

Failing Heaven

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Dedication
to my family

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Abstract

Failing Heaven is a dissertation composed of two sections: a critical introduction and a memoir. The critical introduction explores the relationship between memoir and honesty through close readings of three memoirs: Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, Harry Crews' *A Childhood: the biography of a place*, and Lewis Nordan's *Boy With Loaded Gun*. The memoir is primarily a childhood memoir depicting the events of my life. It's an assemblage of fiction and nonfiction loosely arranged in chronological order and relies principally on a technique of association. The form allows for an interplay among the questions of imagination, memory, beauty, truth, time, space, faith, and love.

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Crafting Honesty

What is honesty in memoir? I started thinking about this question after I wrote an essay about my large family centered on the following questions: If you had to pick two of your siblings for existence, who would you choose and why? And, why wouldn't you choose the others? The responses were candid, funny, and downright brutal. It was like I had handed them all grenades and they willingly pulled the pins and lobbed them right into our family's core. It was an exhilarating essay to write and exposed both the many ways my family loves and the many ways my family inflicts pain. I sent them all the essay, expecting congratulations and kudos and maybe even a little praise for the writer I'd become. The essay landed like the Hindenburg. My dad stopped talking to me for revealing the known secret of his suicidal ideations, Heather, my oldest sister, accused me of having an incestuous love for Colleen (the sister right below me in birth order), and everyone generally agreed I displayed sociopathic tendencies and should be exiled to the familial hinterlands to think about what I had done.

Where had I gone wrong? I went back and studied the essay. It was clever, funny, emotional, and insightful, bringing to light just how competitive, intellectual, petty, vindictive, and dysfunctional my family could be. But upon further scrutiny it also revealed my own pattern of crafting artificial scenarios to avoid emotionally significant material requiring my honest attention. In the essay, I avoided the emotional significance of a boat trip I took up the eastern seaboard in our family yacht, The Olympic Scout, and how that specific memory figured into an understanding of not only my relationship with my dad, but also my relationship with my own anger, loneliness, and threat of suicide—which I cannot remember—I made when I was four. It was simply easier to give my loved ones figurative grenades and watch them chuck them at each other than actually go about the hard work of writing about my dad and the fact I had gone to therapy for threatening to kill myself with a big kitchen knife. Put another way, the essay failed because it had avoided honesty. So I started

reading memoirs for examples of how other writers went about the practical question of writing with honesty.

I'd typically undertaken craft questions with fiction in mind but thinking about honesty in relation to memoir forced the craft questions to take a different shape. As a genre, fiction has a different responsibility toward honesty than memoir, which is a way of saying it does not have any. Fiction is the genre of unfettered imaginative freedom. It is also the genre of choice, possibility, and the undisputed, heavy weight champion of the artistic world at creating and sustaining the classical concepts of beauty and truth. However, it is also the genre of remove. For example, a work of fiction can be understood as realist, but not real, whereas in memoir there is an assumption it is real, or, at least, more real than fiction. It would also be irresponsible of me to gloss the moral component to the question of honesty in memoir. I started down that metaphysical road, but quickly realized I was philosophically ill-equipped for such an endeavor and it would require another book or two or a lifetime of thought to do the question justice. Such an intellectual sidestep is most definitely an evasion, but an evasion made out of practicality, not ignorance. So I'll keep the following discussion narrowed on the question of honesty in memoir.

I'm the last person who wants a brigade of self-righteous memoir police patrolling the borders with billy clubs and tasers interrogating books, "Is this true? Did this really happen? Was the carpet beige or brown? Tell me the *truth*. I know you're lying. Confess!" but memoir is constrained, bounded by time in way fiction is free not to be. That constraint electrifies the genre, charges it with a daring, a vulnerability, and a responsibility toward honesty I do not necessarily find in fiction. It would be a mistake to conclude memoir as the unvarnished truth. That is impossible, as all writing is fictional to some degree. And since the plot in memoir has already happened, it makes memoir more a work of memory than of the imagination, though the imagination still remains vital. There is no

safety net when walking the memoir tightrope. Memoir is the genre of the individual naked to the world.

I've found Kenneth Burke's ideas in "Literature as Equipment for Living" useful when thinking about honesty and memoir, specifically his idea of proverbs, which he expands to literature as a whole, and "its bearing upon human welfare" (Burke 593). He goes on to write "Proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations" (Burke 595, emphasis in original). One could easily reframe the sentence in regard to memoir: "Memoirs are crafted things for dealing with life." So, then, how a writer chooses to craft a lived experience becomes of supreme importance, for those choices not only give the writing a certain artistic shape, but also provides readers a practical approach for transitioning what they encounter in a book to their own experience, which is another way of saying transitioning from art back into life. Cervantes has already catalogued the dangers of making such a move. But, to my mind, it was not so much that Don Quixote erred in living his life according to books, but that he chose the wrong books to live by.

The memoirs I've chosen to take a closer look at are Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, Harry Crews' *A Childhood: the biography of a place*, and Lewis Nordan's *Boy With Loaded Gun*. I'll focus on the craft elements of narration, rhetoric, and emotional honesty, which I've found useful not only for my own writing, but also useful in developing the idea of honesty as the virtue of memoir. And because his book makes me feel like an intellectual David with no sling squaring off against an intellectual Goliath, I'll begin with Nabokov.

The Man Stands Over His Butterflies

The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack between two eternities of darkness.

—Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* opening line

What an opening line. It is ambitious, abstract, and strangely intimate. The first time I read this sentence I found myself thinking *God, what is going to happen to the baby?* The second thing I noted was that Nabokov's understanding of common sense is very different from my own. While my common sense operates more on the register of *don't eat mayonnaise that's been left out in the sun*, Nabokov's operates on the abstract and existential. What enralls me about his sentence is its illumination of a consciousness bookended by darkness and how those bookends give a certain bound to consciousness in a way that frames life as a "crack"—what a quick word—and works to muddle with time by positioning the experience of life in between a past eternity and a future eternity or, at least for someone who believes in time, which Nabokov doesn't—"I confess I do not believe in time," infinite time (139).¹ The explosion from the minute—crack—toward the infinite, the boundless is a common technique in Nabokov's work and its effects can be disorienting, bordering on the supernatural. His narrative position is the closest I've read to first-person omniscient.

Nabokov's first-person omniscience enables him to elevate himself to the highest of heights from which he can look down on the experience of his existence and work to establish patterns. He writes, "Coincidence of pattern is one of the wonders of nature" (Nabokov 157). (I think that's why he was such an accomplished aurelian and novelist). But the subjective distance required to create the pattern often, at least to some, make his writings read as privileged, detached, cold, exhibiting a lack of compassion for ordinary human suffering and the everyday movements of history that tend to grind people into a fine dust. It does not help that his disbelief in time diminishes the roles of history, politics, and morality. But Nabokov's writing at the end of *Lolita* offers a little insight into

¹ For the learned or the papally inclined: æternitas a parte ante and æternitas a parte post, respectively.

his thoughts on art: “For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (Nabokov 358). I interpret “aesthetic bliss” as simply beauty that inspires joy. Or, if one wanted to frame it within Burke’s language, “aesthetic bliss” is a strategy for living. And that strategy plays out in *Speak, Memory*, which, to my mind, attempts to answer the practical question, How does one live with loss?

One of the maddening delights of encountering any of Nabokov’s books is that he’s a consummate illusionist. Someone or something is almost always hiding. The same is true in *Speak, Memory*. But every now and then all the impulse to hide falls away and what is left is honest emotion. Here’s an example: “I have to have all space and all time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence” (Nabokov 297). There’s nothing more common and honest than a human, genius or otherwise, grappling with mortality, but it is the way he goes about articulating that struggle that is noteworthy: there is beauty and joy in the writing, even when confronting the inevitable tragedy of death. Most people would have reached out for the bottle to help them take the edge off, but Nabokov reaches past the bottle and invokes “all space” and “all time” to aid him. How else but through pursuing aesthetic bliss could he try to understand two world wars, the assassination of his father, murder of his brother, and the loss of his country, which Nabokov states, “was equated for me with the loss of my love” (Nabokov 245)?

At its core, Nabokov’s writing is an exploration of loss and love. It is true that the heights required for him to achieve his first-person omniscience in *Speak, Memory* to establish the patterns across his life often leave him vulnerable to charges of callousness and detachment. But to ignore the

intimacy and beauty with which he creates that world is to miss both the strategy and the point entirely: joy.

Killing Hogs in Bacon County

My first memory is of a time ten years before I was born, and the memory takes place where I have never been and involves my daddy whom I never knew.

—Crews, *A Childhood: the biography of a place* opening line

In the general pantheon of craft elements, rhetoric often gets overlooked in favor of things like Freytag's triangle, plot, character, setting, and my personal favorite—only because it sounds fancy and foreign—denouement. If you bring up rhetoric, you run the risk of sounding like a nerd in love with Cicero or a talentless hack who read *How to Teach English for Dummies* and thinks they know a thing or two. I risk both.

The defining craft feature of Crews' *A Childhood* is his rhetoric of simplicity. Take, for example, Crews' simple word choice. Fact is, word choice, the raw material of writing, sets the foundation for the reading and imaginative experience. In contrast to Nabokov's writing that drips with erudite nobility (all those foreign words) and remove from ordinary experience, Crews' decision to write in what one could call a common tongue transforms what could be considered low-culture experience into rich literary terrain. It is not a value judgement. It's similar to the difference between Faulkner and Hemingway or T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams. You will not find words like *chronophobiac* or *Proustian excoriation* in Crews' writing, but that does not mean it lacks in sophistication. (He still manages to name drop Sartre). Through his rhetorical commitment to simplicity, Crews does not betray the people or place of Bacon County. His memoir is an example of honest representation, which is all the more important when writing about people and places that

are typically exploited and stereotyped. It is the problem I had with Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*. Crews balances the distance required to write about something knowingly with the proximity necessary to elicit compassion. Instead of positioning himself up, out, and above the people and place of Bacon County, he positions himself within and yet still apart.

Take his opening line as an example. It too engages in time and memory, but unlike Nabokov in *Invitation of a Beheading*, who dangles us over an abyss, suspending us in a precarious, dangerous, and thrilling position, Crews invites us into the story by acknowledging the impossibility and instability of memory and the limitations of knowledge. Instead of inspiring awe, as Nabokov's first sentence does for me, it inspires wonder and mystery about being alive in a certain time and place. It is worth noting that any engagement in memory is a confrontation with time and reality. Crews writes:

Did what I have set down here as memory actually happen? Did the two men say what I have recorded, think what I have said they thought? I do not know, nor do I any longer care. My knowledge of my daddy came entirely from stories I have been told about him, stories told me by my mother, by my brother, who was old enough when he died to remember him firsthand, by my other kin people, and by the men and women who knew him while he was alive. (Crews 3)

It is an acceptance of orality and myth as an incomplete form of truth. There are things Crews cannot know, but the myths of his father, the stories passed down by his family are the ways Crews comes to understand his father. The historical veracity does not particularly matter to Crews. What matters is the fictional truth. Sometimes that is all people have to go on.

When I read memoir, I concede that a writer is going to fictionalize certain events, details, and memories. Writing memoir is, after all, an act of memory, which, unless you have a photographic one—which sounds to me like a curse of Greek proportions—is going to involve an

imaginative act. Writing memoir, especially a memoir about childhood where the brain has not fully developed, is about developing and complicating recollected sensory impressions that typically reveal or uncover an emotional one. We remember and misremember all the time until what actually happened disappears into relative obscurity and what is left is a malleable, shifting, changing, chaotic and uncertain memory of what we imagined happened, the contours of which are dotted with ruins of the truth. Every memoirist establishes the line of writing toward the truth of lived experience and writing with honesty helps writers approach that limit. For Crews, he accepts the myths and stories of his father, not as the whole truth, but as things of value that gesture toward the truth of things he cannot possibly know but can come to understand. Simply put, his commitment to honesty aids him in writing toward understanding.

And it is precisely Crews' way of writing—underpinned by his decision to tell things simply—that enables him to create an honest representation of the people of Bacon County. Instead of keeping dullards and dimwits at bay through impossibly elevated linguistic games or allusions, Crews' simplicity invites everyone into the story. The technique allows for the compassionate depiction of ordinary suffering, a quality the genius intellect of Nabokov sometimes lacks. The magic of Crews' narrative position of being simultaneously inside and outside his lived experience creates a warm and nonjudgmental tone, like he is simply taking account of the way things happened and avoiding judging the events or people as lacking.

A good example of Crews' narrative magic is captured in his rendering of the hog killing scene. The chapter progress ordinarily enough, depicting hog-killing time as a time of work—detailing how no part of the hog was wasted—celebration, and near-wild excitement. So when Crews plays pop-the-whip with his brothers and sisters and is “popped loose and sent flying into a steaming boiler of water beside a scalded, floating hog,” you are stunned, or at least I was (112). I had to reread the sentence a few times before I realized it had actually happened and it was not just

something Crews had imagined. He writes, “I remember everything about it as clearly as I remember anything that ever happened to me, except the screaming. Curiously, I cannot remember the screaming” (Crews 112). He writes on:

I reached over and touched my right hand with my left, and the whole thing came off like a wet glove. I mean, the skin on the top of the wrist and the back of my hand, along with the fingernails, all just turned loosed and slid on down to the ground. I could see my fingernails lying in the little puddle my flesh made on the ground in front of me. (Crews 113)

The event is gruesome—it is not every day a kid falls into a boiling vat of water and his skin sloughs off—but there are no traces of self-pity or worse the temptation for a writer to roll around in the tragedy of circumstance. The sentences are lean, simple, and unsentimental. Like all Crews’ and others’ sufferings in *A Childhood*, the accident during the hog-killing is rendered in such a way as to make it almost commonplace, which, paradoxically, elevates common suffering and those who suffer commonly into subjects worthy of art.

It might be too simplistic to reduce the mystery and wonder of *A Childhood* to rhetorical simplicity. But I do not think I’m too far off. At the memoir’s conclusion, Crews writes, “I stood there feeling how much I had left this place and these people, and at the same time knowing that it would be forever impossible to leave them completely. Wherever I might go in the world, they would go with me” (Crews 171). Crews’ writing exemplifies the responsibility a memoirist has to write in an honest way. It would be foolish to think that Crews gets it completely right. All acts of writing are limited. But as those written accounts shape how readers come to understand different peoples and places, it is worth considering the implications of something as seemingly rhetorically basic as simplicity.

Punching Yourself In The Liver

Now half a century later the images beneath those magical trees glimmer and ripple and change as if viewed through water, as it seems to me they did even then. All such images, though they occur to me only in beauty, are really images of loneliness.

—Nordan, *Boy With Loaded Gun*, pg. 3

I'm not exactly walking out onto a thin limb when I claim that most people imagine themselves to be more good than bad. An understanding of history and lived experience are adequate antidotes to this general fantasy. Another antidote is honest writing. Here are some examples of memoirs that traffic in such honesty: Andre Dubus III's *Townie*, Brian Doyle's *The Wet Engine*, Tobias Wolfe's *This Boy's Life*, anything by Mary Karr, Brian Turner's *My Life as a Foreign Country*, Donald Anderson's *Gathering Noise from My Life*, and Benjamin Busch's *Dust to Dust*. But one would be hard-pressed to come across a memoir written with more honesty than Lewis Nordan's *Boy With Loaded Gun*. There is an unrelenting, brutal quality to Lewis' writing that I want to explore further.

Nordan's opening paragraph becomes emblematic for the entire book. It starts with a lyric description of muscadines perhaps only rivaled by Hurston's pear tree, "beneath the shade of these vines I stood with my eyes closed and breathed deep and drank in the purple fragrance of the swollen grapes and of the sweet leaves, that, after summer rain, smelled like green peas," turns on the lines quoted in the epigraph, and then ends with this sentence:

My father was dead, my mother was away somewhere, somewhere behind me toiled a nursemaid hired to look after me, and I sat all alone in the crook of a willow tree that grew in a ditch alongside a dirt road, looking outward, outward from my perch for the end of longing, for rescue from grief, for which I had no word or even memory. (Nordan 3-4)

Talk about a sentence sucking the air right out of your lungs. The danger of memory is that it can slant towards beauty, which, when not actively eyed with suspicion, can obscure the emotional reality of how one actually felt while living through an experience. Who wouldn't want to remember a childhood full of muscadines and the shade of pecan trees? But to remember only those beautiful things is not only to miss half the story, but also to miss the more meaningful part as well. An example of a memoir exhibiting this kind of beautiful slant would be Elizabeth Alexander's *The Light of the World*. Nordan's memoir slants toward the honest and ugly.

Nordan pulls no punches, especially when those punches are aimed at himself. He writes himself as the villain of his own memoir. He traces his Southern childhood, first marriage, alcoholism, infidelity, divorce, the suicide of his son, sobriety, and his eventual second marriage, where, if not happiness, he manages to establish a workable peace. And he does all of it with an unrelenting honesty. The honesty he writes with is not the prurient sort that is honest merely for the sake of making one feel better about one's self or pleading for forgiveness, which strikes me as childish and stunted, not to mention self-serving. It is the kind of honesty that comes out of the understanding that he is a part of "the imperfect structure of the universe" and that instead of gilding those imperfections with beauty, he holds them up as objects of study (Nordan 214). There are two moments where I found his commitment to honest writing valuable: the Emmett Till scene and the suicide of his son, Robin.

In the chapter "A Body in the River" Nordan remembers how members of the football team told the story of how Emmett Till "had been killed and sunk in the river with a gin fan barbwired to his neck" (79). The temptation for Nordan, or any writer for that matter, might be to write the scene of overhearing the horror of what happened and frame it in such a way as to portray themselves as, if not the hero, then as an innocent bystander. But those are both dishonest luxuries to Nordan. He writes, "I wish I could report honestly that I was higher-minded and exempt from complicity in the

general sense of approval and jocularity, but I cannot. I was jealous that I had no details to add and no social standing that would have allowed my participation in the first place” (Nordan 79). What does such an admission do? He could easily have conflated himself with the boy who actually did stand up and say something in the face of the prevailing opinion in the locker room—“I’m for the nigger [...] It ain’t right. Kill a boy for that. I don’t care what color he is”—and thereby assure himself some amount of goodwill with the reader (Nordan 79-80). But he does not. He positions himself in the scene as someone who does not outright agree with the killing, but who does not speak out against it either. It is the kind of position many of us find ourselves in. And, if I’m honest, I usually do not act in a way that an outsider (or a reader) would conclude as good. He goes on to describe his obsession with the case and the eventual book, *Wolf Whistle*, that came out of it. Failing to do right in the moment and then dedicating aspects of a life to right that wrong is a far more accurate representation of how most people navigate situations in life. He was not immune to the pressures and habits generated by culture and history, but he also was not powerless to fight against them either. He courted an honest reckoning with his actions and attempted to do something good without thinking anyone was going to congratulate him for it.

But the most significant moment of honesty in *Boy With Loaded Gun* is when Nordan writes about the suicide of his oldest son, Robin. The suicide of a child must be the ninth circle of hell. How does one even begin to reasonably frame such an event? What skills and techniques can a writer use to convey the depth and gravity of such a moment? In Nordan’s case, he failed, which is a way of saying that he could not turn Robin’s suicide into a story. Nordan writes, “But what can a father say? I find myself silenced by the magnitude of how much there is to say, by the inadequacy of words. Words are sufficient for a father’s death, a lover’s, but not for a son’s” (213). But instead of chalking up Robin’s suicide to the limits of language to adequately represent extremity, he writes these devastating lines: “Who is at fault in my son’s death? Isn’t someone to blame for this horror

besides himself? I am” (Nordan 214). He combined the honesty he cultivated in his writing life with detailing all the ways he tried and failed to write about Robin’s suicide, including a friend or a girlfriend’s fictitious imagined essay, in an effort to create a more complex understanding of the events of his life and his role in them. Even in his most agonizing moment, he refuses the temptation to write the “self-blame book,” because such a book would not tell the whole story (Nordan 214).

Whether it was with the public tragedy of Emmett Till’s murder or the private tragedy of Robin’s suicide, the good to be found in *Boy With Loaded Gun* is Nordan’s unrelenting honesty. He pursues such honesty to its conclusion and what he typically arrives at is anything but flattering. His universe is at times twisted and grotesque—“The Amazing Technicolor Effing Machine” comes to mind—but the honesty with which he writes is an example for anyone trying to make their way through “the imperfect structure of the universe” (Nordan 214).

The Man Stands Over His Butterflies, Kills A Hog, Then Punches Himself In The Liver

Exploring these three memoirs and their corresponding craft elements, specifically Nabokov’s first-person omniscience, Crews’ rhetoric of simplicity, and Nordan’s unrelenting honesty leads me back to my initial question: what does it mean to write with honesty? I’ve concluded that the memoirs I keep returning to for comfort and inspiration are the ones exhibiting the wonder and surprise of a unique being struggling to understand the realities of lived experience in an honest way. Those memoirs avoid the shortcomings of simple entertainment and rote didactics and impart a distinct quality of honesty on those who read them, if one wants to go looking, but it is by no means a requirement. Sometimes that honesty comes through how a writer chooses to represent a people or place, a commitment to depict personal failings clearly, and even in the

virtuosity of a single sentence that arabesques across the page and leaves one in a state of open-jawed wonder and white-hot jealousy.

A few years back, Horace wrote in his *Ars Poetica* that poetry should both instruct and delight. I think the same notion holds true for memoir. When confronted with the truth of a life full of love and loss, Nabokov's pursuit of aesthetic bliss and its attendant experience of joy is instructive, just as Nordan's honesty as a check against the possible distortions of memory and beauty is delightful. I'm also inclined to think setting firm requirements on honesty in memoir is a fool's errand. It is like asking the moon to pull harder on the ocean. You could do it, but why? It reminds me of Seamus Heaney's thoughts on Dylan Thomas' poetry and when Thomas' poetry is at its finest, it "[...] fulfills its promise precisely because its craft has not lost touch with a suffered world" (Heaney 137).

The memoirs I have mentioned engage that "suffered world" with an attention to honesty that avoids transforming their lives into carnival freakshows where people can pay a few bucks to walk through the tent, emerging on the other side titillated, but not changed. Such memoirs are entertaining but fail as art. They fall into what Burke calls the literature of "easy consolation" (Burke 596). When memoirs are written with honesty, nothing comes easy. They are as nuanced, complex, and unflinching as life demands.

Failing Heaven

“All things truly wicked start from an innocence.”

—Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*

“Making art in America is about saving one’s soul.”

—Charles Simic, *Dime-Store Alchemy*

Beginnings

I have a terrible memory.

I know it's not the best way to kick-start a memoir, but I didn't know how else to begin. *I was born January 27th, 1986 in Exeter, New Hampshire to Walter and Fern Purio.* Fact, but talk about a book suck-starting a pistol. Holy boring. Or, *I was born into a cradle dangling over an abyss of two eternities.* No need to smear my cheap lipstick all over someone else's blue-ribbon pig. Or, *The day after I was born, the Challenger exploded into a spiral of fire and smoke while my dad was at Toys "R" Us packing two shopping carts full of discounted diapers.* True, but where to go from there?

I had a good childhood. I was fed and loved by my parents and grandparents (well, mostly) and was almost constantly surrounded and entertained by my sisters—Heather, Colleen, Hallie, Claire—and brother—Brian. Our house on Green Street, just outside of Brewster Academy, was haunted to be sure, but it was also the place where we celebrated what needed to be celebrated and uncovered the fun and terrifying mysteries of childhood.

Though I wouldn't say my childhood was normal, certainly not American normal. Dad was out to sea most of the time, I didn't know my Australian mom talked funny or that my Catholic grandmother, who lived with us for a stretch, was a racist homophobe seemingly incapable of showing kindness or love to anyone besides dad or stray dogs she took in and fed torn slices of bologna from the table.

But I do remember a lot of driving to and from Wolfeboro, New Hampshire in the back of our Volvo station wagon. The back seats were rear-facing and there was a rusted hole in the floor where the exhaust came through. It made the air smell funny.

Winter was a good time to drive because I knew mom liked the way falling snow looked in the dark. "It's like flying through falling stars," she'd say. But my favorite time of year to be in the car was in the fall when the forest fired into radiant browns and yellows and reds. Driving with my

back to wherever we were going, it felt like the trees growing over the road were bending around the car and waving hello and goodbye all in a single moment. Whenever we stopped at a stoplight and there happened to be some poor soul stuck behind us, I thought about where in the world that person was going. Did their house have brick front steps leading to a big, white Dutch door? Were they headed back to an old house that smelled of woodsmoke and dust? Did they like to spend time with their kids or were they always working? Who were the other people who loved them and what were their stories? Why did adults always look so tired?

When the light turned and we pulled away from whoever it was, I wondered if that person was happy and I prayed to God they weren't. I wanted those strangers to drive back into their worlds just as angry and confused and lonely as me. Only then could my life make any sense at all.

History

How far back do you have to go to arrive at your story's beginning?

Pineapple Ham

ingredients:

1 large on-the-bone ham

1-2 large can(s) of pineapple rings

brown sugar

ginger ale

long stem cloves

salt

instructions:

1. heat oven to 350 degrees.
2. score fat in angled slices to create triangles in fat.
3. rub fine layer of salt—not too much—over entire ham.
4. drain large cans of pineapple rings and save the juice.
5. fit pineapple rings to the ham with the long stem cloves.
6. in a small bowl, mix together brown sugar, ginger ale, and a little pineapple juice.
7. drizzle glaze over the ham and pineapple rings.
8. baste ham with glaze every 15 minutes.
9. bake ham for 20 minutes per pound.
10. keep basting!
11. insert meat thermometer into ham—should read 145 degrees when done.
12. take ham from oven and tent with aluminum foil for 10-15 minutes.

13. carve perpendicular to the bone.

14. serve warm.

Twilight

Nana's first child was born a blue baby. Her name was Valerie.

Valerie's heart and liver were switched and if she laughed, she'd turn blue. I liked to imagine Valerie's laugh. Baby laughter was already angelic, but what about a laugh that held within it life-threatening danger? Was it more precious to Nana and Poppa? Or was it cause for alarm? And what did a parent do exactly when a baby started to laugh and you tried to make it stop? Pinch its foot? Slap its cheek? Or let it laugh on and on until it was blue in the face?

Valerie died a little after turning one.

Nana's second birth was to premature twin boys. She wasn't supposed to come out of the anesthesia so soon, but she did. After the doctor and nurses left, she got out of bed, pulled back a curtain and there were her twin boys dead on the stainless-steel table. Their lungs just weren't ready. Nanna and Poppa didn't name them.

It was after seeing her dead twin boys that Nana developed the compulsion to clean, greeting Poppa at the door of their home in Western Australia and making him take off his shoes so he didn't track in dirt and checking his jacket for lint.

Nana's third birth was to a healthy girl. They named her Heather.

Nana's fourth birth was to a baby girl covered with a large red and purple birthmark that stretched over the top right quarter of the baby's tiny body. They named the birthmarked beauty Fern.

I wondered what Nana and Poppa thought about when they looked at their healthy girls. Did they see flashes of Valerie skit across their unknowing faces or hear the echoes of her laugh in theirs? Or did they wonder what it would have been like to raise twin boys rather than two girls?

I can't ever know that as Poppa's dead and Nana's lost to dementia, but I suppose the holes dead children leave behind never really fill in and that you unexpectedly fall into them years after having thought them covered and healed.

Balls of Light
—Christmas Island, 1962

SSgt Walter Purio's job was to black out all the windows in the B-52 before the nuclear bomb detonated over Christmas Island and the vast scientific and military apparatus began measuring what needed to be measured.

He'd taped the windows seven times before, peeling it back only after the initial explosion. Seven times he'd peered into the growing mushroom cloud and had been awed silent. This time was no different.

He felt the weapon detonate through the floor of the aircraft and waited for the go-ahead from the pilot.

"Cleared to look," said the pilot.

SSgt Purio peered out the small window and looked at the sun come to earth. There was no talk of communists or the USSR or politics. SSgt Purio knew words were powerful, but what were words compared to this? Nobody spoke.

Years later, when all his friends who'd been on that flight were dead and his heart was on a pacemaker and his skin turned toward death, he would tell Sean, his grandson, after he'd asked what the bomb had looked like, "Do you know what a rainbow looks like? You do. Well, imagine a rainbow shaped into a ball. A rainbow ball. That's what it looked like. The most violent and beautiful thing I ever seen."

Lunch Break

—Whidbey Island, sometime in May 1985

Walter usually ate his lunch in the lunchroom but decided to go home and surprise Fern. He got in the car full of excitement. He might even catch a few minutes with Heather.

It was a typical spring day in Washington when the wind was light and the air heavy with the promise of afternoon rain. He looked to the clouds, then his watch, and predicted it would start raining in half an hour. He still had a pilot's eye for weather.

He opened the door to his small house.

"Fern?" he said.

"Walter? Is that you?" said Fern, turning the corner with a wide smile. Her shoulder length blonde hair, the hair he'd fallen in love with, curled around her face.

"I was thinking maybe we could have some lunch," Walter said.

"Oh, you want some lunch?" she said, all mischief, "Well, Heather's down for a nap. So why don't we go to the bedroom?" and she nudged her head toward the bedroom.

"The bedroom?" Walter said. She widened her eyes as if it say *of course*. "I could go to the bedroom." She grabbed him by the hand and pulled him down the hallway.

Half an hour later, he darted out of the house and into the rain still hungry.

Nine months later, Walter and Fern added a six-pound, six-ounce blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy to the family. His name was Sean.

The Little Man

—15 Green Street, Wolfeboro, New Hampshire

Fern wanted her son's room to be special. He deserved a nice, calm room. She pored over different wallpaper patterns until finally settling on a ship theme with rainbows. Her boy was going to grow up to be nice and kind and well-mannered.

She set to work on his room off the back landing. She took down the old wallpaper—a nautical theme, too, but more mature with compasses and varying shades of brown and blue—from around the room and when she started to remove the wallpaper from the closet, she heard a voice.

“Please leave my wallpaper up,” the voice said. Fern looked around and there was no one. She took a breath.

“Ok,” Fern said. “I’ll leave your wallpaper up.”

She finished her son's room with the ships and rainbows wallpaper and left the closet alone. When the spirits spoke to her, she listened.

A few months later, Heather was playing on the back landing and talking to someone.

“Who are you talking to, sweetie?” Fern asked.

“The Little Man, of course,” Heather said.

“The Little Man? What does he look like?” Fern asked.

“Well, he's little, with a pipe and hat and a kind face,” Heather said.

“Ok,” Fern said. “Tell the Little Man I say hello.”

“Ok,” Heather said. “He told me to tell you thanks for keeping up his wallpaper.”

Doorframe

—Chicago, 1990

I was in a closet smashing the head of a metal airplane into the door frame between the spaces of my outstretched fingers. To the left, up and over each finger and back again. I was lost in the rhythm of the action, but my entire body radiated anger and I couldn't tell where it was coming from. There was no inciting incident. At least I couldn't remember one. Just me bashing away at the doorframe.

Colleen was with me, though she didn't say anything, which made me think these airplane bashing antics weren't a new development. No idea what Heather was up to.

The anger started in my chest and moved out, my breathing tempered and my skin felt ready to pop. That energy and emotion went into the holes between my fingers. One, two, three, four, five, six.

I pulled my hand away and there were six general clusters where the nose of the airplane had dented the wood. A nice arc to the groupings, too. It smelled like fresh pine.

I can't remember what kind of airplane I used, only that the metal was cool and the landing gear dug into my palm. I put my hand back on the wall and kept going until I smashed the top of my hand. Only then did I realize I'd already been crying.

Desert Shield

—Chicago, 1991

“Sean said what?” Walter asked.

Fern repeated herself. “He said he was going to kill himself.”

“What?” Walter asked.

“I know,” Fern said. “He said that if daddy didn’t come home, he was going to kill himself with one of the big kitchen knives.”

“Jesus,” Walter said.

“I don’t know what to do. He misses you,” Fern said.

“Well, I can’t come home,” Walter said. “I’ve got a job to do.”

Sean went to a therapist and didn’t try to kill himself, but a giant dark hole would open up in his chest every time his dad left and his dad left all the time.

Double Bubble

—Chicago, 1991

I remember we had a fat nanny who got stuck in a doorway and Colleen and I helped push her across the threshold once. I also remember Colleen and I eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches by chewing and chewing until they were nothing but liquid and gargling it like mouthwash. I went to some experimental school where I played with water by pouring it over a wheel and watched the wheel spin. I also vaguely remember celebrating dad coming home from somewhere with balloons, confetti, a tub of Double Bubble, and sitting on dad's knee as we pulled gifts from a trunk he'd brought back with him from wherever he'd been.

I don't remember threatening to kill myself or going to see a therapist. Those memories remain unavailable to me. As much as I try to will myself to conjure a memory, I can't bring back anything. Not a smell, a color, a feeling. It's just a blank filled only by mom's stories. They're all I have to go on. Mom's too truthful to be a good storyteller. But I trust her because of it. Mom told me I threatened to kill myself with a kitchen knife and so it was. Why would she lie?

Faith

—Belgium, 1991

The table was long and we were in the company of strangely dressed women. I was told they were nuns. The smell of fresh bread was everywhere. Mom passed me a thick slice of bread with something brown slathered on it. I took a bite and sugared hazelnut lit up my mouth. I was no longer worried we were in a foreign country with nuns who passed food back and forth across the table. It was time to eat and it was impossible to be afraid.

Closet

—Belgium, 1991

Heather's room was at the top of a narrow wooden staircase at the top of the house. The staircase was violently steep and one slight misstep meant a quick trip to the bottom. The staircase steps were wonderfully worn. I had a fondness for worn steps, especially wood ones. I'd run my hand over the worn places and wonder what the tree had looked like before it'd been chopped down. Wood never felt dead to me.

I didn't risk the steps often to visit Heather's room. She was particular about her living space and liked to be alone. But at the bottom of the staircase there was a small storage closet. I hid in it all the time and waited to scare her. Small, dark spaces didn't scare me because I could reach out my hands and feel the walls. I was only scared when I reached out and felt only air. I found comfort in the dark and close walls and would almost grow a little sad when I heard Heather start to come down from her room, but only a little as I prepared to jump out and scare her and send her running off to tell mom exactly what I'd done.

Gas

—Belgium, 1992

I woke and the house was cold. I walked down the wooden steps to the kitchen and went over to the stove.

I'd seen mom and Poppa make the flames jump by twisting a knob and then lighting a match. I found the pack of matches and brought a chair over to the stove. I was thinking about how kind and thoughtful my mom would think I'd been for thinking of the family and not wanting them to be cold and for heating the house before they came down for breakfast.

I turned the knob and hopped down, sat at the table and pulled a match from the box.

I struck it and waited for the flame to jump into the stove. Nothing happened. The match burned down to my fingertips and I blew it out when it started warming my fingertips and placed it on the table.

I lit another match and another and still the flame refused to jump.

I heard someone on the steps.

"What are you doing?" Poppa yelled.

I was confused because he sounded scared and angry. Not exactly the welcome I'd anticipated for being a good, thoughtful boy. He bounded down the rest of the steps, snatched the matches away from me, turned the knob off, and then rounded on me. His face was red and he picked me up and bent me over his knee and began hitting me.

"You. Could. Have. Burned. The. House. Down," Poppa said. I was crying and screaming, not knowing what in the world was going on. I was cold and I'd wanted to be warm and it was the first time I remember getting hit by someone I loved.

"What's going on? Is that gas?" mom said as she rushed down the steps.

"I caught him trying to light the bloody stove," Poppa said. I ran crying towards mom.

There was a tiny pile of spent matches on the table.

Airtime

—Belgium, 1992

Memories of Belgium come back to me a jumbled mess, like a novice quilter's first attempt at a blanket. Some come back sharper than others. One of the sharpest was rushing to Claire's christening. We were running late, and all of us were jogging in our Sunday finest next to the stroller when a wheel caught on a cobblestone and catapulted an unbuckled baby Claire into the air and then she crashed face first into the street. I don't recall the actual christening or what the church looked like or who I sat next to, but I do remember Claire face down in the street, her tiny legs bent close to her head and my parents rushing to pick her up. I watched, a little horrified, a little amused and thought, *Not my fault.*

Gypsy

—Albuquerque, New Mexico, sometime in 1962

Patricia didn't trust Walter to be faithful. He drank too much and only went to church because she forced him to. She knew the marriage was bound to unravel. She'd try her damndest to stay a good wife because the Bible demanded it and she believed herself a loyal, good woman. But she was miserable. Her young son, Wally, was the only thing that brought her joy, especially at the end of the day when it was just him and her and it was time for bed. She'd sing "Just one look at you, my heart grew tipsy in me. You and you alone bring out the Gypsy in me," over and over until Wally closed his eyes and his small body relaxed into the heaviness of a child's sleep. She'd sit in the dark and weep softly, until she heard Walter stumble into the house and it was time to fight. She was slight but had a wicked tongue.

Paris

—1992

“The doctor said to put the pill where?” Walter asked. The bus lurched forward.

“Up his bum,” Fern said. “It’s the only way to bring down the fever.”

“Jesus Christ,” Walter said and put Sean over his knee, while Fern and the girls made a human curtain around him, trying to give the boy a little privacy. Walter pushed the pill up his tiny butt.

“That pill’s big enough for a horse,” Walter said.

I don’t remember the pill or much else about our trip to Paris. I remember being on a bus and not feeling well, but nothing about a pill going up my rectum.

My only other memory of Paris was standing on the top of a flight of steps with two lantern looking things on columns with the Eiffel Tower in the distance. When the memory comes, my mind wants to make it nighttime with the Eiffel Tower decked out in lights. But slowly an image of a gray, unremarkable day crowds out the lighted one.

I wish I’d been healthy in Paris and that my artistic spirit had already been kindled. I could have reveled in the language and land of Flaubert, Rimbaud, and Eluard. Instead, all I had was a vague understanding of Napoleon, who, according to the stories Poppa’d told me, had mastered artillery and then left most of his army to freeze in the Russian winter. WWI had been fought in France, too, and after it they’d built a big, expensive fortified wall to make sure the Germans didn’t invade again. Hitler and his goons just went around it through Belgium. That’s what forced Americans to land on some French beach and beat the Nazis back to Berlin. I also knew Grams despised the French.

I’d later become fascinated with the French court, especially the Sun King and Versailles and the Hall of Mirrors. Later still, I’d try to learn French, but was an absolute butcher with its

pronunciation to the point where a teacher said, “Sean, stop speaking. French is supposed to be a beautiful language.”

But in my first visit to the cultural center of Western civilization, I was simply a kid with a fever taking pills up his butt while riding the bus.

Hair Bugs

—Belgium, 1992

The bugs were huge under the magnifying glass.

“What are they?” I asked Poppa.

“Lice,” he said.

“What do they do?” I asked.

“They bite your skin and suck your blood,” Poppa said.

“Like mosquitoes?” I asked.

“Yes,” Poppa said, “but different.”

“How do you get them?” I asked.

“From other people,” Poppa said.

“Are the other people dirty?” I asked.

“No dirtier than you,” Poppa said.

He combed my hair with a fine metal comb, put the lice under the magnifying glass, then pressed his huge nail into the bug and it popped with a satisfying crunch.

Beer

—Belgium, 1992

“Where’s my beer?” Walter asked. “I put it right here.” He looked around the room and couldn’t find it. “Fern, do you know where my beer went?”

“No,” Fern said, putting her beer down on the coffee table. “Did you leave it in the other room?”

“No, I had it right here,” Walter said and pointed to the wet ring on the beer coaster. He was particular about coasters. Fern got up and moved across the room toward the kitchen. Walter sat in his chair and scanned the small room. Heather and Colleen were playing a game on the floor and Hallie was down for a nap.

“Where’s Sean?” Walter asked.

“Walter,” Fern said, laughing. “Come in here.” Walter pushed himself up out of his chair and walked toward the kitchen. There on the table was his empty glass of beer and his son asleep with his head on the table.

“He drink the whole glass?” Walter asked.

“The whole thing,” Fern said.

Walter watched his son with something like pride, walked to the fridge, and pulled out another beer.

“Takes after you,” Walter said.

“Oh, shut up,” Fern said.

Lakeside

Lake Winnepesaukee was visible from the kitchen window. It was comforting to know the lake was there, hitting against the shore. Sunsets over the lake were beautiful with their pinks and reds and purples that transformed the water into fire. But I was partial to sunrise with its cool blues and the clean smell that follows night.

The kitchen was a typical kitchen—table, chairs, cupboards, stove, sink—except for a big fireplace and a staircase that came down from the back landing. I don't remember a pantry, but there was a cubby under the steps where we kept all of our cereals in plastic containers. We mostly ate what looked like Cheerios and sometimes we were allowed to sprinkle a thin layer of sugared cereal on top. God, how I was jealous of kids who ate entire bowls full of Frosted Mini-Wheats, Cocoa Puffs, and Captain Crunch. All that sugar dissolving into whole milk, leaving a pool of sweet, delicious milk ready to be slurped down. Mom wasn't some kind of health nut—and sometimes we had full bowls of “dessert” cereal—but those times were rare, and often came when she was at her wits' end with the six of us, while dad was months into a sea trip with still months to go.

I don't remember eating many meals in the kitchen or watching my mother cook. I don't think I ever saw my dad cook. He grilled outside on a black Weber a few times. What I do remember are the stairs and the fireplace.

The stairs were made of wood. There were other stairs in the house: the front stairs, the attic stairs, the stairs to the master bedroom, the stairs from the laundry room to the basement, the stairs from the barn to the attached apartment, the stairs from the first floor of the apartment to the second, spiral stairs from second to the third, and a spiral staircase from the apartments third floor apartment porch to the ground. The front, back, basement, attic and lower-level apartment stairs were made of wood. Both spiral stairs were metal. The master and barn-to-apartments stairs were carpeted. Carpet never made much sense to me on stairs. Just seemed like an invitation to tumble

down the steps. Plus, the feel of my feet on wood just felt right, especially the smooth-worn back steps. Though my favorite set of stairs were the metal ones out back. Least favorite, basement. I always felt like something sinister was lurking down there, ready to reach up and grab my bare ankle as I changed the clothes from the avocado green washer to dryer, which, though I rarely did the laundry, scared me shitless.

The house had two fireplaces. One in the front room and one in the kitchen. Hard to choose a favorite. The fireplace in the front room was the one we'd lay in front of after coming in from playing in the snow and invariably passing out with that wonderful kind of sleep that only comes after suddenly being warmed up after being wet and cold. It was also where my dad would tell us stories, especially one around Christmas about dead WWI soldiers. The only downside, the front room was haunted. Come to think of it, the entire house felt haunted, except for the kitchen. The smell of woodsmoke mixed with cooking food was the most comforting smell. I was going to be warm, fed, and safe from the ghosts. I was terrified of ghosts following me. I learned to run up the stairs sideways like a crab.

Fat Daddy

I never knew my dad to be skinny. But I didn't see him as fat either. He was just dad.

I've always been irrationally proud of him. The world might see a fat sea captain marching his crew of six kids—lined up by birth order—to Wolfeboro's post office or grocery store or library, but to me I was being led by a hero on an adventure.

One of my favorite things was taking the Basmati Rice bag we bought at Costco and using it as our mail sack. We'd take the sack downtown to the post-office, which was cool and smelled like dusty paper. The sound of the key turning in the lock excited me. What could be in there? Maybe a letter from Nanna and Poppa from Australia with strange looking animals on the stamps. Maybe even a package.

The post office reminded me of the bank, except that when my dad stepped into the bank, it was like he owned the place. I don't know how he did it, but my dad knew how to convince people to lend him money. I've always hated the feeling of banks and car dealerships. I'll sign anything to get out of there as fast as possible. Something about not taking up someone else's time. But it's more that the whole exchange makes me uncomfortable. My dad seemed to live for those situations.

I wondered what places could make my dad cringe. Found out it was hospitals. And a fat dad afraid of a hospital was a recipe for a late-night conversation with your mom saying, "Your dad's gone." Such a conversation never came to pass, but I imagined it almost every week. I used to wake up in the middle of the night, thinking he was dead somewhere and I'd never get to hear his voice again.

He knows he has a good voice. A storyteller's voice. Deep and rich. And like many things about my dad, I'm jealous of his voice. I still wish mine was a little deeper, but it's higher and more like my mother's than I'd like and when I hear a recording of myself, it sounds like I've got my man parts yammed in a vice. Come to think of it, I don't know what part of me really resembles my dad.

Heather got his wide shoulders and squat legs that make her look like she belongs in Italy squashing grapes or making her own pasta in a small kitchen. Colleen, who'd hate to admit it, his nose—and his penchant for righteousness. Hallie, his feet. Claire, his eyes—although hers are blue. And Brian, his deep and wonderful voice. Me? I don't know. Maybe his hands. I have small hands, too, but his fingers are stubby while mine are thin and his palms are meatier than mine and not just on account of his fleshiness. But I'm his son. I just take after my mom.

Poor Man's Cake

ingredients:

1 cup raisins

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup brown sugar

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup white sugar

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup lard

1 tsp cinnamon

1 tsp (something illegible)

1 tsp nutmeg or $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp allspice

instructions:

1. boil ingredients for 3 to 5 minutes, stir occasionally.
2. let cool, then add 2 cups sifted flour, $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp soda (dissolved in little water).
3. rest for 3 minutes, oven 325 degrees about 45 minutes.
4. too thick, add water.

Attic Steps

Before my parents remodeled the attic into a master bedroom, the only way to get to the attic was by the steps off the second-floor bathroom.

I have hazy memories of the attic before the renovation, but I remember the smell of old wood and dust. I can't picture any of the things that used to live up there. "Live," was an expression my mother gave any kind of object. She'd turn to us and ask, "Where does this live?"

I know my dad's fighter pilot helmet and bowling ball were stolen out of the attic. It seems to be one of the greatest losses of his life. I don't know which thing he missed more, the helmet or the bowling ball. Both seemed to hold excessive amounts of significance to him.

Strange how objects can do that. They are just things and yet when one of those memorable objects goes missing or stolen or destroyed, a palpable loss opens up where there wasn't one before.

When my dad talks about bowling, he generally talks about how good Grampy was.

When I talk about my dad, I generally talk about the man I wish he could be.

So, fighter pilot helmet. A grounded fighter pilot beats a world champion bowler any day.

After the attic renovation, we used the old staircase as a shoe closet. Sometimes I'd sit at the top of the attic staircase, my head touching the floor of the master bedroom and look down at all the shoes. They were hopelessly jumbled and before I'd leave the closet, I'd rearrange them in neat pairs and rows and look up to the spot where the steps met the ceiling and wonder how many pairs of feet had come up and down those steps and how the steps now led to a ceiling and how I'd hate to be a staircase that led to a floor.

NAFOD

—Whidbey Island, 1983

“Ensign Purio, you have been deemed NAFOD,” the Captain said. Ensign Purio’s eyes squinted.

“NAFOD. What the hell is NAFOD?” Ensign Purio asked.

“No-Apparent-Fear-of-Death,” the Captain said. “Which means we’ll be taking your wings.”

“That’s absolute bullshit! You know that psych test was bullshit,” Ensign Purio yelled. “Isn’t that what you want in fighter pilots?”

“Not exactly,” the Captain said. “We want pilots who fear death a little. They’re less likely to crash the jet. Jets are expensive, Ensign Purio.”

“Hell, I’m afraid of death, Captain. I’ve got a baby on the way. This isn’t right, Captain. You’re railroading me because I spoke up about the bombing runs.”

“It has nothing to do with that, Ensign Purio,” the Captain said.

“Bullshit it doesn’t,” Ensign Purio said, shaking his head in disbelief. “I did what was right. Lenny thought he was going to kill himself on those runs and he wasn’t ready and I did what I was supposed to do as the leader of that unit and now you’re fucking me!”

“Careful, Ensign,”

“Fucking NAFOD,” Ensign Purio shouted. “That’s some bullshit. I’m going to fight this. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You’re dismissed, Ensign Purio,” the Captain said and waited for the salute. Ensign Purio turned around and walked out. “Salute me, Ensign.”

“Fuck you,” Ensign Purio said.

Ensign Purio’s call sign was PSYCHO.

11 North Line Road

Valarie Christle was the first person I remember thinking, *She must be an artist*. She always seemed to be dressed in something flowy and soft. I don't remember visiting her house in winter, but if we had, I'm sure she would have been able to make even the heaviest wool blanket look like a fine silk.

Her house was different from ours in that it felt open. All my memories there are tinged with powder blue and yellow, wind chimes, and clean angles of light. Remembering her long, soft face and graying hair makes me feel comfortable and at peace. She's the kind of person who deserves to live forever.

I don't know why we went over her house or how my parents came to know her, but she was the closest thing I'd met to an angel. I wished she could be my grandmother. Kind, open, caring. When Grams looked at me, it felt like an interrogation where she was already convinced of my guilt. When Valarie looked at me, it was like an invitation to a small party of two. I craved that sort of intimacy. To be seen and not judged. Allowed to explore and simply be a kid available to the mystery of the world.

That's it. She allowed me to live in the mystery of the world. With her everything seemed possible. Of course, I only saw a very small side of her and I'm sure she had her ugly parts, too, but I remember her and the rich softness of her voice and can think only of happiness. If she reads this I want her to know she made me feel loved and what else are lonely and angry boys looking for other than love?

Behind

When I was in Belgium, I learned Flemish and could speak it pretty well. We spoke it well enough to call dad bad names in front of him. He eventually looked up the words in the dictionary and promptly bent us over his knee. A lot of kids grew up with secret languages. Ours was Flemish, until we returned to the United States and transitioned back into English and the public-school system.

Before starting school, I had to take an English aptitude test. The teacher looked at me and said, “Please spell of.”

I paused for a moment, rolling the word over my tongue and then said confidently, “Of, U-V.”

I was quickly placed in remedial English class where I met Neal Lemery.

I can’t remember much about the class. But I do remember the color of Neal’s skin—tanned, almost olive—and his handsome face and dark hair. Neal already had a reputation for being athletic and dumb. He ran around the playground with a cat’s confident grace and his smile was quick and bright. Others might have thought Neal dumb, but he was my friend and I enjoyed the way he moved about the world.

Stones

—a letter written by Barbara Bailey

Dear Mrs. Bowers,

Sean Patrick Purio holds an extra special place in our hearts. He has the honor of being the first male grandson born into our family. Being so far away in Australia, we haven't seen as much of him as we would like, so we treasure the times we have spent together. He came to Australia just before his first birthday and we saw him again in Wolfeboro when he was 18 months old. As young as that he appreciated my cooking and has continued to enjoy good food. He learned to swim when visiting us again at the age of three and had lots of fun in our swimming pool. In Chicago, when he was five, I kindled in him an interest in "stones" as Sean calls them—minerals, semi-precious stones, crystals etc., and he has quite a small collection so far. When in Belgium, we watched winter turn into spring and early summer—enjoying lots of walking, picnics, sight-seeing and visits to the Museum of Fine arts in Brussels to see the Reubens paintings. Sean likes to construct models from cartons and scrap paper, and he has made a workable army tank, a garage for his cars, and we all made baskets for our Easter eggs and decorated them. Sean also enjoys male company, energetic games, T.V., the swing in the garden and big, big hugs which we have whenever we see each other. He has a very special place in our family.

Your sincerely,

Nana Barbara Bailey

Bathroom Break

I found school boring and took long bathroom breaks. I can't remember if I started taking my clothes off in the bathroom stall because I was bored, or if I took my clothes off in the bathroom stall because I had some strange compulsion about being naked while I pooped. Either way, when I went to bathroom at Carpenter Elementary and had to go poo, I took off all my clothes, stacked them in a neat pile, balanced them on the back of the toilet, and went about the business of relieving myself. I can't remember what I did with my shoes.

I was never scared of someone catching me naked in the stall. But I knew it was by no means normal. There was another kid who did something strange in the bathroom. He always wore a red bandana and peed with his pants around his ankles.

"I think he's retarded," some kid had said in a thick New Hampshire accent.

I knew I wasn't retarded, but the red bandana boy's bathroom habits made me question whether there was something wrong with me.

I'd hang out in the stall naked for long stretches of time. Well beyond the time when I was done moving my bowels. I enjoyed it in there. It was typically quiet and I was naked and I was usually by myself. There was nothing in the classroom that held my attention, but it wasn't exactly like I was pondering the nature of the universe or working out some abstract mathematical problem in there. I was just sitting and listening.

When my feet fell asleep, I knew it was time to go. I'd put my clothes back on and head back to class. I remember thinking the bathroom was some kind of untouchable place, that teachers couldn't get you there, and that it was a safe place to retreat to for any amount of time. After a particularly long naked bathroom session, one of my teachers asked, "Is everything ok, Sean? You were in there for a long time." I said I was fine. "Well, that is way too long to be in the bathroom.

You missed the entire class.” I wondered if she knew I stripped naked. I wondered if the other kids were going to find out and then laugh behind my back like they did to red bandana boy.

The encounter with the teacher didn’t stop me from taking my clothes off, but it did make me a little more aware of how much time I was spending in there. I didn’t wait until my feet got numb anymore. But strolling down the school hallway on the second floor, hearing my feet squeak on the polished wood, and the gurgle of the water fountain I sipped from before going into the bathroom to take my clothes off and just sit in quiet are some of my fondest memories of public school.

The Lemerys

Neal's dad was a construction worker who plowed the roads during the winter. I don't know what Neal's mother did other than smoke in the front room, but she was kind and always beamed a nicotine smile at me when I came into the house. Mr. Lemery had built the house with his own hands and I remember looking at Neal's dad and thinking about his hands and how much knowledge they held about how to build things. Their house smelled like fresh plywood and cigarettes.

In the basement, Neal and I would play floor hockey or practice shooting a bb gun into the cement wall. When we got tired of playing down there, we'd go outside to his tree fort and shoot things with the bb gun. I'm pretty sure we never targeted animals. I couldn't have hit one anyway.

The woods behind Neal's house seemed to stretch out forever and the light came down in pillars that made the leaves glow a particular shade of warm green. When we were older, he'd have paintball fights back there with his other friends. I was never invited because I didn't have a paintball gun, but Neal would tell me about the fights when I visited. I imagined myself carrying a paintball gun in those woods all decked out in camo and face paint on the hunt for other people. I most likely wouldn't have lasted long as the woods always distracted me either with a fallen log gone rotten or the musty smell of layered leaves still wet from the morning.

My most powerful memory in the woods was a time Neal and I were playing behind his house and we ended up down at a stream. The stream was slow and gentle. Gentle enough to walk in and so we did. Everything about the moment brought my senses together to the point where I didn't feel like I was moving through nature. I was nature. My feet sank into the mud and the cold water moved past my ankles, calf, knee, quad, and the light didn't so much dance as settle into a sound and I felt like I would live forever.

Red Baron

The first computer I remember using was a Sony Vaio. It was purple and I used it for videogames and eventually porn, but mainly videogames. I played a variety of games: solitaire, MechWarrior, and minesweeper. I never figured out minesweeper. I thought you beat the game with random luck. I enjoyed clicking around to reveal large, mine-free spaces. When a mine clearly presented itself, I emphatically clicked the mouse and planted my red flag on it. But my favorite game was Red Baron.

I didn't really like to dogfight or play out the missions. Instead, I liked to take off, cruise the European countryside, strafe towns with rockets and listen for the church bells sounding the alarm as flames crackled from house to house.

WWI planes had a romantic quality to them WWII planes just couldn't match. Sure, WWII planes were faster and carried a lot more firepower, but there was something fragile and beautiful and crazy about aerodynamically sound coffins strapped with machine guns taking off from grass fields. WWI pilots were suicidal cowboys. Sometimes, I'd just fly around and crash once I'd run out of fuel.

The flak and machine gun fire interested me, too. I imagined the people down in the machine gun nests and wondered what they were up to. What was the last meal they ate or letter they wrote home? I created histories for them and then I'd pull back on the stick, gain altitude, cut my speed, and dive straight at their positions with machine guns blazing. The nest would fall silent. All those imagined histories gone. Just like that.

I liked to pilot different airframes and see what they could handle until the wings snapped off and my plane plummeted to the ground. I knew Manfred von Richthofen was German and that the Germans in WWI were the bad guys, but I wondered what it must have felt like to fly around in his red triplane, knowing he was feared by everyone who took to the sky. I never harbored the wish

to be the most feared fighter pilot of all time, but I did want to fly. It was an easy dream to have when my dad had already been a fighter pilot. Strangely, it was never something I spoke about to anyone. Though, if my inclination for strafing innocent towns and pushing my plane to its limits were any indication of a future piloting career, it was better for myself and all of humanity my dream of becoming a pilot was cut short. I was colorblind.

Dodgeball Firing Squad

The Carpenter Elementary playground was a wonder of my childhood. It was almost all wood, except for the metal slides, and basically a fortress.

At recess, we'd play tag and run all over the playground. But at some point the playground became uncool and the cool boys drifted into the playing field or the asphalt basketball court. I don't remember ever seeing anyone play basketball on the court. It was mainly used as a wide-open space for kids to run and play games. The other favorite game was dodgeball. We didn't separate into teams and throw balls at each other like normal kids. Instead, there were one or two throwers and the rest of us lined up against the brick wall.

I was usually pretty good at dodging whatever was thrown at me, but one day I got distracted and someone threw that red demon ball right at my head. It hit me flush in the face and catapulted my head straight back into the wall. I slumped to the ground. I didn't know what had happened other than my face stung, there were strange splotches in my vision, and I was just plain embarrassed. My legs had turned to jelly. I tried to stand and couldn't. I don't think a teacher came over or anything. One of the kids must have pulled me to my feet, dusted me off, and sent me in the direction of the playground, before resuming their place along the wall.

I sat on the playground with my head in my hands trying to get my head to stop ringing and hurting. I watched the thrower hurl the ball at the screaming kids contorting themselves to get out of the way. Up until that point, all games had been fun and I'd never questioned the validity of a game. But after having my face kissed by the dodgeball, I crossed some threshold of awareness and realized the dodgeball firing squad was a really dumb game.

The next year I started playing football.

Ghost

The first time I hit someone on a football field, I knew it was love. It was like the entire universe conspired to deliver me into a moment of purity so all-consuming and wonderous it felt like I'd slipped into an eternity where my being existed with an effortlessness that made me weightless.

Football was simple to me, especially on defense. Find the ball and then hit the person with the ball. We'd played football in school before, but that had been two-hand touch. Real football was something else entirely. At recess, aggression against other kids was discouraged. On the football field, it was a virtue. I'd known—and my sisters and parents had known—that I enjoyed being physical and finally I could be as aggressive as I wanted (within the rules, of course). There was no better feeling than lining up on the defensive line, seeing the ball move, and then exploding with abandon toward the ball, wherever it was. For me, it was a game of instinct, of reading bodies and motion.

"How did you know where the ball was?" a coach asked.

"I could just feel it," I said and it was true. Football was where I fell in love with grass and rain. At least, it was the first time I found myself intimate with grass and its particular smells. There was nothing sweeter than football in the rain. It was absolute chaos with bodies sliding all over the place and planting someone else's body into the mud and hearing a groan of pain escape their body was pure bliss. When I put on my helmet, I didn't so much transform into someone else, but felt like I was wholly myself. On the football field, I didn't have to hide or bury or conceal the violent parts of myself. I felt free.

One of my favorite football memories was peeing in the pile. It was raining and I'd been playing both ways and hadn't taken halftime as an opportunity to pee. So by the middle of the third quarter, my bladder was threatening to explode. I figured everyone was muddy and soaked anyway

and when there was a significant enough pile up, I decided to wet myself. Slightly cold from the rain and muddy all over, the warm pee flooding my pants was glorious. No one said anything.

At the end of the year banquet, I received some awards and the nickname “Ghost.” The coach said I seemed to be able to slip through the line and find the ball. I was proud of that nickname. I was good at football, at least New Hampshire football, and even though the nickname had its vestiges of being unseen, I felt for the first time I’d glimpsed the real me and had been rewarded for it.

But my favorite football memory was a simple one. We were playing Norrock and my dad was at the game. He didn’t come to many games as he was usually out to sea, but today was different. I was playing running back and Neal Lemery pitched me the ball on an outside sweep to the right and I blew past the defense, up the sideline and in for a touchdown. As I streaked up the field, I didn’t hear the crowd or the pounding of my feet or the thunder of my heart. I heard the rich booming of my dad’s voice, “That’s my son. That’s my son.”

I was elated. I’d finally done something to make him proud. I scored a couple more touchdowns and received the game ball, but the memory of my dad pacing the outside edge of the track yelling “That’s my son,” with joy and pride all over his body filled some part of me I hadn’t realized was empty. My dad had finally seen me and was proud. So proud he’d yelled so loud I’m sure even the birds knew whose son I was.

Wheels

My first bike was a second-hand monstrosity with red-faded-to-pink flowers on the mud guards.

“We’ll call it Flower Power,” mom said.

Flower Power embarrassed me. It was a girl’s bike and I didn’t want to ride around the neighborhood with a girl’s bike, especially with Chad visiting his grandfather, Mr. Foss, during the summer. I didn’t want him thinking I was a total loser who had sisters, played with dolls, and rode around on a pink bike. But a bike was still a bike.

Mom took me to the craft store a little past the Corner Store and bought me some gold spray paint.

In the back part of the barn, I spray painted Flower Power a fine shade of gold. No one, not even Chad, would be able to tell my bike was a girl’s. Flower Power was gold and beautiful and got me to where I needed to go.

Before Flower Power, I’d had a neon green scooter with over-sized wheels. I loved that scooter. It had a handbrake and everything. I’d ride it up and down the street, cruise the Christian Science parking lot, ride down the handicap ramp and cut across into the Catholic Church parking lot that always excited me in the way it opened up into a vast space for me to ride around, try wheelies, while thinking about nothing in particular, except for maybe the smell of fresh tar.

I made large NASCAR circles around the church by scootering on the sidewalk next to Main Street, then down the entrance road which went along the backside of the church, down along the bottom edge past the Dows’ basketball hoop and garden, and then back around. I don’t remember wearing a helmet. I even rode the scooter to school when the weather was good.

Which was where it was stolen. And though I can't remember exactly who stole my scooter, I remember knowing then exactly who'd stolen it. He had black, messy hair and pasty skin and I saw him riding my scooter down at the skate park by the old train station.

Grams asked me, "Where's your scooter?"

"Gone," I answered.

"What do ya' mean gone? Did someone steal your scooter?" Grams asked.

"I don't know," I answered.

"What do ya' mean ya' don't know? It's your scooter," Grams said with a gravity like I'd just lost a holy relic.

I just didn't want to confront the kid who'd stolen my scooter. It's not like I had some sort of loyalty to the scooter thief. I was just scared and embarrassed and I certainly wasn't about to tell my grandmother I was scared to confront the kid because that would have just resulted in a heavy sigh and eye-rolling that confirmed to her I was weak and it was probably on account of my mother's foreign blood. A real American boy would have punched the kid right in the kisser and taken back what was rightfully his. But I was only half-American and destined for failure. So I kept quiet and let her believe I was just an irresponsible kid, which was only partly true.

Gambler

—on the road to Albuquerque, New Mexico, sometime in 1960

Daniel Purio was a professional gambler and had done a stretch in San Quentin for holding up an ongoing card game in Fresno with his brother Frank. After getting out, Frank got into a shootout with Fresno police and was killed. Daniel left California behind and moved to Las Vegas.

He was driving down from Las Vegas to see his youngest son, Walter, who was in the Air Force. Walter's four-year old boy was called Wally. Daniel knew himself to be a bad father and had only met his son twice but didn't want to show up alone. So he paid a hooker named Scarlet to accompany him. He'd heard Patricia was somewhat of a Catholic tight ass, the kind who'd button her shirt all the way up for fear of tempting the flesh.

"What should I get the kid?" Daniel asked.

"Why do I care?" Scarlet asked. "Kids like candy. Get the kid some candy."

Daniel pulled up to a gas station, bought some gas and a bag of jelly beans.

"You think he'll like jelly beans?" Daniel asked.

"Sure. He'll like jelly beans. You get me anything?" Scarlet asked.

"No. Why should I?" Daniel asked, started the engine and pulled out onto the road.

Pork Hill Road

Mom thought I was getting bullied at school (which I was) and decided I needed to learn how to defend myself. I'd already gotten into a fight with Rodney, a greasy-haired red head who smelled funny and always seemed to be wearing stained white shirts. I won the fight. And by won, I mean I threw him down on the ground before he could throw me down. Not exactly a knockout, but on the playground it gave me a little credibility.

"He started the fight, mom," I said. Dad chimed in.

"Good, son. Purios don't start fights, but we sure finish them."

"Walter, that's not helpful," mom said.

"Well, the boy needs to learn how to defend himself," dad said.

"Would you like to do karate?" mom asked.

"Karate?" I asked.

"It teaches you discipline and..." she looked quickly at dad, "self-control."

"Will it teach me how to fight?" I asked. If Rodney decided to throw down again, I wanted to be ready with something that would keep all the bullies at bay.

"It will. But it will also teach you how and when to fight," mom said.

"Ok. Sure," I said. Rodney was screwed.

That's how I started taking Uechi-ryu at a dojo on Pork Hill Road. I remember the street because Colleen and I would squeal "PORK KILL ROAD!" as we turned onto it. It was a giant hill. I learned how to count to ten in Japanese and learning the katas was a fun challenge. There was a predictability and grace in the movements I found calming. But what I really wanted to do was spar.

"Mom, can I spar?" I asked.

"Sure, when the time comes and you are ready," mom said.

I practiced my moves, competed in some karate competitions, won some awards, progressed through the belt stuff, but my heart was set on sparing. All I wanted to do was test my skills against another person and kicking someone in the head without getting in trouble had a certain appeal.

I'd been diligent, patient, and committed until it was time for me to spare.

"Mom, I need to get sparring gear," I said, confident the moment I'd worked for had finally arrived and I'd get to square off against someone and fight. I'd learned to curb my anger into something useful.

"The gear's too expensive, Sean," mom said. "I'm sorry. We just can't afford it. You can still do karate, but you can't spar."

I'd been duped. I didn't care if the equipment was expensive. I'd worked hard, done all the things I was supposed to do. I'd been disciplined and committed and hadn't used any of my new moves to beat the piss out of Rodney's ugly face.

I don't remember saying anything in response and I kept taking karate lessons, but I fell out of love with it. Just like that. What was the point if I couldn't fight like all of my friends did? I'd watch Chris Jones put on his gear and spar and I knew I was a better fighter than he was. His feet were heavy and he telegraphed everything.

I cleared my bookshelf of the medals and trophies I'd won, packed away my belts, and stopped going to karate. It wasn't a total waste. Colleen and I still squealed "PORK KILL ROAD!" every time we drove it. But the disappointment of missing out on sparing stuck with me, especially because it was something I'd failed to achieve. I packed that disappointment away in a dusty, closeted part of my heart that would come to be filled with other strange and wonderful things.

Climbing Rope

Gym class never bothered me. Some kids hated it, but I was decently athletic, so whatever game came my way, I usually figured it out quickly enough not to look and feel like a total loser. Though I distinctly remember resenting President Clinton for creating that stupid running program where we received ribbons for running around the school. I never ran well and despised those skinny-legged gazelles, both girls and boys, who could just set out running and not slow down and not even look tired at the end of the run. I felt like I was sucking air through a straw and my legs were on fire. The idea of expending energy across long periods of time where I was breathing heavily and severely uncomfortable never appealed to me. Marathon runners? Sadists. Cross-country runners? Dumb. Maybe I'm still carrying some childhood luggage of never getting a blue ribbon from the President. I did receive a certificate though. That made me feel important. The President actually signed this? Well, I must be somebody then.

Climbing the rope in gym class wasn't my favorite thing, but I could do it. We'd climbed the ropes before and I'd completed it no problemo. So when the teacher asked me to hop up on the rope and get to climbing, I didn't think twice about it. I'd never particularly been a fan of heights, but I just didn't look down and I was ok. The first two or three pulls were fine, but then I started to get a strange feeling in my groin. *Good Lord, what is this?*, I thought.

I stopped about three-fourths of the way up the rope and just sort of hung there. I didn't have a boner or anything, but my groin felt warm and wonderful. The kids on the ground thought I'd gotten scared and started yelling at me to keep going. I was both terrified and excited that whatever had just happened would happen again if I kept climbing. I started toward the top and nothing happened. I was disappointed, but relieved, too.

I got down to the bottom of the rope and hopped off.

"You get scared?" a kid asked.

“A little,” I said.

I walked home wondering what mysterious and pleasurable experience I’d just had and if I was the only kid to have ever felt that way on a climbing rope. I didn’t feel guilty or like some sort of pervert. It had felt good and natural in a way that nothing before ever had.

“Anything happen at school?” mom asked.

“Climbed the ropes in gym class,” I said.

“You get to the top?” mom asked.

“All the way,” I said.

Pipe

Dad smoked a pipe. It was the only form of tobacco I saw him use and I don't think he used it for long. There seemed to be a moral association in what you smoked. From low to high, it went cigarettes, cigars, pipes.

Cigarettes were bad and only people with moral shortcomings would smoke them. They usually had tattoos, too. Cigars were rare and belonged to the world of men and celebration. It was something they did over whiskey or a barbeque. Gentlemen and the sophisticated smoked pipes.

Dad sat in his chair by the fire, newspaper in his lap, and would puff away at his pipe. I'd sit there and watch him. He'd prop his ankle on his knee, gut the newspaper of almost everything except the business section, and then settle into the adult world of money and markets and success.

I sometimes picked up the cartoon section and read them at his feet. But mostly, I watched him and the way the smoke curled out of his mouth, up around his chubby and handsome face.

"Smoking's a dirty habit, Sean," dad said. I didn't believe a word of it.

He kept all his smoking stuff—pipe, tobacco, matches, pipe cleaner, ash tray—in a small side table drawer the top of which was only big enough to fit a coffee mug and an ash tray.

I can't remember when he stopped smoking, but the rich smell of his pipe tobacco lived inside the drawer and when I found myself missing him, I'd open it, breathe deep, and the smell made me think he was with me, just in the other room out of view, running his hand through his hair, or making another cup of coffee, or simply waiting for me to come find him, so I could show him the funnies.

Coffee

—March 1969, somewhere in Oklahoma

Wally Purio ordered his first cup of coffee at 530 in the morning from a diner he and his dad were eating at before going out into the cold morning to hunt. Wally could see their 1959 Chevy from where he sat. The waitress put the thick porcelain mug of coffee down on the table.

“Your coffee,” she said.

“You’re gonna need a lot of sugar,” Walter said.

“I’m fine,” Wally said and took a sip. He tried not to make a face but couldn’t help it. His dad was still laughing after Wally’d dumped a 4th packet of sugar into his coffee.

Art Class

The one redeeming class in elementary school was art class. I loved everything about it. I was particularly fond of the way construction paper sounded when someone ran scissors through it and how modeling clay left a thin film on my hands I could smell hours afterward.

The only problem with art class was I wasn't very talented. I simply enjoyed it. Learning how primary colors mixed to form other colors. How paint could mix and bleed in surprising ways. I used to draw bubbly shapes on a piece of paper and then color them in, trying not to let like colors touch each other. My patterns rarely varied, but there was something magical about sitting down and coloring something in. It did something funny to time. Sounds faded, too. It was just me and my piece of paper.

I'd get so lost in my bubbly doodles that I didn't pay attention to the teacher. And sometimes I didn't pay attention to when I needed to go to the bathroom.

One day I ended up crapping my pants in the middle of art class. I knew I had to go, but I desperately wanted to finish my doodle. I puckered hard, gambled I could hold it and lost. I sat at the table, stole a quick look around at the other hacks to see if they'd noticed, and went back to coloring.

"What's that smell?" someone asked.

"Smells like poo," someone said.

I kept on coloring.

"You smell that, Sean?" someone asked.

"Nope."

Mercifully, art class was at the end of the day and I left school with a giant turd pancaked to my underwear. The walk wasn't too long, but any walk with excrement attached to your butt is uncomfortable. I don't remember what I did with my underwear—I probably just threw them

away—or if I ever told my mom about it. I just remember thinking art class wasn't so much fun anymore and that art was stupid. It made you crap your pants.

Brewster Beach

I learned to swim at Brewster Beach. There were lanes set up and diving boards and a raft anchored a short distance away from the swimming dock. I wasn't so much terrified of the water, but the algae on the bottom. I could half-swim fine over the stretches where it was just sand, but once I went over algae I lost my mind imagining some monstrous thing lurking in the algae coming up to swallow me whole.

So I learned to swim with my head out of the water. Better to not know what I was passing over than confront it.

All the cool kids hung out at the raft, diving down to the bottom, then coming up underneath the raft. I could only swim for a short distance, so I would hop from pole to pole of the swimming dock until I reached the end. Holding on to the end of the dock, looking at the kids jumping off the raft and laughing and looking cool for the girls, I knew I wasn't really one of the cool guys who could do backflips and touch the bottom of the lake without thinking some lake beast was going to eat them, but I thought that just by being over there I might be able to fake it for a little while and that I would rather die drowning in the effort to get over there than stay stuck to the metal pole like some gangly barnacle bobbing up and down with the swell created by passing motor boats. Every time I pushed off the dock I was pretty sure I was going to drown. Halfway to the raft, I was positive. I had to bury the urge to go back to the swimming dock and just keep swimming forward. Growing up right next to a lake, it was pretty shameful how bad I was at swimming. One might even say negligent on the part of my parents. But they'd tried and paid for swimming lessons, and I guess I must have looked half-way decent in the water or they wouldn't have let me swim. Or maybe they both knew I was a weak swimmer but weighed the few moments of relief with fewer children to herd on the beach against my drowning. Plus, there was a lifeguard. So they let me swim. Probably thought it was character building, too.

Reaching the raft was wonderful. Sometimes there weren't many people on the raft and it felt like I was alone. Sitting out on the raft watching the boats go by, I imagined what adult life must be like. I knew adult life was full of responsibility, but at least in the adult world you could find some place where you could feel free.

I'd sit with my legs in the water and watch the boats. The waves slapped against the side of the raft and reminded me of a strange clock that always felt like a better way to keep time than the clocks we kept wound in the house. Dad loved clocks. I never asked him why. And it wasn't as if he was diligent enough to make sure they all chimed at the same time when they struck the hour. Maybe they did when he was home, but when he was gone to sea, the clocks got all out of time.

When I wasn't on the raft, I played pickle on the beach. It was a simple game. Two people threw a tennis ball to each other and everyone else tried to reach base—a circle created by someone dragging a heel in the sand—and not get pegged by the ball. As with any simple game, there were all manner of strategies and schemes. Sometimes the throwers would throw the ball in high arcs a couple of times and lure someone out and then peg them with the ball. My favorite part of pickle was getting a sense of the timing and sprinting when the ball was a quarter into its flight. It wasn't like in dodgeball when we lined up on the wall like some ragtag band about to be executed and some brute in our grade fired a red ball at us. It made sense. Running under than arc, I knew consequence was coming if I wasn't fast enough. I rarely got hit and it was usually because somebody else got in my way or I stumbled through the sand. But what joy in breathing and running with that anticipation building as the ball came down to earth.

Rain

One summer day, I was sitting by the lake thinking about dad and staring into the water when it started to rain. I'd felt lonely before, but as the rain rippled across the lake my loneliness expanded into something cosmic. It stretched farther and farther out until it was beyond me, out of my control, something different from myself but still intimately mine. It wasn't just that my dad was out in the middle of the ocean somewhere or that my mom's love and attention was spread thin across a lot of kids, or that my grandmother was mean and slightly crazy and had a unique ability to make me feel like a pile of shit she'd just stepped in, but a realization that I was an individual connected to the vastness of the universe. I put my hand into the water and it was so soft and warm and beautiful I started to cry and didn't stop until the weather passed and the gold of the setting sun on the quieted lake told me it was time to go home.

Golf

Grampy lived on a golf course in California with his third wife, Nancy. Nancy was a former LA Rams cheerleader and her platinum blonde hair never moved. I called her Grandma Nan and she was nicer than a second piece of pie and treated me with kindness and love, but she never felt like my grandmother. She was just a nice person Grampy lived with who liked to decorate her house with watermelon themed things and go shopping at flea markets.

It was on a trip with Colleen to visit Grampy and Nancy where Grampy taught me how to swing a golf club. We drove through the neighborhood on his golf cart and went to the driving range. There was a machine there that dispensed golf balls and it required strange shaped tokens.

Grampy handed me a few and said, “Get a big bucket of balls.” I had no clue what I was doing, but I watched the guy in front of me. He put the handle of his empty green bucket on a hook right above where the balls were to come out, put in his coins and then the balls fell with a magnificent crunching sound. It sounded like an ice dispenser, only more guttural. I went up and did the same thing as the man before me. Hook, coins, crunch. The ball machine made three wonderous crunches and my basket was full to the top. I hauled the range balls over to where Grampy had set up his golf bag like I was hauling a pail of fresh milk. The air was cool and the grass still lightly damp. As I walked toward Grampy, the sound of clubs of all kinds whistling through the air and thudding through the ground filled me with joy.

“Just put the basket right there,” Grampy said and pointed at a spot with his golf club. I put the basket down where he’d said and stepped back to watch. He pulled the basket over and the balls dumped out in front of him. He caressed a ball toward him, set his feet, shifted his hips a little, and then started his back swing. It was slow, smooth, and elegant and came down and through the ball with a grace I couldn’t put words to. The ball arced high as if it had always wanted to go in that direction. It kept going and going until it met a point in the sky where gravity seemed to say *Ok*,

you've had your fun and started to come back down. The ball landed a few feet away from a flag. He turned back toward me.

“Golf is really a simple game. You just let the club do all the work,” Grampy said. He pulled another ball toward him and again struck it with a purity that sent the ball high into the blue California sky.

“Ok, your turn,” Grampy said. I took a club out of the bag he’d given me. “No, you’ll want to start with a low iron, like an 8 or a 9.” I grabbed an 8 because I didn’t like odd numbers. “Now, interlock your fingers like this. You don’t want to strangle the club. It isn’t baseball. Now put the ball in the middle of your stance and give it a good swing. Nice and slow.”

I did all the things he told me and pulled the club back in a slow arc and then instead of letting gravity guide me back down, I decided to bring the club down to earth with vengeance. The club dug straight into the ground and sent a shockwave rippling up my arms.

“Good Lord, don’t try to kill the thing. Try again. Just keep it nice and slow.” I tried again and again and again and either missed completely or nailed the ground or barely hit the ball and it would dribble forward.

“It’s ok. You’ve got a good swing. Just stay patient,” Grampy said. My hands hurt and I wanted to stop, but I approached the ball again and swung, but instead of missing or thudding the ground or barely hitting the ball, I hit it clean and the ball rocketed into the air and I watched it turn over toward the earth and in that moment golf made all the sense in the world.

“You’re a natural, Sean. If I saw you more, you’d be on the Tour in no time,” Grampy said, smiling.

By the time the balls were gone, the sun had warmed the wet right out of the ground and the air was dry hot. I rode back to the watermelon-themed house with my hands throbbing, but I’d created one sweet moment of bliss and all I wanted was to go back out to the range and do it again.

Knock-off Cheerios

I never thought my parents beat us. Though they were liberal with the hittings.

Mom enforced the more routine hittings. She'd slap you on the back of the head—"Stop being such a nung,"—butt, and if you'd done something really wrong, like talk back to her or hit someone, it was a quick slap to the face that always surprised you in its quickness. One moment you were a few feet away from her and the next the side of your face was hot and stinging and you were left thinking, *Did mom just hit me?*

Mom's anger was one of my favorite things about her. Her anger looked and felt like mine. I had an ally. Or at least someone else who I imagined knew what it was like to shift quickly from an overriding emotion into a physical action. Anger allowed a certain amount of freedom and escape. My anger was wild and uncontrollable. Hers was, too. In those anger-filled moments, I felt like I'd caught a glimpse of something real belonging in both the adult and children's worlds. It took me a while to realize her volatility was just a symptom of a desperate loneliness. And she passed it down to me like an ugly heirloom.

But God was she beautiful and powerful when angry. Her anger was all the better when one of my sisters got hit, especially Heather because she'd always react as if she'd just been ruthlessly betrayed in some sort of courtly drama. It was never a bad thing when Heather got taken down a peg or two. It wasn't her fault she was dad's favorite, but it still felt good. Even then I knew I'd never be dad's favorite. Even if I flew fighter jets or bought him a teal 1956 Thunderbird, Heather, with her dark hair and brown eyes, would always occupy a special spot in his heart I could never achieve my way into. And I resented her for it.

Dad's hittings were more terrifying because there was almost always a psychological element to them. Mom would say, "Just wait until your father gets home," and I'd have to wait on the kitchen steps and imagine what he'd hit me with.

He never hit me with a shoe, but I always imagined he would. I would have preferred the bottom of a shoe to the belt. Most of the time I can't remember what led to the hittings, but I can remember the terror of laying over my dad's lap with my naked rump waiting for the blow. I certainly don't know how much I learned from getting hit other than it was the thing to do when a parent couldn't control someone.

One of my clearest memories of getting hit was in the kitchen. I was sitting down at dinner and had become enraged about something and started yelling and running around by making a loop through the kitchen and the dining room. I think I ran around two times before my dad had enough of it and stepped into the doorway as I rounded the corner. He slapped me full in the face and I slammed into the cereal boxes, spilling the bulk knock-off Cheerios all over the floor.

My head buzzed like someone had trapped angry flies inside a metal bucket. I don't know if my dad had been wearing his Kings Point ring, but it sure felt like it. I usually liked to stew in the injustice of a parent laying into a child, but it was one of the first moments I can remember thinking, *Deserved.*

Fireworks

Fourth of July fireworks in Wolfeboro were idyllic. We'd go down to the Brewster playing fields and stake out a spot on the hill overlooking the first field. Our family never really went all in on the personal fireworks—we had sparklers and neon glowsticks—but some of our friends did. A prior conversation with my dad:

“Dad, what’s an M80?” I asked.

“A good way to blow your hand off,” dad said.

“Can we get some?” I asked.

“No.”

My friends didn't bring the M80s to the fireworks show, but they did bring smoke bombs, bottle rockets and some other things that exploded and made light.

Daylight seemed to stay longer in the sky on the Fourth of July, like it knew all we wanted was for the sky to go dark so the show could begin, but it was going to hold out and make us earn it by having to load up on sunscreen, bug spray and getting bit by mosquitos anyway.

One of my favorite moments was in the twilight time before it was definitely night and the day was certainly gone when everything was a shade of deepening purple. Voices changed in that purple. They became simultaneously excited and hushed. We were about to witness something special, something sacred. It was only a matter of time. That expectation seeped into the cooling grass and I'd recline and stare at the sky. And then a sense of expectation and suspense that made the air hum was broken by the first thump and boom of the first firework. After the first explosion, all that was left of those purple voices were collective *ooohs* and *aaahs*. I liked all the fireworks, but my favorite were the ones that exploded and fizzled outward like a weeping willow. I liked them because I could feel the percussion in my chest and then they lingered in the sky and on my eyes.

The grand finales were cool because of all that sound and light, but I generally didn't like them because it meant the show was coming to a close.

The last firework faded, we packed our blankets and cooler, and started walking home. When we turned the left bend toward Green Street, we saw red and white lights flashing up the street.

"Are they at our house?" mom asked, and without waiting for a reply she took off running. It's one of the only times I'd seen her run, and she disappeared quickly into the night.

I can't remember who stayed with us, but we stayed out in the backyard at the picnic table, while the firefighters moved through the house. I expected it to be on fire. It wasn't, but it sure smelled like smoke. A firefighter was talking to mom and then she came over to us.

"Everything is ok. There's no fire damage, but this is the culprit," she said and held up a burned bedsheet. "It had been draped over a lamp," and she looked at Heather. Heather stared at her in wide-eyed terror and started crying.

"Mom, I'm so sorry. I was trying to dry it out. I swear," Heather said.

"It's ok. We are all safe and there's just a little bit of smoke damage," mom said.

I was elated. Heather, responsible-I'll-always-be-better-than-you-because-I'm-the-firstborn-and-I'm-smart-and-I-can-read-more-than-you-and-that's-why-mom-and-dad-put-me-in-charge-because-you're-dumb-and-slow had almost burned down the house because she'd tried to dry the sheet on a lamp. It was like Christmas had come in July. Anything to dent her sense of superiority was welcome, but this was just too good. Her failure was something I could lock away and use against her later. I savored those sorts of moments and collected them like other kids collected baseball cards or pogs.

I went to sleep that night with the acrid smell of smoke tickling the back of my tongue and I was happy. How could the day get any better?

America's Game

I was never much of a collector. Poppa collected coins and stamps and even sent me a stamp book as a way of keeping in touch. Stamps just didn't interest me. They were something you licked. Why would I want to collect stamps if I couldn't lick them? Pogs and baseball cards were popular things to collect, too, and I had some, but I didn't get much pleasure out of amassing more slammers or rare baseball cards. I simply enjoyed organizing them.

I didn't have a particular system in mind for the baseball cards other than they had to face the same way in the slim box where I kept them. I was told baseball was America's game, but I didn't find it engaging at all. All I knew was that someone threw a hard ball at someone really fast and another person tried to hit it with a wooden bat, only that person usually didn't hit the ball and walked back to the dugout after they'd missed three times. The statistics on the cards might as well have been Greek and the faces of players looking off somewhere in the middle distance struck me as strange. Who cared about these guys? The only thing I cared about was making sure the cards were organized correctly. I liked knowing when I closed the box everything was as it should be.

I don't know where the compulsion to organize came from, but it made me feel like I had control of something. I could accept a lot of uncertainty as long as I had something squirreled away I knew was organized.

I also used the baseball cards to make card castles. The simple, repetitive process of building a card castle kept my mind occupied. The focus the card castle required made me forget how angry I was. I knew I wasn't much fun as a brother. Who wanted to play with a kid who could suddenly start throwing stuff or punching things? Of course, it wasn't always unprovoked. Heather had a special knack for getting me to lose my mind. All she had to do was mess up something I was concentrating on or disorder something I'd already ordered and a simmering anger would rise up

and let loose. I hated being angry and lonely. But, God, once I surrendered to it, I felt powerful and good, even if I knew I was causing the people I loved pain, even if I knew they didn't deserve it.

Tits On A Bull

I only hated mowing the lawn when I was told to mow the lawn. It's not like we lived on a farm where I'd have to wake up before the sun to get the work done. It was a simple lawn. Probably less than half an acre. But when I was told to mow it, you might as well have told me all of the Brewster playing fields needed to be cut with a dull manual lawn mower.

The gas-powered mower lived in the garage with all the bikes and other stuff big families rack up but don't really know what to do with. I don't remember a car ever being parked in the garage, only outside it, even in winter. The mower was always caked with old grass and mud. I never cleaned it.

My favorite part of mowing wasn't the smell of fresh cut grass or the repetitive calm of stepping one foot in front of the other, but the intoxicating smell of gas. God I loved the smell of gas. Filling up the mower was the best part. Getting close to the fumes and breathing them deep through my nose and seeing the light color of the gas as it poured out of the red plastic jug was close to a spiritual encounter. I was intentionally sloppy with my pours and got it all over my hands and pants.

The mechanics of combustion never really interested me. Just knowing the gas in the mower was in a state of controlled fire filled me with wonder. Sometimes I'd sit on the Wolfeboro docks next to tied up boats and marvel at the beautiful rings of gas and oil changing color on the top of the water with the waves. When the family car needed to be filled up, I'd stand outside with whoever was pumping the gas just to get a smell of that heavenly aroma.

I didn't understand the importance of lawns and their maintenance. Mowing was good when I didn't have to do it, but weeding was a chore designed by the devil. It just didn't make sense to me. I remember mom down on her hands and knees pulling weeds out of the lawn. For what? The friends who never came over? She'd enlist us, too. If you were lucky, you snagged a simple metal

weeder with a wooden handle. If not, you just learned to grab the weeds around the base, twist until you felt the roots snap, and then pulled them up. When I was feeling lazy, which was most of the time, I'd just pull off the leaves and let the roots be. Weeding was one of those activities that crossed successful farmer right off my list of things I wanted to be. Combined with an irrational fear of horses, my abhorrence for weeding made me realize I'd be a terrible farmer. Plus, farmers worked too hard and I wasn't exactly about to raise my hands for a lifetime of toil and disappointment.

Another thing: I didn't do well in the heat, and farmers always looked sweaty. Some people looked born to work, had a connection with the dirt and all things living and dedicated their lives and livelihoods based on those things. I just wasn't one of them.

"Useless as tits on a bull," was what my grandmother used to say about me. I didn't consider myself useless. I just wasn't a fan of work. I'd have rather been biking or fishing or running through the woods barefoot thinking about nothing beyond how the warm mud caked my feet and how the shade of the trees turned the air cool and easier to breath as my lungs burned with a furious and rampant joy.

Skunk

I liked the smell of skunk. As much as woodsmoke or freshly Pine—Soled hardwood floors, the tart and tangy smell of skunk reminded me of home. We had a skunk that had burrowed under our house by the woodpile, which was right under my bedroom window.

I don't remember ever seeing the skunk, but it was comforting waking up to his smell. I imagined the skunk as a boy.

When we were driving down the backroads, which, in small town New Hampshire, was almost every road, I found driving through the smell of skunk wonderful and wanted mom to run over the skunk's carcass just so the smell could stick to the wheels a little longer. I felt bad for the dead skunk, but found it reassuring to know the dead skunk wasn't my skunk living below my window. He was safe beneath the house.

I also liked that skunks didn't go on the attack with their spray. It was a protective measure. I wanted to have a defense mechanism just like the skunk. When somebody hurt me or made me angry, I wanted to do something to them that made them run away and leave me alone. I only had fists and a short-fused temper. I used those as a primary defense for a while and discovered people usually left you alone if they thought you were going to punch them. But as I grew older, it became apparent I had to develop some other kind of defense mechanism to create some space between me and the world. Humor was my skunk spray. The only downside to humor was people thought I was only joking, not that I was in pain.

Winter Walks To School

I walked to school in the middle of New Hampshire winters and loved it. It was by far my favorite part of the day, particularly the morning walk. My favorite days were when the sidewalks had yet to be cleared and a thin crust of ice had formed on top of the snow. Powdered snow smelled different than ice-crusting snow.

Heather, Colleen, and I would bundle up in our cold weather gear and start the walk to school. It wasn't cruel or laborious, but wonderful. Everything was different in the snow. The sounds changed and the light danced all over the place. The air was clean and cold and as long as I remembered to bring everything with me the walk to school felt like stepping out onto another planet.

I can't recall any specific conversations we had on the way to school, but I do remember the sound of my feet falling through the thin layer of ice at the top of the snow into the soft stuff underneath. That sound was pure magic. For those moments, I forgot I was walking toward some place I found boring. It was just me and my sisters out in a fresh world. It made me think the world could change for the better. Of course, school always delivered in its boredom and I found myself dreaming of the walk home. The walk home was always slightly disappointing. By the afternoon, the small plows had taken care of the sidewalks and the sun had risen high enough to turn what was left on the sidewalk into an icy mush. There were few things more disappointing than dirty snow and the cars moving up and down Main Street created a brown slushy mess. But even that disappointing brown slushy mess beat school.

Snow Fort

In winter, after the church parking lot had been plowed, there was a massive pile of snow at the end of it. Grams warned us never to be near the pile when the plows were running the lot unless we wanted to end up suffocated and dead under a gigantic pile of snow. None of us died. Granted, none of us played on the pile while the plows were running either. We listened to Grams, sometimes.

The snow pile was where I built snow forts. They weren't so much forts as poorly dug holes, but I was proud of them. In some of the more elaborate forts I had a ledge to store my snowballs. It was comforting sitting below the surface of the snow and out of the wind. The sound of that subterranean world was muted and intimate. You could hear the wind blowing overhead and understand it to be cold, but below the line, it was strangely inviting and once your butt numbed, it was downright pleasant.

One day, I'd been out at the snow pile for a few hours creating a snow fort. It had two rooms connected by a small tunnel. Heather came out to see what I was doing. I loved getting lost in the rhythm of digging. Hearing the crunch of the snow as the shovel hit it and then the muffled sound of the snow falling into other snow as I tossed it. The work kept me warm and I enjoyed seeing the progress of getting somewhere, especially if that somewhere was out of the weather. I don't remember having any specific enemies in mind when I was building the fort. I didn't stage any mock battles or anything. I just knew my building to be a fort. I was particularly proud of this one because of the tunnel connecting the two rooms. I'd tried it before, but the roof had always caved in. This time, though, the roof stayed up.

"What are you doing?" Heather asked.

"Building a fort," I said from the bottom of the hole.

Heather looked around, took in one compartment, the tunnel, the other compartment, and then walked across the top of the tunnel. It promptly caved in. I was enraged, so I punched her in the face. Her nose started bleeding immediately.

“I’m telling mom,” Heather said and she trundled off in all her snow gear with her gloves cupping her nose.

I don’t remember if I said anything back to her or how long I stayed out in my snow fort, but I do remember thinking I didn’t care if she told mom and I got in trouble. I looked up at the blue winter sky and thought it magnificent.

Eventually, the rage faded and I just sat at the bottom of the snow fort and imagined how long I’d have to sit on the steps or if mom would spank me or if I’d have to talk to dad on the phone, which was usually what happened when I hit someone. I sat there until the blue sky changed to gray and it started to get dark and I became hungry. The cold didn’t bother me in the snow fort, but the hunger drove me out.

I walked back to the house, into the barn, and started stripping off my snow gear, expecting mom to descend on me and start yelling with all my sisters around like an aggrieved gaggle of hens all bobbing their heads in agreement and Heather with a bandaged head looking like an ill-wrapped mummy or a WWI mustard gas victim.

I opened the door and thought, *Here it comes*, but no one said anything.

I went up to my room like nothing had happened and shut the door.

Bombing of Britain

—excerpt from Jack Bailey's memoir

The City did have one bad night of bombing but did not suffer as much as many other large towns and cities. Dad was an Air Raid Warden and he was on duty the night of the big raid. The Government had provided steel Anderson Shelters to those householders with gardens and I helped Dad to dig the heavy clay to make a hole big enough to erect it at the required depth and cover it with earth. Unfortunately an underground stream ran through our garden and although we were not directly over it with the shelter the clayey bottom got very soggy and we had to make duckboards. There's that "duck" again. As soon as the sirens sounded and woke us up Mum, Beryl and I trooped down to the shelter. The six-inch naval guns at the top of Wells Road went off with frightening bangs at the enemy aircraft and bombs soon started coming down. When it got a bit intense Dad decided to join us in the shelter. We heard a terrific whirring noise and thought an enemy aircraft had come down nearby. We later discovered that the railway line half a kilometre away had been bombed and a length of line had crashed down in the Morley School Playground. In the clear moonlit night the lead bomber created a line of smoke to demarcate the target area, and following bombers came over the line and dropped their bombs. A huge blaze seen for miles around was caused by incendiary bombs hitting a tyre store but they did most damage when they made a direct hit on the air-raid shelter occupied by the night-shift of the Nottingham Co-operative Bakery and killed 48 people. Over 150 people lost their lives that night and many more were injured.

Ants on a Log

Andrew was a tanned hemophiliac with dark hair. He was generally kind. So when he asked me if I wanted to make a flamethrower out of a can of hairspray and a lighter, I was a little taken aback, but still excited.

I loved all kinds of fire and had only seen flamethrowers in pictures of WWII when soldiers were shooting into bunkers or lighting up some part of the South Pacific jungle. It always seemed to be against objects, never people.

I knew our flamethrower wouldn't be the same, but the prospect of throwing fire made me giddy.

He grabbed some hairspray and a lighter and we went out onto his driveway. I don't remember much about the house other than the driveway and not too much about Andrew other than his blood didn't clot and he couldn't play football. I remember thinking he could just put a band aid over the bruise and that should help. It made me think something else was in play I didn't know about. Or Andrew was lying and was simply a wuss.

"Let's find something to burn," Andrew said. We scrounged the woods for a few minutes, picking up and discarding sticks, until we found a rotting log half-buried in leaves. We rolled the log out onto the driveway.

"How does it work?" I asked.

"Like this," Andrew said and lit the lighter and held down the hairspray nozzle. Whatever was in the hairspray can whooshed and caught fire. The flame was beautiful, hissing and curling outward like a torn flag in the wind.

"Let me try," I said.

"Not yet," Andrew said. "Let me light the log first."

He walked a few steps toward the log and lowered the homemade flamethrower to the wood and I was struck with how the flame looked soft curling around the log. Well, soft until ants started pouring out of it. I looked at Andrew and thought he would stop, but the running ants only brought him closer. Most of me wanted him to stop. But another part of me was caught in how the wet wood whistled and the little ant husks simply curled in the heat and fell away.

After a few moments, Andrew took his finger off the nozzle and said, "Here. Your turn."

I didn't want Andrew to think I was a wuss, so I took the hairspray and the lighter. I pulled the flame up and down the log in a grid pattern, like I was mowing the lawn, and the ants continued to fall out of the log. I felt powerful holding the flamethrower and only stopped once the can was completely empty.

Apple Pie

ingredients:

9 medium apples—green, red, yellow

2 tbsp plain flour

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup of sugar

1 tbsp cinnamon

a squeeze of lemon

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup of butter

2 cups plain flour

pinch of salt

1 tbsp ice water

instructions:

1. cut softened butter into cubes and place into medium mixing bowl.
2. add flour and salt to cubed butter and mix with hands—should look like breadcrumbs.
3. spoon ice water and mix with hands until dough is just combined.
4. avoid overmixing as it will turn the dough tough.
5. split dough into two balls, cover, and refrigerate for 30 minutes before rolling.
6. or just use jiffy mix.
7. peel and core apples.
8. chop apples into $\frac{1}{2}$ inch wedges.
9. combine and mix apples, flour, sugar, cinnamon, and lemon.

10. check to make sure all apple wedges are covered with mixture.
11. eat some of the extra apple slices.
12. add more sugar, cinnamon, and flour as needed.
13. dust the counter and rolling pin with flour.
14. remove dough from fridge
15. roll dough in all directions to maintain circular shape.
16. drape half of rolled-out dough onto rolling pin.
17. unfurl dough over pie dish.
18. place apples in prepared pie dish.
19. eat more apples and be sure to scoop up the juicy mixture at the bowl's bottom.
20. push a few small cubes of butter in the spaces between the apple wedges.
21. cover with pastry and trim edges.
22. slice the pastry with a knife—small slices. don't get excited—four slices should suffice.
23. make an apple out of extra pastry. don't forget leaf detail.
24. place pastry apple on top so people know it's an apple.
25. put apple pie into oven and bake for 30 minutes at 350 degrees.
26. remove apple pie when crust goldens.
27. let pie cool—hands off!—for 10-15 minutes.
28. cut generous pieces and serve warm.
29. take biggest piece for yourself.

The Dows' Barn

The Dows lived two houses up the street from us. Wayne and Marcy had three kids: Adam, Aubri, and Chris. There seemed to be a constant stream of people, mainly older kids, coming and going from the house and we were no exception, although our crew was a lot younger than most of the people who visited the Dows' house.

I remember a few things about Wayne. He was big, drove an Atlas eighteen-wheeler he sometimes parked in the church parking lot next to his property. He always made sure not to block the basketball hoop. He also got throat cancer, but, other than those tidbits, I don't remember too much about him. Kind, but nothing outstanding.

Marcy was more memorable. She was the one who'd let us into her house. You entered straight into the kitchen. You could then take a right and go toward the TV room. The only item I remember in between the kitchen and the TV room was a large blue plastic water jug filled with loose change. Sometimes the light came in through the window and made all the change glisten like they were a rare, valuable material. The jug had a piece of paper taped around it that read, VACATION FUND. But my favorite room in their house was their barn.

They had a barn like ours with a big sliding door. But what was distinctly different about their barn was it had a dirt bike stored in it and smelled like old oil and gasoline. There were a bunch of fuel cans stacked off to the right. There was something magical about the smell of that place. Gasoline and old, dusty wood. It made me feel like anything was possible and that danger and fun were just moments away. It also housed their lawn equipment—they had a few beautiful apple trees and a nice garden—which just added another layer of earthly warmth to the intoxicating smell. I never rode the dirt bike, but I dreamed of it. I asked my dad if I could learn to ride a dirt bike.

"No, Sean," dad said, "dirt bikes and motorcycles are dangerous."

"How?" I said.

“I used to ride dirt bikes in Oklahoma. One day, my friends decided to dig a cave into the side of a hill and drive over the top of it. Two of my friends were in the cave when the other two drove over it. It collapsed. One bent in half and broke his back. The other suffocated under the dirt. I haven’t ridden a dirt bike or motorcycle since,” dad said.

“That doesn’t sound like the dirt bike did anything. They were just being dumb,” I said.

He paused a moment, “Maybe. But motorcycles make you do dumb things, so no motorcycles,” he said and I opened my mouth to correct him, but he headed me off, “or dirt bikes.”

So the closest I was ever going to get to experiencing a motorcycle or dirt bike was by looking at one in the Dows’ barn. I imagined what it must feel like to crank on the throttle going up a hill and then being weightless on the other side. What was also strange about my imagined joyrides was I was never in the fields or woods of New England, but in a desert somewhere, where it was just me and the sun and the heat and my dirt bike carving thin, snakelike curves in the sand. I wanted to go fast and taste what it was like to be free, riding along the turbulent edge of exhilaration and danger.

Radio

When dad was out to sea, our house was wild and cluttered and fun. Mom's rules were different from dad's rules and it was almost like I lived in two different worlds. In one, dad was home, everything was neat and ordered, and I generally did what I was told when I was told. In the other, mom was surviving, the house was generally cluttered, and I felt free even though a persistent loneliness settled into the house like a fog.

One of the things that kept loneliness at bay was imagining what gifts dad was going to bring home. The longer the trip, the more presents he would bring back. I would have traded all the presents in the world to have dad home, but the presents went a long way. My love was easy to buy.

Dad's taste in things was peculiar and he was way better at shopping for the girls than he was for me and eventually Brian. He bought books and didn't read them, hoarded coffee mugs, and stockpiled Persian rugs like they were hard currency he could keep away from the bank if he needed to. He once even brought us an ostrich egg with a map of the world painted on it. It was a beautiful gift, but there wasn't much a kid could do with it except think about what else it could have been, like a yoyo or skateboard. But he was particularly adept at buying jewelry.

The girls would take in massive hauls of gold earrings, rings, and necklaces all set with rare stones or diamonds. Brian and I were usually given a watch or World War II book or a belt. I was jealous of the disparity between what the girls got and what the boys got, until my dad bought me a radio.

The radio was black and had a giant antenna that seemed to stretch on forever. I felt like I could have picked up alien transmissions on that radio. I didn't know how radios worked. All I knew was that if you turned a knob slightly to the left or right all manner of voices and languages could enter my bedroom. I felt like I was eavesdropping on something illicit. I had no clue what the voices on the radio were saying, but I'd listen for hours. It was comforting to know other people were out

there in the world, jabbering away at all hours of the day. It made me feel small, but it made my loneliness feel small, too. I was connected to strangers, participating in the sounds of being human. It made me feel whole. It's why I would sometimes prefer Spanish soap operas to whatever else was on TV. There was a meditative quality about not knowing what was going on and it made the terrible acting entertaining, especially when betrayed lovers got slap happy.

I tuned into the radio almost every night because I was trying to hear my dad. I thought maybe I could intercept some transmission of him talking. All I wanted was to hear his voice, know he was ok, and that he'd be coming home as soon as he could, even if it meant I had to mow the lawn every week or make sure my bed was made every morning or know that fun-loving, volatile, and wild mom would disappear and be replaced with disciplined mom. None of that mattered. I just wanted dad home.

Crab Apple Trees

We climbed two crab apple trees at the back of our house. There was also a solitary maple out front between the house and the detached garage, which was good to climb by yourself, but we usually climbed the trees together.

I preferred the crab apple tree on the right because you could get higher. The tree on the left was better if you wanted a stable place to sit for long periods of time. Heather read in the left tree all the time and, even though I didn't like her very much, I had to admit she looked peaceful and beautiful reading up there.

Up in the right tree, you could climb to the point where the main part of the tree started to bend with your movement. It scared me to climb that high, but it was exhilarating, too. Being up high, I could feel the tree bend to the wind and it struck me as strange that such a firm thing like a tree could be so flexible. I also entertained the idea that if the top happened to snap off, I would be able to catch myself on one of the branches on the way down. The idea was tested one day when I was about two or three branch levels above the ground.

I was sitting in a particular split in the tree branch I enjoyed, when I looked up at something, lost my balance and toppled over backwards. There was a rush of color and then I hit the ground—and a root—with my legs folded above my head. I'd had the breath knocked out of me and heaved on the ground and thought I was dying. I rolled around a little bit until my breath started to come back and I stood up, holding my back where I'd slammed into the exposed tree root. I hadn't even thought to reach out my hand to catch a passing tree limb.

Those two crab apple trees appeared in my dreams all the time and they were almost always a comfort. The one time they weren't was a particularly desolate dream where everything was dark leading toward my house. I could make out all of the general features of where I was and then I rounded the corner to the backyard and both of the crab apple trees were on fire. The flames

reached up high and nothing else around them burned. I woke up scared as hell but went down to the kitchen to look out the window. The trees were not on fire, but backlit by a moonlit night I could almost taste.

I can't remember exactly when, but my dad hired some guys to prune the crab apples trees. They cut off most of the best climbing branches. I was angry.

"Now we can't climb them, dad," I said.

"Sometimes you have to cut things to save them," was all he said.

I'm sure I climbed the trees again, but after the crab apple trees had been pruned, it was like I'd crossed an invisible threshold of some kind I hadn't wanted to cross but had found myself on the other side of anyway. Sometimes I'd run my hand over the scars left by the cut away limbs and white-hot anger would well up inside me and I'd hate those guys who'd dared to cut my favorite tree. And I hated my dad, too.

Violin

I wanted to play the violin but took piano lessons instead. The violin reminded me of the human voice. The piano reminded me more of gathering thunderclouds or the gentle chimes of crystals, but it could never break my heart the way the violin could. It made me contrite all over. I never confessed that to anybody. Playing the piano was bad enough. I didn't want my grandmother thinking that, in her words, I was a total "limpwrist."

Brother

I finally got the brother I'd always wanted on August 27th, 1994.

"Do you want to see the placenta?" a nurse asked us. We were lined up on a hospital wall, waiting to see our brother.

"What's a placenta?" I asked.

"It's where your brother lived while he was inside your mom," the nurse said.

"Ok," I said. We all leaned over and looked into the stainless-steel dish. It looked like something had washed up on a beach, except it was a pinkish red.

"Gross," Colleen said, but kept on looking. The nurse shook the pan a bit, like she was sifting for gold, and the placenta splayed open revealing a network of vessels that looked like a tree without any of its leaves. I thought it was cool, but really all I wanted was see my brother. I could finally be the big brother I wanted to be.

Being a brother to sisters was fun, but there was something different about being a brother to a brother. I'd been a little bit more aware when Claire was born and remember her birth was filled with a little disappointment as she turned out to be a girl. It was kind of like getting the same gift year after year. It was special in its way, but the novelty of it was gone. I thought of Hallie and Claire as variations on Heather and Colleen. People rarely get things right on the first go (Heather), and then they'd really perfected it by the time the time they got to Colleen that Hallie and Claire just couldn't compare. At least that's how I felt at the time. (Spoiler: it's still how I feel). But Brian was something new. He seemed like my chance to start over, to be the kind of brother I wanted to be, who protected, guided, and loved, instead of tormented, misguided, and betrayed. Part of me thought we'd be able to talk to each other telepathically just because we both had testicles. It saddens me to report we couldn't communicate telepathically even with both sets of our testicles in

working order and that his gender had no bearing on my ability to live up to the kind of brother I wanted to be.

An example. Brian was around nine months old and he was asleep on my parents' bed. It was the time of day when the sun was just right to spill sheets of light into the room. I watched him sleep in the abundant light. His tiny impossible chest rose and fell and I was filled with an overwhelming sense of love and pride. Here was my brother, alive and in the flesh, mouth closed as his small nostrils flared as he slept.

I grabbed his hand and let go. It plunked onto the mattress. I kneeled at the edge of the bed for a few minutes just watching him, then reached up and plugged his small nostrils shut. His eyes shot open and his limbs shot outward, while his mouth gaped open and drew in breath. I let his nostrils go and he fell back asleep. I'd wait until his breathing evened, test his arm, and then plug his nose again—eyes, limbs, mouth searching for air—and then release him back into sleep. I kept it up until I became bored and left him to sleep in the gorgeous light.

Fruit Knife

—excerpt from Jack Bailey's memoir

Well that is the lot I hope, two for Heather and six for Fern. I believe in Zero Population Growth but wouldn't want to be without any of them. Barbara threatened to perform a vasectomy operation on Walter with her little fruit knife if he didn't get fixed after Brian was born. He took the easy way out. I hope they all have happy fulfilling lives.

Christmas Tree

I was suspicious of Christmas. I didn't understand the holiday. I knew we celebrated it because it was Jesus's birthday and the three wise men had travelled a really far way to give Mary—that poor woman—the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. I'd seen gold before, usually in the pieces of jewelry my dad bought for my mom and the girls on his excursions into foreign ports, but I had no clue what frankincense and myrrh were. I imagined frankincense as some kind of bread colored like pumpernickel and myrrh was surely the pelt of some exotic cat. I wondered what Mary did with the gifts. The image of Mary draped in exotic cat fur while holding baby Jesus made sense to me. Who wouldn't want to wear a cat fur coat? And, as it was winter and most likely snowing while Jesus was born, she must have been cold in that drafty barn.

I thought our Christmases normal, except for the strange gifts dad bought us. We did the whole Santa thing, hung up the stockings, and went to bed on Christmas Eve when we heard the bells of Santa's reindeer jiggling on the roof. Some kids I knew wanted to stay up and see if they could catch Santa delivering presents. I didn't really care about catching him. I knew he was real and the faster I went to sleep the faster I would get to open my presents.

But my favorite part of Christmas happened weeks earlier when we would go out to a Christmas tree farm and cut down our own tree. Dressed for the cold, all of us would trundle out of the warm reception area that smelled of warm apple cider, cinnamon, and woodsmoke and out to discover our tree. Heather and I pulled some sleds with Claire and Brian on them and mom usually carried the hacksaw.

As far as I could tell, there wasn't a rhyme or reason to how we chose the tree. We'd stop in front of a tree and when I was old enough, mom would hand me the hacksaw and I'd get to cutting. I loved being on my hands and knees under the boughs of the tree sawing into the trunk. Few smells

were sweeter than fresh cut Christmas tree. The cold air seemed to make it even more distinct. I cherished the way saw dust stuck to the sap on my gloves.

The tree would fall and mom would drag it onto the sled and we'd make our way back to the reception area, where they'd bundle the Christmas tree while we warmed ourselves with hot apple cider or hot chocolate and marshmallows. I'd look around and everyone was smiling or laughing. Nobody cared about the cold. Nobody cared about what they did or didn't have. Those moments contained a golden glow even while they were happening.

Actual Christmas mornings, when the wrapping paper was flying and the tree was laden with flashy ornaments and child-made popsicle stick monstrosities and I was stuffing the trash in bags because it was my Christmas morning duty, were fun, but they never held a distinct golden glow, not even in memory. In all my Christmas mornings, I never remembered Jesus or Mary and certainly not Joseph, but I did hold out hope I might get a nice cat fur coat.

Spark

Dad was a storyteller. It didn't matter what subject conversations moved through. He seemed to have a story about everything. His voice was a deep, rich voice that, even when quiet, and could work its way into the farthest corners of your heart. When he started telling a story or was about to tell a story, his voice changed. It became smoother and soft, like when the wind died down on the lake and all you could hear was the soft lap of waves against rock, sand, wood. It was the kind of shift that quieted everyone around him. God, how I loved those transitions into story. All you had to do was surrender and let his voice carry you away.

When my dad was out to sea for months and months, he would record himself reading stories from children's books. I can't remember a single story he read us, but his voice was able to close whatever distance separating us and it felt like he was just out of sight in the next room. I could feel his voice move through my entire body. At night, I'd hear him before I went to sleep, telling and retelling me he loved me in his deep amber voice and when I got scared, it was his voice I heard that quieted my heart and put me to sleep.

When he was home for Christmas, he'd tell a story about soldiers in World War I. We'd get the fire ready, making sure there were ample coals.

"Fire ready?" dad asked.

"It is," I said and we crammed onto the sheepskin rug that covered the front of the brick fireplace. He picked up the fire poker like a baton and started telling story.

"A while ago, but not that long ago, there was a war, a terrible war, and millions of people died," he said and I was already lost in his voice, the way it carried and seemed to rumble out of the cave of his chest. He continued on, recounting the names of famous battles—Somme, Verdun, Gallipoli—and how machine guns and mustard gas and artillery bombardments and military incompetence bled the world of its young men, how entire villages and towns lost all their brothers,

sons, and husbands to the trenches and how empires buckled under the weight of war and maps and history were redrawn.

It wasn't a happy story, but at the end of it, he would come out of his far-off storytelling gaze and look at each of us in turn as he poked the embered logs sending sparks streaking up the chimney and say, "You see those sparks? Those are the souls of all those who died in that war and they want you to remember life is precious and sometimes things are worth dying for, but rarely."

I remember being curled up on the sheepskin with the fire hot on my face and the story hot in my blood. He was that good. I marveled at how he could recount one of the most brutal moments in human history and make it sound beautiful. He never romanticized war or anything base like that, but I felt like he'd pulled off a magic trick of some kind. I wanted to learn how to do it, too.

I never asked him to teach me how to tell a story. That seemed stupid. So I just listened and then stole what I wanted and tried it out. Much of his story-telling power came from the timbre and resonance of his voice, but there was craft there, too. The way he would linger at certain moments, build suspense and then satisfy that suspense, but not exactly in the way you'd expected. He taught me you could tell the same story word for word and it could come off differently just by emphasizing one particular part or pausing or letting the tension build through silence.

But one of the first things I realized when I tried to tell my own stories was I wasn't my dad. When I tried to tell a story like he would, it wouldn't land in the same way. It would fall flat. It took me years to fall into my own story-telling voice and once I got there, I could see my father and his story-telling more clearly. He relied on his wonderful voice too much. He knew it was good and would let it carry him to where it became a crutch. All storytellers have a crutch. But what was strange about seeing my first storyteller's crutch was not judging him as lesser for it, but cherishing it like an heirloom, treasuring it like it was the only thing keeping me connected to him over vast

distances of time and space, loving it like it was the thing I'd miss the most when he was dead and gone.

Valerie Jean

—excerpt from Jack Bailey's memoir

Our first child Valerie Jean was born on October 14, 1952 in the Firs Maternity Hospital on Mansfield Road. Unfortunately it soon became evident that she had a problem. She was a beautiful girl with a delightful little chuckle but we couldn't get her too excited as it caused her to struggle for breath. She was what they called a "blue baby," with a heart defect. With the new responsibility of being a parent I made an assessment of my future with the Nottingham City Transport Department. I decided that the most I could look forward to would be the possibility of a Foreman's job at the age of fifty or thereabouts. I decided to change my work and, as my education had been geared towards commercial work, I began to look for an office job. I found work as an Accounts Clerk with the City Engineer's Department. This had the advantage of transferring my small amount of superannuation to my new employers' fund. One big disadvantage of this move was that my weekly wage became a monthly salary, and as we had no savings to speak of we existed on quite meagre meals for that month. Barbara performed culinary miracles but towards the end of the month we were down to "Toad in the Hole" with one sausage each for dinner.

The week before I started my new job I played cricket for the City Transport against the City Engineers and took five wickets. The following week I played for the City Engineers and took another five wickets against the opposing team. We used to play against other Council Departments and outlying village teams. We had the use of a Department van for our travels, and the team and supporters sat on forms in the back. There was also room for our pram and baby. We had some great outings, English weather permitting, and we usually finished up in the village pub with a shandy. I had by this time transferred my soccer allegiance from the City Transport team to the newly started Bluecoat Old Boys Football Club and became Captain for the next eight years.

The little black clouds that had been at the back of both our minds turned into big ones. Our lovely baby Valerie of the sweetest smile had contracted a cold that turned into pneumonia when she

was one year old. She struggled hard to fight it with the aid of an oxygen tent, while we struggled with our emotions. Even now, after all these years, I can feel again the hopelessness of being unable to cry or pray that I felt then when I faced the inevitability of her death. She died on October 10, 1953, and a postmortem revealed that Valerie had her heart and liver on the wrong side of her body, and the aorta was misplaced so that too much blood was recirculating in her heart, instead of round her body. Sad though the experience was, we were more united in our loss, and obtained some comfort from knowing that her life would have been a continuous struggle with little possibility of relief through surgery.

Earthworm Jim

Mom and dad finally broke down and bought the family a Super Nintendo for Christmas one year. And by family, I mean me. It was mine. They also bought me the game Earthworm Jim and it would have a profound effect on my imagination.

I had the Super Nintendo out of its box and hooked up before anyone else had left the front room.

I can't remember when we moved the Super Nintendo to the back landing, but we put it in the spot behind the stairs to the left of Heather's room. I played for hours and hours. Mario was cool and we had some other games, but I fell in love with Earthworm Jim. It was just absurd. An earthworm in a spacesuit that used himself as a whip and shot a red handgun looking thing at all manner of strange creatures: crows, junk yard dogs, Evil the Cat, and Bob the Killer Goldfish.

The levels blew my mind, too. I loved all of them, but especially "What the heck?" and "buttville." "What the Heck?" did more to establish my understanding of hell than anything I'd read in the Bible or heard from my grandmother. It was fire red and smoky and Evil the Cat danced around in the background, until you warped to his level where he fired an inferno gun at you and you had to kill him nine times. It was wicked. "buttville" consisted of having to constantly press the button that made Earthworm Jim's head spin around like a helicopter and descend through a maze of metal spikes. "Down the tubes," was good, too. You were placed inside a small glass submarine and had to navigate to other air stations to fill up the submarine before you ran out of air or before you'd rammed the glass too many times against the side and it imploded. I think that is where I got the notion real submarines were made of glass and you could see out of them in every direction. Spoiler, that turned out not to be true, but given what furiously absurd creatures lived in the ocean's depths, I was glad for submariners that submarines were made completely of metal.

I was simply taken with the imagination of it all. An earthworm in a spacesuit. The gameplay was simple but challenging and absurd enough that even when I struggled to beat a level it made me laugh.

I sat down one Friday night and decided to play it until I could beat the entire game as fast as possible. I stayed up all of Friday night and Saturday, until I finally beat it fast enough. I'm sure I ate something, but nothing beyond my mom coming upstairs and taking a baseball bat to the console would have stopped me from beating the game. It wasn't a matter of simply beating the game. I wanted to do it clean through, to create a single line, uninterrupted from beginning to end. I became obsessed with the challenge of it. I didn't get anything from it like unlocking a secret weapon or badge. It wasn't even useful to use as a bragging right. Heather would have just brushed it off as dumb and Colleen would have reminded me that all the time I'd been playing was time she wasn't playing. It was simply something I set out to do and then went about doing it. It had no value other than putting in the work and the satisfaction of completing something hard that had seemed impossible.

After that weekend, I still played the game, but I'd taken Earthworm Jim to the edge and beaten it. After that, it was simply amusing to look for strange parts of the game I hadn't noticed before, particularly in "What the heck?" or sit back and watch Colleen struggle through certain parts of the game and give her advice on how to beat certain sections and remind her that "Videogames are meant for boys."

Any Style

I was nine when I joined my dad for a trip up the east coast on our family yacht, The Olympic Scout. It would have made sense, I guess, to have a boat we could have used on Lake Winnepesaukee. You didn't need anything crazy for tubing or wakeboarding or generally just cruising around the lake. But we didn't have a boat that made sense. We had a 75 foot pleasure yacht that had once been used on one of the Great Lakes as a commuter and then somehow ended up on the West Coast as a party boat and then had passed hands through a series of owners until my mom and dad saw it in a harbor in Seattle and my mom had said "I'd like a boat like that," and my dad, a sucker for unreasonable gestures, bought her that very boat.

It was January and my school required I journal my trip since I was missing two weeks of school. Dad on the water had remained a mystery to me and though I wasn't going with him out onto the open sea, it was about as close as I was going to get to seeing him do his job. Captaining a merchant ship in the open sea full of cargo was nothing like captaining a family yacht up the coast with friends and family, but I didn't know any better. It felt like an initiation of some kind and I arrived in Jacksonville, Florida to meet my dad and his crew.

I was a useless crew member. Everyone else had a job. All I did was sit next to dad and try to understand what he was doing. If I wasn't with my dad, I was in my bunk trying to sleep, and if I wasn't there, I was sitting at the front of the yacht, leaning back, trying to look relaxed, but trying to look relaxed and at ease only made me look even more useless than I felt. But I was having the time of my life. I was with my dad.

We ran into engine trouble in Lightning, Georgia and had to stay there a few days. We walked from the docks to a diner. I don't know what the diner was called, but the woman who waited on us was older and uglier than she should have been, but she was kind. After bringing the

men their coffees and me my orange juice, the waitress turned and asked me, “What you havin’ sugar?”

With all the confidence of a boy in the company of men I said, “I’ll have Eggs Any Style, please,” and closed the menu with a cool arrogance that fluttered the napkins pinned by the cheap cutlery.

All the men laughed and I turned redder than a setting sun.

“Oh, sweetie. Eggs Any Style means you get to choose,” the waitress said. The men kept laughing. My mind scrambled for egg styles. Scrambled? Too childish. Fried? I didn’t like a fully cooked yoke. Oh God, why won’t they stop laughing?

“Over easy. I’ll have them over easy,” I said.

“Sure thing, darlin’,” the waitress said and then did the worst thing she could have done. She bent down and kissed my cheek. My dad almost fell out of the booth he was laughing so hard.

The food mercifully arrived and the talking stopped. As we walked back to the boat, my dad put his arm around my shoulders and said, “Don’t worry Eggs Any Style, we won’t tell your mom about the waitress,” and everyone started laughing again. I laughed, too. What else was I supposed to do? Cry?

Shoebox

—around Stockton, California between 1935-1939

Walter Patrick Purio was born too early. So early, he fit inside a shoebox. After his mother abandoned him in a grocery store parking lot during the Depression, he lived out of a car with his older brothers and worked in the rich California dirt picking lettuce.

Fishing

We ended our trip up the eastern seaboard on The Olympic Scout in Charleston, South Carolina. It was the night of Super Bowl XXIX when the Forty Niners played the Chargers and the men were inside drinking beers and rum and cokes and I was on the front of the boat trying to fish. I wasn't much of a fisherman but catching the fish had never really been the point of fishing to me. I just liked being outside under the sky and close to the water. The smells and sounds were calming and having a rod in your hand was a good way of not having to explain yourself. People tended to get weirded out by a kid who just sat, listened, felt things and thought there was something wrong with a kid if he wasn't actively doing something.

So I was out that night casting my bait into the slowly undulating water and reeling it back in. The wind carried the heavy sweet funk of the ocean and there were sounds of people's voices and glasses and laughter falling onto the water. It was the perfect end to a trip, where I'd felt like I'd been given a glimpse of the world of men. One of diesel and weather, jokes and radio communications, diner food and over-worked bodies, and the sounds of people celebrating football. It was winter, but I don't remember the cold being anything to worry about. It was just me, my worms, and the sounds and smells of the night when I felt a giant pull on the fishing rod. I forgot that world of beauty in an instant and I was locked into a mortal battle with a fish.

"Dad! Dad! I've got something on the line," I yelled. "Dad!" He came out of the cabin.

"What's that, son. You got something? Reel it in quick before it gets away," dad yelled.

"I'm trying," I yelled, and reeled it in as hard as I could, trying to look like an actual fisherman and slowly I could feel the fish coming toward me. "I'm doing it, dad!"

"It's got to be close now. Don't lose it," dad said, laughing. The other men were out on the deck watching me, cheering me on. I felt the fish break the surface of the water.

"I've got it. I've got it," I said and I pulled it up over the edge.

“What it is?” dad asked. I’d expected a fish to be flopping around a lot more. I thought I might have killed it and I reached out and pulled it toward me. It wasn’t slimy or wriggling or anything. It was just wet and hard and two green eyes peered back at me.

“Dad, I caught an alligator head,” I said in disbelief.

“No way,” dad said. “You must have ripped its head right off!” The other men were shouting and laughing and yelling. *Good work, Sean. Way to show that gator whose boss. That’s my grandson.* And they went back to their drinks and the TV. Dad patted me on the back and said, “Good work, son,” and he had the brightest smile spread across his face and then he went back inside with the others.

I’d just caught an alligator. Not only that, I’d ripped its head off. Now the trip was really perfect. I’d never heard of someone catching an alligator and I’d done it all by myself.

When I got home, I put my green-eyed alligator head on my bookcase and it was the proudest trophy I ever put up there.

“I caught an alligator, mom,” I said.

“I heard,” she said.

It took me four years to realize I’d never ripped the head off a real alligator and that it was probably something my dad had picked up in a gift shop. When it dawned on me what my dad had done, I said softly, “Son-of-a-bitch,” took the head off my bookshelf, felt the clean-cut back of the baby alligator’s head and its green-marbled eyes and laughed. My dad got me good, but it gave me a confidence I’d desperately needed. If I could rip the head off an alligator, hell, I could do anything.

The Road To Hell Is Paved With Slanted Writing

My dad was left-handed. I wanted to be left-handed, too, but I wasn't. I liked the way he held his hand over the page when he'd write in his gold-edged notebook. His hand barely touched the page and his square letters slanted beautifully. I wanted my writing to look beautiful, too, and tried to copy it.

But instead of learning to write with my left hand, I just made all my writing slant to the left. When I showed my mom, she asked, "Who taught you to write like that?"

"My teacher at school," I lied, feeling the pride of my achievement shift quickly to worry. She took the paper and went over to where my dad was sitting. I followed.

"They are teaching him to write to the left. To the LEFT," mom said. My dad eyed it over and it seemed to provide justification for an idea the two had already been throwing around. My left-leaning slant was all the proof they needed to indict the public-school system.

"That's it. They are going to a different school," dad said.

And that's how all of us ended up at Cornerstone Christian Academy where on the first day of class Mrs. Fuller, an ugly, bun-wearing woman who reminded me of an ox, told Heather she was going to hell because she was Catholic. I sat a few rows behind Heather and kept my eyes down, swearing I'd never try to write beautifully again and wondering if I'd be going to hell too for being Catholic and lying about my handwriting.

Easter

Pastor Tim was the pastor at Cornerstone Christian Academy. The week leading up to Easter Sunday he thought we needed a demonstration of what Christ went through on the cross. Our chairs were lined up in rows behind a giant wooden crucifix on the floor. He lay down on the wood beams, stretched out his arms and crossed his legs at the ankles.

“Can every one see? Good. Jesus would have been like this,” he said and looked up at us from the ground. I remember thinking Jesus probably wouldn’t have been beaming his pearly whites with such glee. He popped back up to his feet.

“And then the Romans would have nailed him to the cross with one of these,” Pastor Tim said. He took out the biggest nail I’d ever seen, placed it on the wood beam and started whacking it with a hammer. The metal on metal made me jump every time he brought the hammer down. Pastor Tim came up a little winded.

“See kids,” and he showed us his palms, “Jesus died for you. He died for your sins.”

I didn’t feel scared like I did when my grandmother mentioned the apocalypse or hell, but I remember feeling sad for Jesus. I didn’t want Jesus to die, certainly not pinned to a rough-hewn slab of wood with his mom at his feet. What did his mom feel looking up at her son on the cross? And why was Pastor Tim so happy about it? And why did we celebrate Jesus’ death with pastel yellows, blues, greens, chocolate, and yellow-sugared marshmallows shaped like bunnies that made me feel sick when I ate too many of them? And what was the whole hunting for colored eggs thing? I couldn’t piece it all together. Easter only got me excited because of Gram’s pineapple baked ham and Poor Man’s cake. The rest of the Easter festivities were just strange.

As I lay awake that night, hearing the hammer reverberate in my memory and seeing Pastor Tim’s wide grin, I remember thinking, *Salvation’s a funny thing*, and *Poor Jesus*.

Ham Sandwich

—October 8th, 1982

Patricia's mom, Margaret Henry, changed from Margarite O'Henry, had been born in Toronto, Canada in 1894 and was known for keeping her home immaculate. Dino Crocetti used to sit in her parlor from time to time and once got hair grease all over one of her doilies. "Get out, you greasy dago!" she yelled and kicked him out of the house before the neighborhood raised enough money to buy him a train ticket to California.

Margaret had a habit of saving a piece of her ham sandwich on the side of the mouth so she could suck on the salts for a long time when she got hungry. It was a habit she picked up during the Great Depression when she learned to stretch food and hope as far as they could go. Later, when she was old and a grandmother herself and in a nursing home, she pushed that piece of ham sandwich to the side of her mouth, fell asleep in her chair, and the ham sandwich slid past the back end of her tongue and choked her to death.

Grammar

I didn't like my primary teacher at Cornerstone Christian Academy. She was young, thin with shoulder length greasy hair, mossy yellow teeth, and made me diagram sentences. I despised diagraming sentences.

"How will you learn to write, if you don't know how to diagram a sentence?" she said and then went about chopping the sentence up into its component parts on the chalkboard. It seemed like a violation to me, like there was something clinical and cold about laying bare a sentence with all those lines. I told Heather I didn't like diagraming sentences.

"What's the point?" I asked.

"I love diagraming sentences. It's like a puzzle or a math problem," Heather said.

"Ok, but still, what's the point?" I asked again.

"To see how a sentence works," Heather said.

Of course Heather would like grammar and diagramming sentences. She'd grow into the type who loved nothing more than finding a dangling participle and punishing a student's paper with red ink for the transgression. Ever since I was put into the remedial reading group, I approached reading and writing as a mystical endeavor. It was magic. Who cared if I could identify a noun, verb, adjective or prepositional phrase? The writer had put the words down in a certain order for a certain reason. Who was I to question it? Or worse, to take it apart? I guess I feared that if I broke the sentence down, if I could isolate it into discrete units that somehow I'd lose the magic of the sentence. Sentences were complete, whole things and I liked them how they were.

So when my teacher asked me to take them apart, I hated it. I would rather have dissected a dead body than a sentence. I read them like they were alive. Plus, I didn't think there was much fun in being grammatically correct. I despised when people corrected my grammar. One of my favorite things to do was to write down how people talked. When I'd go back and look at the sentences,

there was grammar there to be sure, but things were all out of order and wild. There was a rhythm to the spoken word I yearned for. The rules usually made the writing sound stunted.

“That doesn’t sound right,” I’d say.

“But it’s grammatically correct,” the teacher’d say.

In my head, I’d say, “What does this lady know? She doesn’t even know how to brush her teeth right.”

Crab Apples

The crab apple trees behind our house produced small, hard fruits. I never really wrapped my head around why they were called crab apples. I assumed they grew along the coastline and crabs enjoyed eating them. I envisioned waves of crabs scuttling up the beach and spearing the delicacy with a claw and carrying it back down into the sand to eat. I'd bitten into a few crab apples and found them gross, but who was I to argue with a crab's palette? It was nonsense imagining and it was more likely the crab apple got its name from the color of the apple, which looked like a crab—at least a boiled crab—then from it being a steady part of the crustacean's diet. No matter, I loved the crab apples because they were great for throwing at people.

We'd have crab apple fights in the backyard and at first we just used our arms to throw the hard-little projectiles at each other. Then, as these things typically went, someone decided their arm wasn't good enough, so they found a way to use a tool to whip the apples around faster. In my case, I chose a ruler, one with a metal edge I could secure the crab apple to and then whip through the air. It was wildly inaccurate, even compared to my noodle arm, but the crab apple whipped off the end of the ruler with tremendous speed. It rarely hit anyone, but when it did, it did some damage. And by damage I mean when it hit one of my sisters. Mom caught sight of me chucking crab apples at my sisters with a metal-lined ruler and decided to put a moratorium on crab apple fights.

"No more crab apple fights," she said. "Someone's going to get hurt."

I listened, but still wanted to hoard crab apple ammunition for the next fight so I'd be ready when it came. I grabbed some glass mason jars and collected the crab apples that had fallen to the ground and when those were gone I climbed the tree and grabbed ones that hadn't fallen yet. Those were particularly hard. I filled a few mason jars and hid them in the tree.

Heather had never been particularly heroic and I still don't know if she gathered the glass mason jars full of crab apples to protect me from getting in trouble or if she collected the glass

mason jars full of crab apples to use as evidence of my misdeeds. It was hit or miss with Heather. Some days her allegiance was clearly aligned with the kids. Others, she was aligned to our parents. Part of the duties of an older sister, I guess, but I always questioned her motives. Regardless of her motives, she was carrying the mason jars around the back of the house when she tripped over a pile of grass clippings Mr. Pearce had left in our yard—she was one of the more uncoordinated people I knew—fell forward onto the mason jars and cut up her forearms. She ran into the house crying.

As she was getting bandaged up, mom asked, “I thought I said no more crab apple fights?” I looked at her, wondering if she was going to turn me in. She looked at me, her face still red from crying, and said, “I know, mom.”

“I’m disappointed in you, Heather,” mom said. “You’re the oldest and need to set the example.”

“I know, mom. I’m sorry,” Heather said. Her lie surprised me and I slinked away loving her just a little bit more.

Fish Dish

ingredients:

2 to 4 or more lbs white, flakey fish (scrod, cod, snapper, shark)

ritz crackers (two sleeves or more)

1 $\frac{3}{4}$ sticks of butter

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup milk

dash of onion powder

dash of garlic powder

instructions:

1. turn oven to 350 degrees.
2. melt butter in a small pan.
3. butter the bottom of a large glass casserole dish with 1 tbsp of melted butter.
4. fill the casserole dish $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ inches high with fish.
5. pour milk over the top of the fish.
6. dash onion powder and garlic powder over the top of the fish.
7. in a separate mixing bowl, crumble crackers and pour in the rest of the melted butter.
8. spread buttered crumbs over the top of the fish.
9. press crumbs down slightly with fingertips.
10. place dish in the oven and bake for 35-40 minutes.
11. remove dish from oven.
12. check center to see if fish thoroughly cooked—should be white.

13. let dish cool a few minutes.

14. serve warm.

Werther's Original

My two favorite candies growing up were anything cinnamon flavored and Werther's Original caramel candies. Mom had a sweet tooth and dad just liked to snack on things, so we typically had candy of some kind somewhere in the house. It could range anywhere from penny candies like Tootsie Rolls to specialty Belgian chocolates my dad picked up in New York City. Those Belgian chocolates came in a gold box and had to be secreted away or they would quickly disappear and nobody would own up to it. But usually we just had regular candy.

"Sean, you want some candy?" dad asked from his chair. He had his feet propped up on an ottoman and a bag of Werther's tucked under his arm.

"Sure," I said and walked over to him.

"It's a new flavor," he said and moved the bag toward me so I'd take a look. I heard him unwrap one and then hold out his hand. He dropped the candy into my hand. It wasn't like any Werther's I'd seen. It was dark brown and grainy. Nothing like the smooth, light brown candies I drooled over because they lasted so long and if you were impatient and bit down on them they would stick to your teeth for what felt like days in candy time.

"Thanks, dad," I said and popped it in my mouth. Dad watched me intently. It tasted chalky and was not sweet, but I didn't want to be rude.

"Taste good?" dad asked, a smile breaking at the corners of his mouth.

"Real good," I lied.

"You want another one?" dad asked, reaching into the bag.

"Oh no, I'm ok," I said and dad couldn't keep it together. He let out one of his giant laughs that made me think an earthquake was happening inside his body somewhere. His whole body shook and his face turned red.

"You just ate," dad said, shaking with silent laughter, "You just ate a dog treat."

I laughed, too, but it was an outsider's laugh. Half-laugh, because part of me knew it was funny, and half-embarrassment because I'd trusted him and he'd tricked me.

I walked out of the living room and could still hear him laughing and re-telling the story to mom, while I went to the bathroom and rinsed out my mouth.

"I told him it was candy," dad said to mom, "and I gave him a dog treat and he said," and he stopped for a bit, "he said it was good!" and howled with laughter. I expected mom to say something like *That was mean* or *He trusted you*, but her soft cackle mixed with dad's deep belly laugh and I rinsed my mouth out again, spit as much of the taste of dog treat out of my mouth as I could, and stood looking at myself in the mirror, my whole body burning with rage and betrayal.

Driving With One Good Eye

Craig Hanson's dad was blind in one eye, but his disability didn't stop him from smelling the turd I'd left in my pants after crapping myself on the tail-end of our hike.

Halfway down the mountain, my stomach threatened open rebellion and I took off running, leaving Craig and his dad behind. The woods clipped by and I watched the trail for where to place my feet and stammered, "Oh no, oh no, oh no," grabbing at my backside as if it could help.

I can't place the exact moment I surrendered to my bowels and crapped myself, but I recall how thankful I was for wearing tighty-whities. And even with a warm, steaming load in my pants and basically falling down the mountain toward the restroom, I remember the woods as intensely beautiful.

I arrived at the restroom, dropped my shorts and threw my soiled underwear down the hole. I wiped up as best I could, but I still reeked like fresh dog crap at high noon.

Craig and his dad arrived a short time later.

"You ok?" Craig's dad asked.

"I'm ok," I said. "Just didn't make it to the toilet in time." Craig kept his distance.

We drove home, me in the back seated on a towel, Craig in the front-passenger seat. All the windows were rolled down, but I could still smell the stench of my shit and shame soaking into the fabric seats.

Glass Door

The Wolfeboro Public Library had a summer reading competition every year. Heather always entered. I can't remember if I did or not, but I'm certain there would be no way I'd win. I just wasn't a big fan of reading. We'd walk past the police station to the library and it made me feel safe knowing the police were right next door in case an emergency happened and we needed some kind of adult to take care of the situation.

The library smelled like almost all libraries, slightly musty with the residual smell of someone trying to cover something up with cleaner. Heather would go off to the fiction section and I would head to the area where they had small blue foam chairs. I didn't like to read, but I loved building small forts out of the chairs. The librarians usually didn't mind as long as there wasn't a reading going on and I didn't get too loud. The other best thing about the library was the air conditioning and unlike our house, it was everywhere. Sometimes I'd just walk down the rows of books and wonder at how cool each row was. I couldn't figure out how to use the card catalog system. I just wandered in a coolness I found luxurious.

Though I bored of that quickly, too. So I mostly just sat under my fort and either napped or daydreamed. When it was time to go, I looked forward to leaving. My patience for the library dwindled the more times we visited. I wanted to go fishing or biking or to the beach. I didn't want to be shut up in the library with my sisters, even if it did have air conditioning.

Toward the end of one summer, I was sick of the library and I didn't want to go anymore, but Heather did.

"Sean, go to the library with your sister," dad said. I was sitting on the living room couch.

"I don't want to go to the library," I said.

"You'll do as you're told," dad said. "Go to the library with your sister."

"I don't want to go," I said.

“You’re going to the library,” dad said.

“I’m not,” I yelled, pushed myself up from the couch and headed toward the side door through the mudroom. My dad was probably yelling something at me, but I didn’t hear him. I arrived at the side door and hit it with both forearms. Usually, the outside door—half door, half glass—only required a little bit of persuasion to pop open. Not today. The door stuck and my forearms went straight through the glass and then the door swung open. I stumbled out onto the side porch and looked down at my arms. I started screaming, but I couldn’t hear it. Blood dripped onto the porch from deep cuts all over my arms.

“Jesus,” dad said. “Fern, we’re going to the emergency room.” He grabbed some tea towels, wrapped them around my arms, and the next thing I knew I was in the emergency room with a nurse picking out the shards of glass from my arm. There was a particularly healthy chunk of skin missing from the inside of my left elbow and as the nurse wiped the surrounding area with some dark solution that stung, her hand slipped and plunged the cotton swab right into the missing chunk. My entire arm lit up. I yelled out in pain.

“Calm down,” the nurse said, “It’s not that bad.” It was the first-time *bitch* flashed through my brain.

When I got home, my arms were all bandaged up and I lay on the couch eating some chicken soup mom had made and then some ice cream. My arms issued a dull throb and all I could think was *Thank God I didn’t have to go to the library.*

Failing Heaven

I don't know whether I was more scared of going to hell or more looking forward to heaven, but either way, one night in my bed when the rest of the house felt asleep, I prayed the words somebody at school or church, I can't remember which, told me to so I would be saved. The person said I'd have to pray with a contrite heart.

"What's contrite mean?" I asked.

"It means," the person said, and paused, thinking it over, "broken."

I prayed with what I thought was a broken heart.

I started like I always started, "Dear heavenly Father, thank you for this day. Please keep my mom, dad, Heather, Colleen, Hallie, Claire, and Brian and I safe tonight, tomorrow, and forevermore," and then I started in on what the person had told me to say. I struggled to feel like my heart was broken. I repeated the word contrite over and over, but it didn't open up anything in my heart, let alone break it to pieces. I desperately wanted to get into heaven. Who wouldn't want to live forever and be with the people they loved for the time beyond time? I sure did. And I sure didn't want to get left behind in the apocalypse with beasts and demons of all kinds roaming the earth and me with the mark of the beast on me somewhere and the only thing to look forward to was my being mercifully ended by getting plunged into a lake of fire alongside Lucifer. So I tried and tried to break my heart and only succeeded when I imagined Brian dead.

I'd have been broken-hearted if any of my sisters died, especially Colleen, but I'd wanted a brother so badly for so long that if God had decided to take my little brother away from me, my heart would have shattered, dissolved, burnt up into a pile of ash. That I knew for sure.

So I imagined what it would be like to lose Brian. I didn't come up with anything specific, like a car accident, or strange, incurable disease, or choking on something like a hotdog—which would have been more realistic. I just imagined him plain dead.

I imagined how his face would look and what he'd be wearing at the funeral. I imagined someone would want me to say something—being the older brother and all—and I'd say something moving that would make people cry and I would cry, too, but not hard enough to stop me from keeping the eulogy going. What would life be like without him? I'd wanted a brother so badly I'd cut Heather's long, dark hair one day while she was sleeping on the couch into a short bob. "Why did you cut your sister's hair?" mom asked. "Because I want a brother," I'd said. Years later, when I found out my mom miscarried between me and Colleen, I fantasized the baby had been a boy and that we would have been best friends and would have done all the kinds of roughhousing boys did—though Colleen did exactly the same kind of roughhousing—and if that fantasy had been reality, then I never would have had Colleen as a sister. But again, I wouldn't have been any wiser of her nonexistence. But having Brian die would have been more tragic than any of the other kids dying. His imagined death was my ticket to a contrite heart, a broken heart, a heart that would get me into heaven.

After imagining Brian dead and breaking my own heart, I cried. I prayed that Jesus would save me from eternal damnation and that he was my Lord and Savior and that I wouldn't be going to hell for being a bad boy, but be up in heaven where I didn't know what I'd do all day, but I knew I'd be surrounded by my loved ones, and it would be warm, but not too warm, and there'd be food, but I'd never be hungry, and there'd be Brian right there with me talking and running and laughing forever. Amen.

I woke up the next morning terrified. I'd messed it up somehow. My heart wasn't broken enough. How broken did a heart have to be to get into heaven?

I walked toward the smells of breakfast knowing I'd failed heaven.

Mixers and Go-Carts

—Altus, Oklahoma 1968

Stationed in Altus, Oklahoma, Walter Purio opened up a bar called the Tiki Lounge inside the Town and Country Lanes. Jackson County being a dry county, Walter sold only the mixers. People brought their own booze. He also opened up a 1/18th mile go-cart track behind a taco shop. He and his son, Wally, outfitted eight carts with Briggs & Stratton four-stroke lawn mower engines and maintained the track.

A man named Major Dinkle liked to race-go carts. He was also a drunk. Wally and Major Dinkle would race around the track and when Wally put him into the tires, he'd yell, "Jesus Mother-Fucking Christ." Major Dinkle was also known on base as Father Dinkle.

Macaroni and Cheese

ingredients:

4 boxes of kraft macaroni & cheese

1 lb. package of frozen mixed vegetables

worcestershire sauce

instructions:

1. prepare macaroni & cheese as directed.
2. heat frozen mixed vegetables in microwave for 5 minutes.
3. add vegetables to macaroni & cheese while sauce thickens.
4. splash of worcestershire sauce to spice it up.
5. serve immediately.

Costco

Feeding six kids was expensive. I think it was one of the reasons my parents would end up sending me to boarding school, but more on that later. I enjoyed eating and I'd eat almost anything. I don't recall ever not eating something out of a dislike for the actual food. My dislike for the food usually had to do with the cooking. Once, our babysitter Karen—poor girl—made chicken strips that were so dry not even ketchup could save them and ketchup was the Jesus of condiments.

"I'm not eating these. They are dry," I said.

"Well, that what's for dinner," Karen said. I pushed back from the table and stomped toward the steps. I was angry. Dinner had been ruined by Karen's inept cooking. How hard was it to cook frozen chicken? "Sean, come back to the table and eat."

"No. Those are disgusting," I said, standing halfway up the back stairs.

"Try some sauce on them," Karen said. I was incensed.

"Not even water sauce would work on that chicken!" I yelled and made sure the wood steps felt my wrath.

It wasn't Karen's fault, really, but I needed someone to be angry at and she'd been there. In our house, given the amount of mouths to feed, mom stressed quantity over quality. But shopping for quantity at the local grocer was too expensive. We loaded up the car and drove forty or so miles to the nearest Costco.

Costco was a wonderland. It was a lesson in sheer abundance. Even the shopping carts were different and we typically got one of those flatbed carts and all piled on until whatever we were buying forced us off. It seemed like everything imaginable was packed under the steel beams of that giant warehouse. Sometimes I'd lay down on the cart and stare at the ceiling. Usually there was nothing there except lights and cross beams. But sometimes you could see a stray balloon caught

against the ceiling and, if you were really lucky, you could spot birds swooping around up there. Birds. In a warehouse. What an unexpected joy.

Mom spent so much money at Costco she was on a list of 100 top customers and when one of the workers saw our car pull up, they'd grab a flatbed cart and bring it over to us. Ah, luxury. It made me feel special. Almost as special as that first moment when you crossed from outside—after flashing your card—and through the air conditioning and on into the store.

We typically stuck to the food side of things, combing the aisles and refrigerators for whatever was on our list. We loaded the cart with huge boxes of cereal, giant bags of frozen chicken, mixed vegetables, regular vegetables, and (I made sure to remind my mom) cheese-stuffed pasta shells. Colleen despised those, but I loved the way the outside shell would sometimes overcook and become crispy and then the ricotta middle still stayed gooey and warm and I could slop them together in with whatever pasta sauce mom had tried to drown them in.

In short, Costco held the promise of being full, stuffed even. We needed so much food we had a deep freezer in the barn that was always packed. I loved when mom told me to go out into the garage and grab something from the freezer. The lid would smack open and exhale its strange coolness that for a few moments made me believe it was alive. I'd typically have to shuffle things around to get what mom wanted, but I didn't mind. It was refreshing to go in there, even in the dead of winter when the barn was only slightly warmer than the northern winter banging against the door.

We weren't a family who treated cooking as an art. For my mom (or anyone who took care of us), cooking was an act of survival. It's only in retrospect I can see my mom pushing a giant flatbed cart loaded with food and children and understand her to be a goddamn miracle.

Desk

I enjoyed strange spaces, particularly if those strange spaces had things hidden in them. Cupboards, garages, closets, purses, wallets, storage boxes, attics, glove compartments. No telling what I might find. The things were rarely of much value. It was more a matter of satisfying my curiosity.

I was digging through the lower right corner of my dad's desk when I found a stack of pictures secured with a rubber band. It wasn't strange to stumble across a collection of photographs, some still in an envelope, but the stack in my dad's desk drawer was as big as the biggest hamburger I'd ever seen. It was huge.

I began flipping through the pictures. Most were pictures of the desert. Some had burned buildings. A few had blown out cars. And some of them had dead bodies. There was one where a corpse was charred completely black and curled up in the fetal position. I felt nothing while I was looking at them. I got to the end of the pile, secured the rubber band back around the stack, and put it back in the drawer. That night I couldn't sleep.

"Dad, I can't sleep," I said.

"Why?" dad asked. I hesitated before answering, weighing whether admitting I'd been digging around in his desk was worth him getting angry at me. I decided to tell him.

"I found some pictures in your desk and I looked at them," I said. "There were dead bodies in some of them." I waited for his anger.

"I forgot I had those," dad said with no trace of anger in his voice. "I'm sorry you saw those, son. Those were war photos."

"War photos? Which war? Why do you have them?" I asked.

"I don't know, really. Someone gave them to me and I kept them," dad said. He came over and gave me a hug. There was no long-winded sermon about trust or snooping or privacy. I'd seen

something I shouldn't have. I'd seen what war did to places, things, bodies. He'd tried to keep the ugliness of the world from me, to keep me safe from it and I'd found it at the bottom of his desk drawer.

Sega Genesis

The Dows owned a Sega Genesis and Mrs. Dow, who let me call her Marcy, allowed me to play it. We didn't own a Sega Genesis and I liked to play Sonic the Hedgehog and some street fighting game where you moved from left to right punching and kicking people and picking up metal pipes or post offices boxes and beating your enemies with them. Sonic was ok and I enjoyed collecting coins and especially liked hitting the bumpers and getting fired around the loop-de-loops, but I didn't really understand the story and didn't really care too much if I died.

The other game, the one where you went around beating people up, enthralled me. It was so simple and brutal and fun. I knew hitting people was wrong, but here I could hit people and it was ok. Not only was it ok, but I could use almost everything around me, even orange construction cones, to take out the oncoming foes. Much like Sonic, I had no clue what the story of the game was and it didn't matter one bit. All that mattered was I could punch and kick and violence my way through a level. I'd get so engrossed in the game entire summer days would slip by. I don't remember doing much eating and drinking, but I'm sure Marcy kept me hydrated and full.

"Just clean up after you're done," Marcy would say. But I almost never did. I'd get done playing and then just leave. One day, I went up to Marcy's door and knocked. She opened the door.

"Can I come in and play video games?" I asked and it was more a formality than anything as she always let me in.

"No, Sean. Not today," Marcy said. I was stopped cold. I didn't know what to say. I was embarrassed I'd asked.

"Why?" was all I could manage.

"Because you didn't clean up your things..."

"Yes, I did," I said.

“No, you didn’t. You never do. You just left it a mess. So, no video games today,” she said and I turned away and heard the door close behind me.

I walked home angry and embarrassed. Mrs. Dow had made me ask only to tell me no. I loved sitting in her cool and quiet house and playing video games. No one bothered me or told me I had to clean or accompany my sisters to the post office or library or anything. I loved beating ripped-jean losers with metal pipes and jump-kicking motorcycle riders off their bikes. But I hated the feeling of embarrassment of getting told no more than I loved the video games, so I swore I’d never go back to Marcy’s and play video games even if she asked me to. And I never did.

Apple Orchard

The Dows owned an apple orchard and we visited it to pick apples in the fall. We'd walk down the long rows, pick apples, and put them into brown paper bags. I liked the taste of the apples that came right off the tree, but I was more fascinated with the apples that had fallen off and had started rotting on the ground. My stomach always jumped when I turned over a perfectly good-looking apple on the ground, only to reveal a mushy brown underside. If I was lucky, there would be a worm working its way through it. I'd pick up the apple and bring it toward my mouth.

"Sean! Gross. Don't eat it!" Colleen would say and I'd widen my eyes and bring it closer to my mouth, threatening until she squealed and turned away. I never ate the apple, though I did smell the rotting apple flesh and it smelled sour, but still sweet.

Those apple picking outings in the fall were just golden. The wind moving through the trees, the cold balancing that fine edge of something uncomfortable and comforting, which was maintained by walking and sweating a little bit in a sweatshirt. My hands were cold, but I could still move my fingers to grab the apples and my breath hung like a delicious mist in the air.

The Dows' also made cider, which impressed me less than wandering the orchard searching for apples. There was something cruel about crushing apples.

"How do you decide which ones are turned into cider?" I asked.

"One's that are rotting or just look ugly," someone said.

I felt bad for the ugly apples. I'd eaten a lot of ugly apples and they'd tasted just as good as the good-looking apples.

The Dows ended up selling the apple orchard. We went apple picking after that, but it never held the same warmth as picking apples at the Dows' orchard. It was probably knowing you were picking apples at your neighbors' place that made it feel less like an exchange and more like a shared gift. Mom made wonderful apple pies from the Dows' apples.

When I was lonely or just simply alone, I'd go back to the Dows orchard in my imagination. It was curious when I went back that there weren't just ripe apples on all the trees, but each tree was in a different stage of bloom. Bees flew from flower to flower and tree to tree and the wind bent the boughs ever so slightly. It was peaceful. When I visited the imagined orchard, I didn't think about apples or cider or putting my hands in the discarded apple pulp. I thought about the trees and wondered if they were still there bearing fruit, or if the new owners had chopped them all down or if they'd simply let nature return and take back the orchard. I couldn't know, but I liked thinking about an overgrown field, where a solitary apple tree remained and bloomed wild apples that fell to the ground and rotted and filled the air with a sweet sourness that carried on the wind right to me.

Corner Store

I stole change from my parents and bought penny candies from the Corner Store.

They kept their change on a counter to the left of the bed if you were laying in it. It was usually in a small dish in front of the stereo and dad's bottles of Bayer and Sudafed. Or maybe the bottles were on top of his dresser, which was immediately to the left of the bed. I don't remember exactly, but I remember the change being on the counter and I took it, mostly quarters. I didn't particularly like carrying around a bunch of mismatched change. I liked to have all of it of one kind and separated. I trusted nickels more than dimes—because they were thicker—and loved the different shades pennies took on over time, especially the really dark ones, which I assumed were older. Sometimes I'd hold the change in my hands and wonder who the last person was to hold the piece of change and what they'd bought. Or I imagined some kind of story for the piece of change that usually resulted in me not feeling guilty about stealing from my parents, as if the money had been destined to find its way into my pocket before I set out for the Corner Store to exchange it for some candy.

The Corner Store loomed larger in my imagination than it did in reality. In my imagination, it was the center of town, where all the people went to buy gas, talk, share stories, and pick up the essentials—milk, bread, and candy. In reality, it was just a gas station where people got gas and some food they probably didn't need and then went on about their lives. But the place held a romantic hold on my imagination. It was more a place to get to than a place to be.

It was the same with the candy. I'd spend hours and hours dreaming about the rows and rows of candy in front of the register. How Airheads were better than Bazooka Gum even with the cartoon. How Bubble Tape was inferior to Big League Chew. How Swedish Fish were good, but only if you could eat them right away, and if you had to choose between Swedish Fish and Tootsie Rolls, then you were better off picking the Tootsie Rolls because they held their taste longer. And if

it was a choice between a Tootsie Pop and a Blow Pop, the Tootsie Pop always won out regardless of flavor. Smarties were a dumb choice. Dum Dum a smart one.

I'd play out all the scenarios in my head as I walked with the stolen change to the Corner Store. The change clanked in my pocket. I didn't feel guilty. I knew I should and that what I was doing something wrong, but I didn't really care. If my parents caught me, I could always argue it was just a few quarters. They'd say it was the principle. I'd agree and say I was sorry and I wouldn't do it again (which I most certainly would) and they might spank me once or twice, or ground me for a little bit, but none of that would matter much because I had the Corner Store and all of its riches in my imagination. And no amount of punishment could touch that.

The candy always left me disappointed. Too sweet and it ended up chaffing the top of my mouth. But I kept on stealing a little change here, a little change there, and building up my trip to the Corner Store until my imagination had to yield to reality and off I went to the Corner Store, the richest kid in the universe.

Hammock

Just beyond the church parking lot was Brewster Academy. It was a typical New England prep school with sprawling soccer and lacrosse fields, small dorms that looked like houses, typical academic buildings, and a boat house. But what intrigued me most about its campus was the dense forest area right behind our house.

I walked around back there, kicking empty beer cans and bottles, and generally just wondering about stuff like how the light came in through the branches and how much cooler it was in the shade. I never saw anyone, just a bunch of trash as evidence people had been there until I stumbled onto two kids sitting down on a log about to start smoking. They saw me.

“Hey, you wanna smoke?” one of the boys asked. My grandmother smoked and I hated it and I’d taken a vow not to put a cigarette to my lips.

“No, thanks,” I said.

“Good,” said the other boy, “Better for you not to start. Now get out of here.” The boy wasn’t being rude. It felt more like how a big brother would be rough on a younger brother so he wouldn’t repeat the same mistakes. I wandered back to the far right of the forest, which was where I usually hung out and climbed up into a canopy of foliage so thick I could lay down.

I stared up at the open sky. A huge bird of some kind circled high overhead for a bit and flew in the direction of the lake. I closed my eyes and imagined myself as the bird. I flew out over the stone fence, the upper and lower soccer fields, then took a right at the boat house and flew over the field where they held the Huggins Hospital Street Fair, past the Corner Store, the post office and then down over the center of town where all the people looked like ants. I was deliciously free. I could go anywhere. I felt like I could have flown all the way to wherever my dad was on the open sea, and land on the bridge and he’d know it was me. He’d stand there proud and tell everyone around him, “That’s my son. That’s my son.”

I opened my eyes. The sky was still blue and a few clouds had started to fill the sky. The air took on a heavy rain feeling and I started to go inside.

I was all questions walking back across the field. Why were those boys smoking? Where were their dads? What did their dads do? Were they lonely, too?

A few months later, the higher ups at Brewster had the forest gutted. Trees were cut down. Thickets removed. And my natural hammock disappeared.

Follow Through

I took golf lessons at Kingwood Golf Course with Heather and Colleen and a bunch of other kids whose parents thought golf was something they should learn. On the first day of lessons, the golf pro addressed the entire group at the driving range.

“We are going to learn how to play golf, be safe, and have fun,” the golf pro said. Outside of learning how to golf with Grampy in California, the closest I’d been to a golf course was trying to hit golf balls in the back yard. The pro took his club, addressed the ball and said, “You should always stand away from a golfer’s backswing, out of sight, and be quiet. Never stand directly behind a golfer. That’s a good way to find yourself in the emergency room.” After that, he launched a ball high in the air. “Now, your turn,” he said and we started in on our first lesson about how bad we all were at golf. I mostly missed and the ball dribbled forward just out of reach. But sometimes I’d connect, and stand with my club resting on my shoulder, looking at the ball, then the ground and back again—as I’d seen Grampy do—trying to judge where it would land. Sweet-Jesus-on-Easter morning, those swings felt good. When the lessons were over, we all got Gatorades.

“Practice if you can,” the golf pro said, “and remember the safety rules.”

I listened to the golf pro and practiced at home. The only problem was that Tim, one of the boys whose mother rented the apartment out back, hadn’t learned those safety rules and stepped behind me on a follow through and my club sunk into his head.

It wasn’t a sickening crack. It was more like I’d hit a piece of wood. I didn’t feel particularly bad about it. I had told him to stand back. He didn’t listen. That was that. I only started to feel bad when the blood oozed from under where he’d placed his hand. Even then it was because I’d have to explain things to my mother.

Tim went off the hospital and I don’t have any more memories of him.

I went back to Kingwood Golf Course and practiced my swing at the driving range. I always wanted to hit the guy driving in the range car picking up balls. I wondered what the driver thought about. I also thought it must have been the highest honor to ride around in a fortified golf cart that looked like a harvester cleaning up the range. It seemed like something the golf pro might do. I was never a fan of cleaning my golf balls or wiping off my clubface or reseeding when I'd taken a divot. The only golf etiquette I enjoyed was fixing the impression my ball made when it landed on the green. Well, I liked raking sand traps, too. I enjoyed wiping away my own footsteps.

Redwall

The *Redwall* series by Brian Jacques was one of the only book series I liked. I also read World War II flying stories my dad picked up at antique stores. I liked how those old books smelled, but I can't remember anything that happened in them. I loved the *Redwall* series, not because it was about small creatures—mice, rats, weasels, badgers, moles, ferrets—fighting and killing each other, but because of the descriptions of food—snow cream pudding, nutbread and yellow sage cheese, honeyed pears. They drove me wild. I didn't really care about what was happening in the book plot wise, I just wanted to get to the descriptions of food. It didn't matter the cooks were common rodents. Those cooks were the best cooks in the world and when I went to sleep at night, I'd dream about those feasts.

I had a book report for school and I chose to do it on *Redwall*. My first thought was to cook an entire spread like in the book, but I was a pretty hopeless cook and baker and was certain my mom would have shut it down completely. So, instead of cooking those delicious imaginary meals, I settled on building a replica of Redwall Abbey out of Styrofoam from a printer box and hot glue.

I had no clue if my Styrofoam Redwall looked anything like the one in the book. It had four walls and because it was called Redwall, I assumed it was red. I asked mom if I could get a can of red spray paint from the craft store.

"It's for a school project," I said.

"Ok, let's go," she said.

Craft stores made me feel a little weird. There was just so much stuff and all of it looked cheap. They also reminded me I wasn't crafty. Some people seemed to be hardwired for building little things out of popsicle sticks and pompoms. I just wasn't one of them. I guess craft stores made me feel inept.

My mom bought the spray paint and we headed home.

Back in the barn, I set to work on turning my white abbey red. I *clack-clack*-ed the can in my hand until it was cold and then pressed down the nozzle. It was satisfying to turn something a different color. The red I'd chosen was a deep red with a slightly glossy finish. It looked like bricks that had just been rained on. My abbey transformed into something beautiful. I was also light-headed. The room started to spin and I fell into the bottom shelf of the work bench.

I sat there a while, not really knowing what was happening, but my head was buzzing and I felt oddly good. I just focused on my breathing, which seemed to be everywhere in my ears. I kept breathing until my head and body started to feel normal, picked up my freshly painted Redwall and went in to show my mom.

"Mom, check it out," I said. "It's Redwall Abbey."

"Oh, of course it is," mom said. She had a good way of not letting you know your creation didn't just look like spray-painted Styrofoam trash. "It's good to see you creating instead of destroying. You're going to get an A. I know it."

I don't remember if I got an A, but it didn't matter. I'd had an idea, worked hard to bring it to shape, and then felt proud at what I'd created. It wasn't a fully reconstructed spread of a Redwall banquet or even an accurate recreation of Redwall Abbey, but it was all mine and I kept it in the barn for a long time.

Pavlova (Or Sugar Lava)

ingredients:

4 egg whites at room temperature

1 cup white sugar (sifted)

2 teaspoons cornstarch

1 teaspoon white vinegar

2 cups heavy whipping cream

3 passion fruits

6 strawberries

8 oz blueberries

2-3 kiwis

pinch of salt

instructions:

1. preheat oven to 315 degrees.
2. line baking sheet with parchment paper.
3. place egg whites and the pinch of salt in a small mixing bowl.
4. mix with electric mixer until stiff peaks form. should look like cresting waves.
5. add 1/8 cup of sugar at 2-minute intervals until sugar is gone. mix until completely dissolved.
6. fold in cornstarch and vinegar with a spoon.
7. dollop the entire mixture into a big heap in the middle of the baking sheet.

8. flatten the mixture into a circle by dragging the spoon in a circular motion until even and flat. smooth the sides and edges.
9. bake for 60 minutes or until the cream crisps, then turn oven off. don't open if you can help it. cool for a few hours or overnight.
10. while pavlova cools, whip the cream in a mixing bowl.
11. cut the strawberries and kiwis into thin slices and set aside. pulp the passion fruit and set aside.
12. once completely cooled, spread whipped cream over the pavlova.
13. decorate with the strawberries, blueberries, and kiwis in concentric circles.
14. finish off with fresh passion fruit pulp.
15. cut into thin wedges and serve.

Teeth

I had terrible teeth.

“Blame that on your mom,” dad said. “I have American teeth,” and he’d give a big smile.

His teeth were coffee-stained with an overbite, but straight. Mom’s teeth weren’t exactly something out of a horror film, but they sat in her mouth at particular angles, especially an incisor she liked to call snaggle tooth.

Poppa had the worst teeth in the family. It seemed like his entire mouth was an assortment of gold and silver and he had a bridge he would sometimes pop out before eating and it made his face look like a poorly carved Halloween pumpkin. But even with his fake teeth on the table, it made all of us laugh.

My teeth were straight like dad’s, but always seemed to get cavities. I wasn’t exactly religious about brushing or flossing and routinely went to bed without doing either. When I was tired, the last thing I wanted to do was brush my teeth. I just wanted to hop into bed and try to sleep. Didn’t help that I brushed my teeth in front of a mirror and I was afraid of seeing some ghost lurking behind me. But, really, I was just lazy.

I had a recurring dream of being on a beach watching a monstrous crab scuttle by and then all my teeth would crumble out of my mouth and fall into the sand like some strange collection of seashells. In a variation of the dream, my teeth would dissolve in my mouth and I’d swallow them. In either case, I’d run my tongue over where my teeth had been and then wake up and actually run my tongue over my teeth to check and make sure they were actually there.

I wasn’t a fan of the dentist. It was just another place where I felt judged.

“Do you brush your teeth at least twice a day?” the dental hygienist would ask.

“Yes,” I’d lie.

“Do you floss your teeth at least once a day?” the dental hygienist would ask.

“Yes,” I’d lie and she’d press the floss between my teeth and I could taste the blood on my tongue. My unflossed gums betrayed the truth, but I stuck to my story. Flossing once a day seemed like an unreasonable request, though I usually left the dentist’s office shamed into at least trying to brush my teeth more consistently. All to say, cavities and the high whine of a dentist’s drill were constants growing up.

I didn’t mind the sound of the drill or the vibrations that rattled my brain or the way my saliva would pool at the back of my throat before being graciously sucked up or failing to wrangle my own tongue out of the way of the expensive-looking tools of the dental trade. What I minded was the sight of the Novocain needle. I could handle the small prick and pressure of the needle actually going into my gums and numbing my nerves, but what kept me up at night was the image of that colossal thing right before it entered my mouth. God, I hated being on my back with harsh medical light glaring off stainless steel everything and masked people leaning over me, saying “Open up,” and bringing the devil’s harpoon up toward my mouth. Though, once it was in there, I was fine and looked forward to having half my face numb for a few hours after so I could smile at Colleen.

“Look, Colleen, I’ve had a stroke,” I’d say.

“That’s not funny,” Colleen would say and laugh.

And not even the dream-induced fear of a crab walking by and all my teeth dropping out or the horrific sight of that monstrous needle rising toward my opened mouth or the very real prospect of my teeth coming to resemble Poppa’s unkempt graveyard of a mouth made me brush or floss my teeth more often. I had my mother’s British teeth and I was proud of them.

Laundry Room

When dad was gone our laundry room was almost always full of unwashed clothes and it was haunted. Well, it wasn't the most haunted place in the house, but any time I went in there, even if it was just to pass through quickly on the way to the garage, I felt like something was either going to pull itself up and over the edge of the stairs and try to possess me or, if I had to actually go over to the washer, that whatever was lurking in the basement was going to grab my ankle and swiftly drag me through a portal and down into hell. The washer and dryer were a strange shade of green, and we kept all of the laundry detergent stuff on a shelf above the machines.

When I had to do the laundry, I made a point of doing it as fast as possible, while holding my breath. Maybe I thought if I held my breath the demon-thing wouldn't hear me breathing and be tempted by my exposed ankle for a jaunt down to the underworld. I'd take two or three large armfuls of clothes, stuff them in the top-loader, measure out detergent—which meant just dumping what looked to be about right—on top of the clothes, slamming the lid, and turning it to the right setting all while on one breath. The water would kick on and I'd bolt for the door and slam it behind me. I despised that room, but the smell of the dryer sheets that filled the barn when the dryer was running was comforting. Sometimes I'd stand right by the vent and let the warm air and dust blow all over me.

But the point about the laundry room wasn't that I believed it was haunted or that smells of the dryer running held the promise of clean clothes, much like the smell of cooking bread held the promise of butter and warmth, but that I could gauge my mom's loneliness by the state of the laundry room.

When dad was home, the laundry room was rarely full. If it was, it only stayed that way for a day or two. When dad was out to sea, the room was almost constantly full with a mountain of clothes. Sometimes it was so bad I had to shove it out of the way to get to the garage and it had a

nasty habit of getting stuck in the door. Not the most convenient thing if you were trying to avoid getting dragged down to hell or had been asked to go pull something out of the deep freezer for lunch or dinner. I don't remember any of us getting angry that our clothes weren't clean as often and I can remember sometimes going to the laundry room to pick out something to wear. You didn't get more emotional when the laundry room became near-impassable. You became aware, because it meant mom was tired and her already short-trigger temper was even shorter. It meant that she'd been up late watching TV or leaving the sound on so she wouldn't feel alone or that it was time to do what she asked the first time, because if you ignored her, you ran the risk of getting hit with a wooden cooking spoon, or slapped across the face or back of the head. When the laundry room was full, it was time to check in with her.

“How are you mom?” I asked.

“I'm ok,” mom said.

“How are you really, mom?” I asked.

“Tired. Just really tired,” mom said.

Wren

—1975

Fern was a dancer and went on tour around South East Asia as a part of *Peter Pan*. She played the Unicorn and was the understudy for Wendy. It was her first time away from home and she was lonely.

She loved the excitement of dancing in a show in front of people, but the rest of it—the drugs and sex and late nights—didn't really appeal to her. She felt like an outsider and was homesick. Why had she left? The beaches in Western Australia were pristine and beautiful. She felt like the entire west coast from North Kimberly all the way to Albany was free for her to explore. She never felt like she owned the land or anything, but that it was open for her to visit and that sense of expansiveness and openness thrilled her. Though, as is typical in a small city, her horizon of possibility kept shrinking and shrinking, until she felt like she was being suffocated and had to leave. And once she'd left, all she'd wanted was go back, but going back before the show ended felt like defeat to her. So, she danced and cried her homesickness away. But at night, when she felt like the rest of the world was asleep, she was awake with only her loneliness and the moon and a desire for home.

Then a letter arrived. It was from her dad. She opened the envelope and inside was a letter and a penny farthing. It read:

Dear Fern,

If you ever need me and can't get in contact with me, send this penny farthing and I'll come find you and bring you home.

Love,

Dad

She held the penny farthing in the palm of her hand and flipped it over. On the other side was a wren with its tail pointing straight up.

That night, while the world around her exchanged sleep for sex and drugs and a different kind of loneliness, Fern slept and dreamed herself a bird in the backyard of her childhood home and the deepest part of her spirit understood itself to be safe and loved.

Tiny Cars and Funny Hats

Mr. and Mrs. Foss were one of our next-door neighbors. Mr. Foss was a retired fire fighter who drove a miniature car while wearing a fez hat in the Fourth of July parade. Mrs. Foss always had cookies and cinnamon candies at the ready. Their house smelled like cinnamon, even in summer, which I found nauseating. Cinnamon was a winter smell and it took on a harsh, claustrophobic quality when paired with summer heat and open blue sky.

I didn't pay much attention to the Fosses. They were quiet and old and Mr. Foss kept his lawn well maintained.

In the summer, Mrs. Foss would take a beach chair out onto a small concrete dome in their backyard and get some sun. She'd wave and say hello to us and we'd go about the business of playing on the swing set or climbing our trees. Sometimes we played with their grandchildren, Chad and Ryan, who played hockey and were cool. At least, they were cooler than me. I don't know how they particularly fit into the Wolfeboro universe of coolness. All I knew was I wasn't as cool as Chad and Ryan and it mainly had to do with the fact they played hockey and I didn't. I preferred Mr. and Mrs. Foss to Chad and Ryan, because they didn't make me feel like a weirdo.

Then Mrs. Foss died. My mom told us and I was sad, mainly because I didn't know who was going to give me cookies regularly. She certainly wasn't my grandmother, who would sooner give you a slap on the head than any kind of cookie and if she ever did it would be quickly followed with a comment about how fat my sisters were getting. But I was also sad because I didn't know what Mr. Foss would do when he was alone. I hated thinking about him moving around his house in the morning all by himself. All those reminders of his wife. How long did it take for her smell to leave the closet? What did he do with her things? Who did he talk to? It kept me up at night.

A few weeks after Mrs. Foss died, I was playing outside in the backyard and I saw a woman in the Foss's backyard sunbathing. She was young looking with her feet stretched out. I waved and she waved back. I went on playing and then went back inside to grab some water.

"Mom, there's somebody outside on Mrs. Foss's rock?" I said.

"Really?" mom said and went to kitchen window. "There isn't anyone there, Sean."

"She was just there. I saw her. I saw her, mom," I said.

"Strange," mom said.

I came to the window and the cement dome was empty.

Doctor

Hide-and-go-seek was a favorite for me, Colleen, Hallie, and Claire. Sometimes all the rooms in the house were fair territory. I typically hid in the downstairs front closet under a pile of coats, the shoe closet off the upstairs bathroom, or under a bed somewhere. The basement was off limits as to go down there was to tempt the devil himself into hiding you in hell forever.

But most of the time we played hide-and-go-seek in my room. It's not as if my room had an inexhaustible number of places to hide. You could hide in the closet, under the bed, on the bed covered by a blanket, under the desk, or try your luck in a corner draped with a sheet. We made it more interesting by turning the lights off so the seeker had to grope around in the dark for the hidden. A useful strategy was to try and make the hiders laugh to reveal their positions.

One time, it was Claire's turn to find us and Colleen, Hallie, and I were stacked on top of each other wedged in the space between my bed and the wall. I was on the bottom, then Colleen, then Hallie. The moments before Claire opened the door were heavy with giggles and excitement, but once we heard Claire stop counting and the doorknob turn, it was all expectant silence, except for our hushed breathing. It was a rule that you had to enter the room with your eyes closed and could only open them once you'd closed the door behind you.

Claire opened the door, stepped into the room with eyes closed, shut the door, and then stayed silent. Typically, you could make out where someone was in the room by the shuffling of feet or limbs bumping into unseen things. But Claire's refusal to move allowed for none of that. She just stood there listening. It was almost too much. I could feel a laugh building in my chest, but I choked it down. Then, Claire spoke.

"Doctor, doctor, don't touch me there."

What the hell? Where had my little sister picked that up? All of us burst out laughing and we couldn't stop. I was laughing so hard I couldn't breathe and Claire kept repeating, "Doctor, doctor don't touch me there," until I started to panic.

"Stop. Get off me. I can't breathe. Turn on the lights. Claire, shut up and turn on the lights," I said. Claire turned on the lights and we tumbled out of the space between the bed and the wall. We looked at each other. Tears dropped down my face and I couldn't tell if they were laughing tears or scared tears and Claire looked terrified that she'd done something wrong, until she said, "Doctor, doctor don't touch me there," and we all fell to the floor and howled with uncontrollable laughter.

The Rehms

The Rehms were the kindest family I knew. Well, except for the eldest son, Paul. He was slightly off, like his personality had been removed from the oven a little too early and that slight deformity stayed with him. He wasn't sadistic or anything. Just weird. Kyle, my best friend, was weird, too, but in a way that was endearing, not creepy.

I had no clue what Dale Rehm, Kyle's dad, did for work, but he had a pot belly that strained his belt and the kind of open face and eyes that radiated from a place of kindness you just couldn't fake. His eyes sparkled when he laughed and he just made you feel at ease. Mrs. Rehm—Elaine, but I never called her that—was a nurse who worked the nightshift and I called her “Momma Spice.” The Spice Girls were running hot and heavy (everyone I knew liked Sporty Spice, but I preferred Ginger Spice) and the name came naturally, I guess. There wasn't anything particularly spicy about Mrs. Rehm's personality. She was just plain nice and had a seemingly inexhaustible reserve of patience for two boys who kept her up during the day. Sometimes a single sleepover could stretch across the entire weekend. I had no regard for what it must have meant to feed another boy who wasn't yours and then have that boy chip away at your sleep during the weekend. The Rehms were absolute saints (except Paul, weirdo).

They just lived differently. They were into NASCAR and lizards. I'd never really understood the point of NASCAR. Driving around in a circle seemed pretty dumb to me, but they seemed to enjoy watching it and I had to admit there was something comforting, almost hypnotic about watching the cars go around and around. The lizards didn't make much sense to me either. Kyle had some terrariums in his room kitted out with heat lamps.

“Can you play with them?” I asked.

“Not really,” Kyle said. “But you can feed them crickets...alive.” His eyes widened when he said alive.

“Ok,” I said and we fed the lizards crickets. It was cool, but I liked the lizards mainly because they were different and there was no way in hell my parents would ever allow me to have a lizard in the house. I imagined the conversation.

“Dad, can I have a lizard?” I’d ask.

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” Dad would respond and go back to reading his paper, wondering where he’d gone wrong raising a son who wanted a lizard for a pet.

But the main aspect about the Rehms that drew me towards them was their absolute comfort with who they were. There was no sense of pretense or social masquerade or class division. They were who they were, liked the things they liked, and treated everyone, regardless of social standing, with openness and kindness. Some might look at them and call them hicks or rednecks or white trash, but they were none of those things. They liked those things, sure, but there was a refreshing quality of acceptance and an understanding of what was important in life that seemed wholly absent from my house. Ours always felt strained, like we were trying to pull ourselves up and out of our blue-collar roots into something different, and it made me uncomfortable. I wanted to like lizards and NASCAR and motorcycles and tattoos and beer. The Rehm house was a place where it was ok to be who you were and like what you liked. At my house, you hid the person you were, especially if the things you liked lacked what my parents kept calling “class.”

Sledding

There were two spots we usually went sledding: the snow pile at the edge of the church parking lot and at Brewster right in front of the boathouse. We used the snow pile behind the church if we were feeling lazy or if the weather was really cold, but the church snow pile generally made for poor sledding as it was bumpy and a short ride. The hill behind the boathouse was ideal.

The hill was at the end of a playing field, and it was perfect. Well, perfect except that you had to slide across a road down at the bottom, but we made sure to have a lookout. It was just a part of sledding to check to the left and to the right before starting down the hill. The snow on the hill was rarely fresh snow, but I found I liked packed-down snow better. Sure, if I was the first person to get there, I could blaze a trail through the thick powder, but that usually ended with my sled stuck down in the snow and a whole bunch more work. The last thing I wanted to do was waste daylight trying to make a decent sledding path. But having to clear my own path wasn't typically a problem, since the kids at Brewster usually got there first. We'd arrive and it would be already packed down and all we'd have to do was look left, look right, yell "Clear!" and off someone would go. Sometimes we'd ride alone, but it was generally more fun to ride with someone else. Colleen and I did almost everything together, so it was us flying downhill toward the paved road all excited screams and laughter.

One day, Colleen and I were about to start sledding—we'd brought tubes instead of sleds, which were way faster—when I said, "Alright Cols, you first."

"You sure?" she asked and got all bright-eyed. As the older brother, I usually did things first and then it was her turn. Today was different.

"Sure," I said. "Just make sure to get a nice running start and then dive onto the tube. You'll go wicked fast."

“Ok,” she said and walked a good ten to fifteen feet behind the tube. I looked left, then right and yelled, “Clear!” She took off running as fast as her boots in the deep snow would let her and gave a giant headfirst leap toward the tube.

Right when she jumped, I kicked the tube sideways and it shot away from her.

She disappeared over the edge.

I heard her thud on the other side. I was laughing.

“Cols, you alright?” I asked. She lay stone still until I thought something was wrong. “Cols?” She got up without a word. Her face was caked with snow and she started walking in the direction of home.

“Come on,” I said. “You’re ok. I won’t do it again.” She just kept on walking. I watched her until she was just a slow-moving dot on the road back to our house.

I took a few sledding runs down the hill, but it was boring without Colleen. So I just sat in my tube and looked out at the frozen lake. There were a few ice fishing huts, and a truck was making its way across the ice and a couple snow machines zipped toward town. It was strange how much faith people had in ice. I thought fish should be left alone for the winter and that trucks were better off on roads than out in the middle of the lake. But it was pure jealousy fueling those ideas. I wanted nothing more than to go ice fishing, or snow machining, but those things held zero interest for dad. Mom wasn’t about to gather all of us in a small hut on a frozen lake and teach us how to cut into ice and drop our worms or lures or whatever it was that attracted the hungry winter fish to bite.

I lay back in the tube and felt bad for myself. If Colleen had been a boy and closer to my age, he would have gotten the joke and wouldn’t have stormed off all mad. He would have laughed it off and stayed with me and we could have kept sledding down the hill until the moon replaced the pale winter sun and the headlights from approaching cars would have given us all the warning we’d needed to start down the hill. But, as it was, I had mostly sisters and Brian was tiny, dad was on a

ship somewhere, and mom was too busy to put on all her snow gear and go sledding. I was alone, and I hated myself for being mean to the one person who actually enjoyed spending time with me.

The winter sun rose higher and the light danced all over the snow. I picked up the tube and started the walk back home hitting myself in the head and saying, “Be a better brother. Be a better brother. Be a better brother,” hoping it might make a difference.

Katie's Kitchen

The only good thing about church was that when it was over we went to Katie's Kitchen, which was a small diner with a counter full of large men hunkered over plates of food and mugs of coffee. I loved those men. They ate in the silence of working men who knew exactly how much sweat went into eggs, toast, bacon, hash browns, and coffee. I can't remember if people smoked inside, but the place smelled like cigarettes, and when it was cold out and winter had settled into the bones, the air moved between stale smoke, greased cooking, and the crisp, clean notes of fallen snow. It was the heaven I dreamed about while stuck in church.

I never understood exploring the menu at restaurants, particularly breakfast places and diners. I almost always had corned beef hash, hash browns, over-easy eggs and a more than generous amount of ketchup slathered over everything. The last bites where the egg yolk had broken all over were the best. If I was feeling adventurous, I might venture into the wilds of an omelet and walk away disappointed, vowing to stick to the corned beef hash.

Katie, the waitress, was a slight woman with kind eyes and a face that already carried too many years of hard work. She never talked down to us kids and did us the kindness of talking to us like tiny adults. None of the too sweet *aren't you cute* talk that was typically a thin veil of disdain for children, knowing all the food that was going to spill onto the floor that wouldn't be covered in the tip. She took our orders as seriously as she took the men's orders at the counter and that made me feel, if not important, then equal, and equality was a rare experience for me as a child. My dad always picked up a toothpick and started working on his teeth. I tried it, too, but only succeeded in poking my tongue and splintering the toothpick.

The talk in Katie's Kitchen was never distinct. Just the casual chatter of people going along their Sundays and their lives. I felt more a part of the human race sitting in Katie's Kitchen than I did in the pews of the church. Some of the people there had just come from church, but I had a

vague sense that they relaxed into a more natural state among the smells of food and other people. The shuffle of dishes, coffee mugs lifted, sipped, put back down. It was a natural rhythm of sound that struck me as more beautiful than any church organ or people straining to sing a few people over. There was a desperate quality in church singing that made me uncomfortable. In Katie's Kitchen, people were just people enjoying food. It didn't matter what you did or who you were.

I'm sure Katie's Kitchen was full of meanness and gossip, intrigue and betrayal, tragedy and pain, but to a kid desperately wanting to go to heaven and not being sure he'd get there, it was just about the closest I was going to get. Eating food with my dad, mom, sisters, and brother in the company of people not really caring who we were or what we were doing or what car we drove up in or what house we lived in or what boat we did or didn't have or what lakefront property we didn't own or what school we went to, or that my memories of my dad were filled with giant blank spots where I knew he existed in the world, eating and laughing and drinking, and being lonely and pained at knowing he was away from his wife and kids and the laundry and bills were piling up and his mother was going crazy and his wife had to deal with a son who punched and yelled and fought everyone and everything at home and would light things on fire in the barn or destroy a perfectly good set of chairs just to destroy something. Nope. None of that existed in Katie's Kitchen. It was a place of suspension where I could settle into some sense of normalcy where dad was always home, mom was laughing her high-pitched self-conscious laugh, and the kids were just being kids. Katie, with her stained apron and notepad, made all that possible, and I thought she was an angel, especially after she gave me a sugar mint before I left that melted on my tongue like candied butter.

New Skin

Grams was a small woman who smoked, took in stray dogs, smelled like a second-hand clothes store, listened to Republican talk radio religiously, and despised the cold.

“It cracks my hands,” she said and held up her red-raw hands.

“Why don’t you wear gloves?” I asked.

“I do, dipshit. But the cotton sticks to the scabs when I pull them off and it hurts,” she said.

“You could put lotion on them,” I said.

“You think I haven’t thought of that?” Grams said. “Doesn’t work. This is the only thing that works,” and she pushed a small bottle across the dining table, which held the radio, her coffee mug, and stirring stick she used to chew on. I read the label on the bottle.

“New Skin,” I said. “How does it make new skin?”

“Do I look like a doctor?” Grams said. “I don’t know how it works. It just does.” I imagined her in a small white doctor’s coat with a stethoscope hanging around her neck. She had a goiter, which made her throat look like a pelican perpetually gulping down a fish. I didn’t know any better. It was just the way she’d always looked, until she started taking her medication and eating cottage cheese and cod liver oil for breakfast every day and it went away. She was an unhealthy and unhappy woman.

Occasionally she’d say, “My love is conditional,” which made me think of the picture of Jesus and his flaming heart she had up in her room. In the ranking of my grandparents, she was at the bottom. Poppa held the top spot, mainly because he could build stuff with his hands and wrote me letters, then Grampy because he taught me how to golf, Nana because she was thoughtful, sewed things, and baked a rhubarb pie that never failed to make all the bad fade from the world, then Grams. I was one of her son’s kids and she’d do what needed to be done out of a sense of familial duty and Catholic guilt, but she made me feel like the shit in her shit sandwich.

I'd visit her in the apartment sometimes, mainly because I was bored, but sometimes because I thought she might be lonely. I knew if I was her, I'd be lonely. Who did she talk to all day? What did she dream about? Surely, being alone in the back of her son's house with Rush Limbaugh and cold coffee for company wasn't how she dreamed her life would turn out. I never asked her those questions, of course. I'd just watch her and listen to her voice when she spoke.

"You wanna go play or something?" she asked and I knew it was time to go.

"Ok," I said and put down the bottle of New Skin. I turned to go and she threw a scrap of sandwich meat to Hayseed, a mean and loyal mutt, curled at her feet.

"Love you, Grams," I said.

"You too," she said and turned up the dial on the radio.

Chocolates

I despised when school sent us home with chocolates to sell. I was never much of a salesman, but the prospect of going up to someone's front door and asking them if they'd like to buy something made me cringe and want to curl up into something small or, better yet, invisible.

"When I was your age, I sold rocks," dad said. "I'd scour the neighborhood for good looking rocks and then take them to neighbors' houses on a cardboard tray and ask them if they'd like to buy them."

"Did anyone buy them?" I asked.

"Some did, some didn't. But, son, remember this, the worst thing they can do is tell you no. The squeaky wheel gets the grease," dad said. I didn't fully understand what he was telling me. Seemed to me like the squeaky wheel should get replaced. "So, just get out there and ask."

He might as well have asked me to fly to the moon on a cardboard rocket ship. There was no way I was lugging those stupid chocolates around the neighborhood and basically asking people to pay for over-priced trash stuffed with caramel or peanut butter. I shoved them under my bed. And while I may have had reservations about selling the chocolates, I had no reservations about eating them.

At first, I was hesitant to eat them, thinking vaguely it was a form of theft to eat them without paying, but I justified it by thinking my parents would pay for it later. I'd sneak a few at night before bed or after a particularly cold day of playing outside. I'd save the caramel and peanut butter flavored ones for last. Soon, I was completely out and I was raiding my sisters' chocolate boxes.

"Did you steal some of my chocolates?" Heather asked.

"Nope. Probably Claire," I said. It was a solid defense. Claire was known to steal candy, especially chocolate. One night, mom busted her at the kitchen table having eaten almost all of the

Belgian chocolates in the golden box from New York. From then on she was the go-to person to blame for candy related thefts.

“I already asked her,” Heather said, “and she said it wasn’t her.”

“She can’t be trusted,” I said.

The winter dragged on and I kept stealing and eating those stupid chocolates until the entire house was empty of chocolates and nobody had sold any. The day came when it was time to pony up.

“We have to pay for these, kids,” mom said. “Who ate them?” Nobody said anything. I looked at Claire and mom followed my eyes. “Claire, was it you?”

“No, mom. I swear,” Claire said, “I didn’t eat one.”

“Don’t lie, Claire,” Hallie said. “I saw you eat one.”

“Well, I saw you eat some, too,” Claire said and the entire scheme crumbled down and everyone ratted each other out.

“Stop it. Stop it!,” mom said and we all became silent, waiting for some sort of disproportionate punishment for eating all the chocolates. No one moved. “I ate some, too,” mom confessed and we all laughed. “Just don’t tell your dad.”

Bag Lady

Terry, Mrs. Allen's schizophrenic daughter, was the town bag lady. She creeped me out. But she was nothing compared to Mrs. Allen herself. She scared me shitless. Sometimes we'd see her in a window looking out across the street at us. She looked like a ghost caught in the window. As a kid, I didn't think that perhaps she enjoyed watching kids play or that listening to the laughter of children might remind of her own kids all grown up and gone. She might have even just been curious or looking at the trees or the light. I didn't think any of those things. I thought she was a witch. It wasn't the loneliness and pain of adulthood making her stand in the window and look out at us. She was sizing us up. Plotting to snatch one of us and cook us into a stew.

Once, in the summer, she flung the window wide open and yelled at Heather.

"I know what you are doing, hussy. With all those vibrations."

Hussy? Vibrations? We had no clue what she was talking about. We just looked at each other and ran inside to tell mom.

"She must mean the air conditioners," mom said. "I'm not about to turn those off. She can yell at you all she wants." We had two air conditioners in the house. One in our parents' room and one in the old master bedroom before my parents renovated the attic, which was usually Colleen, Hallie, and Claire's room. But in the summer, we'd drag in our mattresses and pack in around the cold air.

Heather asked, "Mom, what's a hussy?"

Mom smiled and said, "All you need to know is that you are the farthest thing from a hussy, Heather."

I doubt Heather was satisfied with such an explanation and probably looked it up in the dictionary later, the nerd. I liked the sound of the word and kept repeating it under my breath hussy,

hussy, hussy. I liked the music of it. It was fun to say, the way it seemed to disappear at the edge of my teeth and float away.

I got the same floating-away feeling when I watched Terry walk down the street with her shopping cart packed with things, mumbling to herself. I kept my distance, remembering mom telling us she was “troubled,” something about a drunk driver and an accident and a severe head injury. It was hard for me to imagine Terry as any different than she already was. It was hard for me to imagine her with a future, a bright one, too, school valedictorian and all. To me, she’d always be the bag lady, pushing her stuff down the middle of Green Street, making cars and people take a wide berth. Only later did I think maybe Mrs. Allen stood in the window in the hopes of catching the first glimpse of her broken daughter finding her way home.

Just One

—Satellite Beach, Florida, sometime in the early 1970s

After school, Wally went to the beach. He wasn't a big fan of surfing, as it was usually hit or miss with the waves in his part of Florida and the thought of dangling his feet as bait for a shark while waiting for a mediocre wave just didn't appeal to him. So he boogie-boarded or caught the waves himself or just lay out on the beach and worked on his tan. He was short and slight, but his skin bronzed a deep gold—a nod toward his deep Italian roots on his dad's side—and what he lacked in physical stature, he made up for with an unearned confidence that turned him into a magnet.

This day was no different and he was still basking in the happiness the beach brought him when he entered their small house.

"Hey, mom," Wally said.

"Hey, Wally Pat," his mom said. "Come in the kitchen. I want to tell you something."

"Can I take a shower first? I just got back from the beach," Wally said.

"No, it can wait," Patricia said. "I've got exciting news."

Wally put his stuff down and closed his eyes. He didn't know what to expect, but when his mom was excited, which wasn't often as her job at the high school kept her pretty tired, it usually meant his life was in for a change he didn't want. He was tired of change. He just wanted to go to Satellite Beach High like a normal kid and hang out with his friends.

He walked into the kitchen.

"What's the news?" Wally asked. Patricia waited a moment, letting her big eyes fill with a sparkle of excitement that spilled into her giant smile. "Mom, what is it?" Wally said, starting to laugh.

"Well, Wally, I'm going sell birds," Patricia said.

"Birds?" Wally asked.

“Exotic birds,” Patricia said, her eyes now wild with excitement.

“What about your job?” Wally asked.

“It’s dead end boring, Wally,” Patricia said. “All I need to do is sell one exotic bird and we’ll be set.”

“Sounds risky, mom. You’ve got a good job now,” Wally said.

“It’s not every day a man comes into the high school and offers you a job to sell exotic birds,” Patricia said. “I’d be a fool not to take it.” Wally didn’t say anything and left the small kitchen. “You don’t think I can do it? All I need is sell one exotic bird, Wally, and we’ll be set. Just one,” Patricia yelled from the kitchen.

Wally knew it didn’t matter what he thought. His mom was a dreamer and who was he to get in the way of his mom’s dreams?

Patricia left her job at the high school and started work at the exotic bird shop. Within a month it folded.

Patricia told Wally the news.

“I’ll find another job, Wally. I will. Promise. All I needed was to sell one damn bird and we’d have been set. Just one,” Patricia said.

“I know, mom,” Wally said. “You’ll sell one next time.”

Mummy Bag

We used dad's green mummy sleeping bag to throw ourselves down the steps. Sometimes we tumbled down mom and dad's carpeted steps, but the wooden ones were fair game, too. The stairs down to the kitchen were ok, but they had a tricky turn in them that was hard to navigate. The front steps were a straight shot, but the slick wood could make you go too fast and you'd slam into the wall. But the carpeted steps were a good combination of softness and speed.

On the top landing, we'd all pile in (except Heather. She probably thought it was stupid (which it was) and that we were just being dumb (which we were) but it was an unbelievable amount of fun). I was usually first in because I was the heaviest. It would then typically follow birth order: Colleen, Hallie, Claire, and eventually Brian when he got big enough. I'd scoot closer and closer to the edge of the steps. We all laughed in anticipation and breathed heavily in the dark and then gravity would take over and we'd tumble down the steps, cocooned in one of the best inventions of the American military.

Under the Bed

I was afraid of the dark. I would leave lights on all over the house with no intention of coming back, figuring ghosts only moved in darkness. Strange to think it would matter to ghosts if it was light or dark and that somehow the ghosts would be more visible in the dark than in the light. Either way, I learned to sleep with the lights on. I was scared all the time.

As most kids do, I imagined monsters or demons or ghouls or any matter of limbo-dwelling thing took up residence in the dark places of our home—under beds, in closets, the basement. And I knew my sisters were scared of such things, too. We talked about ghosts as naturally as people might comment on squirrels or birds. So one night I decided to scare Hallie and Claire.

I waited for them to start brushing their teeth, ducked into their bedroom unseen, and slipped underneath their bunkbed. I was never particularly claustrophobic and generally found tight spaces comforting. Under my sisters' bunkbed was no different. It smelled dusty and there was a loose assortment of stray socks and toys and candy wrappers down there. No limbo-dwellers. Just me, waiting to scare my sisters. I didn't really have a plan other than to wait until the right moment, which I'd know once it arrived. My excited heart was beating so loud I thought for sure they would hear it when they came in.

They didn't.

They came right in and started getting ready for bed. All I could see were unsuspecting feet and shins moving around the room. Who knows what they were talking about. I wasn't paying attention. The suspense was awesome. Finally, Hallie turned off the light and headed toward the bed. Claire had already climbed into the top bunk.

"We should say our prayers," Hallie said.

"You're right," Claire said and jumped back down.

Perfect.

They both kneeled down in front of the bed and started saying their prayers.

“Dear heavenly Father, thank you for this day. Please...” and I reached out, grabbed just above their knees and yelled as loud as I could. It was chaos. Both girls recoiled from the bed like a portal to hell had just opened up and were screaming and crying and generally flailing around on the ground toward the door. One of them turned on the lights and mom came in.

“Girls, what’s wrong?” mom asked.

“Something grabbed me from under the bed,” Hallie sobbed and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Sean! Get out from under that bed and go to your room,” mom said. I pushed myself out, barely able to breathe. “What kind of brother are you? Scaring your sisters like that.” I walked past both girls who were still red in the face and breathing hard.

As I walked down the hall, I heard my mom say, “Don’t worry girls, it was only your brother. There aren’t any monsters under your bed,” and then I was in my room with the door shut behind me. I went to bed that night with the lights on just in case.

Wooden Spoon

Mom had a volatile temper, but only hit us occasionally. Whenever I was acting up, she typically grabbed a wooden spoon out of the kitchen drawer, bent me over her knee, and smacked my butt a few times. The wooden spoon stung and would leave a mark, but I wouldn't say it hurt. Sometimes she'd skip the spoon all together and smack me clean across the face. One time, Hallie and Claire were arguing over clothes and mom came quietly into the room, grabbed each of them by the back of the neck and slammed their heads together. Their heads colliding sounded like pool balls bouncing off each other. Claire fell to the ground and Hallie stumbled backward. I was so shocked my mouth fell wide open and I couldn't speak. Mom went back to whatever she'd been doing. Clothes dispute settled. Another time, she went for the wooden spoon after I'd done something, and I bolted up the stairs, and she chased after me. I was laughing my head off, and it infuriated her. Looking back at her, I couldn't tell if it was her fury that reddened her face or if it was the strain of trying to catch up to her quick son who darted through the back landing, upstairs bathroom, and down the front steps as if by instinct. I knew she couldn't catch me outright, but also knew she'd catch me eventually. So I waited for her in the front room and let her catch me. Breathing heavily, she bent me over her knee and I clenched my butt cheeks hard as she brought down the wooden spoon. It snapped in half and hit the floor. She didn't hit me with a wooden spoon across the butt again. She committed to the face slap.

Abenaki

“Goodness, Sean, looks like you’ve put on some weight,” Dale Rehm said. I’d gained weight after eating all those stupid chocolates I was supposed to sell. “You might want to think about playing lacrosse to get in shape for football season. Kyle’s going to start playing, too.” I looked over at Kyle, who didn’t seem like he’d gained any weight, and wondered why he wanted to start playing.

I’d seen people playing lacrosse on the playing fields and it had looked interesting, and there was a certain appeal to being able to hit someone with a metal pole, though there did seem to be a lot more running than in football. I said as much to Mr. Rehm.

“Well, how else are you going to melt off those pounds?” Dale said. I looked at his ample gut and thought maybe he should pick up lacrosse, too. I didn’t think it out of malice or anger toward Dale. He had a way of letting you know how things were without making you feel bad. That in itself was refreshing and foreign. In my house, the adults had a keen eye for shortcomings and let me know about them with a heavy helpings of guilt, as if whatever I was struggling with was a reflection of my mottled soul.

“Ok, I’ll ask my mom,” I said and that was how I became a player on the Abenaki Lacrosse team. The team was coached by a big, burly silver-white haired man with shocking blue eyes, who was rumored to have spent his adult years in the forests of upper New York learning to trap animals, sometimes with traps, sometimes with his bare hands, and coach lacrosse. His name was William Pottle and he’d alter the river of my life.

“I think he’s part Indian, mom,” I said.

“He doesn’t look like an Indian,” mom said.

From the outset, lacrosse was a spiritual game. There was no other way to play it with Mr. Pottle as your coach. When I played lacrosse, I still enjoyed hitting and hurting people, but I

understood myself to be a part of something larger. There were face-off circles and creases, fast breaks and man-downs, and end-lines that were only end-lines for practical purposes. The game moved with a speed and fluidity and violence and symmetry that was beautiful to take part in.

“Our sticks used to be made out of hickory and leather,” Mr. Jones, Chris Jones’ dad, said. “Now it’s all metal and plastic. You kids have it easy.” I chose to be a defenseman because it involved less running and I could hit people. Scoring didn’t appeal much to me. I liked the idea of working together to protect something. Football pushed my body to a physical extreme. Lacrosse worked on my spirit.

After the last game of my first spring playing lacrosse, I walked home with my helmet and gloves on the end of my stick slung over my shoulder and wondered what had happened to the Abenaki Indians. Mr. Pottle told us they used to live all around the lakes regions. But where were they now? I’d never seen an Indian and it wasn’t like I wanted to meet one for the novelty of meeting someone different, but because they’d created a wonderful game and I wanted to talk to someone about its origins and significance and if the Creator was real and if the world had really started on Turtle’s back. But there wasn’t an Abenaki Indian to be seen. I liked the idea of playing for a Creator different from the Creator who’d created the world in six days and then rested. How long had it taken this other Creator to shape the world, and were the Creators friends? I hoped so. But there were no Abenaki Indians around to ask, or at least, I didn’t know where they were and I felt stupid for even thinking about asking and didn’t want my grandmother to think I was a few answers away from becoming a sun-worshiping heathen. So I kept my Creator and Indian questions to myself and spent the summer practicing throwing against a brick wall with my left hand.

Pep Talk

“Sean, use your anger,” mom said.

“I don’t want to,” I said.

“Sean, I need you to use your anger,” mom said.

“I don’t want to, mom,” I said.

“Use it, Sean,” mom said.

“Ahhhhhhhhh!” I yelled.

“That’s good. That’s good. Now take that into the game,” mom said.

Vagina Monologue

Colleen and I used to take baths together. I generally remember it as a fun time when we'd just talk and laugh. Sometimes, one or two of the other kids would be in the bath with us, but mainly I remember it being just me and Colleen. I don't remember ever taking a bath with Heather, though there were pictures of us doing so.

It was toward the end of a bath when the water was nearly completely drained when Colleen reached down to her vagina, pulled her lips back and forth and began to talk like a puppet on Sesame Street.

"Hello, my name is Colleen's vagina," she said. She sounded like Cookie Monster. I slipped around in the tub I was laughing so hard and Colleen could only do the voice once she'd stopped laughing and gathered her breath. I stood up, tucked my penis and balls between my legs, and said, "Look, I have a vagina."

Colleen roared.

"What are you two laughing about?" mom asked when she came to check on all the noise.

Colleen delivered her Cookie Monster vagina monologue and I showed her my penis-turned-vagina illusion.

I never took a bath with Colleen again.

Politics

Politics never really interested me. All I really knew was we were Republicans and Bill Clinton was a Democrat and he was President and married to Hillary Clinton, who, according to Grams, was a closet lesbian. Later, when Grams was dying of lung cancer in my dining room turned makeshift hospital room, she'd use some of her last breaths to call President Obama "an uppity nigger." Though, there was a time when I convinced my mom I was extremely interested in presidential politics.

I don't know where I'd picked it up, probably somewhere at school, but someone told me Whitehouse.com was a porn site. I didn't believe it, but sure enough, it was. I started a free trial with a credit card and clicked my way around as fast as my dial-up could carry me.

I hid the operation from my parents by waking up early. It worked for a while until one morning my mom came into the room all bleary-eyed and headed toward the bathroom. All she could make out was the picture of the White House at the top of the page.

"You interested in politics?" mom asked. My heart felt like it was going to flop out of my mouth.

"Real interested," I said. "It's a Presidential election year, so it's a pretty big deal." I heard her plop down on the toilet, let her morning pee go and I frantically tried to close the browser before she finished her business. I managed to close it but knew nothing about internet histories and how to clear them. I figured my tracks covered. Of course, they weren't. She figured it out weeks later.

"Porn? You were watching bloody porn?" mom yelled.

"Yes," I said.

"Do you even like politics?" mom asked.

"Not really," I said.

“God, wait until I tell your father,” mom said.

Later, I’d hear snippets of what was going on in the political world. Things like Monica Lewinsky, the Starr Report, and Impeachment, but that was about as far as I ventured into the political world. It just all seemed so silly to me. The cigar and the stain on the dress and the outrage. Bill seemed like a nice enough guy. He could play the sax and Hillary had nice hair. I felt bad for Hillary and how it must have felt having the entire nation and world know your husband, the most powerful man in the free world, had cheated on you. I thought that kind of embarrassment was enough to turn anyone into a lesbian.

Board Game

I almost never played board games correctly. That's what happened when you didn't read the instructions all the way through and even if you had read the instructions entirely, didn't take the time to understand them. The main games in our house were Monopoly, Checkers, Chinese Checkers, Chess, and Rummikub.

Monopoly was Satan's game. We had to ban Heather from being the banker because she cheated so much, and I was terrible and slow with numbers, so Colleen became the de facto banker. She was honest and good with numbers and was a stickler for organization. All I wanted were the railroads and utilities. It wasn't a sound strategy, but I didn't care. Sure, Park Place and Boardwalk had their allure, but owning rich property never appealed to me. I don't remember ever winning a game or walking away from the game having had fun. It was just an aggravating waste of time.

Checkers was a solid go-to, but I quickly got bored of it. Chess held a certain prestige for me because it was a game for smart people and I wanted people to think I was smart. So I studied how to play. Mom bought me a chess book and I read it. One of the first things the book claimed was if you weren't a genius, you were never going to be great at chess. Talk about chopping my legs off. I was smart enough to know I wasn't a genius and Chess Grandmaster had never been a goal of mine, but it was a blow to read it in print anyway. I enjoyed the game but could never develop that enjoyment into a sound strategy and I didn't need losing in chess to make me feel dumb. I had Heather and Grams for that.

Rummikub was a game we learned from Nana and Poppa and it was fun until Nana started losing and she'd make the game unenjoyable. But luckily for us she rarely lost and when she did lose, she'd quickly start another game and avenge her loss and we'd all be better off for it.

I never quite understood Chinese Checkers as a game. There was too much going on, especially if there were more than two players. But I remember Chinese Checkers because it was a

Chinese Checkers piece I shoved up Hallie's butt on the back landing. There really wasn't any provocation for it. We were rough-housing, I pinned Hallie on the ground, pulled down her underwear, grabbed a Chinese Checker piece—I can't remember the color of it—and pushed it into her butt with my thumb. She started crying.

“Mom, Sean just shoved a Chinese Checker's piece up Hallie's butt,” Colleen yelled.

Mom came thundering up the steps from the kitchen saying, “What the hell?” She looked around, saw Hallie on the floor and picked her up. “Ok, sweetie, we have to poop that piece out. To the toilet,” and they went into the bathroom and Hallie kept on crying.

“I can't poop, mom,” Hallie wailed over and over. Mom had locked the bathroom door, so I sat on the step outside and listened to her try and calm Hallie down, but nothing seemed to work. I don't know how long I sat there, but I didn't feel bad. In fact, I thought it was funny. I imagined Hallie pooping out different colored Chinese Checkers pieces, even though I'd only shoved one up there. They bobbed in the imaginary toilet water like buoys in a clear sea. But I didn't laugh. I just sat on the step, imagined, and listened to my mother's soft voice calming Hallie down.

I'm sure I was punished by my mom, but I can't remember it. I felt nothing about the incident. But it slowly transformed into a moment in my life where the guilt of what I'd done grew and grew until the memory of it resembled a sizeable monument I was embarrassed to show anybody, like it was one cairn among many leading to the darkest parts of myself.

Total Gym

My dad bought a Total Gym and I never saw him use it. Chuck Norris made it look so easy and, for some reason, I thought using the Total Gym would translate into becoming a karate master. It didn't.

The Total Gym lived in the barn and I never got around to actually figuring out how to work it. I usually just pulled on the cords and hauled myself up and down the track. I wasn't working out. I was playing.

The Total Gym was another failed attempt for my dad to get in shape. I imagined him staying up late into the night or getting up early in the morning, which was usually when he drank his coffee and read the paper. Maybe he caught the infomercial of Chuck Norris sliding his well-chiseled physique and ginger-goatee up and down with ease. I bet he looked at Chuck and said to himself, "I can do that. I'm not a fat sailor. I'm a goddamn Navy fighter pilot. I can do anything. Fern's always on me about losing weight. She could lose some weight, too," and wrote the check right then and there.

It was a habit in a long line of habits of starting again. The hardest part for me was to know with that unshakeable belief sons have in their fathers that he could do it if he wanted to. I believed. I believed he could change and even get to the point where he could kick the bad haircut right off Chuck Norris's head. But he didn't. Seeing the Total Gym all dusty in the garage made me bury that belief in my dad. Funny thing, belief. As much as he proved me wrong, a deep, hopeful part of myself believed he could still do it. Maybe next time. Yes. Next time would be different. My dad's the baddest man on the planet and could kick Chuck Norris's head clean off. If he wanted to.

Family Reunion

—Sacramento, California, sometime in 1980

Walter picked up Wally from the airport. It was sunny and the California air smelled like the desert, hollow dreams, and a natural abundance Walter thought must have been what Eden felt like.

“Hey, dad,” said Wally, and threw his bag into the back seat of his dad’s car. Wally was twenty-four, newly commissioned into the Navy out of Kings Point and was getting ready to go to pilot training. He was slight, muscular, tan and flashed a gigantic smile only youth could afford. He wore a button-down shirt with his chest hair sticking out and a decently sized gold necklace of Jesus on the cross he’d picked up in Buenos Aires during his sea year. Walter wore a similar outfit, except his shirt didn’t show as much chest hair and he had a silver POW bracelet on his left wrist.

“Hey, Wally,” Walter said. “How you doin’?”

“I’m excited about the reunion,” Wally said. “I’ve never met your entire side of the family.”

“They’re nothing special,” Walter said. “Just regular family,” and he left it at that. They talked about Wally’s young Navy career, his next assignment, what jet he was hoping to fly.

“I don’t want anything cargo,” Wally said. Walter had been an Air Force Crew Chief on a lot of different cargo planes.

“Nothing wrong with heavies,” Walter said.

“I just want to fly fast, dad,” Wally said. “Cargo missions just seem boring.” Walter’s career had been anything but boring, but he also knew that his son was arrogant and cocksure and would fit right in with the other jet pilots who thought they were God’s gift to pussy.

The rest of the trip passed in silence. They arrived at small house and got out.

“Butch,” Walter said, “I want you to meet my son, Wally,” and that was how Butch, Walter’s half-brother, came to walk Wally around the party introducing him as Walter’s boy. Wally had finally made the rounds and ended up back with his dad.

“You having fun?” Walter asked.

“I am. Everyone seems nice,” Wally said, “But why’s everybody speaking Spanish?”

Walter paused for a moment, like he’d finally come up on something unavoidable and said, “Because you’re Mexican, son.”

“Mexican? What do you mean, Mexican? I thought you said we were Italian,” Wally said.

“We are. Just more Mexican. It was just easier to say we were Italian. Italians get treated better than Mexicans,” Walter said. Wally just stood there, his chest hair and gold necklace gleaming in the sun. He’d built his entire dick-wagging persona around his deep Italian roots.

“Mexican? God damnit, dad. Fucking Mexican,” Wally said.

“Mexican,” Walter said. “Now watch your mouth. You’re Mexican and should be proud of it.”

“Proud? How am I supposed to be proud? I just found out a minute ago,” Wally said and stormed off.

Walter knew the news wasn’t easy for Wally and that he was a proud of being Italian. It would take some getting used to, but he was confident one day Wally’d understand growing up a Mexican kid picking lettuce in the fields of California and being treated like dirt changed a man. He didn’t want his son to ever feel that way.

Vacation

I never saw my parents take a vacation. Don't get me wrong, we went places, but it almost always exclusively for work and even if it did resemble a normal vacation—Disney World—the experience didn't leave my parents looking rested. Granted, a life raising six kids was an exercise in pure parental survival and survive they did, but I don't think it was for the better.

We typically vacationed down in Dania, Florida, which was the headquarters for American Maritime Officers Union. The place was a shithole and I loved it.

Vacations rarely started with airplanes and airports, unless we were going to visit Grampy in California. We'd load up the Suburban with packed bags, snacks from Costco, and cram into the backseat. I sat with Colleen and Heather in the back. Colleen was in the middle because she was tiny. The road trips down the east coast were boring and I can't remember where we stopped to sleep. By the end of it, with the snacks firmly ground into the floor of the car, Dania, Florida transformed into a veritable paradise. I didn't care that Dania was Fort Lauderdale's ugly sister. It was Florida and it was sunny and warm.

The rooms where we stayed were what you'd expect. The air conditioning was a little aggressive in the way cheap air conditioning can be and when it kicked on it sounded like a small diesel engine, but it kept the rooms wonderfully cool.

We spent most of our days at the pool, jumping and swimming and generally wearing ourselves out. Pools were God's gift to tired parents. Colleen and I would play a game of going into the deep end and sitting on the bottom of the pool. What was remarkable to me was how the sound changed down there. I'd lay for as long as I could thinking about the strange sound of being underwater, wondering why it was so familiar, while looking up at a blue sky breaking and reforming until my lungs burned with a fire-hot desire for air. The experience of sucking down big lung-filling gulps of air after being under water was one of the purest joys I'd ever experienced. The pleasure of

simple breathing reminded me of what a miracle it was to be pulling breath, exchanging carbon with the trees. But the pool wasn't even the best part.

The 24/7 snack fridge was the best part. After basting all day in the pool, taking a quick shower and changing into fresh clothes, heading to the cafeteria was pure bliss. It wasn't as if the food was top-shelf—it wasn't—but its sheer availability, hiding behind the slightly frosted glass doors of the refrigerator was my idea of heaven. Mom made sure we ate our main meals, which seemed to be mainly mashed potatoes, some kind of gravy, and an assortment of mixed vegetables. She let us choose dessert from the snack fridge. I typically chose a regular ice-cream sandwich. Nothing fancy. When I found something I liked, I barely ventured out. But when I did, it was for an orange creamsicle. Sweet heaven-on-earth those were tasty.

It didn't matter that our vacations were really work trips for our parents with us in tow. We had food, sun, more food, and each other. It wasn't Niagara Falls or Martha's Vineyard or Myrtle Beach or even Orlando. It was Dania, Florida, where the sun was too hot and the air conditioning too cold and the dessert snack fridge always open. It was a time for forgetting the long northeast winters, how they settled into your bones and turned everything gray, how you didn't own a boat in a lake town, how you didn't ski or snowboard during the winter and how you felt on the outside of just about everything. It was a time for laying on the bottom of the pool with your best friend and holding your breath in anticipation of rocketing up through the water, breaking the surface and tasting that humid and industrial and sweet, sweet air of Dania, Florida.

A Field In Pennsylvania

My dad liked history, especially military history, and on one of our trips down to Florida we visited Gettysburg and took the audio car tour. I was bored out of my skull until we stopped and looked out at the field of Picket's Charge. The field looked like any other field, except listening to the number of Americans that died moving across that wide and clear field turned me cold. I was looking at a field of death.

At the gift shop, my dad bought *Gettysburg* on VHS. Prior to watching the movie, I had a vague understanding of the Civil War. It went like this: people who talked normal like me fought people who talked funny and the normal talkers beat the funny talkers, ended slavery, and then President Lincoln went to a play and got shot in the head by some loon with three first names.

I can't say watching *Gettysburg* incessantly taught me the Civil War was one of economics, not ideas. Or that the Battle of Gettysburg was the most significant battle of the Civil War. The Battle of Vicksburg seemed more significant militarily. But those ideas would come after later reading and thinking. Watching *Gettysburg* taught me Chamberlain of the 40th Maine was a hero with a hero's moustache, General Lee was a stubborn old man and should have treated General Longstreet better, and that it didn't take a military genius to know a direct assault over an open field under heavy artillery fire was a bad idea.

Watching those funny-talking men march across that open field with Union artillery ripping large holes out of the neat ranks made me think war was tragic and beautiful and mostly downright stupid.

Fallout

—excerpt from Jack Bailey's memoir, section written by Barbara Bailey

After marriage in 1950 I had four pregnancies. In October 1952 Valerie Jean was born with quite a big malformation of the heart. The term "Blue Baby" was used and she lived to be just over a year old before she developed pneumonia whilst teething and died after several "strokes." A lot of birth defects at this time may have been caused by atomic fallout. The renowned gynaecologist, Dr. Cochrane said it was a "million to one chance" against another similar birth defect. So I became pregnant again in 1954 and lost twin boys by miscarriage at five and a half months into the pregnancy. This he described as a "twenty-thousand to one chance." So we tried again and Heather Alison was born fit and well in the Firs Maternity Hospital in 1956 followed by Fern Elisabeth at home in 1958. My health was good until just before we migrated to Australia in 1964 when I had tonsillitis and found I was allergic to penicillin.

Since arriving in Australia I thought I was pregnant again at forty-one (1971) but it turned out to be an early menopause. Then followed two years of depression followed by "red lumps." Things went fairly smoothly until in 1988 during a trip around Australia I got "Shingles." This left me depressed, almost suicidal, and I was diagnosed with an under active thyroid gland that was contained by alternative medicine for seven years.

Lightning Bugs

Kyle was short, blonde, bow-legged and had an irresistible capacity for fun. I don't think I ever saw him angry, either on the football or lacrosse fields or just playing around. He bounced around with a joy that expressed the simple wonder of being alive. If we were at his house, we'd go exploring in the woods or play video games or just do the weird stuff young boys did. He looked more like his mom—which was a good thing for him. Dale was a lot of things, but good-looking wasn't the first thing that came to mind. Though he did look like he could survive a winter. And Kyle was better looking and better tempered than his older brother, Paul The Weirdo, who, for whatever reason, always seemed to have just escaped the world's second-worst barber. The first-worst would have administered the mercy of a buzz cut. Kyle was also really good with Colleen, which was a prerequisite to being a close friend.

When we were at my house, we either rode bikes, climbed trees, climbed onto the roof, or explored the lower fields and forest of Brewster. The great thing about living on the edge of a prep school was feeling like all of those open fields and dense forests were open for exploration. If you walked away from the boathouse along the edge of the lake and the lower fields, you'd eventually arrive at a small path leading through the forest to Brewster Beach. Me, Colleen, and Kyle would run through those woods with our shoes off, feeling warm mud melt between our toes as we navigated sun-warm rocks and jumped over exposed tree roots. I ran the path so often I could run it in my imagination. I knew all the turns and dips and obstacles and could feel my body leaning into a turn, but unlike the real path that ended when it opened up onto the beach, my imagined path just kept going and I could just keep running. Kyle was quicker than me, but I was faster. But the point wasn't to compete or to win. The point was to run and feel free the way only children could. There was an abandon to it I lost when I grew up.

Kyle attracted spiritual moments like a lightning rod. The most memorable was when we were out catching lightning bugs. We'd brought a mason jar with us so we could catch them. We'd been out to catch lightning bugs before and had been successful, but this particular day the air hummed with the buzz of wings, and the lightning bugs were everywhere. As the afternoon faded to night, the air around us lit and unlit with the most wonderous constellations of light. The stars held a particular fascination for me, mainly because I knew my dad could navigate by them using a sextant, but on this particular occasion the bugs lighting up the sky were better than any night sky I'd ever witnessed. I could reach out and touch those constellations and being close to those miracles of light altered the fabric of time. There were moments when I felt time become material and I could reach out and move through it like I was moving my hand through a light layer of water. And there was Kyle, moving through that awesome wave of time and light with a maniacal look of beauty on his face. Kyle's eyes saw some lightning bugs on the ground and he dropped to his knees and started gyrating his hips wildly.

"I'm humping the bugs! Look, I'm humping them," Kyle said. I laughed, and whatever mystic material we'd passed through disappeared.

"Gross, stop it, Kyle," Colleen said and he did.

We walked on home up the hills our feet knew by feel with a mason jar full of lightning bugs bumping up against the glass. The next morning the bottom of the jar would be littered with dead lightning bugs (turns out they needed air, too), but while I was walking home I felt like I'd experienced something transcendent and life-changing, like it had forever altered my sight and I could never see the world the same again. And those moments happened more often with Kyle around.

Thrift Shop

We were down in Dania, Florida on one of summer vacations and Grams came with us. It wasn't an immediate cause for celebration because that meant we'd have someone watching us the entire time and one of the wonders of being down in Florida was we were generally free to do what we wanted.

We went to the pool most of the time, but sometimes we went to the pool hall. It's where I learned to play pool. When I hear the smack of pool balls, I'm almost instantly taken back to that poorly lit room where, once we'd tired of playing pool the correct way—the cues were usually too big and unwieldy—we'd just line the balls up and start hurling them down the table at each other. I don't remember a point to the game other than not to get your fingers crushed.

One day, Grams took us to a thrift store. If there was a place Grams was in her element, it was in a thrift shop.

So in we went. I'd always liked thrift shops. There seemed to me the ever-present possibility of stumbling onto something special and valuable on the cheap, something that might get those near-unflappable appraisers on *Antiques Roadshow* all excited and flustered. Grams was off in the clothing section and I was off by myself looking at some bowls on a bookshelf and one caught my attention on the top shelf. I wanted to touch it. I liked the feeling of clay on my hands. Clay held an intimate coolness that always surprised me and I reached up to get it and pulled the top of the shelf toward me and it started to tip over. All the bowls and plates and cups came tumbling down and broke on the floor.

"You silly little boy. I knew you were trouble when you first came in," a woman yelled and walked over to me. I stood and looked at her and couldn't speak, looking up at that menacing woman. "You going to pay for all that?" she asked.

“Who do you think you are, lady, talking to my grandson like that?” Grams asked. “You’ve been eyeing him right as he stepped in the door, like he was some kind of street trash. Let me tell you,”—one hand on a jutted-out hip and the other pointing at the woman’s chest—“he’s not trash and it’s people like you who are ruining the church. Just ruining it.” She put her hand around my shoulder and pulled me close. “Come on, kids. We’re leaving. And guess what, lady, we ain’t payin’ for shit.” And next thing I knew we were out of the store and on the street.

“Those self-righteous pieces of shit,” Grams said.

“What happened Grams?” one of the girls asked.

“Klutz over here pulled a shelf over on himself,” Grams said.

“I’d just found a pair a shoes I liked,” Heather said.

“Shut it,” Grams said. “We’re going back home and looks like you,” she was talking and pointing at Heather, “could use the exercise.”

Heather, hurt, looked down at her feet and kept walking. I wasn’t hurt at all. Grams had protected me when I’d needed protecting. It was so unlike Grams to accept that sometimes accidents happened and kids were sometimes just kids that it was strange and remarkable to feel loved and protected by her. It gave me a glimpse at who she must have been before life meant the best parts of her flat and nearly invisible.

Ellie

Ellie was my first real crush. She was Heather's friend, and she went to school at Cornerstone Christian Academy, too. She was from a large family, though not as big as ours, and they lived on the other side of town, which might of well have been the moon. She was short, blonde, smart, funny, and exhibited an independence, particularly in the way she thought, that interested me.

Small Christian schools were good for a lot of things, but sometimes the adults and children came out thinking some strange things. Such things happened when the authority figures had the backing of the universe's creator. And though Ellie wasn't the rebellious type, she questioned things, or at least entertained that maybe Christianity didn't offer the entire picture.

My crush on her wasn't sexual. I just wanted to be around her as much as I could. The only problem with the setup was Heather was her friend, too. It was annoying to have my crush be my older sister's friend. She'd just always be there, hanging around and I'm sure Heather thought the same thing of me. Whenever Ellie was over, I was wherever they were, doing things I usually didn't do. Heather knew something was up.

"You like Ellie?" Heather asked.

"No," I said.

"Liar," Heather said and then sprung a clever little trap, "Not even a little bit?" What was I supposed to do? I didn't want Heather knowing I liked Ellie because she would most certainly have used it as leverage of some kind, but I also didn't want Ellie thinking I didn't like her at all, which I thought of as equally disastrous.

"Ok," I said. "I like her a little bit."

"I knew it," Heather said. "I knew you were being weird for a reason."

“I wasn’t being weird,” I said. I felt vulnerable and it made me embarrassed. My face blushed and that was all the evidence she needed. I might as well have raised my hand to be tortured. Expressing my emotions wasn’t the problem. Controlling them was, and they’d betrayed me into Heather’s clutches.

Heather didn’t do anything overtly cruel. That wasn’t her style. Hers was always more psychological and insidious. It was enough for her to know and leave me questioning if she’d let on in any way to Ellie that I liked her. The imagining and questioning were brutal. Every time I was with Ellie, Heather was there, and I couldn’t be sure she wouldn’t turn me in. So I had to treat Heather kindly, whereas before I might have made fun of her or told Ellie something embarrassing. I was leveraged into being a good brother and I hated it.

But Ellie was no dummy. She must have known. I wasn’t exactly good at hiding it. I’d laugh too hard at all of her jokes and was by no means cool around her. I stumbled over my words, forced my way into conversations, and generally behaved like any young boy around his crush, which meant like an absolute idiot.

One night, CCA was having a lock-in, which was where parents volunteered to spend an evening at the school, while the kids ran around late into the night. It was fun to explore the school outside of regular school hours. When it got dark, it became even more fun, because it felt foreign and strange. We were playing hide-and-go-seek, and Heather had peeled off and hid somewhere else and Ellie and I ended up in the same place, sitting against a dark wall. My heart was racing. This was it. I was going to tell her I liked her.

“Ellie...” I said and I turned to her in the dark. She didn’t say anything. I’d expected her to say something. Why wasn’t she saying anything? I could hear her breathing. “Ellie...” I said again.

“I know,” Ellie said and she reached her hand out across the dark and held mine. In that moment I didn’t care if Heather had betrayed me or not. All that mattered was Ellie was holding my

hand. Mine. My body went all hot and I wanted to marry her right then and there. Her hand was thin and soft and I never wanted her to break away. But she did, and eventually our lives stepped away from each other, but for a few brief moments she'd made my heart run wild with the unreasonableness of love.

Dueling Pianos

Mr. Struble was our piano teacher, and he was gay.

“Mom, who is Mr. Struble’s friend?” I asked. I’d seen a guy in a bathrobe walking around in Mr. Struble’s house before one of our lessons.

“That’s his partner,” mom said. That was gentler than dad’s “He’s a fag,” or Grams’ “Pervert.” Our house wasn’t exactly accommodating to other configurations of love.

It made no difference to me Mr. Struble was gay. I just couldn’t stand the synthesizer room. After I was done with my piano lesson, which took place on side-by-side upright pianos with the student right next to a sliding glass door looking out across the backyard, I had to go into the synthesizer room and do my drills. It smelled of plywood and was cold.

I’d generally fall asleep with my head to the side of synthesizer and pray I’d hear Mr. Struble’s footsteps and wake up before he reached the door. Though the giant red marks across my face probably gave me away.

I enjoyed playing the piano, but I didn’t have much talent. That went to Heather and Colleen. When I complained about practicing, dad would say, “Classical music makes you smart. Do you want to be smart?”

I didn’t really care about being smart. I just wanted other people to think I was smart.

“Yes, dad. I want to be smart,” I’d say.

“Good boy. Now, get to practicing,” he’d say. I did so half-heartedly. It just wasn’t my instrument, though I found piano music intensely beautiful, particularly anything played in the lower notes. I detested the upper notes. They reminded me of someone hitting a metal spoon against glass and it annoyed me. I liked the deep cadences of the lower notes, like thunder was rumbling around a mountain.

I preferred the music of the frogs behind Mr. Struble's house. Sometimes, when mom was running late to pick us up, which was almost always, we'd play in Mr. Struble's backyard and listen to the frogs. I liked picking up rocks and chucking them into the pond. The frogs would stop their deep singing for a bit with the splash and then resume, filling the woods and the evening air with their throaty, guttural songs.

I was proud of being Mr. Struble's student, especially when he was asked to perform on TV.

"Mom, look! It's Mr. Struble," and there he was on TV wearing a strange black coat. He sat down, tipped his head back slightly and then his whole body was into the music. I knew then he played the piano for a spiritual reason and not just to teach little kids who didn't practice. When he played, his whole body radiated rapture. I wanted that, too. To create my way into a different appreciation of time, to escape into something beautiful crafted by my own hands. The only problem was I knew I wasn't going to discover that place with the piano. I wouldn't find my piano for a long time.

Impossible Puzzle

One of my favorite things about Christmas was trying to find where my parents stashed the presents. I was terrible at it. I almost never found them, which meant my parents were either really good at hiding presents or that I was a lousy seeker. Probably a combination of both.

Scouring the nooks and secret places of an old house for presents made my heart pump quickly and turned my hands cold. I knew I shouldn't be doing it, but there I was in the basement looking in old trunks that smelled like mildew, or in the storage space behind my mom and dad's room, which was the best way to get into their room when the door was locked.

And this Christmas was no different. I went searching for the presents, anxious and excited. I checked all the closets, the office, my parents' room, the apartment, and the basement. I hated the basement, but still I ventured down there, turned on the creepy single light bulb with its cheap, rusted metal chain and checked everywhere. I even went around back into what was called the pig pen—a dirt space under the apartment—and checked in there. Nothing. The cold feeling thawed from my hands and my heart settled back into its normal rhythm when I checked the barn.

The barn was my second-favorite place in the house. Only the kitchen held more sway, mainly because it was where I ate, and I loved to eat. Mom had opened a dance studio called Center Stage Dance in the barn. There were still ballet bars along the wall. We all used to take lessons. I enjoyed dancing around the barn, going through the five positions, not really knowing others might find it strange for a boy to dance with his mother in the barn. It was just something we did. The dance studio was long gone and it was full of odd stuff: furniture, boxes of books, strange items my dad brought from overseas, rugs, a deep-freezer filled with bags of chicken and pre-cut vegetables—the ridged carrots were disgusting—and at the back left of the barn was a little workshop, with a workbench and vice grip, a cabinet with various stains and paints, and another table that's only use

seemed to be to collect stuff. And under the stuff table was a curiously clean bed sheet spread out over a bunch of lumpy things. My hands got cold again.

I pulled back the sheet and there were the gifts. I can't remember any of them except the Impossible Puzzle. I've never been particularly fond of jig-saw puzzles. I'd do them if other people were, but I found the prospect of sitting down by myself to do a puzzle tortuous and boring. If I was going to suffer, I wanted others to suffer with me. But the name of the puzzle caught my attention. How could a puzzle be impossible? Turned out the Impossible Puzzle had no definable edges, which meant my usual strategy of putting the edge pieces together first wouldn't work. It didn't exactly seem impossible, but still harder than normal. I rifled through some of the other presents and then put the sheet back over, careful to make it look like I hadn't put my clumsy mitts all over it.

Christmas day arrived and I could discern the shapes of some of the presents I'd discovered all decked out in wrapping paper. Santa gifts arrived in pillowcases. I wondered who was going to get the Impossible Puzzle.

Our Christmas present openings were a methodical affair. Each kid opened a present in turn and I was in charge of stuffing the wrapping into a plastic garbage bag, otherwise dad would have lost his mind. I picked up my Santa pillowcase and pulled it down to reveal the Impossible Puzzle.

"What did Santa get you?" mom asked.

"A puzzle," I said and the magic of Santa died right then on the floor in the middle of opening presents. I placed the puzzle in my stack of things, grabbed my trash bag and waited for Colleen to unwrap her next present.

Ears

I had ear infections so often they became old news I stopped telling my mom. At night, when I felt the pressure building in my ear, I'd turn the hurting ear toward the pillow, push my breath hard against the back of my throat until my ear popped and fluid ran out and I went back to sleep.

Panasonic

The TV in my parents' room was a Panasonic with a remote that had small circular buttons. I used to sneak into their room through the storage space running behind their room and watch TV.

I didn't watch anything in particular—though QVC always held my imagination—and just liked flipping through the channels and one day I got curious. I started punching in numbers higher than the cable channels the remote cycled through.

Most of the channels were snowed. A few came in and out. And one came in discolored and splotchy, but the sound came in clearly. The picture was of bodies flopping against each other and people, mainly women, moaning. I found it all funny. The *oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah* and the sounds of wet-sounding flesh slapping against each other. And the scene usually ended with a disembodied hand pulling on a penis and groaning.

I knew I had a penis and that sometimes it grew hard and looked like the penises on the Panasonic, though I'd never thought to rub it with such vigor.

I didn't do anything right then. I turned the TV off, put the remote back where I'd found it and scurried back out through storage space. But I came back again and again and watched the fuzzy porn channel, until one day I decided I was going to pull on my own penis and see what happened.

I lay down on my parents' bed and went to work. At first, I yanked like a madman as I'd seen the men on TV do and quickly stopped as it did nothing but hurt. So I took it slow. Up and down and up and down. And, God, was it boring. Nothing was happening. I just felt dumb with my dick in my hand. I might as well have been rubbing my own foot, until something warm and pleasurable started to stir in my stomach. It was the same feeling I got when climbing the rope in gym class. So I kept at it until my hand was pumping fast and it felt so good and then my mind went blank except for the sensation of my body feeling like it had been plunged into the most pleasurable kind of fire.

I wiped whatever strange goo that was on my stomach off with some toilet paper, flushed it down the toilet, pulled the comforter tight of any wrinkles, turned off the TV, and crawled back out the storage space radiating with the discovery of something new and exciting and wonderful. It was as if I'd just stumbled into heaven.

Kitchen Cabinets

Poppa made things with his hands and I loved him for it. My dad was more the pay-someone-else-to-do-it kind of man. Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing him fix anything with his hands. Not even small household things like sinks or toilets. So when Poppa came for a visit, I was sure to be as close to him as possible, because I was going to learn something important.

The job that sticks out in my mind was when Poppa decided to refinish our kitchen cabinets. I don't remember why he decided to do it, but he gathered all the tools he needed and brought them out to the detached garage at the front of the property. He then emptied all the cabinets, brought them all out to the garage, and started sanding.

"Here," he said and extended a piece of sandpaper toward me, "touch this."

I ran my hand over the paper.

"It feels like a cat's tongue," I said.

"That's called grit. The lower the number, the rougher the grit," he said. "This is 60 grit. It's great for stripping things."

"Stripping?" I asked.

"Getting the top layer off. Once you're done with 60, you move to 80, then 120 and so on. I like to finish with 220. Leaves the wood nice and smooth."

"Seems like a lot of work," I said.

"It is. But after the wood is stained and finished, it is beautiful. Now step back and let me get to work," he said and smiled. And he got straight to work. I watched him for a long time. The sawdust kicked up into the air and settled on everything. He worked the sander up and down following the grain and the old layer of stain came right off revealing a light wood color underneath. He finished a cabinet and said, "Run your hand over it."

"Feels rough," I said.

“It will get less and less so as we go through the grits,” he said and he bent back to work. I enjoyed watching him, but I got bored and went back into the house. The sander whirled the entire day. I went back out to the garage in the failing afternoon light. Standing at the garage entrance, the golden light lit up all the sawdust and it seemed like the air around Poppa glowed. I stood there in dumb silence while sawdust coated my skin and settled on my hair. Poppa was lost in his work and didn’t know I was there. I put my hand on his back. It was damp with sweat. He killed the sander.

“Nana said it’s time for dinner,” I said.

“So it is,” Poppa said, looking around as if he’d come out of somewhere peaceful and quiet.

Poppa worked on the cabinets steadily over the next couple days and brought me over to feel the 220-grit sanded wood.

“That feels like water,” I said.

“I know. I love working with wood. Feel like I’m bringing it back to life. Now for the fun part,” he said and put a flat-head screwdriver under the lid of a metal can and popped it open.

“That stinks,” I said.

“Sure does,” he said, dipped a brush into the stain and dragged it up the wood. “Always with the grain,” he said and I watched as the stain brought out the different shades of color in the wood.

“That is beautiful. It looks like a bunch of rivers,” I said. He didn’t say anything but kept on staining the wood until every piece was covered.

“We’ll leave that to dry, apply another coat tomorrow, and then apply the finish,” he said.

I never looked at wood the same.

Sweets and Print

Mr. Pearce, another neighbor, owned two beagles, three apple trees, and a small store downtown selling all the fare typical of a summer town: postcards, candy, children's toys, ice-cream, and magazines. The pornos were in the back. Essentially, sweets and print. I only went into his house a handful of times, and it smelled like dog urine soaked into newspaper. Not as biting as cat urine, oddly pleasant, but hinting of something not quite right.

Mr. Pearce was like that, too. Something not quite right. A head too large for a thin neck, drooping shoulders, a soft stomach, and a large nose. His eyes were unremarkable. Brown, I think. Nothing specific like doe or chestnut or trench-mud. Just plain brown. They had depth but lacked clarity. His voice was too high and he flashed a sickly-sweet smile like a state fair candied-apple.

When I remember Mr. Pearce, I remember his fingers. One could describe them as piano, but that wouldn't be quite accurate. No, they weren't piano. They lacked a certain passion about moving. Though they did hold an aspect of being misunderstood or ignored or discarded. Sea glass. That's it. His fingers reminded me of beige colored sea glass. Slow. Muted. Soft.

One summer I walked down to Mr. Pearce's store and tried to steal a porno wrapped in a newspaper. I hadn't gone down there with the intention to steal it, but once inside and having glimpsed the adult section, I conceived of my Trojan horse scheme. I walked up to the counter, shaking, and put the newspaper on the counter.

"Hold on, Sean. I'll be right back," Mr. Pearce said and he walked toward the back of the store to help someone. The door was wide open. I could have just bolted with the porno. But I needed the newspaper, too, otherwise people might find it suspicious that a youngster was just casually strolling downtown Wolfeboro with a porno. Plus, wouldn't Mr. Pearce think it strange I'd left without buying anything? What if he asked my parents about it? So more out of a practical concern than anything, I stayed and waited for Mr. Pearce to return.

He came back, and all I could do was watch his slow-moving hands as he removed the porno from the newspaper and placed it under the counter. I waited for Mr. Pearce to transform into some kind of avenging Old Testament angel bent on vengeance. But none came. He just looked down at me with his plain, noncommittal eyes.

“\$1.50, please, Sean,” and nothing more. I paid in nickels and dimes and left. I walked home wondering if he was going to tell my parents about my failed attempt to smuggle smut. It never came up.

Small Bones

There was a kid in town who drove himself around in a motorized wheelchair. His head was normal sized, but the rest of his body was tiny, like everything but his head had been frozen in the proportions of a toddler. It made his head look way bigger than normal. I didn't know what the scientific term was for what he had, but his hands were tiny, and he was nice. What made him relevant to my life was that he owned a Nintendo 64 and Star Fox 64.

With all the tact of a child, I asked him, "What's wrong with you?"

"I just have small bones," he said. But those small bones could still work a controller and we played Star Fox together. I'm not ashamed to say it: if he hadn't had Star Fox, we wouldn't have been hanging out. It wasn't that I found him strange to be around. His physical condition didn't weird me out. He was kind and shared his things. It was more than I could say for a lot of my other friends with normal limbs and torsos. Fact was, if I couldn't play video games with you, then our friendship was doomed. I'd settle for any kind of gaming system—well, probably not an ATARI. I didn't know anybody with one of those and even if I did, the games sounded paint-dry boring. I was even still friends with Max a few streets over and he only had a regular Nintendo we played Super Mario 3 on. I didn't like Max much because he was only nice to me when Bosche wasn't around. Bosche was a big, pudgy kid whose dad was apparently somebody politically important in town. He and Max would skateboard and BMX on Max's homemade half-pipe. I was embarrassed by my Walmart brand skateboard and I never owned a BMX bike with pegs on it. Tony Hawk was getting to be a big deal, as were the X-Games. My favorite event was the street luge. It looked insane with people plowing into haybales. It made the half-pipe competition look tame.

Anyway, the kid with the small bones—I can't even remember his name—and I played Star Fox, and he was good. I remember him telling me what was coming up next and what to do. I didn't

find it annoying. He was trying to help me and I'd never been particularly good at any game that involved controlling a vehicle of some kind.

Once I beat Star Fox, I didn't hang out with the nice, small-boned kid anymore. I didn't think I was being mean or anything. Our friendship had just come to its natural end. What else were we supposed to do together? He couldn't run or play outside or go swimming in the lake, and I was interested in all of those things. The logic of it was simple.

Newspaper

When I tired of the small collection of masturbatory material I'd stashed in my room, I'd take the newspaper, look for the Sears section, and flip to the lingerie pictures. The women weren't as dolled-up as the ones in my porno mags, but they were still beautiful in a homey, realistic way. It made more sense to me for a woman to be in a department store bra against a dull gray background than it did for them to be laying across expensive looking couches or cars or fur rugs spreading their lips with some look of distant pleasure on their faces. Why did the porno mag women hold their lips like that? And why weren't they looking at the camera?

The women in the newspapers were different. They smiled and looked out at you. I also liked how the newspaper women held little risk, too. As long as I covered my tracks by taking other sections of the newspaper, I knew the questions would probably not amount to much. If I'd been caught with a *Hustler* or *Playboy*, my mom would have turned into a detective and started in on an interrogation of my sexual urges. Not to mention that my grandmother would have found out and cited it as another piece of evidence to the coming apocalypse and my assured place in hell.

It took me a long time to realize one of the allures of my porn collection was the very thought I could get caught with it. That knowledge, the threat of getting caught, stashed in the back of my mind, made my life a little bit more adventurous. I'd run scenarios in my head about what I would do if I got caught. Would I lie? Say they were my friend's? Say they weren't mine? The threat of getting caught teased my mind long after I'd thrown the newspaper in the trash.

A Lapsed Catholic Might Doubt God, But A Lapsed Catholic Never Doubts Ghosts

I've always been scared of the dark. It didn't help that our house was haunted.

I kept the lights on thinking ghosts could only move in the dark and if the lights were on, then the ghosts couldn't move. It made sense in my child-brain. And even though I didn't consider myself Catholic, Catholicism had a strange way of leaving traces. My belief in ghosts was one such trace.

There was only one thing better than keeping the lights on to keep me safe from ghosts. It was my Snoopy blanket dad brought back from Korea. It was dark blue and had Snoopy riding a rainbow off to sleep. When I got scared, I'd just pop the blanket over my head and everything would be ok.

One night I felt a ghost in the room, over in the corner, and heard it coming toward me. I pulled the blanket over my head and closed my eyes. The ghost didn't touch me, but I could hear what sounded like breathing right outside my blanket. I was sweating and terrified, but firm in my conviction there was a no kidding ghost breathing over my face, and Snoopy wouldn't let that spawn of Satan hurt me. It could scare me, but it couldn't touch me.

A few years later, I was doing homework at my desk with my back to the closet. I felt another ghost in the room. I straightened up and, without turning around, asked "What do you want?" I could feel it up close. It didn't say anything, but felt something touch me just slightly below my ribs. I screamed and bolted out of the room. I ran down the steps, out the front door, and was at the edge of the street looking back through the front door, expecting to see a ghost gliding down the stairs.

No longer safe, even in the light, I asked if I could move rooms. Mom probably thought I wanted a little more privacy or freedom or some place to masturbate in peace, but all I really wanted was to feel safe in my own room with no threat of being groped by a ghost.

I moved into the back apartment with Heather, slept with Snoopy blanket, and kept the lights on as much as I could, until mom or dad yelled at me, or turned the lights off themselves. It was also why I kept music on in rooms I'd left, believing I could trick the ghost into thinking I was still in there and to stay away.

The Birds

Sex wasn't a taboo subject in our house. At least, sex wasn't a taboo subject for mom. It was commonplace to see her with her boobs out going about the business of getting dressed and helping six kids get ready for the day. I was taught that nakedness wasn't a sin and I was aware I had a penis and the girls had vaginas and to make a baby you needed a penis to go into a vagina, but a brother penis couldn't go into a sister vagina or the baby would come out cross-eyed and drooling. That much had been made clear to me. Masturbation had also been made clear to me.

"It'll make you go blind if you do it," Grams had said. I didn't want to go blind. So I tested it out by masturbating at night and then checking my eyesight the next day. I already had glasses, so I didn't know if my bad eyes were just bad eyes or if it was on account of my newfound practice of pleasuring myself, but I was willing to risk it. Afterall, if things got really bad, I could always just get another prescription. I told mom what Grams had said.

"You're not going to go blind," mom said, "but you are going to have to talk with your dad." I didn't want to talk to dad about sex. I just wasn't as open to expressing myself with him as I was with mom. It's not like he avoided uncomfortable parental conversations either, but up until that point, I'd never walked away from an uncomfortable conversation with my dad feeling like I'd been heard, seen, or understood. It generally felt like someone painting over wallpaper. It got the job done, but it didn't feel right. The sex talk was no different. He sat me down on his bed.

"So, Sean, your mom wants me to talk to you about sex," dad said.

"Ok," I said.

"Just wrap your tool," dad said. "I don't want you getting AIDS."

"What's AIDS?" I said.

"It's not like in my day when you could just have sex and not worry about things. Sex can kill you now," dad said. Good Lord, I could not only be stricken blind by masturbating, but I could

die from sex, too. Was sex even worth it? “So, you know, just stay safe, use a condom, and have fun. Don’t tell your mom that last part. It’s fun, but it’s got to be with the right person. You understand?”

“I understand,” I said.

“Good, now go tell your mom I had the birds and the bees talk with you, ok?” dad said.

“I will,” I said and I left the room. I understood less about sex after I sat down on my dad’s bed than I did before he talked to me. Before the talk, sex seemed like a simple thing people did. After, I understood it more like Russian roulette and that I might walk away with a disease that could kill me. And did birds and bees have sex with each other? Had I missed something?

“I had the birds and bees talk with dad,” I said to mom.

“Everything good?” mom asked.

“Good,” I said.

Everything was not good. There was no talk about anything practical. How do I not get AIDS? How do I put on a condom? Where could I even buy one? And before even thinking about condoms, how in the world was I supposed to talk to girls, much less play hide-the-willy? Was there any talk of the spiritual aspects of sex outside of the Catholic one of the desires of the flesh are sinful and their satisfaction will ensure damnation? No. Nothing. Just off-white paint slathered all over bad wallpaper.

Sex continued to be a mystery to me. I gathered as much information I could from any porn I could get my hands on and talk among middle school boys, which was about as useful as asking a blind person to distinguish between fuchsia and magenta. I knew I wanted—eventually—to have sex, but I didn’t want to die for it. Not yet, anyway.

Lost Property Office

—excerpt from Jack Bailey's memoir

During the war the buses were parked out in the streets at night to avoid being a concentrated target for the German bombers and they tended to get misused for fornication and toilet purposes. On one occasion a bus brought in for repair had been used as a temporary lavatory. The fitter who had to work on it drew the attention of the Foreman to the excreta and said, "What am I going to do about this Harry?" Harry replied in his high-pitched quavering voice "I'll tell you what to do Bill. Take it across to the Lost Property Office and if it's not claimed within three weeks its yours!" Each night about ten of us had to sleep on the premises on fire-watching duty. It was usually very boring and we used to take it in turns to go out for a walk in the blackout. One night two of us were walking under the railway bridge on Meadow Lane when a siren sounded. A woman's frightened voice said "Ohhhh! It's an air-raid!" A man's gruff voice replied angrily "Hold still!"

Mice

After Grams moved out of the apartment at the back of the house, Heather and I moved in.

“What color would you like to paint your room?” mom asked.

“Lime green,” I said.

“Ok. Lime green it is,” mom said.

I don’t remember what color Heather chose, but I don’t think it was anything close to lime green. Maybe a yellow. I didn’t particularly have a preference for lime green, but I figured it would be the best color to keep the room light without keeping the lights on. I was still afraid of the dark.

Living in the apartment made me feel like I was an adult. It had a full kitchen downstairs and a little living area, a porch, two bathrooms, one of which belonged to the third-floor bedroom, which had its own porch and spiral staircase looking over the church parking lot field and you could see Lake Winnepesaukee through the trees.

In winter, the apartment got so cold you could see your breath in the morning. The coldness of the apartment was how Heather ended up killing half of her mice she was trying to keep alive for a school science project. She left them downstairs on the kitchen table, and half of them froze stiff. She was heartbroken.

“I didn’t mean to do it,” Heather blubbered to mom. “It wasn’t my fault.” I’ve always been adept at picking up peoples’ soft spots and then filing them away as something to bring back out and hurt them with. Heather’s remorse was real. I could feel it. I filed it away.

That night, she made sure her mice wouldn’t freeze. She put a space heater in front of the cage. The next morning she checked on her mice and they were all dead.

“I even put the heater on high,” she said.

Some time passed and I don't remember how Heather made me angry or if I'd just decided to be cruel, which was sometimes the case, and I said, "Well, H., at least I didn't oversee Mousewitz."

"That's not funny, Sean. I didn't mean to kill those mice," she said.

"Maybe. But they're still all dead," I said.

"And the Holocaust isn't something to joke about either," she said.

I knew she was right, but I didn't know how to process the Holocaust. Millions of people murdered. I'd seen their pictures. More skeleton than human. And those were the survivors.

The Hills Were Bored

P&H Marine was my parents' shipping safety business. Once Pease Air Force Base closed, they rented out one of the buildings as office space and set up shop. It was a nondescript building with offices, cubicles, and light blue carpet. At the back of the space there was a large office that functioned as the conference room. We used it as our movie room when we waited for mom or dad to finish work. We watched other movies in the conference room, probably the typical Disney stuff—*The Little Mermaid*, *The Lion King*, *Aladdin* (I had a bigtime crush on Jasmine and fantasized about owning pet bird and naming it Iago)—but I really only remember watching *The Sound of Music*.

The afternoons spent at P&H Marine weren't all boredom. When everyone else had gone home for the day and my parents were still putting in work, we'd play on a moving dolly by turning the halls between the cubicles into a circular track and race around the office. There was a snack bar loaded with candy and when we got hungry we'd ask mom or dad if we could have some. They agreed because they knew the candy would shut us up for a while. My favorite candy from the snack bar was Hot Tamales. I ate them until I couldn't feel my tongue anymore. There was nothing like cheap cinnamon flavored candy to keep me quiet. But besides the dolly races and candy, P&H was drop dead boring. It was a place of business. Not exactly ideal conditions for kids to be spending their afternoons.

Sometimes we'd sprawl out on the floor and fall asleep. Other times we'd do homework. But most of the time we watched *The Sound of Music*. We learned all the songs and would sing them in the car on the way home. To my mom, it probably felt like torture, hearing us sing "Doe a deer, a female deer, ray, a drop of golden sun," over and over again with her head full of expense reports and ISO 9001 audits or whatever it was my mom did. Then again, maybe she enjoyed hearing us sing our candied-up little hearts out. I actually don't remember dad being in the car on those drives back to Wolfeboro. I'm sure he was there. But did we sing when he was with us? I don't know. He had a

wonderful singing voice. He sang for the Queen of England once. Heather had a great voice, too, and it made me jealous every time she opened her mouth to sing. The rest of us took after mom, whose creative talents were outside the realm of singing.

Simply put, P&H was the place we went to be bored. It wasn't even the good kind of childhood bored that encouraged imaginative play. Colleen and I would sometimes go outside and wander around in the back. We found a dead crow out there once and I poked the carcass with a stick, but that was about it. P&H was my first experience with dead time. Time I could feel flowing away to no place in particular. The boredom experienced there was the kind of adult boredom that beckoned to me with its cheap carpet, drab colors, and flat fluorescent lighting. It was the responsible adult world of paperwork and desks and paper clips and computers and printer ink and money, money, money.

Babysitter

I had a crush on Aubri Dow. She had curly blonde hair, a radiant white smile, and the kind of tan particular to being on a lake. Someone else had a crush on her, too, and got her pregnant. I wouldn't say the news was scandalous, but more something to take into account, like the lake had finally thawed. It was just something to be aware of. She had the baby and moved into the apartment at the back of the Dows' house.

She needed a babysitter so she could have a night out, and I'd just completed my baby-sitting course. I had a certificate and everything. So she hired me to take care of her baby. The baby was asleep when I arrived and didn't wake up while I was there. I was giddy because I was in my childhood crush's apartment alone and I could explore her place. I poked around her closet a bit and then built up enough courage to check her underwear drawer. I was careful not to ruffle the folded underwear too much and pulled out a particularly silky pair and held it up to the light. I held it for a while and decided to seize the moment.

I'd thought of her naked and she was one of the only real women that had made their way into my young fantasies and in her apartment, alone—well, except for the sleeping infant in the back room—I had in my possession a pair of her silkiest underwear and the temptation was just too much. I sat down on the couch, wrapped the underwear around my dick, and then fantasized about her coming home and finding me there, the baby fast asleep, and me more than willing to do whatever she wanted. It had all the makings of a bad porno. I came into her silk underwear and then relaxed back into the couch—or was it a futon?

I wasn't doing much thinking at all until I thought about the underwear. What was I supposed to do with them? I could just take the underwear and keep them as a souvenir, but what if she noticed someone had taken them? That potential encounter with my parents dissuaded me from taking off with the loot. Not to mention the kind of embarrassment I'd feel every time I saw the

Dows if they found out. So I decided to ditch the underwear I'd soiled in her dirty laundry. I buried it deep into the dirty pile, hoping she wasn't the kind to discern between whites and colors or regular and delicate. But she'd gotten pregnant before marriage, so I figured she wasn't the most discerning type and concluded it was my safest option.

She came home and when the moment passed where she might take my virginity, I walked home not completely disappointed, but a little deflated. It didn't matter she was nearly twenty and I was somewhere in the neighborhood of twelve and that it was illegal. My horny mind didn't see it that way.

The night was clear and the moon was out and I thought if she'd just give me a chance, I'd treat her and the baby right and I could love her like she needed to be loved. I'd care for her better than whatever loser had gotten her pregnant.

She never found the dirty underwear or, at least, she never confronted me about them. And if she did find them and decided to keep it a secret, then all I can say is "thank you." And if she never knew and is now reading this and finding out for the first time, then all I can say is "I wasn't wrong."

Contrails and Helicopters

Chris Jones' dad was a nice man and a conspiracy theorist.

"See those contrails up in the sky, Sean," Mr. Jones said, pointing. "That's the government testing something on us."

"What are they testing?" I asked. I didn't disbelieve him, because he was my friend's dad and everything else about him seemed sane enough. It would take me years to understand that everyone had shades of crazy, but some people's crazy was like living in the dark.

"I don't know. But it's something," he said. "Check these out," he said and took out some pictures of helicopters. "Notice anything strange about them?" he asked, flipping the pages.

Helicopters had always struck me as curious machines, but I couldn't see anything particularly odd about these helicopters.

"Look like regular helicopters to me," I said.

"Exactly," he said, "but they're unmarked, man. Unmarked helicopters." I looked up from the pictures and still didn't understand the significance. "Why would they need to be unmarked? Every other aircraft is marked. It's the law. So why not paint these birds, huh?" he asked. I had no idea, but the look in his eyes had become slightly fevered and he'd drawn out *It's the law* like a preacher discussing the ten commandments and why you shouldn't covet your neighbor's wife.

"Because they're up to something?" I ventured.

"Exactly, because they're up to something," Mr. Jones said.

"What are they up to?" I asked.

"I don't know," Mr. Jones said. "But it's something."

Chris had remained quiet, like he'd heard it before, and seemed to be waiting for a good time to intervene. He'd probably learned not to intercede after his dad started in on the contrails and unmarked helicopters and government conspiracies stuff, but also learned not to let the

conversation go on too long, because he was, after all, a kid who wanted friends to come over. Though I was used to crazy because of Grams.

At one time Grams believed the FBI was tapping our phones and building a case against our mom because she was a foreigner and it was only a matter of time before the authorities swooped down in their cars and whisked all the kids away because foreigners were spies. So, I was ok with some talk of contrails and unmarked helicopters.

“Dad, can we go outside now?” Chris said. Mr. Jones didn’t want to embarrass his son, but something told me he felt like he had a patriotic duty to inform me about the current state of the world.

“Sure,” Mr. Jones said. “Just don’t go down by the pond,” and we headed for the door, “and don’t trust your government either!” and then the door closed behind us and we were outside.

“Sorry about that,” Chris said. “Sometimes my dad is crazy.”

“Don’t be sorry. I like your dad. He makes me laugh,” I said and we headed straight for the pond.

Blackheads

Mom grabbed my face with both hands and checked my nose for blackheads.

“Mom, stop touching my face,” I said.

“Hold still,” she said, angling my face left then right. “You’ve got some good ones,” she said and pressed her thumbs together and her eyes grew a little wider when the blackhead popped out.

“Mom, stop,” I said, but I didn’t really want her to stop. I loved when she popped my blackheads. It was one of the rare occasions I saw her get excited. When she was popping your blackheads, it was an even more rare moment of singular attention. Something could have been on fire in the kitchen and she would have said, “Just a minute.” So when she started canvassing my face, I acted like I was miserable, but I wasn’t.

I told other people about her habit of popping blackheads and they found it disgusting. Maybe it was. It reminded me of gorillas cleaning each other. There was something intimate about it.

Even now, when I see her, she’ll sometimes grab my face in her hands, turn it left then right. I’ll say, “Mom, stop,” and she’ll say, “Hold still,” and I’m suddenly a kid again, sharing my mom with nobody.

Boots, Shoes, and Coats

Chris Jones had a Walkman and a big, black CD case full of music. He wasn't obnoxious about how much music he had, but just the sight of that CD case made me jealous. I didn't have a CD case or a Walkman.

Chris had a different taste in music than me. He listened to Korn, Alice In Chains, and Rob Zombie. I grew up on a combination of classical music, Kenny G, Jimmy Buffet, and ABBA. ABBA was my favorite because it's what my mom danced to when she cleaned. It's not like Chris took it as his personal charge to expand my musical taste beyond "Dancing Queen," but he let me borrow his *Hellbilly Deluxe*. I had a silver CD player and listened to "Living Dead Girl" on repeat.

I'd been charged with organizing the closet at the bottom of the front staircase and wasn't happy about it. The weather was too good to be stuck inside putting other peoples' boots and shoes in order. So I brought down my CD player, turned on "Living Dead Girl," and got to work.

I cleared everything out of closet, including the coats, and set about organizing. I organized the boots and shoes by owner, style, then descending size. I applied the same method to the coats, except I went by function, not length. I was done with the boots and shoes and halfway through the coats when Colleen came into the entryway and turned down the music. I turned and looked at her.

"Why did you turn down the music?" I asked.

"Because I'm concerned," Colleen said.

"About?" I asked.

"Your soul," Colleen said. I looked at her blankly. "If you keep listening to music like this, you are going to end up in hell." I smiled, bent to the CD player and turned the volume all the way up. Her big eyes welled with tears and she screamed, "You're going to hell," and ran outside.

I turned back to the closet and started in on the coats. It's not like I wanted to punch a one-way ticket to eternal damnation, but pressing into Colleen's zealous sincerity was just too good a moment to pass up.

Annapolis

I found and claimed my first porno mag from a trash can at the United States Naval Academy. I was at the summer lacrosse camp playing along the Chesapeake, which, in the summer, was miserable, borderline cruel. The best part of camp was going to the pool and jumping off the diving board. It was too hot for lacrosse.

I remember Coach Richie Meade asked if any of us were interested in attending the Naval Academy and to come to a little meeting if they were. I had no interest in being involved in the military, but I figured it was one of the reasons my parents had sent me to the camp in the first place. So I went and listened to him talk, and the only thing I could think about was how I thought he'd be taller and how hot it was outside and how much I wanted to escape the heat and get into the pool. He droned on about duty and service to your country and all I could think about was how the chlorinated water folded over your entire body, diving as far down as you could, the weight of water pressing against your eardrums and then the near-ecstasy of breaking the surface and breathing in a lungful of air, even if that air was gross and humid.

I was walking back from the meeting toward my dorm and spilling out of the trashcan was a *Hustler*. I quickly plucked it from the trash and stuffed it in my shorts and pulled my shirt over it.

Women were a mystery to me. And naked women of any shape or color with varying nipple, breast, butt, and bush sizes enthralled me. It wasn't as if I'd been raised to think naked women shameful. Mom walked around with her shirt off a lot and it didn't make me feel weird or ashamed. But there was something else about these women that attracted me. It was the absolute nakedness, the vulnerability of exposing the most intimate parts of themselves to strangers that had me flipping through the pages.

I carried the *Hustler* home and stuffed it in my hiding place under a floorboard in my room. Over the years I'd garner a small collection of pornos. But that first *Hustler* was close to my heart,

mainly because of the way I'd found it. I'd rescued it from the trash. How could anyone treat a magazine like that?

Operator

—Satellite Beach, Florida 1973

After a trip to Great Britain where he sang for the Queen of England and visited Stonehenge, Wally knew he'd have to quit his job as the first male telephone operator in Florida. He applied to Kings Point Maritime Academy and was accepted onto the waiting list. A few days later he got a call telling him he'd been accepted.

"Mom, I got in! Some kid was running to tell his parents when he tripped on a log and broke his leg," Wally said. "I'm in."

"That's great news," Patricia said and was proud of her son. He'd be going to college. The first in the family.

Later that night, Wally saw the kitchen light still on and moved quietly to the doorway. Patricia was singing one of her favorite songs over the sink. "You and me against the world, sometimes it seems like you and me against the world." He couldn't see her face, but knew she was crying. He could hear it in her voice. He crept back to his room and felt an enormous guilt settle on his chest. His operator money had helped with the mortgage and now he didn't know how she'd make up the difference. Would she lose the house? It was the only thing she had. He wanted to stay and help, but also felt the unrelenting pull of a vast world that stretched far, far beyond the mediocre beaches and opportunities of Satellite Beach. He knew a beautiful world was out there and he was going to witness all of its terrors and wonders with his own eyes.

He left for basic in the summer.

Patricia lost the house in the fall.

Kettle Corn

I looked forward to the Huggins Hospital Street Fair every year. It was like any small-town American fair with rides, games, vendor booths, and different kinds of food. My favorite part about the fair was the kettle corn. I could smell the sweetness of it in the air before I could see the kettle corn stand. It was my first stop if I had any money. Some people liked cotton candy more and there would be some goon gesticulating wildly with his cotton candy paper cone going around and around the machine and then pulling it up and out like he'd just pulled a rabbit out of a hat. If I got any cotton candy, I bought the bag of it out of principle, but that was only if I'd eaten all of my kettle corn.

I never played the games—ring toss, air gun, Skee-Ball horse race—with any illusion I was going to win something. The fair promised nothing other than cheap entertainment, and I'd made my peace with it. Plus, proceeds went to the hospital. Who could argue with that? There was a ping pong game where you tried to throw your ping pong ball into different colored glass cups. If you hit a certain one, you won a goldfish in a plastic bag. Didn't seem like much of a prize to me, but I liked the sound the balls made when they hit the glass. So I played, sunk it in the goldfish cup, and won myself a goldfish I then had to carry around the rest of the night.

I was stuffed full of kettle corn and halfway through my bag of cotton candy when I got to a ride that spun you around in a circle and pinned you to the wall. I think it was called Gravitron, but I can't be sure. I'd seen a bunch of older kids going on it and coming off laughing. It seemed like the cool ride, but I've never been fond of fair or carnival or theme park rides of any kind, especially the kind that turned you upside down or spun you around in circles. What sadist invented the teacup ride? But my desire to seem cool trumped my instinct to keep my tickets for another ride or another unwinnable game. I gave the bored looking attendant my ticket and got on.

The ride started and I regretted the decision immediately. The concoction of kettle corn and cotton candy swirled around in my stomach as the ride spun faster and faster and pinned me to the wall. Someone screamed with delight near me and the world was a blur of lights and sound. All I wanted to do was put my hands up to my mouth to somehow limit the projectile vomit threatening to rifle out of my mouth. I closed my eyes, tried to breath and mumbled *Jesus, please let this be over* repeatedly, hoping for divine intervention until I felt the ride begin to slow down.

“Ride’s over,” the attendant yelled and I ran for it. I bounded for the exit, ran to the back of the ride and threw up a large pile of kettle corn. I retched and retched until nothing was left in my stomach. I wiped my mouth on my shirt and went back to where I’d dropped my stuff before getting on the ride. How cool did I look now with puke all over my shirt? I grabbed the goldfish and what was left of my cotton candy and started the walk back to my house.

The night was clear and beautiful and I’d have stopped, lain down in the field, and looked at the sky if I hadn’t felt so terrible. What a dumb ride. What a dumb event. Who cared about Huggins Hospital anyway? Why had I been so stupid? Something had told me not to go on that ride, but I’d ignored it and gone anyway. Stupid. Why was I so stupid?

I opened the side door and was hoping to pass through to my room unnoticed. No luck.

“How was the fair?” mom said before she’d taken a look at me.

“It was ok,” I said and then she saw me.

“You sick?” mom said.

“Got sick after a ride,” I said and trying to salvage the situation said, “But I won a goldfish,” and held up the plastic bag.

“Sean, I think that fish is dead,” mom said. The goldfish was belly-up. “Here, let me help you,” and she took it to the bathroom and flushed it down the toilet. She came back and said, “Did you at least enjoy the kettle corn?”

Portsmouth Christian Academy

“You’ll be going to Portsmouth Christian Academy next year,” mom said.

“Do they have football?” I asked.

“They have soccer and basketball,” mom said.

“So, do they have football?” I asked again, wanting her to tell me what I already knew.

“No. They don’t have football,” mom said.

“I’m not going,” I said. Football was my favorite thing on the planet and they were taking it away.

“You’re going,” dad said, “And that’s final.” And so it was. I immediately despised the place.

There were two eighth grade sections, and there was a clear difference between the two. Mr. Collins’ class was the cool class, where the kids who had been at the school for a while ended up. The capstone for people in Mr. Collins’ class was their final projects with Revelations. I guess it was a specialty of Mr. Collins. I was thankful I was in the other class. Revelations and all the weird stuff that happened in it terrified me.

Mr. Collins was colorblind and wore the same set of clothing depending on the day.

“I haven’t been sick in years,” Mr. Collins said.

“What’s your secret?” someone asked.

“Well, I wake up early every morning at around three-thirty and down a glass of water I keep on my nightstand. Keeps me healthy. Haven’t been sick in years,” Mr. Collins said. I thought such a practice was stupid. How does a glass of water in the early morning keep you from getting sick?

Later, after I’d left the school, I heard Mr. Collins ended up getting cancer and the majority of me felt bad for him, because he was generally a nice guy and it wasn’t his fault I’d been put in another section and there was a comfort in knowing what outfit he was going to be wearing, but

there was a small part of me that reveled in the news. Turned out a glass of water every morning before the sun came up couldn't keep you from getting sick.

I was still angry I couldn't play football. It felt like a betrayal. How could my parents fail to see the football field was the place where I felt most alive and free?

"You can play basketball," mom said. And so I played basketball and I was terrible. I didn't really understand the game and was always fouling somebody. What do you mean I can't throw my body into someone else? Layups? Forget it. I didn't like anything about it. The gym smelled funny, the sound of sneakers scrapping against the hardwood was like a herd of homeless cats trying to sing, and the flow of the game made no sense to me. It was just a bunch of sweaty bodies bumping into each other up and down the court. I had no talent for the game and it would take me years to discover the simple beauty of a pick-and-roll or the wonderous arc of a three-point shot where the entire world stood still or the great-god-almighty thunder of a transition dunk. Basketball just might be the most beautiful game on the planet, but at twelve I wasn't interested in beauty, I was interested in controlled violence. Basketball just wasn't football.

As we drove home from PCA each day that fall, all I thought about was football practice, the sounds of helmets and pads hitting each other, bodies hitting the ground, the sound of thirsty mouths slurping from a water buffalo, the smell of fried dough and powdered sugar wafting out of the concession stand, and the slow turn of the leaves from summer to fall to winter and how I was missing all of it because my parents needed to be closer to P&H to work. The world wasn't ending, but, Jesus, it sure felt like it.

Coogee

We had a yellow lab named Coogee. She was a good dog, and I felt bad for her because we were almost never home. Once we started going to Portsmouth Christian Academy, we didn't get home until evening with just enough time—sometimes—for a sit-down dinner, homework, and then bed. She spent most of her time locked up in the barn and even if we did have time for her, she wasn't well trained and was big and could pull you right off your feet. We had one of those metal pronged collars for her and hooked her up to a line that ran from the far-right edge of our property to the first crab apple tree. In the summer, she'd lodge herself in the bottom of the tree where it forked and would pant heavily in the shade. If she slipped her collar, she'd dig like crazy in the church parking lot field until she'd created a nice mud pit and roll around in it to cool down. We were too busy to take care of her properly and I generally didn't care about her anyway.

It wasn't Coogee's fault, but she'd piss and shit in the barn during our long days away, and I was responsible for cleaning it up. It made me loathe her. Why did I have to clean up her shit when it wasn't my fault we were gone most of the time?

I'd go weeks without cleaning it up, and the dog turds started turning a strange white color and the barn took on a slightly acrid smell of stale piss when my mom would threaten to take something I really cared about away, like video games or lacrosse or spending the night over at Kyle's house, before I'd head into the barn with a shovel and a trash bag.

I finished cleaning up all the poop and had tied off the bag and was furious. Why didn't Heather have to clean up Coogee's shit? She was the oldest and it would seem like dog shit cleaning responsibilities would fall to her, if not all the time, then at least occasionally.

I had that satisfied feeling of completing a job, even if it was one I hated, when I had an idea. I'd take a dump in the corner and see how long it would take for someone to notice.

I dropped my pants in the corner to the right of the workbench, squatted down and took a nice, healthy dump. It smelled terrible. Far worse than any dog poop I'd ever smelled. I didn't care that I was going to get in trouble. I figured it might offer a reasonable occasion to discuss the injustice of having to clean up the poop in the garage, while the girls did whatever chores were allocated to the girls, which, as far as I could tell, consisted of brushing each other's hair and stealing each other's clothes. I shut the barn door behind me confident in my plan.

One, two, three days passed. Nothing. One, two, three weeks passed and nobody said a word until my mom approached me. Finally, the moment for justice had arrived.

"It's time for you to clean the barn again. Don't argue. Just do it," she said. "And there's a particularly large poo in the corner. Make sure to get that one, too."

Defeated, I grabbed my shovel and trash bag and headed back into the barn. I didn't shit in the barn again, but when I was absorbed in a project and needed to pee, I'd pee on the floorboards and if anyone had asked, I'd have blamed it on Coogee. I figured she owed me.

Chester's Fried Chicken

There were nights when we left P&H so late we knew we were going to get fast food on the way home. I enjoyed McDonald's fries and dunking them in a strawberry milkshake. The salt and sugar of it all sent my mouth into a frenzy. But my favorite fast food was Chester's Fried Chicken. And it wasn't the fried chicken I craved (which was still good), but the salted potato wedges. They were heaven, especially the smaller pieces that had crisped. Once I'd eaten the chicken, I'd eat the larger wedges first, work my way down to the smaller ones and be careful not to eat them all. I saved some in the greasy box for the next morning. I knew they'd be cold but waking up to those crisped wedges gave me something to look forward to before the day took hold and bored me into an anger I couldn't escape.

Rhubarb Pie*

ingredients:

forgotten

instructions:

1. forgotten.

*Nana forgot her daughters' faces.

Trust

Coogee liked to hump things. I thought it was funny. I didn't know what the humping was for other than it made her look out of control. She'd throw her front paws around whatever she was trying to hump and then get to humping. I was bored and it sparked an idea.

"Colleen, do you want to play a game?" I asked.

"Sure. What is it?" Colleen asked.

"Well, it's a game where you curl up in a ball on the floor of the barn and see how long you can stay there," I said.

"That it?" Colleen asked.

"That's it," I said.

We headed toward the barn. She got down on her hands and knees, then curled up in a tight ball with her face straight against the floor.

"You ready?" I asked.

"Oh yeah. I'm going to win this game," Colleen said.

"I bet you are," I said. "Now go!" I let Coogee into the barn, and she mounted Colleen and started humping her with abandon. Colleen was stuck and she started screaming.

"Get her off! Sean, get her off! She's humping me," Colleen yelled and started crying. But all I could do was double over and laugh. Grams ran into the doorway to see what was happening.

"What is wrong with you?" she screamed at me and hit me on the back of the head and went to kick Coogee off Colleen. "What the hell is wrong with you?" she repeated, helping Colleen to her feet and they both walked toward the kitchen. Grams' face was puckered with anger and Colleen's face was red and tear-soaked and her eyes blazed betrayal. She'd trusted me and I'd broken it and I didn't care. It was all too funny to me. The violation of trust was what made it funny. That moment

when she realized the game wasn't what she thought it would be was what had me doubled over. I was still laughing.

"You won, Colleen," I said between laughs. "You won." Grams came back into the doorway.

"Ooo, you little shit. I can't wait 'till your dad gets home and tans your hide. Boy, you won't be laughing then," she said and pulled the door shut with a heavy thud. The threat of dad punishing me sobered me up a bit, but I still thought the prank funny and the image of my tiny, life-weathered grandmother kicking at the family dog flailing on my crying and screaming sister was well worth whatever punishment that came. I can't remember the punishment, but, God, how I remember the joy of laughing.

Another Way The World Didn't End

Y2K came and went in the basement of Tommy Bresson's new-smelling house. I watched the ball drop in Times Square on TV with a certain amount of excitement at the prospect of the world clicking over into chaos, of some sort of reset that might stop our constant back-and-forth from Wolfeboro to Portsmouth, listening to *Harry Potter* on cassette while green mile markers clipped by and I thought about how much I loathed playing basketball and goody-goody Christians who dressed nice all the time and beamed with an otherworldly benevolence I desperately wanted for myself, but mistrusted completely, and how I'd sit for long stretches with an anger weighing on my heart for not being able to control a damn thing as the clear night sky turned above me and I watched my mom slap herself in the face trying to keep awake driving down New Hampshire's winding roads toward a house that no longer felt like home, but a weigh station where I did homework, slept, and woke to the general frenzy of attempting to get seven people out the door on time and invariably succeeding at being constantly late to school.

Anthony and Malia

Anthony and Malia were two students in my class at Portsmouth Christian Academy. Anthony had a bad boy persona and wore sneakers with his khakis and Malia was tall, shy, and beautiful and had been cursed with big boobs. I also don't remember Malia being particularly smart. Anthony would write dirty notes to her. I, as the go-between, would read the notes before passing them on to her before she'd let out an exasperated giggle and shake her head. The notes were usually Anthony bragging about how big his dick was and occasionally he'd invite her to meet him in some random closet so she could see it, maybe even put it in her mouth. The come-meet-me-in-a-cleaning-closet part didn't make me uncomfortable. The dick-bragging part did.

I'd never really considered the size of my penis. It had always just been the size it was. There'd never been any need for comparison. But Anthony's notes made it seem like he was smuggling an over-sized salami in his pants and I knew my penis couldn't compare to that kind of deli meat. If I'd passed such notes to Malia, what would I have drawn? A pig-in-a-blanket? Hot dog? Dill pickle? I didn't know. And even though the notes made me uncomfortable, there was a certain amount of excitement in knowing that if Anthony and Malia went to the bathroom around the same time she could be finding out the actual size of Anthony's wang.

The whole sexual note passing thing reached such a fevered pitch it was a relief when the two decided to act on it at Anthony's house. We were upstairs in a big TV room when Anthony, always in his khakis, asked, "Hey Malia, want to see my dick?" Malia laughed in a nervous sort of way and said, "Ok," and I sat on the couch not knowing what to do. I couldn't see a video game system and the TV was off. I would have given anything to play a video game or watch some TV or even an infomercial, while Malia was in Anthony's room. They were in there a long time, longer than it takes to check the size of a penis, and I started to wonder what was going on in there. I just stared at the ceiling.

The door finally opened. “Hey, man. She wants you to come in, too,” Anthony said. “She wants to give you a blowjob.”

“What?” I said.

“Yeah, man. She just gave me one and she wants to give you one, too,” Anthony said.

It would have been my first blowjob and I was thrilled someone wanted to give me one, but I sure as hell didn’t want my first blowjob to follow another guy, especially if that guy was big dick Anthony. What would Malia think when she saw my penis? Would she look at me with pity? Laugh at me? Make some joke to Anthony?

“No thanks,” I said.

“Don’t be a prude,” Anthony said. “She wants to.” I just shook my head.

“I’m good,” I said and Anthony closed the door.

I continued to be the note middleman between the two, but I no longer read the notes. There’s only so many times a guy can say he has a huge cock until it gets boring. I went to bed at night wondering if I’d missed my one good chance at a blowjob. It’s not as if girls were lining up for a chance or coming over my house or disappearing with me into my room. But when I thought about Malia comparing the size of our penises and giving me a blowjob out of charity, I knew I’d made the right decision.

The Hilltop

I followed Mr. Pottle, my lacrosse coach, to Kimball Union Academy to play lacrosse. My whole family drove to Meriden, New Hampshire, helped bring my stuff up to my room on the second floor of Mikula where I met a kid named Charlie who was going to be my roommate, set up my computer, kissed me, cried, and then packed back into the car and left for home.

That first night, we gathered into Josh Laurie's room and taught Teppei Sasaki new English words as Teppei drew on a small whiteboard.

"That's a penis."

"Dick."

"Cock."

"Schlong," and we all laughed. Then he drew a stick figure girl with an arrow pointing toward her crotch.

"That's a pussy."

"Vag."

"The redder the better."

"Cunt."

"Vagina," and Teppei repeated the words in his broken English and then cackled a high laugh.

I didn't fall asleep that night thinking of my parents dropping their fourteen-year-old son off at boarding school, or Colleen being separated from her best friend for the first time, or about feeling homesick or lonely or daunted at the prospect of trying to make new friends and attempting to fit in among kids whose parents had pulled up in expensive-looking cars. I thought about all the words I didn't know and how desperate I was to learn them.

Lava Lamp

Charlie was a decent roommate, but he was strange and played computer games all the time. I played computer games as well, mainly *Diablo II*, but he played a car game where you drove around with guns and missiles strapped to your vehicle and blew other players up. I didn't find anything wrong with the game, it was just how excited Charlie got when he blew something up that unnerved me. Sometimes I stayed awake well into the night thinking he was going to try and smother me with a pillow.

I preferred to hang out and talk with Jon Burling. He was a short, fun-loving kid who was instantly a part of the cool group, which I wasn't. His parents were Peter and Jean Burling, who were people of political and social importance and that bit of clout carried over onto Jon. But he wasn't a turd about it. I was an unknown who'd done the last few years in Christian schools, and nobody knew who my parents were.

As the leaves turned the fantastic yellows and reds of New England fall, I found myself spending the evenings in Jon's room, staring into his lava lamp and talking.

"What's it like being adopted?" I asked.

"I don't think about it much," Jon said. "It's weird. I know certain things about my birthmother. She was some teenager around here, got pregnant, and then gave me up for adoption. I want to meet her eventually, but not yet. I know my parents are my parents and I lucked out as far as that goes."

"Man, that's crazy," I said.

"I guess," Jon said, "but it's my life, so it seems normal to me." I stared at the lava lamp and thought about how angry I'd be if my mom gave me up for adoption.

Nights passed like that with Jon, and we became friends. I still wasn't a part of the inner circle of cool, but being friends with Jon helped. Plus, his family farmhouse was only fifteen minutes

away in Cornish, which meant he was the rare breed of boarder who could live like a day student on the weekends. I wasn't just friends with him because his parents were politically and socially important or because his house was a huge, expensive, sprawling farmhouse where we could ride mini-Harley's out in the fields until the sun went down, but being Jon's friend had its perks.

Teaching Without Shoes

Mr. Farnsworth was my English teacher in spring semester. He was young, with a big nose, wide shoulders, and long blonde hair he'd pull back in a ponytail. When he taught, he'd take his shoes off and pace around the front of the room in wool socks. He was an improvement on my previous English teacher who'd bored me senseless talking about his unpublished short story about riding around on a purple bus. I spent those classes staring out the basement room window. But Mr. Farnsworth was different. He was electric. And the way he talked about books made me think they actually mattered in the world. He had us read *1984* and then took us to a screening of *The Matrix*. He listened to Rage Against the Machine, coached football and stalked around campus as if daring anyone to impinge on his civil liberties or right to privacy. I once saw him snatch a digital camera away from a kid who'd taken his picture going down the library steps and he'd said, "I'm deleting this right now. I know how digital pictures can be manipulated," and the kid was all slack-jawed and spluttering, "Sorry, Mr. Farnsworth. It won't happen again. I'm sorry."

I wanted to be like Mr. Farnsworth, and if reading books could turn me into a free-thinking badass, then I wanted in, even if it meant I had to grow a ponytail.

Boo

Ben Rivard was a kind, unathletic, and smart kid, so we naturally teased him without mercy. No matter how he tried to fit in, we'd find a way to keep him firmly on the outside. It wasn't personal, but someone had to be out there in the social cold and I sure as hell didn't want it to be me. So I'd call him "lardass," "loser," "faggot," and when I was feeling a little sorry for him, "Bitchtits." He withered under the ceaseless assault of boys who were supposed to be his friends, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't fun.

We'd read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in English class, and I'd taken to calling him Boo. One day after dinner, we went by his room on the first floor. I knocked softly on Ben's door and cooed, "Does Boo want to come out and play?"

No answer.

"Come on, Boo, just come out." Whoever I was with was laughing.

"Leave me alone," Ben said.

"Oh, Boo lives. He's just behind this door," I said.

"Shut up," Ben said.

"Ooo, Boo's getting angry. I can hear it in his voice. Why doesn't Boo want to come out and..." I said and the door suddenly opened and there was Ben holding two glass cups full of vanilla soft serve ice cream in each hand with a crazed look on his face.

"Stop calling me Boo," he yelled and chucked both cups at me. I jumped out of the way and they exploded against the wall.

"Holy shit, Bitchtits has lost his mind," I said and laughed.

"I didn't mean to," he said. "I just wanted you to stop calling me Boo."

"Tell that to Mrs. Fuller, Bitchtits," I said and walked away, leaving Ben sobbing in his doorway as ice cream dripped down the white concrete wall onto the carpet.

Storage

The family moved from Wolfeboro to Manchester during the spring. My first visit to the new house was at the beginning of summer.

“Mom, where’s my room?” I asked.

“We’re putting you in the back,” she said.

I went to “the back,” and looked it over.

“Mom, that’s a storage room. It’s full of stuff,” I said.

“Well, you’re only here for a few weeks. Did you see where I put your mattress?” she asked.

I’d seen it on the floor wedged along the back wall behind a metal filing cabinet and an old table.

“I’ll have to crawl to get to it,” I said.

“You can crawl for a few weeks,” mom said.

That night I thought about my crab apple trees. I’d forgotten to say goodbye.

Polar Bear Club

I went to Exeter Academy's summer school after my first year at Kimball Union. I didn't really know why I was going, but I went. The highlights of summer school were beating *Diablo II: Lord of Destruction* the day I bought it, walking out on an impish British math teacher who'd always say, "How didn't you get this? It's so easy," and Polar Bear Club.

Every morning I'd wake up early, hop on a bus, and drive toward the ocean with the rest of the Polar Bear Club. The Atlantic wasn't the most visually or physically appealing ocean I'd ever seen or been in, but there was something majestic about its dark, cold waves. I'd sprint as fast as I could into the surf and dive under the oncoming swell. The first time I'd run at the ocean and dived in I was unprepared for the cold and how it could take all the breath out of my lungs that I'd gulped down a huge mouthful of water and came up on the other side choking. But I learned to brace for the cold and once the sharp pain at my temples faded away, it was refreshing to go numb in the push and pull of the ocean.

I liked how saltwater dried on my skin and hair and wouldn't shower until evening. But diving headfirst into something as cold and vast as the ocean made me forget for the smallest amount of time just how much I missed my family and how lonely I was attending a summer school for no reason known to me.

Crew

I wanted to go to Princeton's summer lacrosse camp, but it was full. So my parents decided to send me to Princeton's rowing camp with Heather and Colleen instead.

"What?" I said.

"It will be a good experience," dad said. "You'll be with your sisters. It's crew. It's Princeton."

"I don't want to go to rowing camp," I said.

"You're going," dad said.

"I've never rowed," I said.

"You're going."

The staffers were confused when I showed up and told them I'd never rowed before. They were kind and put me in the back of a girls' boat. I had no clue what I was doing. Feather. Pull. Finish. What? My rhythm was all off. My blade would come skipping out of the water. I was useless and all I could imagine was somewhere on campus kids were getting to beat each other with metal sticks and run around on a lacrosse field, while I was stuck in the back of a boat I had no place being in. Though, I liked the smell coming off the water in the morning and there was a camp instructor—she must have been over six feet tall with wonderful, thick legs—I had a crush on. So all wasn't lost.

I improved as the days passed and on the final day there was a race. I was competitive in just about everything and I wanted to win, even if I had little rowing talent. The coxswain started us off at a manageable pace and I settled into the rhythm of hearing the oars slip into the water and the pull of the boat forward as we glided across the surface. It was magic. Then the coxswain yelled to go faster and faster. I couldn't keep up. I caught a crab and the oar slammed into my stomach. I couldn't breathe. I held the oar up out of the water and decided to spare the rest of crew and waited for the race to be over.

At the end of camp awards, I received the Most Improved Award and was proud of it. When I got home, I stuck it up on the fridge. My dad took it as validation.

“I knew you’d be good,” dad said.

I’d been nothing but embarrassed the entire week, sitting in the back of the girls’ boat, rowing my heart out. But the crew camp I never wanted to go to did teach me that sometimes it’s better to just pull your oar out of the water, be ok with being dead weight, and let your betters carry you along.

A Normal Day in September

I was back at Kimball Union and living in Bryant Hall right across the street from a stone church. The day started normal enough. I showered, dressed in khakis, button-down and a tie, walked down to breakfast where the air was beginning to carry the smell of the leaves turning, and attended an uneventful class before heading over to Miller for some well-deserved down time: pool, ping-pong, or foosball.

I was weighing whether I wanted to lose at ping-pong or win at foosball, when Sparky, my Proctor in Mikula, came out of the community center and said, “Dude, someone just attacked us or something.”

I was intrigued more than scared and headed in past the mailboxes and toward the TV, where a bunch of kids were huddled around watching the news. A plane was flying into the World Trade Center over and over again. I stood there watching, not really comprehending what I was seeing. Smoke, fire, people screaming their heads off, a plane there and then not. I didn’t see people flinging themselves out windows to escape the flames and hit the ground like wet sacks of flour or first responders charging up the steps or sheets of paper fluttering down in awkward tumbling sheets. I just saw a world on fire and was terrified.

I walked back to the dorm and tried to call my parents. No one picked up.

I called Nate Long, a friend from PCA, and his dad, a roofer, picked up.

“It’s Sean. Have you seen the news?” I said.

“I have,” answered Mr. Long.

“What’s going on?” I said, looking for some kind of reassurance the world was going to be ok, that the ground beneath my feet wasn’t about to open up and swallow me whole.

He said, “This is the beginning of Armageddon,” and I promptly hung up. *Fuck!* I thought, *My souls not ready. I’m going to be left here all alone.* Being left behind during the apocalypse had been a

long-standing fear of mine. I had a recurring nightmare where the trumpet sounded and my entire family was whisked away to heaven and I was left alone to try to survive. The end of the dream was always the crust of earth peeling up over me like a giant tidal wave and I was stuck staring up at houses turned upside down and other people falling from the crest of the world toward me.

The rest of the day was a blur, except for the afternoon when Mr. McMahon, a chemistry teacher and football coach, huddled us all up and said, “When the world around you is uncertain, the best thing you can do is control what you can, otherwise they win. So today we practice football.” I think he was a former Marine, and if he was, then he joins a long line of Marines I’ve known to be absolutely out of their skulls under normal circumstances, but completely lucid when the world was collapsing.

What did I know about terrorism, jihad, or Al-Qaida? My world was American safe. My parents kept me relatively ignorant of what was happening in the rest of the world. I knew we’d beaten the Soviets when the Berlin Wall came down. I knew the US moved around the world unchallenged and we fought on the side of good. It would be a while before I learned about the CIA and South America and the Middle East, about Saddam Hussein and fighting Iran, or China beating the shit out of us down the Korean Peninsula after we’d crossed the Yellow River or the Viet Cong going twelve rounds with a heavyweight and winning, or about Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Japanese interment, Indian Reservations, and slave ship schematics. Not to mention the Holocaust, the Rape of Nanking, the Trail of Tears, Bosnia, Rwanda, the Ukraine, the idiocy of the 2nd amendment in an age of automatic weapons, school shootings, the War on Drugs, the War on Terror, The Patriot Act, and state-sanctioned torture at Guantanamo Bay. All that was to come. That afternoon, I practiced running off tackle, while the rest of the country geared up for war.

While someone else was taking reps, I stared at a row of pine trees and the halos of dried needles on the ground. I thought about how quickly pine burned in our old kitchen fireplace, and

how mom would never again pull baked fish dish out of that kitchen oven, or dad throw a half-read newspaper into the kindling bin, or all six kids would never sit on the smooth wooden steps and wait to be punished. I stood in the grass and knew myself unprepared for the dark and glorious unknown coming toward me. The promise of it drove my heart wild. I was awake.

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