of sorts from Gavin’s benefit. It was the photo people saw as they entered that night, the night he was baptized. Bennett brushed his hand over the face in the picture and babbled, “hooo.”

Gavin still had those same innocent fighting eyes.

My mind went to the dark place. I granted myself a moment, then I’d pull away.

If I did outlive Gavin, what would be left of him? All we would have left of him would be an embalmed body in a grave, bones. Bones were all that was left after the body shut down, after the flesh buckled and folded. But bones, even in their morbidness, still carried stories about the bodies they supported. In Gavin’s bones, we’d know it was him by the titanium rods in his hips, from his double hip surgery. We’d see him in the inward curvature of his

handsome hands. In his legs, as long as rivers. His bones would represent what was left of him, but they wouldn't be *him*.

I bit the inside of my lip. Desperate to fight back against the image of visiting my brother's gravesite. Kneeling by his tomb. Kissing the hot concrete of a headstone. I'd be buried by the heavy feelings of wanting to stop time. And rewind the yarn of life back, to hold him once again.

Bennett's legs kicked me, snapping me out the image of a gravesite. I walked down the hallway, Bennett stuck to my hip, and down the stairs, to where Gavin sat in his white egg-shaped lounge chair. I kissed him on the cheek. "Gavin! Are you excited about Christmas?" I sat Bennett next to him, and he pushed cars on the floor next to his Uncle Bubba. Just the feeling of being in Gavin's presence stripped me of my uncertainty. And I was reminded of how powerful he is.

Even if he died, he would never be forever gone. Not totally. He'd be his soul.

Although light, the soul had weight. Scientists had proven it. In studies, bodies were weighed immediately before and after death, and reports said the bodies always weighed less—21 grams less, the weight of 21 raisins. Which I hung onto, in case I did outlive Gavin. Even after his bones dissolved into the ground, he'd still be around. In the energy of the world. Energy morphed and fluxed, it exchanged and shapeshifted, but it remained fluid. It stayed the weight of 21 raisins; it never disappeared.

"Ready to go see Santa?" I asked the boys. Gavin would get the honor of introducing Bennett to the jolly man in the red suit. Gavin smiled. He had those same innocent eyes, but now they appeared stronger.

At the mall, I purchased a photo of both boys smiling while sitting with Santa.

On Christmas morning, the house was quiet. Bennett snuggled into me on the couch with his “baba” and his Uncle Bubba sat close to him, propped up by pillows and blankets. My dad joined me us, wishing us a merry Christmas.

“Merry Christmas,” I said. “Can I make you a hot chocolate with a splash of coffee?”

“Sure,” he smiled, then went to kiss both boys on the forehead. He sat down next to them and I got up to make coffee. It was Bennett’s first Christmas, Gavin’s tenth.

The reason the downstairs was so oddly quiet was because most people were all of a sudden sick. The heaves came, from my mom in the downstairs bathroom. Echoing. Like they had a decade before. Overnight, the house had been hit with the flu. My mom, sisters, Nick all had it, bed-bound most of the morning. It was just me, my dad and the boys.

On the couch, I pulled both boys close into me, one on each side, as I helped them open their stockings. Soon, the sick members of the family rolled in, wrapped in blankets. We enjoyed the Christmas, albeit not a perfect one, through the magic of two boys’ eyes.

# Blooming

Sometime early in the new year, I thought we had lost Gavin. It was a rare afternoon of just Faviola, Gavin, and me. Bennett was at daycare, my parents at work, Sydney and Danika at school. I was home, in between subbing at a high school and teaching at the university. I put together an arugula salad at the countertop when I heard shrieking.

“Help! Help!” Faviola screamed.

She began screaming in Spanish and English. She ran from the TV room to where I was. “He’s not breathing!” she said. Gavin, short surfboard-length, was on the cool Spanish tiles with his eyes closed. His skin had gone egg white. Purple circles encompassed his eyes. Faviola smacked his chest, over and over, turning him sideways. He had residue on his mouth, purple and brown coloring. His snack. Each day, he ate a blended snack of cookies and warm ice cream.

“He’s choking!” she said. “Come on Gavin,” she uttered over and over.

“Gavin, no!” I screamed. “Gavin, breathe!” I ran to the phone

For the first time in my brother's life, I dialed 9-1-1, the number of doom. "Hi, my brother," I stuttered. "He isn't breathing."

"Ma'am," the operator said, "Where are you located at?"

I began telling her our address, then all of a sudden, I heard a cry, a choke for air. Faviola had helped get him to breathe. She had dug her finger down his throat and scooped something out. Whatever she did worked and he cried only briefly, then started to laugh.

I swiftly inhaled and told the operator, "Never mind, I think, I think he is okay. He is breathing again." I let the home phone dangle as I ran over to hug him. "Gavin, are you okay?" I asked. He stuck out his tongue and smiled at me. "You scared me."

I asked Faviola if she was okay. "I was so scared," she said. "So scared. I think he choked on a piece of cookie. It must have not blended all the way."

Gavin sat there, smiling and giggling, and we began laughing too.

"Wow, if that was the end, Gavin, after everything you've fought through." I wiped my face, half in shock, half nervously chattering. "Me, you, Faviola...and a cookie?!"

After my brother had his close encounter, my family gathered to decompress for the night. We sat on the burnt orange couches by the window. By the table of orchids. It was spring, and the blue orchid that took a home on the side table with my mother's pots had rebloomed. It was not blue anymore, but white. The stem curved awkwardly toward the light. The rest on the table made a makeshift garden of color and hope.

Together, we ate carne asada fries, scooped dollops of refried beans and rice on our plates, and clinked Coronas. A rare night all eight of us were together. And we all had good news.

“I got into the Ph.D. program,” I said. “And received full funding.”

“I’m retiring this year!” my dad said. “So, I get to spend more time with Bubba and Bennett.”

“I’m extending my time with the Army,” my mom said. “So, I can afford to build Gavin a first story bedroom.”

“I’m taking an adventure, and studying in Norway,” Sydney said. “Our family’s Viking history!”

“I’m going to dental school,” Danika announced. “And I’m going to join the Army, too, to help with the tuition.”

“I’m graduating!” Nick laughed. “I’ll be a doctor of Physical Therapy. Thanks to Bubba who inspired me way back when,” Nick said to Gavin who sat next to him.

“And Bubba?” my dad asked. “Bubba, you are going into sixth grade this year! And you will graduate then go onto 7<sup>th</sup> grade at the middle school, big boy.” Gavin smiled his big signature smile, a little drool spilled from his mouth and my dad wiped it with a towel.

“And Bennett?” I said. We laughed. “He’s busy enjoying his life.”

“Well, cheers,” my dad said, holding out his tall bottle of Corona. “Cheers to trying your best, everyone. Many new adventures on the horizon.”

A unanimous cheer and the clinking sound of bottles echoed throughout the first floor of the house. For once, we all had something to celebrate. That summer, Nick,

Bennett and I packed an eighteen-wheel U-Haul and moved out east to the country's center, Oklahoma, for another education.

Time passed quickly, and during my first summer semester of my Ph.D. program I found myself in Taos, New Mexico. I was there to write and to study the culture and beauty of the art, people, and landscape of this place. It was a difficult choice to make, to go on the trip because back at the house, Bennett who was now two years old was battling a 104-degree fever. We took him in to the urgent care where he was tested for every virus, and no one knew why he was so sick. His temperature circled me back to images of Gavin, when he was sick. They whirled at the doorway, waiting for me to pull it open, enter, let it swallow me. But instead of opening the door, I saw it, acknowledged it, and kept walking. I held faith, instead of fear, that whatever was happening to Bennett would improve. Soon enough, he was better.

I also wanted to go to Taos to have my own form of healing and escape. My family had recently been given the news that Gavin was awarded a Make-A-Wish. And I wasn't initially happy about the news. I wasn't happy like my mom was, who doled out the news to me over the phone. I was angry. Her face had glowed on FaceTime, as now 11-year-old Gavin sat next to her. "Your brother's getting a wish! Isn't it exciting?" she'd asked, squeezing him. I'd looked to Gavin, who said "ahhhh" and appeared excited. But I didn't think he'd understood the requirements of getting a wish according to the Make-A-Wish website: a child between 2 1/2 and 18, "suffering from a progressive, degenerative or malignant condition currently placing the child's life in jeopardy."

I wasn't sure if Gavin had still qualified to get a wish. He wasn't suffering from regular seizures anymore. He was happy most of the time. But, I'd realized, he has a "condition currently placing his life in jeopardy" and the illness would never go away, it was incurable. Most days I'd pushed this truth out of my periphery.

I'd smiled and waved back into the screen. "Gavin, how exciting! How do you plan on spending your wish?"

My mom had chimed in, "Maybe an adaptable outdoor gym. Something he can use forever."

I'd thought for a long time, even as an educated person, that there would be a chance my brother would be miraculously healed. One day, he would regain muscle strength, jump out of bed and waltz downstairs on his own, instead of my 62-year-old dad carrying his son's 50-pound body down the steps. Gavin wanted to walk on his own. It was evident every time he was in his walker practicing his steps. But Jesus hadn't shown up in that way. And maybe he didn't need to. My brother still needed constant assistance and qualified for this wish for something material.

In New Mexico, I decided to make a private trip to El Santuario De Chimayo, a sacred church, home to red dirt believed to have healing powers.

I exited the car and looked around for the church. "Do you know where El Santuario is?" I asked the only woman I saw with a backpack through the red dirt parking lot.

"It's right this way," she said. "I'll take you."

She walked in front of me, in the right direction of the church.



The woman slowly turned to face me, halting our walk. "Are you Catholic?"

I was not expecting her to ask. I blushed and said, "I'm Christian."

"I'm a born again Christian. Jesus led me out of terrible Catholicism, and I am so happy. Jesus is the only one who heals, there is nothing in that church that will do anything because Jesus is the only one who can save you."

I stuttered my words and thought, sheesh this was why religion sometimes received a bad reputation.

"Okay," I said. "Thanks for the directions."

I had never been solely one thing. Sure, I was Christian. I believed in God. But I also believed in nature, all this beauty on our planet. It could reveal so much. Dirt, a part of the world, a part of nature, a part of me.

At the entrance of the church, I closed my hand on the door handle. I realized I was here because for the past 11 years, I'd prayed for my brother in different capacities. The constant prayer was one of living. To live. Sometime the prayers would move onto a desire for him to have the choice to walk independently. And I knew, inside here, people had left their canes and walkers after becoming miraculously healed. I also knew it could be problematic for me to wish something like this for my brother. I loved his walker, but I only knew how to fight for him, advocate for him. I could always sense the frustration on his face when kids ran and jumped around him, freely. This visit was not one based on ableism. My brother would still be my brother no matter what changed. It was a desire based on how I knew my brother, the desires spoken to us through facial expressions and sounds. His own language. If I could do something to help him, I would. Plus, what harm could a little dirt do?

I opened the door. The church was quiet, having just opened. A large, crucified Jesus stood at the entrance. His feet and hands were over-sized, out of proportion to his 10-foot-tall body. His face was cartoonish, exaggerated lines for the eyes, mouth, nose. I took a seat in a pew toward the back and prayed. Once I finished praying, I turned left at the front of the church and entered the holy room full of red dirt. There was a corridor to the left, a wall full of photos of loved ones with a sign asking us to pray for the people in the photos. The other wall, across from the photos, was filled with hanging crutches, like I had seen online. The crutches were there because after prayer and spending time in the room with red dirt, people magically were able to walk. So they hung their crutches as a gesture of gratitude, a sign of a miracle. The entire room was chilling, in temperature and breath.

In the small private room full of holy dirt, I squatted and scooped some red dirt into a Ziploc bag. I prayed for my brother and for the photos on the wall, made a donation, and exited, into the warm New Mexican sun.

There was a small gift shop about fifty feet outside the church. It was scant with some snacks, a coffee maker with no coffee, and a few jars of red and green chile sauce. I scooped a jar each from the shelf. The green chile was famous across New Mexico and the red chile from Chimayo was also known to have curative powers. Nick said the only thing he wanted me to bring back from New Mexico was some authentic chile, so I placed the two jars down at the small table near the door.

“That’ll be \$12,” the boy said, sitting in a black folding chair, behind the table.

I pulled out the money and asked, “So what do you think about this place? The holy dirt?”

“I believe in God,” he said.

I nodded. “Me too.”

“But I don’t know about the dirt or the holy water. I just fill the holy water tin up with sink water every day.”

“Do the priests pray over it?”

“Sometimes. But usually not. They think because it is located in a holy space, it is blessed,” he said.

“And the dirt?” I asked.

“Same with the dirt. It’s brought in from the hills. Sometimes it is prayed over, most of the time it is not.”

“Interesting,” I said. “Do you think it has healing powers?”

“I guess,” he said. “I’m not sure. But people believe in it.” He handed me a brown bag with the jars inside.

“Thank you,” I said. I left and walked around the sanctuary grounds. Regardless of what the boy said, I still wanted to believe the red dirt could heal my brother. That weekend I randomly had a wedding back home in California, and I was to be there that night, for about thirty-six hours, in San Diego. I packed the red dirt safely in my backpack.

That night, Danika, Sydney and I sat at the kitchen table at my family home in Bonita and I told them about the red dirt. And how it was believed, by some, to be curative. My parents were away on a rare, welcomed vacation, with just the two of them. I mixed the dirt with some water in a plastic cup to make a clay-like material. We all rubbed some on Gavin’s feet, across his arms, down his temples. He laughed. We laughed. And we

rubbed some on us too, because maybe we too had healing to do, too. At the end, I slipped some in my mouth and on his tongue.

The next day, Gavin woke up, normally. Faviola carried him down the stairs like he had been carried every day of his life. He didn't walk down, and it wasn't like I believed he would anyway. I didn't want to change him, not at all. I remembered the people's crutches hanging on the wall and thought hell, it'll be fun to give it a shot. I had always accepted and loved my brother for who he was, in his beautiful life. He was my brother. I was going to have some fun with the dirt, regardless of the outcome.

A week after I returned from Taos, I flew Bennett out to California with me for a summer trip to see my family. On the first morning back, Bennett woke early and I brought him outside to play. The early summer morning sun lifted the dew from the grass. Gavin played with us in his brilliant blue walker. We made our way up the grassy hill in my parents' backyard. Bennett ran ahead and I pushed Gavin through the grass. At the playset at the top of the hill, Gavin helped me push his nephew on the swing. I held my brother's hand and pushed it gently against the plastic red bucket when it bumped into us. Gavin laughed, Bennett giggled. Hawks flew overhead. There was a nest in a neighboring yard.

"I ride with Gavin?" Bennett asked from the swing.

"Of course." I scooped Bennett out of the swing and sat both boys in the double-person swinging bench. I pushed, and the boys cheered in glee. The morning dew dried away and hawks flew overhead to their nests, back home. There was so much wonder in the simple act of being, of breathing. With these two boys next to me, I could have lived in this moment for a lifetime.

On the day that I brought red dirt home to my brother from Chimayo, I would not know how many years I would have left with Gavin. I would not know if a divine source would miraculously heal him. These things would no longer matter.

I had come to learn that it was enough to see a hawk slice through the blue of the sky and trust it was no longer at battle. It was enough to pass by doors, knowing what lived inside, and walk past, anyhow. It was enough to know that the beauty was not only in the bloom of the orchid, but in the in the slow cycle of change. What I did know: the pain of the past no longer had to hold me. The beauty of life rested not in what I could see, but in what I chose to see.

Years later, I would look back at my time in early motherhood, look back at life with my brother, and realize, we were always blooming.

VITA

Courtney Lund O'Neil

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: BLOOMING: A MEMOIR

Major Field: English (Creative Nonfiction)

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in English with a primary specialization in Creative Nonfiction and secondary specialization in Rhetoric and Writing Studies at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2022.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at University of California, Riverside, Riverside, California in 2014.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Global Studies at University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, California in 2010.

Selected Publications:

*The Normal School*, "Something About Mangoes"

*The Columbia Journal's* 58<sup>th</sup> print edition, "Angel Town"

*The New York Times*, "My Brother—the Hospice Graduate"

"O" *The Oprah Magazine*, "My First Year as a Mom Taught Me How to Make a Marriage Last"

*The Guardian*, "Make-A-Wish Granted My Brother 15,000 Dollars. Why Did it Make Me Angry?"

*The Washington Post*, "Why I Cried When I Found Out I Was Having a Boy"

*Sweet: A Literary Confection*, "Not the Color of the Rainbow"

*Sonora Review*, "Dear Placenta"