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A Christmas Tree and Other Stories

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A CHRISTMAS TREE AND OTHER STORIES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
English

By
Jillian Leslie Lang
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Accepted by:
Keith Morris, Committee Chair
Jillian Weise
Alma Bennett

ABSTRACT

The stories presented in this thesis are written mainly in the vein of literary minimalism and post-Modernism. The stories focus on a variety of themes, as related to human emotions and reactions. The thesis begins with *A Christmas Tree*, which focuses on the opinions and reactions of a mentally-handicapped man as he struggles with his desires to be an average, contributing member of society. The second story in the collection, *The Little Red Schoolhouse*, focuses on sexuality and how pride and dishonesty can ruin an otherwise successful relationship. *A Learned Helplessness* and *Supper Club*, stories three and four in the collection, are written almost as diary excerpts, and they both focus on familial relationships and a sense of obligation one feels to protect family members from potentially harmful people/situations. The last story in the collection, entitled *Bogey*, takes a deeper look into characterization. In it, the reader must decide whether or not to support the main character in his endeavors to save his father from a life not worth living, or to disregard him as mentally unstable and his actions as unjustifiable.

As a whole, this collection was inspired by the works of Raymond Carver, the veritable father of literary minimalism; Donald Ray Pollack, a relatively new force on the scene, but one who shouldn't be taken lightly; Flannery O'Connor, master of the quietly disturbing; Dennis Johnson, a mix between Carver and O'Connor, and a writer who creates such unlikable, but loveable characters; and Philip Roth, whose *American Pastoral* encapsulates all of the characteristics I respect in current post-Modernism.

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the greatest influence on me as a short story writer is Raymond Carver. For years, I wrote stories and was dissatisfied with the direction they took, but couldn't understand why. Either I couldn't establish much of a reason for my reader to care about my character, or I got too concerned with writing a story using lovely, poetic language, or a jarring, intense story, or a vaguely unsettling story. I was very concerned about the "effect" my writing would have on the reader, and I forgot about the importance of respecting the actual art of construction in a story, with believable characters, an actual point, a plot, etc. Raymond Carver reminded me (or perhaps he was the one who first showed me) through his writing that stories don't have to be so immensely complicated, laden with twists and secrets and intense action; they can just be. I think this is truly what's made literary minimalism such a popular style in the past thirty years or so (though writers like Samuel Beckett introduced the idea several decades ago). Carver's minimalism is different; it's a sort-of gritty, honest minimalism. It's not particularly nasty or grotesque; it's more like a camera lens has zoomed in on these people and their problems, and what the viewer is seeing through this lens is how life truly is. It's very much a sense of giving the reader a look at what's happening in the average household in middle (sometimes lower) class America. It's as if the author is saying to his reader, "Ok, this is how marriage/alcoholism/depression *really* works. This is how people *really* respond. These are the conversations they *really* have." And the reader is left with a realization that life is ugly, sometimes even unbearable. And that sometimes life's not that bad, or even exciting. This is perhaps the most significant idea I've tried to showcase in

my writing, the effect I'm probably most eager to achieve in each story. This notion that "here is my life, and it's not pretty, and it might not make much of a story, but it's real." Now, at some points, I take these (hopefully) very realistic situations I've tried to create and take them a bit further (with the passive murder scene at the end of *Bogey*, for instance), but for the most part, I like to think and write about things that could happen, and do happen, and have happened, in an average relationship/family/lifetime.

In keeping with this stylistic vein, I'd like to mention that Carver is known for introducing dramatic episodes in his stories (take, for example, the scene in which the men in *So Much Water, So Close to Home* recognize the drowned girl on the riverbank, and decide to wait until they've finished fishing to contact the police), and moving them away from the forefront of the reader's consciousness to the back. That story, then, turns into a story not exactly about the huge, dramatic incident; it becomes a study of reactions and relationships and feelings, a study of the aftermath of a horrible event. So, the most significant part of *So Much Water, So Close to Home* isn't the fact that a young girl was killed, or even that these men didn't report the death right away; it becomes a story about the wife of one of these men, and how she copes with the discovery of her husband's true character. I'm very much attracted to this idea of introducing something truly shocking or even terrifying, and only devoting the tiniest attention to it, just long enough to inform the reader of what happened, and then examining the repercussions of this, or what went on before, or how people react to it. I like the idea that much of Raymond Carver's stories, and hopefully mine, could be fittingly entitled, *This Story Isn't Really About That*.

I'd like to continue on about the style I'm really attracted to when I'm reading short stories, and, consequently, when I'm writing them. Carver's language in his short

stories is usually fairly simple, fairly straightforward, but at times he takes liberties to create poetic, intricate descriptions to depict a certain feeling, or a certain small animal, or a certain time of day. I really admire that when Carver chooses to be a complex literary master, a wordsmith, he can; he just recognizes that writing doesn't always have to be ornate and dramatic, which is refreshing. Perhaps this is because his editor forced Carver into realizing that what he was saying in two full, flowery paragraphs could be said in two short sentences; regardless, it's a respectable talent.

Another author I very much respect and appreciate, and aspire to write like, is Donald Ray Pollack. Though his stories are set in a town existing outside of any normal boundaries for what an average town should be (a town called Knockemstiff, Ohio), and therefore his characters live basically along the outskirts of humanity and propriety, he's a skilled master of language and honesty and truth. His characters are people who are trying to live as best they know how; this is most often an ugly thing, but Pollack doesn't shy away from it. (As an aside, I'd like to note that the characters I choose to write about aren't nearly as corrupt or warped as his are, but I do try to mirror the effect he achieves in his stories).

In my mind, Donald Ray Pollack's work is reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor's, another enormous influence on my story content and character structure. I see a distinct, and significant, connection between the regionalism and rough truthfulness I find present in both of these authors' stories. O'Connor is the veritable queen of writing disturbing, yet simple, stories, in which the reader is invited to take a closer, much more critical and honest look into what humanity and civilization and Southern society really are, and how far we, as humans, can be pushed before we reach a breaking point. I also respect and try

to emulate the cruelty that O'Connor and Pollack usually instill in their characters, and enjoy trying to find a balance between an unnecessary cruelty and just the natural tendency for humans to place their own well-being before others'.

I also very much admire what Dennis Johnson does in his short stories. I read Johnson's stories as a mix between the muted but honest style of Raymond Carver's work and the violent and often grotesque incidents Pollack and O'Connery focus on in their writing. Johnson's main character in his book of short stories, *Jesus' Son*, is this affable, damaged drug addict who keeps unwittingly ruining his own chances for happiness in life. Johnson almost blurs the lines for the reader between what is actually happening in the story, and what the main character is hallucinating in his drug-induced state. I like that Johnson basically gives the reader the responsibility to decide what the conflict or resolution or relationship is in each story; the reader can either choose to believe what the main character is telling the reader, or the reader can choose to believe none of it. I find the idea that the reader has some say in determining not only what to take away from the story, but also in what's really happening, exhilarating and refreshing in a short story. Sometimes being spoon-fed the plot, setting, conflict, and resolution can feel tiresome and monotonous for the reader; it's exciting when the writer introduces an opportunity for the reader to take an active part in the construction.

I'd like to move away a bit from short story authors, and away from the whole genre of minimalism and take a look at post-modernism as a whole. I interpret post-modernism as a search for the answer to the question "What do I do, now that I've achieved the American dream?" I'm particularly interested in this facet of this genre of literature, because I find unhappiness and dissatisfaction very interesting. I try to take the

idea of characters actually achieving what they think they've wanted their whole lives, things like marriages and children and nice homes, and looking at what happens next, and examining the characters at the moment that they must ask themselves, "Now what?"

This is a theme I picked up on from Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*. In *American Pastoral*, Roth paints a picture of a man who has been fairly fortunate his whole life, has been the privileged child in his family, went on to marry a beauty queen and purchase a fine home, but whose world comes crashing down on him. I respond to what Roth does when he takes a look at a man who has all of these seemingly rich "blessings" in life, and then finds that none of these are sufficient to support him in withstanding a tragedy. The main character is forced to search fruitlessly for whatever it is, whoever it is, that will make him feel like a real, whole man again, and yet, he never finds it. I very much respected this adventure that Roth created for his reader, and the fact that he encouraged his audience to examine these unfulfilled hopes and a sense of bewilderment that come when you realize that you've done everything you set out to accomplish but you A. still aren't happy, and B. don't really know what to do now. I try to incorporate this same looming frustration and sense of uncertainty in my stories.

So, the post-modernist tendency to feel disillusioned and lost in the search for fulfillment, and the minimalist style in which authors can accentuate this feeling are what I generally try to accomplish with my stories. I want my characters to struggle in finding themselves, because I find it so rare that a person truly knows what he wants, and if he *is* lucky enough to know what he wants, and how to get it, then what does he do after he achieves it? What next? I find that journey fascinating.

In each story in my thesis, I try to highlight this specific struggle and journey. In

my first story, *A Christmas Tree*, I tried to step out of my comfort zone as a writer, and I wrote from the viewpoint of a mentally-impaired, albeit highly functioning, middle-aged man living with a woman who has cheated on him. I also wanted to focus on sexuality and the power that sex can have over a person and a person's emotional responses. Here, out of all of my stories, is where I feel I most seamlessly melded the Carveresque way of introducing a dramatic event, then focusing not on the actual action but on the character's reactions and thoughts surrounding the action, and on the ambivalent stasis a person feels when he's realized his life hasn't turned out the way he imagined, that the person he trusted didn't really deserve his trust, and the fight to figure out how to feel about the realization. I thought this character, Harry, was an ideal vessel for me to show how I view shock and coping mechanisms and "healing." He's been taught how to feel by those around him, so when one of those people ends up being the one making him feel badly, he's confused as to how to react. In the end, he has no choice but to adhere to the rules that have already been ingrained in his mind about conduct and personal reactions, which is a real tragedy, as his mind is filling up with regret and sadness and he has no real place or solace to escape from it. This purgatory of human emotion was what essentially drove this story, for me.

In *The Little Red Schoolhouse*, I tried to further highlight what I mentioned earlier about what was so attractive in Carver's stories: the idea that though something very tragic happens to a couple, the demise of a relationship is actually more heart-breaking than the actual tragic event, which is, in this case, a car-jacking and subsequent sexual harassment incident. I also like to think I delve deeply into the human emotion of pride, and pride as related to sex and vulnerability, and just how detrimental these self-

assembled roadblocks can be not only in a relationship with a partner, but also with one's inner self.

A Learned Helplessness was a very difficult story for me to write. Actually, I just found it extremely difficult to try and get across what I wanted the reader to feel about these characters. I didn't want to write an expository story, one in which I tell a plot-driven story in the normal, straightforward way, because it felt too heavy and I knew a typical reader would feel bogged down in these tragedies that keep happening to this family. And the story wasn't necessarily about these huge tragedies, but how these tragedies were affecting the people they fell upon, mainly the father and the daughter. So, almost in a diary-like way, I tried out a new story-telling device in this story to take away from the depression and heaviness of the actual events, and I focused more attention and detail on bits and pieces to depict characterization in a roundabout way, and devoted very little description or detail to the actual "heavy" events. I wanted to do a study of longing, and how it affects the human soul, and the different ways it can change a person (usually for the worse).

In keeping with the diary-like telling of a story in *A Learned Helplessness*, I wrote *Supper Club*. I was very excited to write this story, because it was an idea I'd been throwing around in my head for awhile, a story about a child who discovers some very nasty secrets about the adults living in her town, and the struggle she has over whether or not she should spill her secrets and defend her mother's honor, or keep the secrets and reap the big benefits. I was most excited to write in the voice of this atypical teenager, the outcast at her high school, who prides herself on being cool and unaffected, but who actually still struggles with her conscience. I had a lot of fun placing myself in Paige's

mind, forming what I think her comments and observations about the society and world in which she lives would be. I think I achieved my goal of studying what fuels a teenager's desires and motivations. I was also invested in trying to effectively blur the lines between parent and child, so that by the end of the story the reader is left wondering which of the two female characters is strong enough to be an adult, and which navigates her life through complacency and weakness.

Lastly, there's *Bogey*. *Bogey* is one of the first stories I wrote and was semi-pleased with; I wrote *Bogey* before I wrote all of the other stories in this thesis. It's a story I've reworked several times, obviously, in hopes to actually strike a balance between this monster who feels comfortable with murder, and a disillusioned kid who desperately wants to be appreciated for his romantic nature and ideals. It was difficult to create this characterization, when what I really liked writing about was his dysfunctional family, so I had to try several times to mold him into a boy the reader would, if not sympathize with, at least understand. Hopefully, with this latest, and probably last, version of *Bogey*, I strike this clean balance and inspire my readers to find humanity in a seemingly deranged young boy

In these five stories, I think that I've accomplished the effect I had in mind when I started constructing this thesis. Stylistically and thematically, I can see a distinct connection to literary minimalism and post-modernism, which are two genres that fuel my work as both a reader and a writer. I also think that I examine the various, confusing human emotions and their place in relationships and society. I feel I've effectively highlighted some very interesting, albeit realistic, conflicts both within my characters and among them, and then gone a step further into observing how each character reacts to

these conflicts and struggles within their his/her life.

A Christmas Tree

I hate when I can't sleep because I'm trying to hurry up and sleep. I'm lying there, already in my bed, and I can't sleep because all I can think about is that the minutes are going by and soon my alarm will buzz and I'm not asleep yet and will I be able to work the next day without much sleep? Sometimes it's not just thinking about not sleeping it's thinking about my tree and trying to move everything hanging on the branches around because they're breaking. Sometimes I'll think about my tree for hours and then I'll look at my clock. Then I think, if I fall asleep right now, this minute, I will only have four hours and thirteen minutes of sleep, that's without a pee break, and that Mr. Andrews says I really need a full six hours to do any good at work the next day. Then I start to plan out when I can take a nap at work, and think would I rather eat my lunch or take a half hour nap in the back of my truck, and do naps make you feel better or more tired? I always know when I wake up from naps if I like them or hate them, but I can't remember the next time I'm about to take one.

She doesn't need naps because she sleeps all the way through the night. She didn't used to, because of her secret, but since we settled our differences in a grown-up way, she does. That's her words, "settled our differences." It sounds to me like something Dr. Corrigan would say.

I really only remember a lot of her talking and crying the day she told me her secret and all I could think about was how the ABC magnets on the refrigerator behind her head spelled out J N E 1 2. I remember thinking did I spell that out, because if you added a U that's two days before my birthday, but I don't think it was me.

I met her at my doctor's office last spring. She had the nicest purple coat on and a matching bag on her lap. I was trying to count the number of times the fly on the

windowsill's legs rubbed together. Flies rub their legs together really fast. They do it to clean them and because they have these tiny hairs all over their bodies that they use to taste and smell their food and when they rub their legs together they are tasting something they picked up in the tiny hairs. People think flies are dirty and try to swat at them, but I like them. I've never swatted at a fly before, even at work when they buzz in my face and sit on my arms in my sweat.

She was there with her sister. Her sister's name is Janey, and I met her sister before I met her because she was in my class at the Y. I used to take this class at the Y every week because Dr. Corrigan said it would be good for me to be around other people, and people like me, but since I got my job he said I didn't have to go to the class anymore because I am around people enough at work everyday.

She was talking on the phone at the doctor's office. She had these long fingernails that were painted light pink, almost white, that she tapped on her handbag while she talked. I quit counting the number of times the fly rubbed his legs together and watched her tap. Janey was sitting next to her, flipping really loudly and fastly through a magazine and when she saw me, she waved from across the room. I waved at Janey but still looked at her. She looked at Janey then looked at me, and she smiled. It was the tiniest smile I've ever seen. It looked like it came from her eyes and forehead and her hair, not her mouth.

That smile went away for some days back when she was fucking another man before Christmas, but it's back now.

She really doesn't like me to use that word. I don't much care. I like how it sounds. I think it might be my favorite word to say. Probably that or kaleidoscope. Dr. Corrigan had a kaleidoscope in his office waiting room that had really pretty colors in it

and if you turned it just right you could see butterfly wings. Some other patient dropped it on the hard floor one day and cracked the glass on the end, so it didn't really look the same anymore, but I found a way to turn it right and still see the butterfly.

Her secret smile came back after she told me that she had fucked another man and I forgave her.

She asked me to sit down at the round kitchen table that day after work.

“Can I please get a root beer first? Today was very hot at work,” I said from my chair at the table. I really love root beer. She knows this because she likes it too, and we both drank one on our first date. I took her to the zoo.

I remember how sad the zoo made me feel that day. The cages and ponds were dirty and the animals looked like they were asking you to help them or let them out. The lions wouldn't even move in their cages. They didn't even swat their tails at the little bugs that landed on their backsides, just rested on the big rocks underneath their trees. I sat in front of their cages for a long time, waiting for one of them to move, even just a little bit. She sat with me and held my hand and told me that the zoo didn't have enough money to keep the park clean, but that the animals were probably happy to have a home where nice people could watch them and take pictures of them. This made me feel a little better, so I took lots of pictures of the lions and baboons and elephants then. We stayed at the zoo 'til it closed.

“Here,” she said, reaching for a glass and filling it with water from the faucet. “Just drink this. I have something important to tell you, for God's sake.” She put it down in front of me.

“Thank you. I really want a root beer, though. It will just take a minute.” I stood

up and walked to the refrigerator.

She blocked me with her small hands and nudged me backwards hard. “Harry, sit down. Now.”

I stared at her. “Pushing is wrong. You said not to let anyone hurt me.” I thought of my tree then.

She sat next to me and took my big, hard hand in hers. She nodded. When she looked at me, her eyes were wet.

“You’re right. You should never let anyone hurt you. I did say that.” She nodded. “That’s why this is not easy for me. Please listen.” She breathed loud. “I was with another man.” Her voice was shaking and she squeezed my hand.

“What do you mean? You were with someone this afternoon?” I didn’t understand. “Can I have my root beer now?”

“No, Harry, I was intimate with another man. Do you understand?”

I thought a minute. “I know what intimate means.” Intimate was what we did most nights in my bed before I went to sleep. “I’m not stupid.”

“Of course you’re not stupid.” Her tears fell on my hands. “I didn’t say that.”

I felt like I did when I jumped out of the lift that time and landed on my back, like all the air was pushed out of my chest and no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t pull any back in. I only sat there.

“I’m so sorry, Harry. It meant nothing. It was one time. I love you.” More warm tears fell on my hand.

Finally, I talked. “What did I do wrong?” Dr. Corrigan said taking responsibility was a sign I was maturing and growing and that I was ready to be on my own and have a

real job and drive my truck.

“It wasn’t you, Harry. You didn’t do anything. It was me. I made a big mistake.”

“Who was it? The man?”

“You don’t know him. He’s an old friend from school.”

“Fuck him.”

“I really don’t like when,” she started.

“Fuck him. And fuck you, slut.” I’d heard it on *Casino*. We’d watched it together with Janey and Janey’s friend. I didn’t much like it.

Those words felt funny coming out of my mouth. I had not yelled at another person in a long time, especially not her. I thought she really was too pretty to yell at.

“Harry,” she breathed. “Don’t talk to me that way.”

“You let a man touch you where you said only I should touch you. Slut.” The men at work used this word a lot. I liked it.

“I know, but I said I was sorry... What can I do?”

That’s about all I can remember about that day. The yelling and crying and the refrigerator magnets. She told me I forgave her but I’m still not sure I know what forgiveness feels like because if forgiveness means you don’t hurt anymore then I don’t forgive. I told her this and she said it will go away one day.

She says that everyone makes mistakes, and it shows real character for a person to forgive another person’s biggest mistakes. She says she’s proud of me. I don’t know why, but this doesn’t make me feel better. She says I shouldn’t bring up her secret anymore, anyway, because forgiveness also means forgetting, so let’s not talk about it anymore, OK?

Dr. Corrigan told me before that when I feel angry or sad or I am losing control of my temper that I should imagine a big Christmas tree, like the one in New York City that's really tall and has so many lights, and every time I feel like I want to hurt someone or myself, I should put an ornament on the tree. He said it would make me feel better to hang the ornament, to let go of what was making me mad or sad or hurting me.

I don't have any room on my tree anymore.

I want to tell Dr. Corrigan that the branches on the tree are breaking, that some of my branches have 3 or 4 or 5 ornaments hanging on it. Some of the branches dip so low the ornaments are almost falling off. If I could, I would ask Dr. Corrigan if this is ok, or if once the ornaments start to fall if everything I put up on the tree will start to make me mad or sad again. I wish I could ask Dr. Corrigan if I can have a new tree, but she says I shouldn't talk to anyone about this. I want to tell him that the tree is keeping me up at night, too.

The Little Red Schoolhouse

“I don’t know what you want me to say. I told my mother two weeks ago that you’d be bringing the lasagna and she said it was fine. I can’t help it that she forgot and brought lasagna, too. She’s old.” John rolled his eyes and checked the side and rearview mirrors before changing lanes.

“No, honey.” Liz’s sarcasm was thick. “That’s called rude, not ‘forgetful.’ She did it on purpose. How many times has she made a comment about her goddamn secret recipe lasagna? She wanted to show me up in front of your entire family.” She snorted and looked out her passenger window.

“Well maybe you shouldn’t have offered to bring lasagna in the first place,” he murmured.

“What’s that? f you’re going to make a remark like that you should have the courage to say it aloud.”

Liz’s shrill voice sent him back to his mother’s house. He’d wanted to rip his eyeballs out with forks. He’d had his mother nagging him about Liz’s attitude and self-righteousness in one ear, and Liz’s belittling comments about his family in the other.

“I only meant that we could have avoided this whole thing if you’d just made something my mother doesn’t feel so strongly about.” He drummed his fingers on the wheel and strained to see through the steam coming off the street from the freezing rain. It was a little after five, and he was annoyed with himself for not figuring traffic and weather into the otherwise two-hour drive home.

“I only wanted to contribute something special to the party. I’ve been going to those cooking classes at Holmes for weeks, and we learned a good recipe for lasagna. I

thought it would help your mother, not invite her to compete with me.” She rummaged in her purse; John knew she was feeling around for her berry-tinted Chapstick. When she found it, she uncapped it and smoothed the Chapstick over her moisturized lips.

He knew about the cooking classes. He’d had to play guinea pig to Liz’s numerous domestic experiments ever since his mother had hinted that Liz’s housewifely endeavors left much to be desired. He’d only just managed to finish off the vat of vegan chili from two weeks ago.

He shuddered visibly and said, “Dammit, Elizabeth. Don’t scream at me. I’m stressed out enough with this weather and traffic. And I don’t understand how we wind up in a different version of the same fight every time we’re around my mother.”

“How? Because I’m married to a man who, at the age of 39, still cannot stand up to his mother and take his wife’s side in an argument. If you’d only said ‘Mom, you knew Liz was bringing lasagna. That’s disrespectful, and it hurt her feelings,’ we wouldn’t be in this situation, and I would have had a nice time this afternoon. But when you saw that she’d made it, you kissed me on the cheek and slinked out of the kitchen. It’s bullshit, John. I’m sick of it.” Elizabeth pulled her checkbook from her purse and flipped the pages of the ledger back and forth loudly; John knew she was making those noises on purpose. She did things like this to irritate him. “How much did it cost to fill up in Meridian?” she asked.

“I don’t know, thirty-five dollars? Look Liz, I’ve told you that my family isn’t like yours. We don’t like conflict. We’d rather swallow it and hope the situation resolves itself on its own.” John rolled his window down and tried to crane his neck around the snaking traffic line. “Why isn’t anyone moving here?” he barked to the cars.

“All I can say is, I hope you’re not planning on raising our family that way. I’ll have no part of it. It’s ridiculous. I want my family to be open and *honest* with each other,” Liz said.

John caught himself before he told her he couldn’t imagine raising a family with her right now anyway.

She crossed her arms across her khaki raincoat and the polyester crinkled, a noise John found nearly as grating as the ruffling ledger sheets. “Is there not a different route we can take here, John? Let’s go.”

“Sure, Liz. I’ll just turn around in the middle of 27th Avenue at 5 o’clock and find a different way home.” He rested his forehead on the steering wheel and groaned. “And they just put up a detour on Hawkins, so 27th is the only way back. You know that.”

“Don’t speak to me that way,” Liz began, but she stopped abruptly. “John, roll up the window,” she whispered.

“No.” John’s head was still down. “I need some air circulation in this car. I feel like I’m suffocating.”

“Just do it, John. Now.”

But John didn’t have time to roll up the window. A tall man had approached the window and was leaning down to stick his nose in the car.

“Move over. My hand is on the gun in my coat pocket. You,” he nodded once to Liz, “don’t do anything. Leave your bag on the floor under your feet.” The man opened the door and slid in, almost on top of John, and John scrambled into the passenger seat with Liz. “Give me your phones, beepers, whatever. We’re gonna take a ride.”

John reached subtly across Liz to push the passenger door open, but the gunman

grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him back against the leather seat. “Don’t,” the man said with a sly grin. “I have a gun.” He tapped his pocket and said, “Remember?”

“Please let us get out. You can’t go anywhere,” Liz asked in a shaky voice. “We’re in standstill traffic. We can just get out right now and walk away; you can take the car. Please, sir.” John heard the desperation in her voice and was surprised.

“Shut your fucking mouth and calm down. If you cooperate, I’ll let you go after we get out of this shit. Now, what’s the fastest way off this street?” The man shifted nervously in his seat, alternating frantic glances between the rearview mirror and the couple in the passenger seat. He scratched the side of his neck ferociously and John was aware of the sound of his fingernails dragging across his scruffy beard.

John took a small breath and started calmly, “Ok. That alley up on the left will take you to McDowell Road.” John gingerly pointed to the wide alleyway a little distance up the street, then took Liz’s quivering hand. “Where are we going?”

The man shifted the car into drive and swerved into the lane void of oncoming traffic. John and Liz held their breaths until the man turned safely down the alleyway. “No questions. I need to use your car to run an errand. Like I said, calm your shit down and you’ll be fine. It won’t take long.”

John squeezed Liz’s hand and she looked at him with tear-filled eyes. He tried to lasso his thoughts and make them resemble something sane and smart, but he found all he could concretely think of were crazy ways he could strangle the gunman with the seatbelt or leap from the speeding car. Nothing fruitful.

John’s anxiety heightened as he realized they were heading out of town. There weren’t many exits, let alone towns, off this section of the Interstate. It was about seventy

miles worth of fields and wooded areas until you reached the exit for the university.

John felt that the danger had grown exponentially. There were no quick errands to be made off of this stretch of I-55.

“Can’t you just drop us off here? In the middle of nowhere? You can keep our phones. It would be hours before the police found us, and by then you would have finished your errand and dumped the car.” John’s voice sounded confident, but he had to clench his teeth hard to prevent chattering.

The man reached quickly into his front pocket; John tensed reflexively, but the driver pulled out a small, blinking cellphone and pushed a button.

“Yeah?” the man said, keeping one hand on the wheel. “No,” he paused. “Off 55.” He sat for a second. “I don’t know. I told you I didn’t know shit about this part of town.” He grinned as he listened for a longer beat. “Yeah, I can do that. Twenty or so?” John tried to listen to the voice on the other side of the call, but the driver switched to his left ear. “Yeah, man. Sounds good.,” the driver said. He stuck his phone back in the pocket and glanced at John. “Like I was saying, I need your fucking car for something, and if I dropped you off here, you would flag someone off the interstate in no time. The cops would be on my ass and I would be screwed. So just keep your mouth shut for a while longer and it will all be over.”

Liz was whimpering softly now, rocking back and forth with her arms wrapped tightly around her torso. John hadn’t seen her like this since her mother passed away nearly five years ago. She made it a point to never let him see her upset, vulnerable. John had a nagging feeling that he should be protecting her. He held her hand in his lap and stroked the back of it, wondering if he should whisper reassurances to her. He decided

against it.

John wondered if this is how he and Liz would die. Humiliated, probably robbed, on the side of the road somewhere. He felt a stifling sense of panic when he considered that this car ride might be the last thing he experienced before he died.

John tried to concentrate on planning a safe escape from the moment the car either stopped, but he was only able to think of a memory of their first night in their new home, four years after being married. Liz had found a mouse stuck on the trap they'd set in their pantry—a small, grey, scared mouse, twitching in the sticky glue on the wood and metal trap. She'd yelled for John to take care of it, so John had freed the mouse from the glue and released it in their backyard. When he'd told her, Liz had berated him and called him weak for not having the courage to just kill the mouse and dump it in the trash. They'd gotten into a big argument, and John had slept on the brand new sofa in the living room that night.

The car jerked and John was thrown forward against the tense seatbelt he shared with Liz. The driver was now alternating between punching the brakes then speeding up at every exit. John knew these exits because he'd grown up around this area, and his heart thudded as the driver veered off onto exit 241—the Little Red Schoolhouse. There were no working gas stations within fifteen miles of the interstate, and the actual Little Red Schoolhouse hadn't been as such for over thirty years. As kids, he and his brothers had been warned not to get stuck without gas near the Little Red Schoolhouse.

John was thankful Liz didn't know about the exit. She was from Virginia, and they'd only moved back to Madison recently. She had fallen almost silent beside him and John felt grateful she hadn't tried anything brash.

The man pulled sharply down a dirt road several miles from the interstate, drove slowly for several minutes, killed his lights, and stopped.

“Wait! What are you going to do with us?” Liz squealed. “Please don’t hurt me! Please don’t hurt me! Please don’t hurt me. Please don’t hurt me...” She continued to repeat the words in a loud whisper, looking straight ahead as she rocked back and forth in her seat.

John closed his eyes.

“Bitch,” the driver was saying. “I told you, no questions. Now, let’s have some fun.” The driver twisted towards the passenger seat, pulled his gun, heavy and shiny, from his left coat pocket and shook it in John’s direction. “Shut her up. Get out and stand next to the car.”

John leaned across Liz and pushed the door open. She shivered violently when John touched her, and when he looked into her eyes to offer a reassuring glance, he saw only two cloudy holes.

John felt strangely calm, detached, as he gently guided Liz out of the car and onto her feet. She swayed in the wind, still mumbling her pleas.

“Take off your clothes,” the driver said in an excited voice.

A new, stronger wave of panic hit him. He heard a guttural sound rumbling inside of Liz. She dropped to her knees and started to moan something, but the man interrupted her.

“Do it. Don’t give me any fucking trouble.” He held up the hand that clutched the gun and waved it above his head. “I mean it. Now. Do it.”

John stripped his shirt and slacks off quickly so that he could help Liz. He pulled

her up slowly and unzipped her raincoat. She said nothing, but looked down and away in shame. John lifted her arms and pulled her dress over her head. They stood waiting: he in his grey boxer briefs and she in her matching lace bra and panties.

“Naked,” the man said in the same loud voice. “Everything off.”

“Please don’t do this to us. To her. I’ll do anything you want. Please leave her alone,” John pleaded in a pitiful voice. He gingerly took a step towards the gun-wielding stranger, holding his hands out.

“Stop. Don’t take another step or I swear to God I’ll fucking shoot. Do I look like I care about how you feel right now? Strip.” The gunman paced in front of them, never taking his eyes off of Liz’s Yoga-slim, smooth body.

John turned to Liz and said, “Honey, I am going to take your underwear off now. We’re going to be fine. Stay calm.” He gently removed her undergarments and whisked his boxer briefs off.

The gunman quickly walked the few feet that separated him from the couple. He brought the cool gun up to Liz’s bare stomach and purred in a shaky voice, “Do you like this?”

Liz didn’t respond, didn’t move; she showed no recognition.

The stranger pulled the gun up along her torso and between her breasts.

John pinched his eyes together tightly; hot tears ran down his cheeks and dripped onto his collarbone.

“What about this?”

Liz remained still.

John opened his eyes and stared straight ahead, into the bright car lights.

“Spread your legs, bitch.”

Liz did.

“How about this? Tell me how much you like it.” The man was pushing the gun below her stomach and between her legs.

Liz whimpered and clenched her small fists at her sides. John stared ahead.

“I thought you might like that,” the grinning gunman breathed in her ear.

And then the man reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the blinking phone again, while holding the gun at Liz.

“What?” He waited. “No, I’m on my way now. With the car.” He waited again.

“Yeah, I know where to go.” Silence. “I’ll be there.”

He shoved the phone back into his pocket and looked at Liz and John. He pulled the gun from between her legs and backed away, waving the gun back and forth between the couple. “Turn around,” he said.

John put his arm around Liz’s quivering body and they turned around and faced the thick blackness of the forest in front of them.

“Start walking. Don’t turn around or I will fucking shoot you in your heads,” the gunman said.

They huddled together and shuffled along blindly; John held a limp arm out in front of them to push away any branches.

They had only taken a few steps before they heard the rapid crunching sounds of the leaves and sticks crumpling under the gunman’s old sneakers as he ran away. They kept walking, listening for the low hum of the engine as the gunman started their car.

When they heard the spray of the gravel as the gunman drove away, John made a

little yelp and wrapped Liz in a firm embrace. He whispered, “We made it, honey. We’re okay. We’re okay.”

John straightened up when Liz walked out of the interrogation room. She crossed the small room and sat primly on the folding chair in the lobby of the Calhoun police station.

“How was it?” John scooted over on the shiny couch and laid his hand on top of Liz’s. He had already finished his round of questioning with the officer.

“Fine. This is taking forever though, John.” She slid her hands from underneath his and pulled the men’s flannel shirt that the policeman had given her tighter around her torso. “Can we go now, please?” she asked in a loud voice.

“Almost.” Officer Hogan walked up to the couple and stretched his hands above his head. “We’d like to question you two together now for just a second, if it’s not too much trouble. Sometimes victims remember details more clearly when they’re questioned with the other victims of a crime. They play off of each other.” Officer Hogan sat down in the chair opposite Liz’s, and placed his tape recorder on the table in front of them. “I know it’s late, but let’s just get this all over with so you can go home.” He pushed the button on the recorder and leaned back in his chair. “So, tell the story again, please, from the beginning.”

John cleared his throat and opened his mouth to begin, but Liz interrupted with a sigh.

“Ok, look. We were sitting in traffic on 27th this afternoon and this disgusting man came up to the car and pushed John over into the passenger seat with me. And we did

nothing. He drove us to that fucking Schoolhouse exit off of 55, kicked us out of the car,” she jabbed an index finger towards John, “stole his wallet and my purse,” she crossed her arms across her chest, “told us to take off our clothes, and took our car. Then that man in the Volvo saw us on the side of the road and stopped to pick us up. And now, we’re here. And all I want to do is leave and forget about everything.” She leaned back and raised her eyebrows and said rudely, “Ok, Officer?”

“Sure.” Officer Hogan lowered his voice. “Now, what I’m most interested in is what happened once you took the exit. This is difficult for me to ask you, but did the gunman perform or force either of you to perform any acts of sexual perversion?”

John shifted his eyes towards Liz and reached for her hand again. He prepared himself to make this difficult speech again. “Alright,” he began.

Liz pulled her hand from John’s again, and said, “Please, John.” She turned towards Officer Hogan, smoothed her hair down, and smiled serenely. “No, Officer. Nothing happened out there. The man just kicked us out of the car, took our clothes, and left. Now, is that it? Can we go?” She moved like she was about to stand.

John sat motionless on the sticky vinyl. He was confused. He said quietly to his wife, “Liz, what are you doing?”

He looked at Liz’s face for a sign of cooperation, but found none. He smiled apologetically towards Officer Hogan.

“Honey, I’ve done all that I can. Is there something else you remember that I’m not saying?” Now Liz met her husband’s eyes. John saw something alien in the normally cool face – a new person. She looked innocent, blank, with perplexity tugging at her forehead.

John realized he didn't know her anymore –he questioned if he ever had. The gunman had shattered her glass façade that she'd always clung to, something John had tried to do since they met, and the small woman sitting across from him was no longer Liz, John's wife. She'd lost her dignity and pride, her defining characteristics, somewhere in the woods.

He sat and stared at the woman next to him. He knew she was probably furious at him for what she thought was his cowardice. He knew she was humiliated at how the gunman had treated her in the woods. But John knew she was probably most horrified that John had witnessed it.

“Mr. Anders, is it alright if I talk to you in private?” Officer Hogan asked him as he leaned forward to push **STOP** on the recorder.

“Sure.” John stood up and followed the big policeman to the end of the hallway.

“What's going on here?” Officer Hogan said. “We have two different stories from you and your wife. Did the gunman sexually harass her or not? It's important for us to have the facts straight when we're writing the report.”

John looked back at Liz., hoping to see a sign in her face that they would be alright, that they could overcome tonight.

She looked expectantly back at him, like an expressionless doll, her perfectly groomed eyebrows raised.

He realized he didn't know if he wanted them to get through this together.

John sighed and nodded to the officer. “Whatever she said is right. I think I just overreacted.”

“Are you sure, sir? Try to remember exactly what happened out there.”

“I’m sure, Officer. Nothing much happened once he let us out of the car.”

Officer Hogan looked at him for a long time before sighing and telling John that they were free to go.

They didn’t speak to each other on the ride back to their house. Once they got home, John went to the bathroom they shared and turned the faucet for the shower. He gently shut the door and locked it as he de-robbed. After he got out, he heard Liz rummaging in the closet outside the bathroom, and he knew she was pulling down her suitcase from the top shelf. As he towel-dried his hair, he listened as she opened and shut her drawers, ruffled through her hanging clothes, and slowly pulled the zipper shut on the case. He imagined her neatly organizing her suitcase, and wondered if she’d remember to get her slippers from underneath the bed. He walked to the door and waited to hear her pull the suitcase off of the bed and roll it out of the bedroom and to the front door. He decided not to offer to help her with the heavy luggage. He held his breath and listened to her pause there by the door, and he knew she was neatly scribbling a note to leave on the hall table; John knew it would read something polite, along the lines of “John, I can’t. I’ll be in touch.” As he heard the door slam, he exhaled.

A Learned Helplessness

MID-MARCH, 2009

I'm driving to Central Mississippi Correctional Facility for the last time.

This drive to CMCF takes only forty-three minutes from my home in Ridgeland. It takes another six minutes if I stop for coffee at the Chevron off Lakeland. I've been making this drive every other Saturday morning for the last six months, ever since my father was transferred from Mississippi State Penitentiary. The filing clerk at CMCF told me that he was one of the only inmates that'd ever requested a switch from MSP back to CMCF. He filed the transfer request because he'd contracted a respiratory infection that winter, and CMCF had a special needs facility for severe physical/medical conditions. CMCF was also the first facility in Mississippi to receive the American Correctional Association accreditation, so they're more equipped to treat things like this.

I was surprised that he'd bothered to file the request. Dad had adopted this mindset recently, one that he didn't care to live anymore, but I refused to acknowledge it. I knew he just felt sorry for himself. Dad went through phases like this, about every year or so, usually when the snow began melting and we got more than one or two days of nice weather in a row. I knew what he was thinking. The better the weather, the nicer the temperature, the more depressed he got that he was stuck inside his cell for three more years.

NOVEMBER 30, 1989

I got a call from my mother's sister as I drove through a Wendy's after my first college exam. There had been complications during the preterm delivery, my aunt said. Something was wrong with Hal.

"What?" I asked, dumbly. I abruptly pulled out of the drive-thru lane and into a

parking spot at the restaurant. “What do you mean? Is he OK? Is Mom OK?”

“Your mom is fine. Hal’s...not doing well. Basically, his oxygen supply was cut off during the delivery,” she said quietly. She cleared her throat. “What that means is that Hal might have some brain damage. We don’t know how severe it is yet.”

She tried to explain what had gone wrong, calling it umbilical cord prolapse. She said that the doctor told them that this sort of thing was very uncommon in modern deliveries, but that Mom’s age probably had something to do with it.

I tried to formulate more questions about the baby and about my mother, but I didn’t know what to ask, so I hung up. I left the Wendy’s and drove home that afternoon; I didn’t stop at my dorm room to pack a bag. I didn’t stop to go to the bathroom on the ride back. I made the seven-hour drive in less than six.

DECEMBER 1, 1989

He looked like a shriveled pink piglet, all deflated and gurgly in his soft, white blanket. He didn’t look brain-damaged. He looked like a normal baby.

The doctor told us we wouldn’t know how extensive the damage was until Hal began to grow and mature.

MID-DECEMBER, 1989

My father got out of the car and opened the door to lift Hal from the carseat. It was nearly three weeks after Hal was born, and one of the first times that both Mom and Hal were leaving the house together. Hal was doing really well. He didn’t cry much at all.

“This little piggie had roast beef,” Dad cooed to Hal as he unbuckled the straps.

“Are you okay, Mom?” I asked as I helped her ease out of the front passenger seat. She’d been really sore since the birth; the doctor told her this was to be expected in women over forty.

“This little piggie had none!” he said, and Hal gurgled happily.

“Oh, yeah. I feel better today than I have in nine months,” she replied brightly, holding on to my arm.

“This little piggie went wee-wee-wee, all the way home!” Dad was tickling Hal’s minute feet at this point, waiting for us to grab the diaper bag and shut the front doors.

There was a pause.

“Hey, Cheryl? Will you come look at this?” my dad said quietly.

“What is it?” Mom shuffled around the car slowly and leaned over my father’s shoulder to look at the baby. I crawled in the passenger seat and peered over the seatback.

“Watch what happens when I tickle his left foot.” Dad gently ran his fingertips over Hal’s sock-covered foot and Hal wiggled his toes and lifted his foot up. It was small, nearly imperceptible, like a reflex.

“Now look what happens when I try it on his right foot.” He did the same thing on Hal’s other foot, and the only things that moved were Hal’s toes. They stuck straight out from his foot.

“Do that again,” my mother said in a whisper.

My father tried again.

Did you know that there’s a saying about insanity? Insanity means doing the same thing, over and over again, expecting different results.

EARLY 1990

The doctor told us that Hal had a brain injury called periventricular leukomalacia. It’s caused by the death of white matter near the cerebral ventricles in Hal’s brain. This explained why he had trouble moving his right leg. It explained why Hal couldn’t fix a

steady gaze on anything.

The doctor also told us that Hal was at high risk for developing cerebral palsy or epilepsy in the coming years.

He gave my mother a pamphlet on “Learned Helplessness, as related to CP” and the phone number for a support group that meets weekly in the hospital.

SEPTEMBER, 1990

I decided that Hinds Community College was much easier than a real university. There weren't as many electives as there were at Georgia, but the parking lot was much bigger, so that was nice.

1990-1994

Hal learned to ride his tricycle with no help from anyone. My father let him hold Bobo's leash when we took the dogs on walks. He was a really happy kid.

MID-JULY, 1995

“Rick, please! It will be good for him to experience some sort of normalcy for once,” my mother pleaded in hushed tones.

I crept to my bedroom door and pulled it halfway open so I could hear.

“Absolutely not. He's not ready for school yet. He barely survived the nursery twice a week! Are you crazy?”

“You don't know! You don't know because you're not around! The woman in the nursery *recommended* that he give real school a shot. She said she thinks he would flourish with other children around. That's what Dr. Donaldson said, too!” I could hear the tears in her voice, could almost see them in her eyes.

Silence from my father.

My mother pressed on. “Rick, I've been talking to one of the women from my old

support group, and she said it was the best thing she could have done for her daughter. She said that since our children are lucky enough to be able to move and function on their own, we ought to give it a shot.” I heard her rummaging around, presumably in her purse. “Here,” she said.

“Learned Helplessness: How To Avoid It,” my father murmured as he read from the brochure. “Now, what is this again?”

“It’s some information on how we can encourage Hal to be independent, so that he won’t need or want our help with every little thing. It’s actually very interesting,” my mother said.

More silence, as my dad read the pamphlet.

Finally, he sighed and answered, “It sounds like a lot of bullshit. Dr. Donaldson recommended we try this?”

“Yes.”

After another pause, my father said, “Fine. But if it doesn’t go well, we’re taking him out of that school. And if it doesn’t work out, I will be the first to say ‘I told you so.’” He pushed his chair underneath the table and I heard the screen door slam.

OCTOBER, 1995

TWO DAYS BEFORE HALLOWEEN

I got the call while I was on my lunch break at work. Hal had wandered away from his class at playbreak and tried to climb the four-foot retaining wall that separated the schoolyard from the fast-moving stream on the other side. He’d fallen over the wall and broken his neck in the landing.

His teacher didn’t notice he was missing until after lunch.

The paramedics told us he died instantly. I think they thought that would make us

feel better.

OCTOBER, 1995
ONE DAY AFTER HALLOWEEN

Hal's coffin was shiny and small. I wondered if his right leg was uncomfortable. I wondered how the toes on his right foot were positioned. Did rigor mortis beat out periventricular leukomalacia?

I sat between my mother and father at the funeral. My mother was shaking violently and sobbing, but it was my father's piercing silence that drowned out the minister's prayer.

FEBRUARY, 1996

My mother joined the Junior League, and she donated her Crawfish E'touffe recipe for next year's cookbook. She took up spinning at the Y, and really enjoyed it.

EARLY APRIL, 1996

I got a promotion, from bank teller to head bank teller. Louise, my cubicle neighbor, brought me a chocolate doughnut from the Dunkin' Donuts next door as a congratulations.

I didn't want to eat it, because she'd put her fingers all over it, and it was a bit smushed from the walk over, but I shoved it down my throat and murmured a thank-you with my mouth still full.

APRIL OR MAY, 1996

I came home from work one day to see that my father had put a sleeping bag on the floor of Hal's old playroom.

"Dad, what the hell are you doing?" I asked him.

"Huh? What does it look like, Katie?" he mumbled as he adjusted the bag on the

carpet. "I'm putting my sleeping bag on the floor."

"Yes, I see that. But why?"

He stood up and turned to look at me. "What do you mean?" he asked simply.

SUMMER, 1996

My parents fought often. My father screamed at my mother for not filling the car up with gas. My mother reminded him that he had been the last one to drive it. He yelled at her for talking back to him. She whispered that she was sorry. My father slammed the playroom door in her face and didn't open it again for the next two nights.

AUGUST, 1996

Dad seemed better. He moved from the garage back into the house again, and he ate supper with me and my mother at the kitchen table for a week straight. My mother cooked a pot roast for him the third night, and he seemed to like it. She said he seemed excited about school starting next week. Mom thought it was because he was ready for high school football season.

APRIL 2, 1997

I picked up the paper from my driveway and saw "Respected Businessman Careens Into Oncoming School Bus; Kills 1, Injures 11," with a picture of my father's smiling face next to it. The picture had been taken ten years earlier, when my father ran for the Governor's Board at our Country Club.

I remembered the look on his face. I hated what he'd done to our family, what he'd done to the families of his victims. That's what they all were. Victims.

APRIL 9, 1997

I listened to the judge announce the verdict in the courtroom. Guilty of homicide by vehicle in the first degree, sentenced to fifteen years in prison, no chance for parole

until after six years. I felt all of the air whoosh out of my mother's body at the sentencing.

The lawyer said my father's term could have been considerably longer, but since the bus driver he killed was an older man and not a school kid, he'd caught a break. He was lucky, the lawyer said, that he'd only injured the children. Lucky to have just killed the one man.

I'd known the bus driver. His name was Charlie, and he'd deposited his paycheck with me every other Friday. He'd listened to Otis Redding and the Drifters. He'd moved to Jackson from Gulfport almost three years ago.

JULY, 1997

"I don't care, Mom. I can't even look at him, let alone speak to him," I said clearly.

We were eating salads and tuna sandwiches in her kitchen.

"Katherine, please. Your father might have made a horrible mistake, but he is still your father." She laid her fork on the placemat and put her hand on mine. "He is still your father."

"It wasn't a mistake."

"Yes, it was."

"How many times did he talk about getting revenge on the kids at school? The faculty? The parents? How often did he say vengeance was the only way to right what had gone wrong?" I gulped my iced tea. "Do you not remember any of this? Did you forget about the last two years?"

"Well, the officers blamed the accident on the alcohol in your father's system..." Her hopeful voice trailed off.

"Oh God, Mom! You don't believe that bullshit, do you?" I took another sip of tea

and picked up my fork. “We need to move on. You need to move on with your life. Forget about Dad. He’s nuts.”

“I won’t. I love your father. I always will, Katie. I’ve already forgiven him for what he’s done.”

“Well, he doesn’t love you!” I threw my fork down and it bounced off of the plate and onto the linoleum floor. “He’s changed. He’s a bad man, now. And he doesn’t ever want to see or talk to you again. Leave it alone,” I said before I thought about it.

My mother’s eyes welled up with tears. Her face reddened and it looked like I’d slapped her.

I sighed and squeezed her dainty, cold hand. “I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean that. That was an awful thing for me to say.”

My mother wiped her eyes and shook her head slowly. “You’re right. He doesn’t want to speak with me. He’s angry with me, I suppose. Although for what, I don’t know. But he is still willing to speak with you, Katie.”

“So? Like I said, I don’t want to speak with him,” I said stubbornly.

“You’re right. I know you’re right. But please do this for me, honey.” My mother grasped my hand with hers. “Promise me that you will visit your father as often as you can, so that you may be a refuge for him now. Remind him everyday that you forgive him for what he’s done, and that we love him. Can you do this for me? Please, honey?”

I looked at her and noticed that she’d aged a great deal in the past few years. She wasn’t yet fifty, and she looked like she was in her seventies. She looked tired.

I closed my eyes. “Fine,” I said. “I’ll visit Dad during visiting hours. I’ll be as kind as I possibly can. I want you to know, though, that I think this is really screwed up.

You won't be able to move on if you don't distance yourself from him. Ok?" I asked.

"Yes. I know. I just can't let go of your father so easily. He's a good man, even if you can't see it."

EARLY JUNE, 2008

My mother was diagnosed with Stage III-B breast cancer. Well, re-diagnosed. She was diagnosed the first time in 2006. She'd had a double mastectomy then, and she'd been in remission for the last two years. Not anymore.

Her prognosis was seven months, but the doctor wasn't optimistic.

I didn't tell the doctor that what she's dying from wasn't cancer; it was longing. Cancer was just the physical form it took.

MID-NOVEMBER, 2008

She died at 6 in the morning, in her hospital bed. The cancer had attacked her frail body with a vengeance, and she succumbed without much of a struggle.

I wasn't surprised at how quickly the cancer took over. She actually held out for longer than I thought she would. She never said anything, but I knew she was hoping to get at least a letter from my father.

NOVEMBER, 2008

ONE WEEK AFTER MY MOTHER'S DEATH

"Why is Papa in jail?" Lulu asked from her car seat in the back.

I glanced in the rearview mirror and caught her picking her nose with her tiny fingers. She was looking out of the window as we crossed the bridge, bouncing her legs against the booster seat.

"Lulu, honey, you know why. We've been over this. Papa's mind was sick and he hurt some people very badly. Being in jail is like being in time-out for grownups," I lied for the hundredth time. This was a real problem for me.

Lulu, honey, your grandfather ran a school bus full of children your age off the road into a ravine. He'd been drinking, and that's what the officials blamed the wreck on, but he did it on purpose. He wanted to punish the children and the school for what'd happened to your uncle Hal earlier that year. Lulu, honey, this is why you've only seen him once. I don't want you to know your grandfather. That's what I wanted to tell my daughter.

"Ok. Mom, guess what Sam's bringing next week for show-and-tell? He got a guinea pig for Christmas this year and he named it Tilly, and he said she can do tricks and run on the wheel just like a hamster, but I don't believe him, but he's bringing her anyway," she jabbered excitedly, but I quit paying any real attention. She'd been telling me about Tilly since the first day she'd gone back to school after the holidays.

I took a left onto Old Canton, where the ballet school was, and a squirrel ran out in front of my car. I stomped the brakes, realized I wouldn't be able to stop in time, and released them, cringing. The car glided fairly smoothly over the tiny, furry body, save only for the faint *bomp-bomp* I felt as the front and back tires rolled over it.

"No!" Lulu wailed. "You killed him!"

How had she felt that? Had she seen the squirrel run out? *Dammit*, I thought.

"I didn't hit him, Lulu!" I exclaimed. I tried to catch her eye in the mirror. "He made it to the other side! Didn't you see? He ran off by the church over there!" I pointed to the Methodist church we'd just passed.

"Liar!" she screamed in this awful, high-pitched squeal. "I saw you hit him! I *felt* the car bump!" She started kicking the back of my seat, knocking me against the steering wheel and back.

“Lulu, stop! You’re going to make me wreck the car!”

I jerked the wheel over to the shoulder of the busy road and jammed the gear shift into Park. I hastily unbuckled my seatbelt and twisted around in my seat to look at my daughter.

“I didn’t hit that squirrel,” I lied again, urgently. Why did I lie? Was it so awful to just admit that I’d hit a fucking moronic squirrel that ran out in the middle of the street?

I didn’t want to re-explain what dying meant. I’d just dealt with explaining to her why her grandmother wouldn’t be around anymore. Death and Heaven and Hell and angels and souls were such intangible, impossible things for children to understand. I didn’t like to think about what dying really meant for the one who dies and for the family who mourns the one who dies.

“You. Are. A. Liar.” She glared at me--huge, glistening tears in her eyes threatened to spill out and down her cheeks, onto her black leotard. Her lower lip was jutted out in a pout.

I reached out and squeezed her chubby little leg. “I promise, Lulu.” I held up my hand with my palm facing her. “Love honor.” Love honor was our family’s way of saying Cross your heart and hope to die, stick a needle in your eye.

“Hmph,” Lulu said suspiciously with a sniffle. “Love honor?”

“Of course,” I said. I turned back around in my seat and buckled my seat belt. “That squirrel is probably back with his family on the other side of the road now, looking for nuts under a tree!” I was sick. What had my father done to my sense of decency? What had he done to my process of dealing with grief?

As I left the ballet studio and began the familiar trek to the institution, I

contemplated on the bizarre idea that my five-year-old probably felt more empathy for an insignificant rodent than my father had ever felt for any human since Hal had died.

NOVEMBER 2008

TWO WEEKS AFTER MY MOTHER'S DEATH

"Mom died." The words fell from my lips. Funny how easily I could say this now.

"Oh? Is that why you weren't here two weeks ago? I was wondering, because you didn't answer my phone call." My father picked absently at a piece of string on his jumpsuit pocket. When I didn't respond, he looked at me expectantly. "What?" he asked.

"Mom died. She died, Dad."

No response.

"Don't you give a shit? How can you not care? She was your *wife*. You have to care!" I shouldn't have pushed him; I knew what his response would be.

"Why should I care?" He sighed.

"What?"

"Katherine, your mother was a weak woman. Always was. It was sickening, really. Didn't have the strength to care for herself, or her children." He leaned back in his chair and raised his eyebrows. "Good riddance, I say."

"I don't even know you anymore. What happened to you, Dad? You're a monster."

I could hear him chuckling as I walked away from the table.

"Next time you come, will you bring me some more Crossword Puzzle books?" he called.

NOVEMBER 2008

TWO WEEKS AFTER MY MOTHER'S DEATH

"Can I help you?" The woman at Reception didn't look up.

“I need to take my name off of an inmate’s visitation and contact list, please. And I read online that there’s a way to prevent an inmate from sending you anything through the mail? I’d like to do that, too.”

APRIL, 2010

I got a call from CMCF. My father died due to complications from an operation he’d had recently, an operation that had been done to alleviate his respiratory problems.

I didn’t tell the woman that I think what my father really died from is longing.

I did tell the woman that she could burn whatever was in his cell, all of his drawings and notebooks. I didn’t want them.

Supper Club

When I was younger, about nine or ten, my mother let me watch *Jaws*. I thought I could handle it, so I watched the whole bloody, terrifying thing by myself, at night, when she had gone to bed. The next day, I had a panic attack in our swimming pool; I closed my eyes to retrieve a diving ring from the deep end of the pool, and I accidentally imagined that I was bobbing in the ocean and that *Jaws* was hunting me. Our cleaning lady had to drag me out of the pool because I was almost drowning.

Decision-making is not my strong suit.

Don't take this the wrong way, but I would commit suicide if I thought anyone would come to the funeral. I don't mean that in a 'poor little girl' sense; it's just honesty. My English teacher told me that Shakespeare once wrote that honesty was the mark of a good man, something to hang on to, so if nothing else, I try to be pretty upfront. Anyway, I would hang myself from the pull-up bar in my stepdad's closet if I thought a dime would be spent on the funeral arrangements. But my mother probably wouldn't want to hold one because, among the other, bigger reasons, she'd have to diet to fit into her good black dress so she could look beautiful-in-grief for the attendees; she'd just rather not deal with all of the added stress, coupled with having to move all of my shit out of the room I share with my stepsister, Caroline. I guess I don't blame her. Manual labor is a fucking drag.

I know what you're thinking. What is wrong with this kid? She probably has a regular house in the suburbs with a nice family who loves her, but she thinks they don't pay enough attention to her. She is the product of too much television and not enough sit-down family dinners. She is caught in the war of hormones that begins in adolescence. She is on her period. And though some of this might be true, it isn't the reason I've been on this self-loathing kick lately. That's all because of something Nancy Grace has dubbed the "Southern, Small Town Sex-Craze." Our local newspapers referred to it with more gusto and flamboyance; I've read articles entitled "Loose Morals, Looser Women here in Holly Springs" and "Perverted Potlucks: What's *Really* Going on at Supper Club." Hell, I've even been called the Swingers' Snitch. And this whole fiasco is why I, along with the

rest of the inhabitants of Holly Springs (and some that live in the surrounding counties), hate myself.

Let me give you the rundown on my life pre-shit-going-down: I was a normal seventeen-year-old girl who lived with her mom, stepdad, and younger stepsister in Holly Springs, Mississippi. I liked my mom okay; we'd had a shaky relationship since my father left us, but I loved her deep down. I even like my stepsister. But my stepdad creeped me out. It wasn't just his mustache either; it was that I knew he jacked off to Olivia Thirlby in the shower. Caroline and I know he thinks Olivia Thirlby is hot because he told us the night he proposed to my mother that he thought she was beautiful and nearly identical to OT. He said it as he kissed my mother's hand and looked around the table like he expected applause or something. I remember the look of fake surprise on my mother's face, and her shiny, fake tears welling up in her eyes. Anyway, I saw him making this weird jerky movement in the computer chair with his back to the door one day, looking at an onscreen picture of Olivia Thirlby in a thin tank top that showed her nipples, smiling and blowing a kiss to the camera. I never said anything and Mike never saw me, but I think he heard the floor creak as I sped-walked down the hall. Now I'm pretty sure he jacks off in the shower.

(Yes, I know I should've been a big girl and gotten over this, but it's like once you know a person's masturbation muse, you just can't let it go.)

Holly Springs is a smallish town right near the University, but don't let the stupid name fool you. While unfounded, the inhabitants feel, or certainly used to feel, a sense of entitlement. Whether this self-righteousness started once the college football team got good and the real estate market started booming, or because we've been written up in

Southern Living twice in the “Cuisine and Culture” section, I don’t know. But this was the epitome of a twisted city; where soccer moms were also trophy wives, where Golf and Politics and Religion and Martinis were equally important. Shit, the families here really thought they were living in New York City or something. We had designer boutiques popping up all over the place, and the country club had just recently completed a yearlong renovation to include a spa and “sweat lounge.” The best part though, was that they were all still rednecks at heart. The men still had football Sunday parties in which they gathered at someone’s house to scratch their balls and drink whiskey and make inappropriate comments about the Holly Springs Academy cheerleaders (Academy? How is this “Academy” any different from the Holly Springs High it used to be, you’re asking? It’s not. They just doubled the tuition and built a “reflection pool” in the courtyard.) The only difference is that the men drank their whiskey from their wives’ new crystal lowball glasses. The women still dressed to look as young as their high school-aged daughters. Ever since Jennifer Lopez made those fucking velour jumpsuits popular, not a day went by that I didn’t see some middle-aged mom prancing around town or driving her Escalade in one of those fluorescent atrocities.

This is where I grew up. (By the way, I don’t know why I’m referring to everything in my life in the past tense; it’s just that everything’s changed. Like I don’t even live here anymore.)

I actually had friends here. Several, in fact. We were termed the “artsy” kids, the “hipsters,” which really meant we didn’t play sports, and we listened to music other than the Carpenters at Christmas and Britney Spears in our convertibles on the way to school. We were “individualists” and “music lovers” before rebellion and art appreciation got

cool. I blame all of my current angst (not your regular teenage angst) on the fact that I wasn't just a follow-the-crowd type of girl. In fact, if I hadn't been a member of the artsy group of kids, I'd have never been asked to babysit for the Garraways that Saturday during the U of M football game. I was saving up for this big concert in Nashville, and I didn't really like to participate in drunken football Saturday, so I told the Garraways I'd watch their daughter while they made an appearance in college-town. Sarah-Love (that's her actual name) was recovering from wisdom teeth removal surgery she'd had the day before; if she hadn't had yellow bruises from her eye sockets to her chin, her parents would have dragged her along. Who better to take drink orders than an 11-year-old who can't open her mouth?

When the Garraways got home at around midnight, Mrs. Garraway stumbled in to check on Sarah-Love, and Mr. Garraway hung around to ask if I'd "held the fort down" and whisper drunkenly in my ear that when he was in college, I would have been just the type of gal for him. He had on a mock turtleneck shirt and a houndstooth blazer, and sported a cheesy mustache like Mike that unnerved me, so I just mumbled something about what a sweet girl Sarah-Love was, grabbed my shit, and ran out the door. I totally left the check Mr. Garraway had written me on the counter.

Now, as a standard, Holly Springs parents pay \$12 an hour for their babysitters, and \$15 if they are either really late or really drunk. So, since the Garraways were both, I knew Mr. Garraway had left me a nice, big check. And I left it just lying there.

I realized when I got home that I'd forgotten to grab it, but it was too late to go back, so I called Mrs. Garraway the next morning. I left a message stating I'd come to pick up the check later that day, and to call me if this was a problem. One of the strange

perks about Holly Springs is that because everyone is so concerned with their image, they sport a fake sheen of neighborliness. This means that babysitters often get a key to their charge's homes, neighbors pick up each others' newspapers if they go out of town, the women hold baby showers/graduation showers/wedding showers for their neighbors and their neighbors' children, etc. Anyway, in my haste to escape Mr. Garraway's whiskey breath and roaming fingers, I'd forgotten to leave the key on the countertop.

I decided that I'd just swing by, knock on the door, and run in. I knew Sarah-Love would probably be there recuperating in the downstairs playroom anyway.

Both cars were in the driveway once I got there, so I walked around to the side door (in Holly Springs, front doors are used only for hanging Christmas wreaths) and rapped on the glass. I could see the check on the countertop, where it had been last night, so after waiting a couple of minutes, I turned the knob and gently pushed the door, praying it would swing open and I could just pop in. It did, so I did.

And just as I grabbed the check, I heard low adult voices behind me. I turned to explain to Mrs. and Mr. Garraway, and saw Mrs. Garraway, my stepfather, Burt White's mother, and the Hendersons shuffling down the stairs and into the kitchen, looking all ruffled and strange. Mr. Henderson was buttoning his shirt, and Lesley White was smoothing her pencil skirt. Mrs. Garraway, in a loosely tied silk bathrobe, was rubbing my stepfather's shoulders and he was caressing her hand as they walked. I knew they hadn't noticed me yet because their conversation continued and became clearer the closer they got to the kitchen counter. And I just stood there. Like an idiot.

"Same time, two weeks from now?" Mr. Henderson asked the group.

"Fine with me," answered my stepfather, slipping on his loafers. "Sundays are the

days I end up needing this the most, anyway.” He laughed.

They all laughed.

“I know what you mean,” trilled Mrs. Garraway as she checked her lipstick in the mirror above the desk. “Barry and I get so tense throughout the week. Hey, Mike?” she asked, rotating towards my stepfather and placing her hands on his chest. “Bring Dee around next time, won’t you? I think she’d really enjoy our parties once she got past the nerves.”

And I think that’s when I realized what was going on. Oh my God, I thought. Holy fucking shit.

I must have inhaled sharply, because that’s when they saw me. Well, really it was Mrs. White. She shifted her glance from Mrs. Garraway to Mike and saw me trying to melt by the side door.

“Paige?” she whispered loudly, before Mike could answer.

They all turned to stare at me. And, like an idiot, I stood there and said nothing.

“What are you doing here?” Mike said quietly, dragging his fingers through his crinkled hair. “How long have you been here? It’s not what it looks like.” He was talking fast and I heard that fucking ‘Believe me, won’t you?’ tone in his voice. He took a couple of steps toward me.

“I came to get my check,” I started uncertainly, looking around from face to sheepish face. “You know, from last night, Mrs. Garraway? I left it on the counter.”

Mrs. Garraway said nothing. She and the other adults just averted their eyes. The Hendersons were trying to scoot backwards into the hallway.

“Where’s Mom?” I asked Mike, looking him in the eye. “What are you doing?”

“Mike, you forgot your wallet on our bedside table again.” Another jovial voice was coming down the spiral staircase. “I know, I know, Dee says she’s understanding of our parties, but you don’t want to keep rubbing it in her face. And I think you having to explain where your wallet is every other week would probably do that,” Mr. Garraway exclaimed as he strutted into the kitchen, shirtless.

We just stared at him until he looked up from the wallet and noticed me standing there.

And that’s when they explained the whole situation to me. Right there in the Garraways’ kitchen. The men talked in very matter-of-fact ways, and the women coddled me in hushed, soothing tones, trying to appeal to me as both mothers and females. The Garraways explained how adults have needs, and that there are no hurt feelings with their arrangement because each person only wants the others to be happy and fulfilled. The Hendersons stressed that secrecy was the most crucial part of their group, that each member mustn’t speak of the parties outside of the parties, so as not to ruin their reputations among town. Lesley White sat on a barstool and pretty much whimpered the whole time, mumbling something about her son, and being treated as a whore because she was a single mother. And Mike was a bumbling fool. He went from guilty child, to strict stepfather, to pal, to unapologetic, to paranoid. He explained to me that while my mother knew of his membership in the group and about the weekly parties, she had chosen not to participate because she found it...intimidating. (I knew she was really thinking about her role as Junior League rep and what the fuck this would do to her if it leaked. I also knew she was probably repulsed at the unsanitary nature of it). He began to explain about how now that they required that each member get tested for sexual health,

they no longer had to worry about Chlamydia (oh my sweet Jesus, I thought), and this was when Mr. Garraway stopped him.

“Ok, Ok, Mike. She gets the picture.” He walked towards me and jauntily threw his arm around my shoulder. I cringed at the feel of his chest hair against me. “You won’t say anything, will you, Paige? It’d sure mean a lot to all of us here.” He waved an arm around the room to indicate the rest of the group.

“I don’t know...” I trailed off. I looked around, still in shock.

“Oh, come on now, Paige. What can we do to make you understand?” Mr. Garraway tightened his grip on my shoulder.

I came to real quickly. This was a trip. This guy was going to try to bribe me to keep my mouth shut about their secret Swingers parties? Give me a fucking break.

“You have nothing to worry about, sir,” I said sweetly, looking at Mr. Garraway straight on. “None of you have anything to worry about,” I promised the rest of the adults in the room. Then I turned to Mike. “See you at home,” I said. And I walked out the side door, check in hand.

Mike got home ten minutes after I did. He looked like shit. I was watching Maury Povitch on the kitchen television. (Don’t judge me. That shit is funny.)

“Where’s your mother?” he asked quietly.

I pointed to the bulletin board, to which my mother had pinned a note written in her perfect handwriting. “Darlings- Supper is in the fridge. Be home after Hot Yoga at the Club.”

Mike nodded. “I need to talk to you,” he said as he pulled out the bar stool next to

me and sat down.

I muted the kitchen television and raised my eyebrows. “Ok?”

“What you saw today is not a big deal, right? Your mother is aware of my, um, involvement in this group, and she’s perfectly fine with it,” he stated. “I am not ashamed of my being a part of this, and I think it is healthy for men and women to participate in whatever they need to to feel satisfied. However, I need to make certain that this doesn’t get out to the rest of the town.” He clasped his hands together and smiled at me as if he was about to administer Novocain. “Reputation is a big part of my job, and to tarnish it with something like this would really hurt my success in the real estate world.” He paused.

Oh God. He thought he was *such* a big deal with his new television commercials that featured him standing next to a goddamn blowup gorilla and talking about the craziest deals in town.

“Ok?” I was trying to hurry him along so I could get back to Maury. The episode was on mothers who slept with their sons who were secretly gay and had boyfriends on the side.

“What I’m trying to say is, I need to guarantee that this won’t leak,” Mike continued in a more urgent tone. “I’m willing to reward you for your word, Paige. Each member of the group is.” He waited.

I was confused. “What do you mean?” I asked. “You’re going to pay me so I won’t tell all of my friends that you and their parents are involved in some Swingers club? Why would I do that anyway? It’s embarrassing and disgusting.” I reached for the remote.

He grimaced, but went on. “You can think of us however you’d like, but we really need to make sure that you won’t spill our little secret. So, how much would you need to make you guarantee us you won’t tell?” He made a big show of pulling his checkbook out of his back pocket now. It was plaid with a U of M Rebel on it.

I thought for a minute. This was crazy. I would never tell anyone about my stepdad’s nasty pastime. Kids my age didn’t like to think about older people having sex, especially their parents. I would have taken this to my grave. But since Mike was offering...

“That music school up in Berkeley. Tuition is \$25,000 a year for out-of-state students. I want to go next year,” I heard myself saying in this calm voice. I couldn’t believe this shit coming out of my mouth. Sure I’d been wanting to go to this school for years, and my jackass parents were refusing to pay for it (because they thought pursuing music was passé and that, Heaven forbid, I’d marry a hippie), but I’d never considered blackmailing my stepfather and his friends to get the money for it. I opened my mouth to tell him I was only joking, but he interrupted me.

“Fine,” he said, uncapping his Montblanc and reaching for a pad in the drawer. “Each of us can manage to cover one semester apiece so we can pay for your first two years,” he murmured as he scribbled. “Will this work?” He continued without waiting for a reply, “Of course, Lesley will need some financial help in figuring out how to pay for both your and Burt’s colleges, but she’ll survive. Gene can take a look at her finances to help her out. And I’ll have to find a way to hide this from your mother, but it’s manageable. We’ll tell her you got a scholarship.” He finished figuring up all of these calculations onto his tiny pad and looked up at me. “And you will agree to never mention

this to anyone, right? If we do this, you can never say anything. Do you give your word?"

Fifteen minutes later I was upstairs, looking at the Berkeley School of Music online, and filling out early acceptance applications. I was so excited I could barely feel the constriction in my chest.

This all seems pretty easy, right? Apart from the apparent lack of any functioning moral compass, I seemed to have a good situation on my hands. How, I know you're wondering, did I possibly fuck this up? Well, it's all due to my sense of self and how murky that sense is. One minute I'm fine with taking hush money from the adults I've known my whole life, and the other I'm suffering from such intense guilt and empathy for my mother that I can barely breathe. Though I'd really like to blame Nancy Grace, Trudy Sims, and all of the adults in this town, it is only my distorted sense of self and my gullibility that derailed this seemingly flawless plan. And my decision-making inability.

Days passed without much happening. I was still rocked by the disturbing images my brain kept creating, graphic ones of my hairy stepdad and Mrs. Garraway, ones of Mr. Garraway and Burt's mom. It was so bad that I avoided Burt in the hallways at school, and I turned down all the babysitting jobs that were offered after the incident. I was scared that every parent in town was a member of this club. I remembered Mike stuttering that they weren't the only adults in this town that would be hurt if I told someone. What did that mean? Were there that many more parents that swung?

And now that I knew about the group, I worried every time Mike left the house without my mother. How could she possibly accept this about her husband? I fought the

feeling to believe that she was doing this so she wouldn't have to face another divorce, but I knew, deep down, that's what was going on. You can't still love a man in that way once you learn that he openly cheats on you with several women, twice a week. Right?

I finally allowed myself to exhale once a month had passed and I hadn't accidentally spilled my secret. It wasn't so much that I would hate getting BSOM taken away (though that would suck), it's that I didn't want anyone knowing my stepfather was a part of something like this. And the families of the group members would be humiliated.

Almost a month and a half had passed when things changed. I overheard Mother and Mike talking late one night after supper.

"Absolutely not, honey," my mother whispered angrily as she closed the dishwasher. Even in anger, a Southern woman can still call someone "honey."

"But why not, Dee? You won't be here, and the kids can go to a friend's house or something, and I'll wash all of the sheets after. It's not a big deal," he said.

"That is so disgusting," she exclaimed. "Please don't talk about things like that to me. I don't want to be a part of this stupid phase you're going through, and I'm not letting one of y'all's "parties" take place at our home. It's not happening." I knew she crossed her arms in front of her chest with that statement.

"Give me a break, Dee." He sounded like he was rolling his eyes. "Don't act like any of this hurts your feelings. You just don't want me doing it because you don't want me to be happy. I'm sorry, but whatever we're doing in the bedroom isn't working, so I need to find it somewhere else." He walked towards the stairs and said coolly, "And I think I'll call Lesley and tell her the party's on for Sunday afternoon. This is my house,

after all, and I'll do whatever I please here." He walked up the stairs slowly.

And then I saw something that made me sick. My mother sank down to the floor and cried. I'd only seen her cry like this twice before: once during *Free Willy*, and once when my father left us for his dental hygienist almost eleven years ago. I was six, and she thought I was asleep, but I'd come to her room with another nightmare. She was sitting on the bathroom floor with her back against the bathtub, crying into her hands like she was now. Not loudly or dramatically, just really, really sadly.

I think that night was the night I decided I hated my father. I really could handle him leaving me, but it was too much to see that he'd made my mother cry like that.

I backed away from the kitchen as quietly as possible and went to my room. What I just saw had changed things. My disgust towards Mike flamed into hatred, and I realized that my mother truly cared about Mike, loved him so much she allowed him to have sex outside of marriage to appease him, and he didn't feel the same way anymore. I'd thought all along that my mother's marriage to Mike was more of a I-don't-want-to-be-alone-and-you're-fairly-attractive-and-successful type of arrangement, not a love and affection thing. But I suppose it was more of the former for Mike, and the latter for my mother.

Mike was a dickhead, and I wanted him to feel as bad as my mother was feeling just now. I resolved to put my needs aside to make Mike feel at least a little bit of the hurt that he'd inflicted on my mother.

I was sorta on the fence as to what I should do about the whole situation. On the

one hand, I gave my word to Mike and the rest of the group that I wouldn't say anything. On the other hand, I wanted to embarrass Mike and expose him for the creep he was. But I know that if it wasn't for what happened at the grocery store later that next day, I probably would have put what I saw in the kitchen out of my mind, and chalked it up to normal marital woes. I probably would have just vowed to be kinder and more understanding of my mother, and continued to hate Mike. Quietly. But that isn't what happened.

I had to run to the grocery store for a piece of poster board that I needed for a school project, and I happened to see Mrs. Garraway at the make-your-own-peanut butter station. She had her cell phone resting between her shoulder and cheek and was chatting loudly as she crunched the nuts in the machine. I turned to walk away so that she wouldn't see me and I wouldn't have to awkwardly choose between acting normal, like I hadn't just discovered she was part of a big Swingers club, or standoffish. Then I saw Mike. He snuck up behind Mrs. Garraway and nibbled on her neck. She giggled and closed her cell phone and turned around to face him.

I ducked behind the counter behind them; they were pretty safe on this aisle since no one ever used the make-your-own-peanut butter station, but still. In the middle of the grocery store like this?

“Hey, baby,” he purred.

“Hi. I've missed you.” She kissed him. “What did Dee say about the party?”

I cringed at the sound of my mother's name.

“It's on.” Another kiss. “She's driving me nuts though. She can't tell me how to live my life, and what people I can invite into my own home. Right?”

“Right. We’ve been telling you for weeks, honey. She’s not good for you.” She giggled as he leaned down to nibble on her neck again. “Mike, stop.” She didn’t want him to stop. “Someone will see us.”

He backed up a bit. “I know. But I can’t just leave her. Especially now that Paige knows about the club. I have to think about my career, babe.”

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “But you know you’re too good for her, right? Too sexy, too adventurous, too strong for a woman like that.” She picked up her basket again.

“Hell yes, I know that. I can’t believe I married that boring bitch.” He straightened his tie and asked, “How do I look? I’ve got to go home now.”

“Hot,” she said, grinning. “I can’t wait for the party this weekend, babe. You and me.” She turned back to her peanut butter.

Mike spun her around roughly and kissed her on the lips again before walking away. “Counting down the minutes,” he said, and winked.

I sat there, crouched behind that counter, until Mrs. Garraway finished with the damn peanut butter and moved through the checkout line. Hot tears pinched at the corners of my eyes as I thought about what I’d just seen.

So, not only was Mike cheating on my mother, he hated her. He held company with people that also despised her and often talked badly about her. He wanted to leave us, like my father did, but couldn’t because of the fact that I’d discovered their secret club.

I wanted to kill Mike. I got as far as thinking about how I could slip the rat poison

into his coffee.

I sat and stewed over this new development all night after I left the grocery store. (To hell with the school project.) I had to figure out how to hurt Mike, really hurt him, and to burn the rest of the group members along with him.

I weighed the options. I could wait until after a couple of semesters at BSOM had been paid for, and *then* tell my secret. Or I could say something now, forget about Berkeley, and help my mother save face in a really damaging situation.

I thought about when I fell off of my trampoline and twisted my ankle. My father had told me to toughen up, then gone back to reading in his recliner, but my mother had scolded him and brought me into the kitchen and made me a chocolate sundae with extra whipped cream and read my favorite book to me until I forgot about the pain in my foot. She'd walked with me out to the trampoline later and said she was going to punish the trampoline for hurting me. "Bad trampoline," she'd said as she lightly slapped the screen floor. "Don't you hurt my baby like that."

And she told me that I couldn't use the trampoline for a week after that because the trampoline was in trouble.

I decided to make Mike the trampoline. I couldn't spank him and the other members of the club, but I could make them look really bad.

I pushed BSOM out of my mind and wrote a quick, anonymous email to Trudy Sims encouraging her, as editor of our school newspaper, to look into a rumor that there was a real-life Swingers Club in our community. I included the Garraways' names, but not Mike's. I didn't want my mother to be linked to any of this in the article.

I sent the email quick before I could even think about not sending it.

Shit really hit the fan after that. Trudy actually looked into the rumor, and uncovered several more members of the club. It turns out, Principal Branning and Mrs. Keenan, the 9th grade math teacher, were both occasional attendees at these meetings. I guess Trudy's dad, editor of *The Times-Holly Springs*, got hold of the story, and covered the scandal the next day, and Trudy was interviewed in several of them.

It got even bigger when Lesley White came forward to try and clear her name, because she got hysterical and accidentally revealed the names of the other group members. Reporters started calling my house and asking for me, my mother, and Mike, and when they discovered that Mike had moved out, they hounded him at the hotel. Mike's commercials were taken off of the air. My mother quit speaking to me all together. Burt White told me he hated me via a nasty text message. The Garraways contacted Nancy Grace, no doubt for the chance to be on national television, and gave her tons of information about the scandal, including names of past members. Nancy Grace's segment featured pictures of me, of Trudy, of my family, of the other members of the group. It featured sound bytes from the Garraways and from Trudy, who let slip the fact that my stepfather had bribed me not to say anything. (I *might* have mentioned that in the email I sent her...in hopes of further damning Mike's reputation.) Then I really became the subject of scrutiny. My mother wouldn't let me go to school because she was scared of how the kids would treat me, or what the media would do to me. The principal recommended I find another school, one more suited for my "situation."

And that's how it is now. I sit in my house all day, not answering the phone or the

door, praying this will all blow over soon, thinking about killing myself but not really because I'd be way too scared to do it, and plus, I don't really want to die yet. Mike and my mother aren't speaking; in fact, in a bizarre twist, Mike and the other members of the group have banded together to protect their images. He hasn't been back to the house in over two weeks.

Oh. And BSOM is off, naturally (unless Ellen Degeneres invites me on her show and offers to pay for my school. The only show I'd ever think about doing would be Ellen. Or Maury.) I realized the other day that I wasn't quite sure why I had ever decided to go through with the telling of the story in the first place. Because whatever the reason, it wasn't worth all of this bullshit. Especially since my mother hasn't even thanked me for exposing Mike as the creep he is. She told me that she doesn't even care that he tried to bribe me.

My mother said that this is what I get for trying to play God. I should have just left it alone, let the bad people win, let my mother suffer silently because her husband didn't love her. It really wasn't any different than any other normal scandal in a Southern town, right?

Bogey

He winked, tipped his hat slowly, and let a small, subdued grin walk across his face. “Here’s looking at you, kid,” he said in a deep voice, loaded with emotion and unwavering confidence. Just as he was turning to walk away, he heard a distinct noise through the fog. It was laughter.

“Holy shit, Johnnie. Are you listening to this? He’s doing it again.” The words were barely audible through Tommie’s wheezing laugh.

“Oh, dear God,” murmured Lace quietly. “Tell me this is not happening.” He’d been caught, again, impersonating Humphrey Bogart in the bathroom he shared with his two older sisters. He didn’t understand how this could have happened; he’d even set his alarm clock back half an hour to avoid this particular situation.

It wasn’t that he was obsessed with Bogey (that would be queer as shit); no, it was more that Lace felt a distinct connection to him, a sense that, if given the opportunity, Lace could rise above this personal hell and become the Bogey of his time: a hero, a charming outlaw, a heartthrob.

“Open the fucking door, Humphrey. We have chorus practice this morning and Sandy is going to be here in forty-five minutes to pick us up. Move it.” The raucous laughter had almost subsided now, and Lace knew he had only a few seconds to exit his stage before his sisters started whining to their mother.

He gathered up his second-hand Bogart hat and wet towel, gave one last wink at his reflection in the cloudy mirror, and turned the knob. *Keep your cool*, Lace heard the familiar voice say. Lace wasn’t crazy or anything; sometimes he just heard Humphrey Bogart’s voice in his head. He guessed that it was like his conscience or something. It

was pretty cool.

Lace nodded and pushed the door open. “Morning, ladies,” he said, bending down slightly into a polite, half-bow.

“God, you are such a faggot,” Johnnie, the mouthy, fat one said, pushing him against the door as she bustled in. “How do you have any friends at all?” She waved her hand in front of her face. “Shit, it’s steamy in here.”

“Yeah, faggot. How do you have any friends at all?” Tommie the parrot squawked directly into Lace’s ear.

Sigh, Lace heard. He sighed aloud. “I don’t know what’s funny. Do you realize that you two have no affinity for culture, no appreciation for the arts? You spend your time on nothing worthwhile. Why don’t you go watch Billy Sundson mow his lawn without his shirt on again? What a tool. Then you can hold each other and cry about how you two ugly whores will never probably even kiss a member of the opposite sex, unless you count Tuesday here.” He reached down to tug on Tuesday’s tangled tail; Tuesday lifted an eyelid lazily, then let it drop. “But poor Tuesday might refuse. Even mutts have standards.” *Nice one, kid*, he heard. He pushed past them and walked quickly down the hall now, knowing he had gone too far but not really caring. He only had to wait for one of the two things that was sure to ensue: either Tommie would tackle him face-first on the thinning carpet and sit on his skinny frame until he cried out “Uncle,” or Johnnie would fake-cry to their mama, telling her he threatened to murder her first-born and string the body from a clothesline or something.

Mentally preparing himself for Tommie to jump him from behind, Lace was even more annoyed to hear the terrible two high-fiving and more laughter as the door slammed

shut behind them. How is it possible, Lace thought, that we are related? How are those painstakingly uninspired girls my sisters?

Lace's parents were weirdos, but he loved them. Or at least, he loved who his mother once was, and who his father had become. His mother had been an extreme feminist a couple of decades ago; she'd sworn she would break the gender rules and spit in the proverbial face of conformity. And in her own way, she had. She'd graduated college in three years with a degree in communication. She'd gotten married, then pregnant with the twins while she was pursuing her Master's, and she was one of the only women she'd heard of to give birth to two children, finish her thesis while breast-feeding, and get her degree without missing more than a month of class. She'd given her daughters masculine names, and her only son a feminine one. When Johnnie and Tommie turned sixteen, their mother allowed them to change the endings on their names to "ie", making the names look at least a bit more feminine (though their mannish figures and stubborn black mustaches did little to help with this). Lace (named Lacey), just insisted he be called by his nickname, so his name wasn't ever much of a problem for him. In fact, "Lace" sounded almost *too* masculine to him, like Bif or Todd. Names that were simple enough for the jocks to spell and remember, names that looked perfect airbrushed next to "Spring Break!" on white muscle tees. If he really thought about it, Lace figured he was damned either way.

Lace's mom's fiery desires to break all the rules had cooled over the years, after she lost three toes in a march for an equality of bathroom stalls in the public school system around eight years ago. Lace knew this botched protest was the beginning of the end of Tony's career. She said it was because she'd gotten too old and she was pleased

with the way the fight towards equality and peace was heading, but Lace knew it was something more. She'd smelled the bitter stench of defeat, and the realization that she wasn't invincible scared her into complacency.

Nowadays, Tony would occasionally watch a protest on television, or go on a short-lived rampage throwing out any clothing made in China or Taiwan, but her days mainly consisted of reclining on the worn couch in the den, popping Fritos and guzzling Tab. Lace guessed that as the years went on, quiet suburbia had gotten the best of her, and her violent loss of digits had completely extinguished her flair for the dramatics in the fight for equality.

To Lace, his dad was a hero, and certainly the more interesting of the two parents. Phil was really a nerd; he worked nights at a supply company and Lace rarely saw him, but Lace respected the him regardless. Phil was gentle, patient, complacent...nice. He was just nice. He'd met Tony at a rally for the Bye Bye Bra movement in the 70's. He'd been big into video equipment and stuff, and his cousin had asked him to film the rally. As Phil tells the story, he ended up filming Tony instead of the rally. And that was the beginning. As far as Lace could tell, Phil had followed Tony around the world as she protested, with a camera stuck to his face. That kind of devotion made Lace believe that true love really existed in the world. He knew Humphrey Bogart would have agreed.

Now, Lace was always amazed that Phil could put up with Johnnie and Tommie, the poisonous thorns in Lace's side, and it even appeared that he loved the two bitches. He also doted on Lace's mother, never suggesting, even hinting, that Tony might move and let her ass (and the couch) breathe a little, let alone work.

This puzzled Lace: how could someone love another person so much that he is

willing to work nearly twelve hours a night to support her revolting habits? Lace knew that Phil respected the stubborn and independent woman that Tony once was, but he couldn't see even a shred of that woman when he looked at his mother now. Lace sighed again.

Their relationship was indescribable, and Phil's devotion was unwavering. The relationship had once been close to achieving Bogart status, but Tony had botched that, too. Now, Phil and Tony had a unique connection. Phil was not only a hundred pounds lighter, five shades paler, and had three times less hair than his wife, he was also working shitty night-shifts so that he could afford to let Tony keep the television on all day. And Tony loved Phil, too, Lace guessed, just not enough to get up and get a job. Lace hated her for that.

"Morning, Mother," Lace called towards the couch.

"Hello," Tony grunted back. "Hey, the batteries on this damn remote are shorting out again." Lace heard Tony hitting the remote control against her palm.

She continued, in a saccharine tone, "I'm sorry, baby."

Lace paused and waited for what he knew would come next.

"I don't know why I'm grumping at you. It's not your fault this thing's dead... unless you've been staying up all night watching those damned old movies again?" Lace heard the accusation in her voice. "Because that would certainly use up the batteries quicker, you flicking the channels back and forth for hours." Tony turned her head to look at her son. "Have you?"

"No ma'am. I really haven't watched much of anything lately," Lace lied easily

through his teeth, to the sound of a chuckle in his head. Lace barely considered this lying anyway, as Tony monopolized the television set nearly all day and night; his only solace was to immerse himself in the world of film, where men like Humphrey Bogart existed, and while there weren't always happy endings, there was a healthy supply of drama and passion and excitement. Lace's eyes flickered to the screaming television set and he grimaced; he could hardly relate to Bogey's world.

"Whew!" came Phil's voice as the back door swung open. Lace craned his neck to see his father returning home from a night's work. "It's scary out there. Raining dats and cogs!" Lace groaned good-naturedly as Phil and the voice inside of his head chuckled. When Lace was little he'd always switched the "C" in cats with the "D" in dogs, and his father had used this phrase ever since. Lace regretted that he'd ever even said it (and secretly he doubted he did), but he smiled nonetheless. With his matted hair and foggy glasses, Phil looked exactly like Rick Moranis from *Little Shop of Horrors*. Such a good guy, thought Lace. He deserves so much better. And then he heard Bogey's familiar response to thoughts like this. *Oh, yeah? So what are you gonna do about it, kid?* Lace ignored it.

"Hey, Dad," Lace said, walking into the kitchen and tossing his dad a dishtowel so Phil could dry off.

"Whaddya know, Sport?" Phil replied as he goofily caught the towel; Lace noticed he had dark circles under his eyes. "Ready for school? Gonna find you a lady to appreciate you today? Gonna find some excitement maybe? Huh? Looking sharp, Son. Nice hat! You look just like Bogey in *The Roaring Twenties*." Phil spoke in short, enthusiastic sentences, which was one of the things Lace loved about him. Lace smiled in

spite of himself. Phil was the one who'd introduced Lace to Bogey back when Lace was just a baby. They'd watch Humphrey Bogart marathons, each imitating classic Bogey one-liners until Tony made them both go to sleep.

"I guess, Dad. Maybe today's the day," Lace said, hoping that it was. "How was work?" Lace asked his father.

"Who cares, Lace? I'm just glad to be home with my babies!" With this, Phil danced into the den to kiss Lace's mother, his soggy tennis shoes leaving big wet marks on the kitchen floor as he moved.

Lace winced at his mother's would-be response to the mess, wiped up the tracks with a quick swipe of the now damp dishtowel, and grabbed a couple of dollars out of the cracked ceramic pig on the counter for his lunch money. He smiled sadly to himself as he thought of his dad. What a good person. Works all night only to come home to this shithole, to a wife that barely blinks at his presence and two ungrateful cows of daughters. I hope this isn't as good as it's gonna get for him, Lace thought.

Lace heard his mother grumble a greeting and peeked in at his parents on the couch. Phil was sitting by Tony's feet, and she was trying to lean around him to see the television. Phil kissed her on the forehead and shuffled back into the kitchen.

Phil caught his son's eye and grinned. "Hey Lace, what do you want for breakfast, huh? Pancakes? French toast? I'm feeling adventurous today." Phil raised his eyebrows three times in quick succession. "Phil got excited over the smallest things. It was refreshing.

Lace opened his mouth to answer, but he was interrupted by the loud stomps of his sisters entering the room.

“Oooh, pancakes. That’s what I want.” Johnnie plopped down at the table and took out her cell phone.

“I want French toast!” whined Tommie. She pulled out a cell phone identical to Johnnie’s and began punching furiously on the keys.

Lace cringed at their fatness.

“Comin’ right up, ladies! Lace, will you ask your mother if she wants anything?” Phil chimed from inside the pantry.

Lace wondered when it had reached this point, when his father was expected to work all night and still cook and clean and cater to everyone’s needs. Had it been gradual? Lace didn’t remember.

“Mom?” Lace asked as he walked back into the dark den. “Do you want pancakes or French toast for breakfast?” He hoped she’d fallen back asleep.

“No. But you can tell your father I want Belgian waffles with strawberry sauce and whipped cream. And tell him not to let the waffles get cold this time. I want them straight off the skillet.”

Lace considered telling his father that Tony was asleep so Phil wouldn’t have to fix three separate orders for the women in the house, but knew that shit would hit the fan if his mother didn’t get her breakfast soon.

“Mom wants waffles, Dad.” Lace said quietly.

“She does? Well, we’re out of waffle mix…” Phil’s voice trailed off as he thought a minute. “No worries! I’ll just run to the store really quick. Anything else she wanted?” Phil grabbed his dripping raincoat off of the hook by the door and paused.

“Yes,” Lace grimaced. “Strawberry sauce and whipped cream.”

Phil sighed a very small sigh. Only Lace heard it. “Ok. Sounds good. Girls,” he said to Lace’s sisters, “I’ll be back very shortly to finish with your breakfast!”

“God, Dad. We’re going to be late to school if you take too long.” Tommie said without looking up from her phone.

“I’m hurrying, I’m hurrying!” Phil called as he darted out of the back door and into the darkening monsoon.

He popped his head back in the door, and said, “Lace, do you want a ride to school? I’ll drop you off if you’re ready. It was really coming down out there earlier.” His thin hair was soaking wet and plastered to his forehead.

“Naw, Dad, I’m ok.” Lace pulled back the cheap drapes and eyed the rain. “It’s slowing down a bit.” Plus, Lace liked the drama of walking slowly in the rain with his raincoat pulled tight around his neck. Just like Bogey at the end of *Casablanca*. Here’s looking at you, kid.

Lace opened the door and yelled out a “Ciao” before the voice in his head could respond.

Lace was three houses down the road when he heard Johnnie’s screeching voice, much louder than the voice in his mind he’d been trying to ignore. He looked up to see her standing on the front lawn, motioning to him through the rain. He could barely hear her. He jogged towards his sister.

“What is it?” he shouted.

“Lace, hurry! Something’s wrong with Mom. We think it might be a heart attack!” Johnnie said, wheezing like she had earlier that morning, but with no laughter in her

voice now.

He leapt up the kitchen stairs and as he pushed past Tommie to get in the kitchen, he saw his mother's bulky figure crumpled near the refrigerator. Oh my God, thought Lace. Holy shit. "Holy shit," he murmured aloud. "Tommie, you and Johnnie get the medicine in Dad's cabinet upstairs. The white bottle with the red top; I forget what it's called. It's gonna be fine, just calm down. I'll stay here with Mom and call 911." Lace pulled Tony's head into his lap and reached for Tommie's phone. Tony's head was heavy and her breathing was painfully slow and silent; she looked like she was already dead, but Lace could see the gradual rise and fall of her round stomach.

Lace's mind raced as he held the phone to his ear. In the dragging seconds it took for him to push the digits and wait for the call to go through, Lace was surprised that it wasn't sadness or panic or desperation for his mother's life that flew through his mind, bouncing off his brain. It was the Bogart film he'd been watching last night.

Key Largo wasn't one of his favorite Bogey films, but Lace had wanted to watch it because it was the last film that starred Bogey alongside his wife, Lauren Bacall, and because Lace was feeling sentimental. Lace loved to watch the crackling attraction between the two, even if they didn't play lovers in the film. With Bogart and Bacall, Lace could tell they were deeply in love when they were together. Just by looking at them. Humphrey Bogart played an average hero in *Key Largo*, eventually killing off every member of a murderous gang and restoring the harmony to an aging hotel owner and the wife of one of Bogey's buddies from the war. A real do-gooder. Lace pondered this. I could play it this way, he considered. A little evil for the good of the family. I could just barely choke her, cut off what little air she can suck in; I could restore the order to our

home. Help my dad out. Loosen the financial and emotional strain she has caused in the past decade. Lace heard, *Now's your chance, kid. You can change things around, take matters into your own hands.* Lace pondered this option for a quick second, then shook his head so vehemently at the idea that he dropped the phone onto the linoleum, disconnecting the call before it had even gone through. He quickly picked it up and re-typed in the numbers, and waited again for the call to go through. No way could he live with that. Lace was no murderer.

Then Lace's memory of *Dark Victory* snaked itself into his consciousness, like it was being placed there on purpose. Lace respected Bogart's character in that film, but he felt a real connection to it because of the female lead (played by Bette Davis). The main female character was a horribly spoiled, infamous heiress who contracted a fatal disease and wasted away to death; Lace saw a lot of his mother in the character. They shared common vices and personality flaws, and they both rested upon the feeling that they were once great, once famous, once important. Lace's mother had loved herself once, Lace knew. But all that was gone. Unlike Bette Davis, Tony possessed no desire for a transformation. She didn't even care anymore.

In *Dark Victory* Bogey plays Davis's horse trainer, a man who has loved her from afar; the movie basically ends with Bogey's love fading away, dying out. Lace remembered feeling pained as he'd watched Bogey's face in the film. Distraught, beaten, mistreated. Every disappointment seeping out of the deep lines on his forehead and running down his face. The same expressions Lace knew his father fought to stifle every minute he was close to his Tony. *Do it, Lace. Be a real man. Make your father proud. The spoiled princess bit ends now!* Lace heard. Lace grinned and gingerly punched the END

button on the cell phone just as the operator answered with “**9 1 1 , W H A T ’ S Y O U R E M E R G E N C Y ?**” He initially fought it, but then he let it slide wide across his face, the sly grin that distorted his features and painted terror into his mother’s near-lifeless face. Better give it a few more minutes, he thought.

He looked into his mother’s watery eyes and watched them grow wide with panic, and he thought very seriously of what expression he wanted to have on his face during the funeral. Would he wear his hat, and sit with his collar pulled up around his neck? Would he sit tall and manly as he played rescuer to his sisters? *Tough choice, kid*, he heard. *You do look nice in my hat...*

He’d have plenty of time to worry about this. He knew a Bogey marathon was starting on TCM this weekend.