

still gods

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Preface

This creative work consists of a collection of poems and a short novella. Many images, phrases, and tones from the poetry appear throughout the course of the novella. I did not intend for the reader to read the poems and story as necessary components of one another. I am fascinated by words and their ability to change meaning, form, and tone by placing them in different contexts. I often did use an image, phrase, or feel from one of the poems to inspire passages in the story, but they are not textually linked. At the most, they are merely meant to complement each other and allow the reader to expand his or her mind by seeing the same idea conveying completely different emotions or images in different contexts. My only hope is that the varied use of linked language provides an enriched reading experience.

Thank you,
The Author

poems

Easy

she'd come home at night
burning with something besides
the summer heat under her shoes
and when she came in late
i pretended to be asleep
as she slipped off her cotton dress
and washed the makeup off her face
before saying her prayers and crawling into bed
smelling of sweat and the knowledge of something
i couldn't recognize at eleven

i never knew how she looked at them like that
all lips and eyes and hips and hormones
and how they understood so easily
the eye, the wink, the smile
all so innocently done
the sexy slide of her tongue that when i tried
always looked like i was trying to get peanut
butter off the front of my teeth

i saw her once
through misted windows
her head thrown back
eyes shut
mouth open to scream
as if she really didn't know that this
was what she'd wanted when she started

religion

her rosary was resting between the pages of her bible
she never used them
not even when i was younger
and she would pull me onto her lap
whispering God stories that smelled like whiskey or rum

i'd managed to pack everything
it all fit into 3 boxes
it was mainly junk
stuff she never would have wanted
stuff she probably would have been
surprised to see she had kept as long as she had
mass cards on shelves between books
perfume samples under her bed
tiny bottles of gin in her nightstand drawer
i packed these last
binding them together with that chain of beads
leaving them on top so they wouldn't break
on the way home

eve unnamed

i once saw a girl pull her own hair out and
bite through her own lip
she was obviously searching
for something else
she clawed at walls
and when they finally laid her down
fingers wrapped in crimson gauze
she said only
that the walls of heaven were probably
softer and easier to break through
everyone nodded and agreed
and turned the lights out on a girl mumbling

i am tired i am so very tired

red lipstick and rosaries

she used to wear her mother's rosary
as a necklace and prance around in
white dress shoes and red lipstick
when she got older she traded them in
for cheap pearls and heels that made
her legs look too long to be treated well
and she found herself screaming His name
in the back of rusty pick up trucks
and old Buicks of strange men's fathers
her necklace being ripped off more than once
she, on her knees, scrambling to find the
beads to put it back together

licorice

I drink coffee these days. black. with no sugar.
Its flavor doesn't tickle my teeth
Or remind me of days I didn't need to care

I used to like cherry soda and black licorice together in the summer
I'd use the licorice as a straw and swish its flavor around in my mouth
On really hot days we'd strip down to our underwear
And run through the sprinkler or spray each other with the hose
Sometimes we'd talk about tomorrow even at that age
Planning our futures as far as the following week
We were never really right
But the sprinkler was always there
And we forgot that we were wrong
And that there were other things we'd planned on doing.

still
gods

There was one summer hotter than all the rest, the summer I turned 13, the earth bubbling under my feet. If I'd believed in my mother's idea of religion, I'd have prepared myself for an apocalypse. The unnaturally dry air for my lush southern town; the increase of hallelujahs coming from behind the white chapel doors of the church; my sister leaving her awkwardness behind to me as she sprouted legs and lips that caused even the married women to stop and stare. It was the summer everything changed, from my very own gawky chicken legs and flat breasts to the fabric of the world around me, leaving me restless and unsure under the hot Georgia sky.

I still don't know how, in those consuming months, I managed to lose and find myself in that thick, suffocating heat. My mother spent her days full of fear for her daughter's damnation, and my sister and I full of nothing but an unquenchable thirst for something beyond ourselves in the lonely, hot days of summer.

My mother believed in two things: Jesus and discipline, both of which she found with such a fervor when I was five years old that I still cannot see a spanking without hearing a breathless Lord's Prayer beneath the clap of reddening skin. Her new found salvation found me and my sister at church services three times a week, a five and a nine year old trying to reconcile the fiery red face of the preacher with his message of God's love and the glory land.

"Have you found Jaysus? Have you barought haim into yar heart?"

"Glory be!"

"Paraise the Lowrd!"

And the congregation, heads down, arms waving in the air, feet stomping.

I used to stay after the service looking under the pews and behind the pulpit, wondering where my mother had found Him, if not there. She'd drag me outside, saying I was "disrespectin' the Lowrd and Reverend Abram," pulling me by the long blonde hair she never let me cut.

"I was just lookin' for the Lord, mama." And she'd smack me for being smart, calling me a devil child if she ever saw one.

The summer of my thirteenth year, I still hadn't found him hiding in those wooden rows, Margaret and I sitting in the same pew every Sunday, listening with half open ears to what was supposed to save us from ourselves. Margaret, at seventeen, was past saving, and I hadn't found enough of myself yet to understand I would ever need any. The first hot day of summer came in with a wave dry enough to lower the creek a full three inches, and my mother dragged us to church early to pray for rain. We sat in those crowded pews, sticking to the hard wooden seats. Margaret fanned herself with the hymnal, brushing her long hair off her neck, with half the men in the congregation paying closer attention to those moist blonde strands than to their embodied salvation banging his fists wildly on the pulpit.

"The Lowrd knows what is in ar hearts. He knows what ya try to hide from Haim. The Lowrd can see. All those sins ya've buried inside of yas – He sees 'em, and He will not be fooled! We caynt hide from Haim. He will seek us out and find us, hiding in ar own filth and shame! We need to give arsilves over to the Lowrd. We need to give arsilves to Jaysus! Let me hear yas say 'Amen!'"

"AMEN!"

Our walks home from church were always silent. Mama said it was a time for reflection and prayer and asking the Lord for forgiveness for our sins, a concept I couldn't grasp at thirteen being the daughter of a woman who would sooner slap you for blasphemy when you asked a religious question than answer it so you could understand. I sometimes asked Margaret my questions when we were alone at night in the small room we shared.

"Who decides what's a sin, Mar?" We sat on my bed, she brushing my hair.

"Anyone who wants to make you feel bad about yourself."

"So will the Lord really smite me down for my sins? That's what the Reverend says."

"The Reverend's probably hopin' that you'll smite yourself down and won't sin in the first place. That's the whole key to religion, Isabel – guilt and shame."

My only memory of my father is him pulling me into his lap whispering stories that smelled of whiskey or rum, tickling me with clumsy fingers. He couldn't have been a bad man, or else I'm sure my mother would have either damned him in the name of God or asked for Him to save his soul, neither of which she ever did, for reasons I still don't know. Maybe it was because her cling to God didn't begin until after he was already gone, one form of worship exchanged for another, erasing the link, the memory of the past.

He died three days before my fifth birthday, which had to be the start of it all. She came home from the hospital with a Bible the reverend had given her after he read

aloud from it over a lumpy white sheet. In the front flap, he had written "God Knows," and signed it with a graceful arch of a signature, before placing it into my mother's desperate and empty hands.

When I went back to my childhood home for my mother's funeral, I found that Bible, smoothed to the point of fragility, the thin pages, dry and crumbly between my fingers. I traced the smooth loops of the reverend's signature, thin and faded, looking upward to ask why he couldn't have written, "God Understands" or "God Loves," while rubbing my mother's shaky hands and warming them with his own before sending her, alone, back to us.

The first day of that fateful summer came early, Margaret and I still with two more weeks of school, and we stayed up nights talking about our plans. I was going to explore the world or at least the county, and Margaret, with her new eyes and lips and hips, had her own plans for exploration. She'd had a date every Saturday since the early spring when she sprouted right along with the hydrangeas in Miss George's garden. She came home nights late, waking me up with dreamy eyes and sighs, telling me stories of romantic walks through the fields and starlit nights. She told me about the boys and how they kissed her neck and hair and told her how beautiful she was in the dim moonlight, some going so far as to touch her breasts, and she going so far as to let them. As the spring blazoned into summer, she began ignoring my questions, telling me I was too young to talk with about such things. She started coming home with wrinkled and sometimes torn clothes, scrubbing her makeup off in the corner sink before crawling into bed smelling of sweat and a wildness I had no way of recognizing at thirteen.

I noticed her lipstick getting redder and her perfume getting heavier as the summer heat sucked the moisture out of the air. Mama noticed it, too, and I could hear my mother's voice preaching in those early hours of the morning when Margaret crept through the swinging screen door. Mama's voice shattered the silence before the door slammed back into place, yelling words like "damned" and "sinner," and my sister would come upstairs burning with more than the summer heat under her feet and something besides the fire of sin in her soul.

I stayed out one night, waiting up for Margaret, swinging on the tire swing by the creek near our house, falling asleep before she came home. I dreamt of fire and Margaret that night, her standing in a burning field, barefoot, arms out to her side, face tilted toward the sky, ready to scream. And I ran to her, calling her name, watching as my words turned to heat in the dry air, fanning the orange blaze. Reverend Abram stood untouched, calling out against the flames, "The Temptress shall burn in a pool of cool water. And her savior will beat his drum, laughin' as she fumbles to its beat." And the Reverend laughed, and Margaret beat a large drum, eyes blankly staring forward, whispering, "Isabel . . . the fire . . . it's cold." And I woke up sweating with the sound of morning in my ears. When I wandered in with the sun, my mother gave me a beating that I still feel with the sight of a summer sunrise. After that, I searched for my adventures in the daylight, starting on my first day of freedom.

Mama didn't ask too much of my time in the summer. She worked at home canning syrupy fruit and jam. My daddy had money, though Lord knows where he got it, and after he died, my mama didn't have to work a day in her life if she didn't want to.

"Idleness is the Devil's invitation," she always said, her hands multi-colored from the sticky sweetness.

Robby Benson started helping Mama in the kitchen as punishment for chopping down Mr. Wilson's apple tree earlier in the summer. The Reverend sent him to Mama after lecturing Robby behind the doors of the church in such a way that Robby came out shaking, no doubt with the fear of, if not God, then the Reverend in his heart. On some days she made us go out to the field to pick fruit for the next day's boiling, but mostly I was just free and spent my days acting out fantasies on the rolling hills or in the shadowed woods around my house.

The first few weeks playing alone I was a great Safari leader, discovering new species of life out on the rough Georgia plain. One especially hot day after a fevered sermon, I pretended to be Jesus wandering the desert, and when mama caught me on my knees calling upwards to an empty blue sky, she faltered between her slaps, eyes tearing up, confused as to whether or not God had really found his way to me through the thick midday heat. She sent me to bed that night without any supper, saying that if Jesus could survive for forty days in the desert, I could survive through the night in my suffocating room.

I abandoned my religious games after that and found myself once again running from invisible dangers and creatures not yet named. I imagined Margaret in the fields at night, running in sport from whichever boy managed to grab her fleeting attention. I knew she went there, she, too, discovering things that until those moments were unnamed. I sometimes pretended to be her fleeing through those fields, and I lay on the brittle grass with him next to me looking at the sky until the fireflies blinked their

warning lights that dusk was coming. Then I ran home begging my lover to let me go and promising that I'd return to him tomorrow, truly believing in my naiveté that love was as simple and pure as that.

When Mama sent Robby and me together to pick fruit, we'd wander through the orchards, stretching out our time in the open air, plucking only the best fruit from the pregnant trees. We often sat in the shade eating apples and peaches, flirting with the abstraction of adulthood.

"Your boobs are getting bigger."

"Uh!" And I pushed him over, blushing.

"Not as big as your sister's. But bigger." He took a bite of his apple and smiled. Now, I see he was just a boy, a boy as lost as I was in a world of heat and fire. But that summer, I saw a man, someone older than I with the ability to show me a world more full of life than the dry, dying earth around me.

I convinced Robby to help act out my Safari adventures as the summer days stretched themselves out, intruding upon the night hours, the sky still light with oranges and golds as the crickets sang in the moon. He was fifteen that summer and came and went from our house with adolescent eyes full of Margaret. I had to know I was only the next best thing, but at thirteen, my own eyes were too clouded with dreams of romance to see him not looking back.

Our first days in the field consisted of me running from him, he pretending to be a wild animal stretching its lines against the sweltering horizon. In between catching his breath and the chase, he asked about Margaret in indirect ways, his face red and moist from the sun. I would relate her to me as much as possible, recalling stories of our youth

and the summers before she left our childish games for ones in which there was more to lose.

“You and your sister close?”

“Pretty close.” I said. “We used to come here when we were little with picnics Mama put together of jam and crackers, and we would lie on the ground watching the clouds, taking turns describing what they looked like to us.”

“Why not anymore?”

“There haven’t been many clouds this summer.”

Robby and I picked at the grass, sometimes sucking on the ends if we found ones that weren’t too dry and still had some sweetness in them.

“So what did you see?”

“Clouds,” I said. “Mostly just clouds.” Which wasn’t true. I used to see all sorts of things floating above me in those cooler, more shadowed summers. One time, lying next to my sister, we both pointed upward at once, “What about that one?”

“A face,” I said. She thought it looked like a patch of flowers, the buds forming what I saw as hair.

“So whose face is it?”

I tilted my head to look, the eyes now enlarged and blurring into the nose and mouth. “Nobody’s. It’s gone now,” I said, the clouds continuing to shift, folding into themselves like the kneading of fluffy, risen dough.

“It looks like a candle now – see there, the top, how it looks like a flame?” And we continued naming the clouds, defining them as quickly as we could before they lost their shape and changed into something new. I saw a bird, a waterfall, and the same

clump of flowers Margaret spotted earlier farther down in the sky. She saw the candle, a hand, and something that changed too quickly to recognize. She thought it might have been a face, but she wasn't sure.

"Maybe it was God's," I said.

She shrugged. "Maybe. It just looks like a cloud now." And we watched the sky for the rest of the afternoon in silence, the sun stretching through in long rays like giant fingers. When I saw another face, I looked over at Margaret to point it out, but she had closed her eyes, and when I looked back it was gone, already too far transformed into something different to find again.

Mama died when I was twenty-five and Margaret was twenty-nine. I went home to that old house, which was both too empty and too full, and I couldn't help but wonder how I survived. Margaret came in dressed in a baggy black wrap dress with a cigarette fixed between her bony, tinted fingers. Her hair was died a dirty brown color, the natural honey color appearing only at the roots, looking jaundiced pinched between her pale scalp and the muddy color of the rest of her head.

The house was crowded with faces grown too old to fit my childhood memories. Miss George looked bent and gnarled, her skin tight and dry like her summer hydrangeas. Margaret and I nodded politely and shook hands until we could finally stand off to the side together.

"Look at Mr. Parker."

"He's like a giant head," I said, taking a sip of Margaret's punch and coughing from the taste of vodka that burned my throat.

"I slept with him that summer." She nudged me with a sly, sideways smile. We both knew which summer she was talking about.

"Margaret! Ah! He's like forty!"

"Well he wasn't then. Shut your mouth, Isabel. You look like you're going to fall over."

I couldn't help but laugh, and once I did, Margaret couldn't help but follow me. Something about that moment brought us back to ourselves, or at least to those kids we never really got to be, and we laughed at what we hadn't let ourselves consciously remember until then. I couldn't catch my breath, and both Margaret and I were bent over with our elbows on the hors d'oeuvres table.

"Was he the one that Mama caught you with behind the church?"

"Right after Sunday service."

We couldn't stop and the pain and joy strangled me and left me gasping as though I were drowning in warm honey and loving it.

Margaret and I don't laugh anymore when we talk. We talk about gas prices and the comparative surge of her life to the complacent dullness of mine. That moment of honesty, of release, of all guards down at the funeral remains a solitary moment in our adult lives, suspended in our consciousnesses, filling our silences with everything we've never said.

On the night before my thirteenth birthday, my sister woke me to the dim of a single flickering flame, singing to me, her words hanging in the thickness of the air.

"Happy Birthday, Isabel."

And I blew out the candle in one breath, watching the glowing tip die out slowly in my sister's small hands.

"What'd you wish for?" Her outline looked blurred in the darkness, like a mirage through rising heat. I looked at her sitting on the edge of my bed, her skirt ripped along the hem, her shirt scattered with grass. Her skin looked thirsty, like tanned leather, the heat clogging her pores and licking up her sweat before it could offer any relief from the night air.

"Rain," I said. "I wished for rain."

The shadows on her face shifted as she smiled, and she leaned over to kiss my forehead before going to the corner sink to wash away her evening, splashing cool water onto her face and neck, the dirt running down, her skin moist and cool for an instant before the heat crept through our open window and stole it away.

It only rained one day that summer. It came in late July, the morning air thick and sticky, licking my skin so that it constantly glistened. The first clap of thunder seemed to echo from the fields and bounce off the sky so loudly that I expected Reverend Abram on Sunday to tell us it was God calling his wrath down upon us. The ground sizzled as it drank deeply of those first drops of rain, sucking in the moisture that had been so long absent from its parched body. Miss George's hydrangeas seemed to stretch their open buds toward the sky, waiting for more, thirsting for the heavens to open up and shower them with life.

The town looked cleansed, washed free of the stagnant air and replaced with the smell of coolness and moisture. But the next day, the sun was back licking up the water

with its tongue of fire, scorching the ground so that I had to hop from foot to foot in my bare feet, and Miss George's hydrangeas were once again shrinking into themselves, trying to escape the directness of the sun's evaporating gaze. The next night Margaret's lipstick was the darkest I'd ever seen, and she snuck through our window instead of the creaking screen door downstairs, not returning until long after the rays of the sun had already reached through my curtains and opened my sleeping eyes.

That same night, Mama and Robby worked late in the kitchen preparing for the church's weekend summer festival, the smell of Mama's fruit floating up to me as I watched Margaret descend from our window and waited for Robby and Mama to finish in the aroma-filled room. I went down occasionally, dipping my finger into the jars, painting my mouth a deep red with its subtle bittersweetness. It was dark before they were done, and Robby and I ran down to the creek, throwing rocks in, watching the moon ripple on its cool surface, leaning over as our reflections blurred together.

"You're it!" I pushed him over into the tall grass of the bank and ran laughing through the small patch of woods into the open field. He came up behind me, and tackled me to the ground, pinning me down, the moon behind his head like a halo.

"Gotcha," he said, smiling, and I squirmed under his grip, hoping that he wouldn't let me go. "Hey what's that?" And he left me lying there at the sound of my sister's voice. We followed the echo of laughter and slamming car doors across the field and watched through foggy windows my sister's nightly undoing. Heat and desperation groped with hungry hands, my sister's head thrown back, he kissing his way up to her open mouth. We ran away laughing for reasons that if we'd understood would have made us blush, and fell together on the dry grass.

"You ever been kissed like that, Isabel?"

The air was thick and hot even under the sunless sky.

"You want to be?" He asked, turning to me, his face close. I could smell the sweetness of the hot kitchen as sweat beaded on his forehead and he leaned into me, filling my mouth with his. His hands found parts of me I hadn't yet discovered in ways he did, and his breath became bated as he fumbled with my spaghetti straps and I held on to him with uncertainty. He licked my neck and touched my breasts, his back glowing yellow under the golden moon. I groped at him with inexperienced hands and lips and heard myself loving him in the still night air.

And when he groaned a breathless "Margaret," I made my first honest appeal to God, using His name at the symbolic loss of my innocence, biting my bottom lip, trying to keep my body from shaking against the quaking earth beneath me. After, lying on the crackling grass alone, watching the looming clouds drift like giant soft gods above me, I cried for myself and my sister and went home to wash the smell of experience from my awkward body. I crawled into bed, listening to the silence, letting it envelop me in its empty arms and rock me to sleep.

I dreamt again that Margaret stood in a burning field. This time Reverend Abram ate an apple, spitting pieces of it out into the open air as he expounded prophecies of flame and brimstone, the pieces turning to ash and floating up toward the sky. I saw myself in the dream, a separate body walking through the orange field carrying a lifeless drum at my side, my cotton clothing waterlogged, dripping into the unabated blaze. My sister stood motionless, holding a clump of hydrangeas in her hand. They were brittle and lifeless, curling into nothing as the flames licked at her body, and I stood next to her,

staring forward, grabbing her hand in mine. We both tilted our faces to the sky, and screamed, and I watched as our words turned to ash in the midst of flame, falling in piles at our feet.

I woke up with my tongue thick and dry in my mouth and followed my mother and sister to church with my mind aflame with visions of Reverend Abram smiting me down in front of the congregation, waving his Bible in the air, spouting eternal damnations that wouldn't turn to ash before reaching my mother's ears. Instead he evangelized about lust and gluttony and the summer heat on the minds of adolescents, and I squirmed in my seat sure that everyone's eyes could see that I was no longer exempt from his threats.

Robby sat across the church from me, eyes closed, fanning himself with the bulletin advertising the summer festival. And when the service ended, he brushed past me out into the open air, leaving me without a word in the crowded church. For the rest of the summer, this was as close as we returned to one another, and I walked outside into the blinding sun, unsure of whether I could survive another month of such heat.

That night, I walked through the fields barefoot, retracing the flattened patch of grass with my small feet. Arms stretched out, face toward the sky, I spun around as fast as I could, the stars blurring like the reflection of lights in rippling water. I fell to my knees, dizzy, my cries carried away on the soft breeze left over from the rain, which felt unnatural after a summer of static heat. I walked home slowly, stopping at the creek, listening to the sounds of life chirping and crying out around me. I stripped down to moonlight under the shade of those thirsting trees and walked into the lukewarm water, immersing myself in its fluid embrace, splashing away the dirt and grass covering my

body. I crawled into my bed, my clothes clinging to moist skin, and had dreams of water and earth, my sister and I rising from fertile soil, autumn air filling our lungs.

I was awakened by the slamming of the screen door and the sound of my mother's threats dropping, weightless, on my sister's ears. She crawled into bed, and I heard her weeping in muffled gasps, me wishing she could share my dreams with me and see herself rising out of fire into cool, clean air.

"Margaret?"

She cleared her throat, trying to quiet her tears.

"You can sleep with me, Margaret." My voice cracked, offering her all I had to give in that dimly lit room. "If you want."

The room was quiet, the curtains bowing slightly from the breeze, like sails light with air. I heard bare feet shuffle across the hardwood floor and felt my covers shift as my sister slid into my bed, her body warm and soft next to me. We lay in silence, listening to the premature hints of sunrise chirping outside our open window.

"I hate this heat," she said.

"It'll be fall soon." But even as I said it, I strove in vain to believe that the coming season would bring anything for her beside longer and colder nights. When we fell asleep with the first intrusions of daybreak, I awoke to watch her breathing in a shadow of broken gold, wondering if her dreams were of fire or water or of something else entirely.

Now I think of her in her dreary, yet fast paced Seattle life, too many losses under her too slender belt. She gave up her name three times by the age of thirty, exchanging

paper thin words that couldn't hold up against the windy chill of the big city. She married for the first time too young, both in age and outlook. The marriage lasted three months, ending in the throwing of our mother's antique vase, the one thing Margaret took with her when she left home at eighteen besides her problems. The second and third marriages came and went just as unimpressively, both men falling in love too fast with a girl incapable of loving them back in any real sense of the word. But with a girl who hates herself too much to be alone.

But she couldn't have known this then – known that the path she chose that summer was a one way street, that she might one day long for this small, hot town and who she was before she let it drive her away from herself. Maybe she doesn't. Maybe her slender frame and nicotined veins aren't cries for help but slaps in the face to the open air of our Georgia home. Now, two thousand miles away, I wonder if she remembers that summer night when she realized she couldn't do it by herself – and knows that she isn't alone.

My mother's funeral lasted three hours, finally ending with the dull thump of an empty shovel on a mound of fine dirt. Margaret and I returned to the house for the last time since that day and picked apart our mother's life, throwing away probably too much and keeping what I'm still not sure were the right parts.

Holding her Bible in my hands, tracing "God Knows" with my pale fingers, I couldn't help but be angry, not at God, but at my mother for doing what could have only been her best. And at Margaret for never seeing the difference between them.

"Do you believe in God, Margaret?"

She didn't even look up from behind her large pile of dusty papers and trinkets.

"Why believe in someone who doesn't believe in you." She wasn't asking. She held one of Mama's old aprons up to her body. It swallowed her like the sweater my grandmother made me when I was six years old. I still wear it today.

"What do you think?" She twirled in front of me as if the stained, green apron were an elegant dress.

"You don't cook," I said, returning to my pile of photographs.

"So, maybe I'll start." But she threw the apron on a pile and let a box consume her head and shoulders, one leg kicking up as she dug to the bottom.

"Hey, look at this one." I held up a photo of Mama, Margaret, and me. I was twelve, Margaret sixteen, the fall before the inferno. Margaret sat in front of Mama, Mama's arms wrapped around Margaret's neck from behind. I sat next to a Margaret who had not yet discovered make-up, boys, or a reason to hate herself, and I kissed her cheek while she tried to push me away playfully. We were all smiling.

Margaret took it from my hands, looked at it, shrugged, and let it flutter down on top of a dusty old vanity.

"I don't even remember that."

I reached up for the picture and, wiping the dust from its edges, placed it into an empty album and put it by my purse.

"You know, Margaret. You don't have to hate Him just because you hated her."

The house I grew up in was a small, white house that most people thought fit the picket fence surrounding it. But even then, the siding was peeling, the white fence was

dry and brittle and stained, and the inside was either too hot or too cold. From a distance, though, it was and is perfect – porch swing, fields for miles, and the smell of Mama's fruit swirling together in a mess of memories. But only from a distance.

If people knew to look closer, they'd see the imperfections. Margaret's open window; my transformation from thirteen to thirty in the course of a summer; Mama's use of fear instead of love. But even in spite of it all, there were specific moments that, despite their pain and lasting effects, produced instances that I can't help but hold onto and return to, desperate to convince myself it wasn't all bad. That we weren't as far from each other as we thought. Like the day Mama caught Margaret with Billy Joe Rollins behind the canning storage shed in our back yard. He was licking raspberry jam off of her shoulders, her bare legs wrapped around his skinny, sun-deprived thighs. She walked right up to them, a fire in her eyes that made even the defiant Margaret lower her chin to her chest and make her way inside without a word. As for Billy Joe, he was already half way over the picket fence with his jeans around his ankles before Margaret had even covered herself up. I watched from the upstairs window as both Mama and Margaret came around the back of the shed. I ran out to the hallway to listen when I heard the screen door slam, but strained in vain as nothing but silence met my ears. Finally Mama broke the silence, and I'll never forget this moment in that summer – the moment when I realized for the first time that my mother was as lost and lonely as we were in that heat.

I had crawled out to the stairway and sat with my head poking through the chipping white bars. I could see Mama and Margaret in the kitchen, Margaret sitting at the table, her knees squeezed together, one hand holding her button-down dress closed at the chest. Mama stood at the kitchen sink, washing her hands.

“It’s time for bed, Margaret. You get yourself upstairs and wash that mess off you.”

Margaret rose from the chair.

“And get that make-up off your face. I swear, the Lord won’t be recognizing you these days.” And then it happened. My mother walked toward my sister, Margaret’s head down, too afraid or ashamed or possibly even too proud to look her mother in the eye. And Mama reached out and lifted her chin with a hook of her index finger, brushed the hair out of her eyes, and tried to smudge away the face Margaret was hiding behind, one that was already all too permanent. “Hell, I don’t even recognize you these days.” She wasn’t angry when she said it, or spiteful. Just sad, and pleading, and desperate. I held my breath, just waiting for the moment to culminate into one of those perfect reconciliations. Margaret held Mama’s persistent gaze for as long as she could until whatever it was boiling inside her brought her back to herself. She pulled her face away, wrapped her dress more closely around her, and broke the line Mama had thrown out to her in her own humble surrender to the life Margaret was leading.

“It doesn’t matter what I look like, Mama. God ain’t watchin’ anyway.”

Margaret disappeared for three days after that. She ran out that screen door, and when she walked back through it, her hair matted, her eyes heavy with swollen black circles, Mama didn’t say a word to her. Margaret stood in the doorway like a deer in headlights. I sipped my lemonade through a swirled red straw, unable to take my eyes off my sister standing in the door with her chin high, as though trying to create an air of confidence which her torn clothes and bruised body couldn’t support. Her chin was raised, but her eyes were humbled, and she waited for my mother to scold her, prepared

to receive more purple stains to her thin skinned pride. Mama looked her up and down twice and placed a glass of water on the table for her.

“Isabel, go run a bath for your sister,” she said, already having turned back to the dishes in the sink. Her head pointed straight forward, looking at the small curtained window instead of her dishes. I knew she was trying not to cry. She had a trill in her voice which my mother was never able to conceal no matter how hard she tried. I’m still not sure whether those first tears were of anger or relief, but when I came back down after Margaret’s bath, I found her still standing at the sink, one hand on her hip, the other cupping her forehead. Her shoulders rose and fell in silent shudders, and after a few minutes, she exhaled, composed herself, and offered an exhausted “thank you, Jesus” under her breath.

At the moment, though, I waited for an explosion or for something I couldn’t even imagine. I realized I was slurping at nothing through my straw, and I fumbled to put my cup down and stood horrified at the shattered silence the scraping of my chair caused on the dated linoleum floor. “Yes, ma’am,” was all I said, locking eyes with my sister. She held my gaze for only a moment before she lowered her chin and her eyes absorbed the blue and white of the kitchen tile.

In the bathroom, I ran the water feeling its hotness flow over and through my fingers. I lost myself in the sight of my sister, small, dirty, and broken sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, her knees pinned together, her body curved at the shoulders. She sat staring forward, probably seeing nothing but a blur of steam as she gazed with one arm crossed over her stomach, the elbow of the other resting on it as she bit her

thumbnail. I wanted to say something but didn't know what, and instead my first words were an involuntary yelp as I jerked my hand out from under the scalding water.

Margaret looked up a few seconds later, as though it took that long for my voice to reach her. She looked scared and her eyes were wide and wet, a slow blink releasing fat tears down her pale, sunken cheeks. She said nothing. The tub was full. I turned the water off and got a towel down from the shelf of the linen closet. It was her favorite, a fluffy lavender towel big enough still to wrap us both inside of it – something we hadn't done in years and definitely not since Margaret's transformation the previous fall.

"Tub's ready." I stood up and wiped my wet hands on my torn jean shorts that I was amazed to think fit her just a year earlier.

She stood up and began unbuttoning the front of her dress, pulling her cardigan off first and then letting the thin, torn fabric slink down to the cracked tile under her feet. I averted my eyes from her smooth pale skin and cotton underwear. She'd stopped letting me see her undressed early in the spring, and I'd begun to do the same, changing under my covers, pretending I had anything to hide. Her back was punctuated by bluish purplish smudges, like a swirl of cream and blueberries. I cracked the door to squeeze out without taking too much of the steam with me.

"Isabel." Her voice cracked. "Can you wash my back for me?"

"I – sure." I nodded.

"Wait for me to get in the tub."

I turned around and stared at the peeling wallpaper, small blue flowers accented by the dirty yellow color the hot, steamy room had added over the years. I stared at one flower and picked at the loose paper as I heard Margaret's underwear and bra drop almost

imperceptibly onto the floor. The sound of water in motion met my ears about the same time as Margaret's "Okay" for me to turn around. I pressed down the strip of paper I had pulled from the wall and turned around to face my sister. She sat with her chin on her knees, her arms squeezing them to her chest. She rolled her face toward me, her chin still balancing on her bony knee. I walked toward her and got a washcloth off the towel rack by the tub.

I sat on the edge of the bathtub, trying to balance myself as I twisted toward her with my feet flat on the surprisingly cold tile. I dipped the grey cloth into the water and watched it expand before clumsily rubbing the soap into it, dropping the bar more than once. I didn't mind the splashes. I didn't know what to say.

"Just your back?" I tried to pretend it was a necessary question.

"Yes. Just my back." She understood that I was trying, and she was letting me, even though I knew she didn't want to talk either.

I brought the washcloth to her upper back and squeezed it. I watched the small waterfall flow over her skin and separate into tiny streams as they found their own imperceptible grooves along her back. Her skin glistened, and I reached out to move her damp hair off her upper back and neck. Her neck was a paisley design of purple and black, marks of both love and hate mingling together and spilling over onto her shoulders and back. Her shoulders blades stood out as though they were guards against anything more that would try to force its way between them.

I rewet the washcloth and pressed it lightly against her back. She took a quick breath in through her teeth, the backwards hiss which was as close as she came to an admittance of pain.

"Sorry," I said and continued washing her back in downward strokes, really convincing myself that if I wished hard enough, her bruises would melt away and trickle into the pool surrounding her.

I sat there for twenty minutes. They never went away.

By the time I had been married for a few years and had my first child, I was used to the idea that Margaret would never change. I knew to expect her random phone calls, her unexpected visits, her crises that she somehow always thought I could and would solve. I accepted our role reversal. I played the part of the older sister brilliantly. But that didn't change my frustration, my anger, and my sadness in knowing she played her role just as well, if not better.

The phone rang, and as I grasped blindly for it with only the oversized red glow of "2:00 AM" to light my way, I hoped that it wasn't her.

"Hello?"

"I'm pregnant."

"What do you mean you're pregnant?" I reached over and turned on my lamp, my husband groaning.

"What the hell do you think I mean, Isabel! I mean, I'm pregnant."

"Does Bob know?" Bob was Margaret's boyfriend. She started dating him right after her third divorce. He was one of the lawyers.

"No. I just found out today."

"Well, what are you gonna do?"

"What do you mean what am I gonna do. I'm gonna have a baby."

Margaret thought she was pregnant once before. Toward the end of that summer. She never told me then. She never told anyone. But I know now. Looking back, I know. She spent every night at home one week, spending most of the time sitting in the bathtub. I walked in on her once. She was just sitting there in what by that time must have been cool water, even in that heat. She hugged her knees to her chest, her body rocking slightly. The water moved in subtle ripples against the inside of the bathtub.

“What are you doin’? You’ve been in here for two hours, Margaret. I wanna take a shower.” This was before she’d run away and I’d spent the afternoon trying to wash away bruises and tears with a three month old bar of soap.

“I ain’t done yet, Isabel. Now leave me alone!”

And throughout the day, she sat on the tire swing, her chin resting on the smoothed black rubber. She looked so young, so scared as she passed the entire day out there. She kicked at the dirt, her hand constantly reaching through the middle, where her legs stuck out, to touch her stomach. At church that Sunday, during prayer, instead of watching her wink at the closest man willing to give her attention, I caught her with her eyes closed, her lips moving in silent desperation, one hand resting on her stomach, the other clutched up by her collar bone.

The next day I found a newly opened box of tampons on the bathroom counter, and the tire swing remained still in the stagnant air. Margaret skipped church that Wednesday, and by Friday night, she was back out her bedroom window, returning always in second place to the sun.

His name was Jack Burnside. He was a twenty five year old factory worker from Alvan, the town over. Margaret had met him at the stockyards one night, a popular hangout for what most of the town considered the troublemakers. I saw him only once for a brief second that night Robby and I watched my sister and him through the foggy windows of his run-down Chevy. But I'd recognize him anywhere. I saw him in Margaret's first husband and in a number of her other transient love affairs. He's that guy who's dangerously good looking; who's too handsome to be all bad, but too aware of it to be good. He's the one you really believe could do anything, the one who'll break your heart. And the one for whom you'd spend your whole life waiting to grow up. He's the same one who's still hanging out at the same place and still working at the same factory. And still dating the same girl – innumerable Margarets of different names.

But that summer, he was the one. Margaret's abyss of loveless flings paused at him before continuing its downward spiral. There's nothing worse for a girl on a path of self destruction than falling in love, especially falling in love with a guy who's on a similar path of his own. He catapulted her years ahead of her time in heartache.

The first night she met him, she came home, as usual, with the sunrise. But that morning she didn't sneak in, hiding in the bathroom or at the corner sink to wash away the smell of whatever man had rubbed off on her. She came down with her face fresh and clean and even kissed my mother on the cheek, something I had not seen her do in over a year. My mother crossed herself in the corner, even though we aren't Catholic, going right to left in her inexperience and watched my sister plop down at the table and proceed to stuff her face with raspberry jam-smeared toast. That was the first and only meal we ate together that summer.

“What’s gotten into you?” I asked, my mouth full of wheat bread and apricot preserve.

“Nothin’,” she shrugged her shoulders but couldn’t help from giggling.

Mama had sat down at the table with us and we both stared at Margaret, my mouth openly advertising my breakfast.

“Nothing! I’ve just got a date tonight, is all.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve been doin’ all summer?” I asked, smacking my food around in my mouth exactly the opposite of how my mother taught me to behave. She corrected me then as she always did with a covert tap on her lips with her index finger and a look that was mostly business but, I have to think, at least partly a form of love.

“No, I’ve been doing –“ Margaret threw an askance look at Mama “ – other things this summer. But tonight, I’ve got a date.”

“And where to and whom with are we going?” Mama always spoke formally when she wasn’t sure how she felt about something.

“Oh, you know. Around.”

Around was right. Within a week, Margaret was professing love, though only to me and, I would guess, to Jack. Her lipstick got darker, and she started leaving through our bedroom window which was always left open for her. But she began telling me about her evenings again, her eyes dreamy and her details lavish up to a point. She always stopped short of what constituted most of her evening, after they had gone bowling or driven around the business side of town. I heard about the handholding and the sweet kisses on the cheeks, but not about her being pressed against the backseat of his Chevy, one hand gripping the seatbelt, the other trying to latch on to his sweaty skin.

And how he then drove her home in silence and did nothing more than lean over in front of her from his seat to open her door, blowing cigarette smoke into her face in the process and spilling beer into her lap. And how he never called her or picked her up; how she always met him at the stockyard, which meant for Margaret a two mile walk in stifling heat.

She never told me any of this. I either saw it myself or inferred it by her unkempt hair and clothes and the way she smelled of beer and smoke. She couldn't see all of this, though, and how it didn't fit into her fantasy. She wasn't used to being on this side of things. She'd been the indifferent one too long. She'd become the men she slept with, the men who drooled over her long blonde hair and blue eyes, who saw her as perfect and thought that maybe, if they were good enough, she might look at them the way they looked at her. The closest Jack probably got to looking at Margaret that way was with his eyes closed, in those brief moments when he truly wanted her and nothing else, desired her, and reached for her with the same intensity with which she reached for him. After, lying there sweaty and exhausted, I'm sure Margaret clung to him for very different reasons than Jack clung to her.

I can only guess this by the way it ended, Margaret crying in her bed that night after I retraced my own footprints out in the field, the day after I watched them through the window of his Chevy. I didn't find out he'd dumped her that night until the next week when Mama caught her with Mr. Parker behind the church on Sunday. If I could forget one thing from that summer, it would be that – that it had happened so soon after that night. If what I knew about Margaret and Jack wasn't true, then what I did couldn't be as meaningless, as empty as I know it was. I knew that what Margaret and Jack had

wasn't love, at least not for Jack, but I've always held on to the dream that it could have been something more than I know it was. That love could have been more than dried grass and being called by the wrong name. That Margaret was more than the wasted breath of a teenage boy, than a collection of loveless love affairs, than what she seemed to be.

"You can't have a baby, Margaret. How are you going to take care of it? You can't even take care of yourself."

"That's not true. And besides, you're my sister. You're supposed to be supportive."

I rubbed my eyes, which still hadn't adjusted to the brightness of the bedside light. I drew a deep breath and exhaled it as loudly as possible without letting her hear the exhaustion in my voice. I thought of her missing my wedding for a Grateful Dead concert, and missing the birth of my first child because she forgot to confirm her flight. I thought of how I'd gone to Chicago six times in the past three years and even further to Seattle when she decided she needed a change of scenery to help her pick up her life as marriages and jobs slipped through the cracks which she never took responsibility for making. And I thought of how she never gave me any credit for being the big sister I wasn't supposed to be. "You're right. Congratulations."

"Yea!" she squealed like a little girl. "This is gonna be wonderful, Isby, just wait. You'd be so proud of me. I got a new job, a serious one at Bob's law firm. I started night classes to finish my degree. I can't even remember what I was majoring in in

college, can you? Oh well, it's not important. It's gonna be great! You just wait and see. It's a new beginning for me. You're talking to a changed woman."

She miscarried three weeks later. And broke up with Bob ten weeks after that. She never finished her night classes. Instead, she showed up at my door with no warning and lay on my couch in the guest room for three weeks. She ate only soup and never turned the lights on. After three weeks of not seeing her, she emerged from the back room dressed in a black cocktail dress and bright red lipstick and stumbled back into it six hours later pulling a strange man by the tie. I heard her show him out early in the morning, and at breakfast, we didn't say a word. She packed her bags and left that afternoon. I haven't seen her since.

The letters stopped right before my fifth birthday, the last dated just four weeks before my father's death. I found a pile of them in the attic after Mama's funeral. There were six letters for each of us, in a bundle, neatly tied with a piece of cooking string Mama used to tie vegetables together with for boiling or steaming. They were flattened under the front covers of our respective baby albums. The first letter for each of us was dated before we were born. They were a ramble of fear and excitement, both addressed to us by name, as if she somehow already knew us. The rest were dated days before our birthdays. She wrote in a hurried backward slant that I came only to know on grocery lists and post-its around the house. By the time I was old enough to read, my mother was writing in a neat, deliberate hand, her outward formal presentation translating even onto paper.

The letters never mentioned God in the way she mentioned him during my childhood. She told us she loved us and that we could be anything and that we were beautiful. She recalled funny stories and her favorite memories from our previous year, predicting all the great things we would do in the three hundred sixty five days until the next letter. The one for my fifth birthday, the last letter she would ever write me, just weeks before she abandoned her own words for ones deemed much holier, said, "You are an angel, God's gift, and you are going to fly." I can't help but think that just weeks later, when my mother found the word of God, she lost her faith.

I didn't show these to Margaret. I placed the two separate bundles together into my purse. I sent Margaret hers on her next birthday, her thirtieth. She never mentioned them to me, and when I asked her about them on the phone, she gave herself away with too long of a pause to convince me that she didn't care when she said, "Oh those? Yeah, I read them. I put them somewhere." I reread mine every year on my birthday, and sometimes in between when I have a sudden, unexplainable desire to be loved by my mother. I've relived memories from my childhood, implanting this woman from the letters into the scenes, taking out who my mother became after the death of my father. I think of my mother running through the fields with me, chasing after me, and the two of us falling into the grass giggling, catching fireflies together, boiling fruit and tasting the warm strawberry paste, talking about life and love. It makes me both happy and sad, and a little guilty. Like I'm killing her all over again, being unfaithful to the real woman who shaped me and pushed me into who I am today. I doubt Margaret ever thinks about it like that.

She asked me once if I ever wished we'd had another mother or that Mama was different. The question surprised me and relieved me a little, too, knowing that Margaret wasn't avoiding, repressing us as much as I often think she does.

I told her how I sometimes rebuilt my memories. "But then I can't help always feeling a little guilty, like I'm erasing her from who I was, from who I am. Thinking about what she could have been, though, I do feel cheated sometimes. I think she got cheated, too."

"She wasn't the victim at all, Isabel. We were. What the hell are you talking about, she got cheated?"

I couldn't explain it to my sister, how I felt sorry that my mother never knew her daughters, sacrificed them for a version of God I still can't understand. She learned love from a God of fear, of punishment, of guilt. And yet, in the last years of her life, when she was sick and let go of what she'd held onto so fiercely throughout her life, I was angry at her. I was angry that she put Margaret and me through what she did, only to let it go in the end. It made our suffering seem futile, vain. She turned our childhoods into a phase. I wanted her to hold onto it, to make me believe it wasn't all for nothing, for my sake and my sisters, and for hers, too. I didn't think it was the right idea of God, but it was hers and in a way, sort of ours, too, and she needed it. I needed it. She gave it up, and died alone.

But I didn't say any of this. "Oh I don't know. I just think it must have been lonely. That's all." And we left it at that.

After the attic was cleaned out, our lives separated into three messy mounds neatly labeled, "junk," "keep," and "giveaway," Margaret and I didn't know what to do with ourselves.

"Want some tea?" I asked.

"I'd rather have coffee. Black. With no sugar." Margaret used to swear she'd never drink coffee when we were really little. She said it was a disgusting habit that only smokers and drinkers would do. Now she does all three of these.

I grabbed the old coffeemaker that I never saw my mother use, not sure it even worked, and we went downstairs to the kitchen. It felt much smaller without the crowd of people who occupied it earlier. It was oddly empty, too quiet. I put the teapot on and plugged in the coffee maker, only to realize that we had neither filters nor coffee.

"Tea's fine then." She was fixing her hair in the reflection of a left over piece of tin foil from one of the potluck dishes. I think Mr. Gregory had brought it over. It had sour cream smeared across one half of it, guacamole on the other. When Margaret placed it back on the counter, she dipped her finger into the guacamole and scraped it off with her teeth. We didn't speak. She sat at the kitchen counter on a stool, tapping her fingers on an exposed part of the cluttered counter, and looked around the room, checking it out as though she'd never been there before.

"So." She scraped again at the caked-on guacamole. "How's life and stuff?"

I was crouched down on the floor trying to look underneath the burner, to see if the pilot light was still on. I'd always loved this stove, even when I was little, although at the moment, faced with my sister's trivial attempt at normalcy, I felt annoyed that I

couldn't get the burner to light. I finally got it, and placed the kettle on the stove, half full of water.

"You don't have to talk, you know. There are worse things than silence."

"I'm not just talking to talk. I mean, I care. How's Eric? Wedding bells anytime in the future?"

"He proposed last week. I told him no."

"Isabel! What were you thinking? Why?"

Because of you, I wanted to say. Because of your two failed marriages and your third failing one. Because I don't want to be responsible for children who grow up hating me when I only did the best I could. Because I don't want to think about my daughter suffering the way you did. Because I'm afraid I'll end up like you or like our mother, alone despite everything and hating myself.

"I don't know. He just isn't the one, I guess."

I'd only dated one guy in all the time I lived in that small Georgia house. Watching Margaret all those years paired with my solitary adventure into the world of 'romance,' had left me with no desire to date, left me skeptical that actual love could root itself in any boy's heart, or in my own. It was my junior year of high school. His name was Alex Rancing. He was a senior. He picked me up in his blue pick-up truck, even came in to meet my mother. We went for ice cream at the new local shoppe that had just opened on Main Street and then met some of his friends at the park. We played on the swings and slid head first down the slide. I remember thinking how funny it was, that this experience was how my first should have been: innocent and childlike. How

backwards things seemed. He drove me home at eleven sharp, just like my mother had asked him, and kissed me on the cheek under the flickering light of my front porch.

On our second date we drove the twenty miles to the drive-in, having to leave fifteen minutes before the movie ended to get home by curfew. We wound up kissing in my driveway until my mother began flashing the porch light in a desperate attempt to preserve the one supposedly pure daughter she had left. Mama wasn't blind to Margaret's past, and after Margaret left home, the day after graduation to get away, to see what she could become, Mama had put all of her energy into me. She had probably just gotten comfortable thinking she was safe from any more sin in her house, when Alex came along.

Alex and I dated throughout the school year and into the following summer, and on my birthday he took me to Atlanta to a fancy dinner that cost him more than three weeks of pay at his uncle's farm. We stopped in a cheap motel on the way home, paying the desk clerk for one hour as he checked our IDs to make sure we were at least close to eighteen.

Sometimes when friends have asked me, I've told them my first time was then, on the stained bedspread of a rent-by-the-hour motel. Despite the musty smell, the three dead cockroaches in the shower, and the mildew in the sink, it was more what I'd imagined my first time being like. He kissed me, whispered "Isabel" in my ear, and never left my side. And yet, when I think of my first time, I always think of Robby. He had a hunger for me that no boy has had for me since, not even my husband, even if he did call me by the wrong name and leave me lying there alone.

After, Alex drove me home, kissed me softly, and told me he loved me while looking deeply into my eyes, one hand caressing my cheek. I smiled and said it back, feeling as soon as it came out of my mouth that I had betrayed myself, that I had let myself be taken with the idea of it when I wasn't sure how I felt. I broke up with him two weeks later, three days before he left for school. He cried and asked me why, and I sat with him on his bed, my arm around his shoulder, telling him everything you never want to hear. "It's not you, it's me." "You deserve better." "You deserve more than I can give you." I left feeling liberated, but guilty, sad that he had to be a casualty in what I've come to see as my selfish need for independence. That absurd obsession with defying what people expect of me. My insatiable mania with being in complete control of myself, to the point of shutting myself off. I can see now that I've lost more than I've gained.

I met Eric when I was twenty-three, while in law school. He was an associate at the firm where I had my first internship. We danced around each other for months until working late one night on a case, practically falling asleep over hundreds of color coded files. Our hands brushed when reaching for "Red 10123," a transcription of a telephone conversation from August 23, 1992, the night our client was supposedly raped after months of obscene phone calls from an ex-boyfriend. No one else was in the office, and I let him take me on top of another girl's painful past. We started the normal dating process the next evening. He called me to ask me to dinner, and we went to a new restaurant in the city, both of us irrationally nervous, considering. He closed the taxi door on my dress and spilt wine on the clean white table cloth. But it didn't matter. I fell hard

and fast, and we moved in with each other, something I told myself I would never do without a ring, within a month.

Two years later, on my birthday, this time not in a dirty motel, but at the Four Seasons, Eric got down on his knee and asked me to marry him. In that moment, I saw myself, seventeen, sitting in Alex Rancing's pick-up truck, with a second chance, to either say "I love you" in uncertainty or to be the strong independent I'd fought so hard to be. I got down on my knees, took his face in my hand, and then, in my irrational need to be as unlike my sister as possible, I made a conscious choice not to be in love, to not let myself be taken by another person as I saw her taken night after night. He's the one person I still wish I could apologize to.

I met my husband when I was twenty-seven. I'd sworn off office dating, blind dates, and any guy dressed in a suit. I'd been on only seven first dates in the past two years, no second dates. I'd taken myself to the theater to see a production of *Metamorphoses* with a single front row ticket. He had sat behind me, and leaned forward. "Don't get wet." I turned enough to catch a smiling face retreat out of my peripheral vision. He had dark hair, slightly receding, a long, defined jaw. He wore frameless glasses, which I only noticed as the overhead light cast a glare over his eyes. When we shared a taxi on the way to our respective homes I was struck with how brilliant his eyes were. I knew there was no way I would not have noticed them.

The play with its message of love, of the fluidity, and naturalness of human nature, of timelessness, left me lonely and surprisingly panicked at the thought of ending up alone. I'd run into Eric a few times since the break up when my new office and his represented clients in the same cases. He'd gained weight and never looked me in the

eye. He'd won three out of five times when we were set up against each other in the court room, and, despite the anger of my client, I always left feeling satisfied, happy the evidence had stacked against me, as though it were the least I could do. I wished I had loved him enough. At that moment, I wanted nothing more. So when I started to leave the play, my silk blouse speckled with splashes of water, and the stranger behind me caught up with me in the lobby, I didn't have the energy or the desire to turn him away.

Our taxi ride ended at a small Greek restaurant around the corner from my apartment instead of its original separate destinations. We spent four hours not eating our Greek salads, Bourekakia and Briam, talking about nothing important enough to remember now. I think that is why I fell in love with him – he'd had nothing to win by dating me, nothing to lose by letting me go. Our first date ended with a hand shake, neither of us willing to embarrass ourselves with feta cheese on our breath. The second date ended in a hug, the third the same way. His name was Bram, his mother having had some unexplainable obsession with the book Dracula during her twenties.

He always gave me my space. Even so, I kept him at an arm's length. Men always fell in love with me faster than I did with them. I kept myself just far enough removed so that, after the fall, I could still stand up and walk away. I broke up with him once, after Margaret's third divorce, in some sort of desperation I still can't qualify. I showed up at his door in the rain only after I'd realized that I'd turned out more like my sister than I've ever been willing to admit out loud. That I'd been punishing myself for years, depriving myself, scared because of someone who would never change.

Even now I sometimes avoid the touch of my husband, always suspect of his motives, having to remind myself that he's not one of those guys, that he loves me and

has been married to me for thirteen years. That I love him back. That I am, in fact, not my sister.

Margaret and I took our tea out onto the front porch. It was a cool day, mid-October, the leaves just starting to change. Our backyard was a battle of green and gold, even the sun trying to force its way through the leaves onto the open porch. Part of the woods behind our house had been cleared, leaving the creek exposed from where we sat, the pool deeper, heavy with water. The sky was changing, metamorphosing into a sea of pinks, reds, and golds. The clouds looked illuminate, as though from some secret source too pure and bright to see first hand.

“Wow, look at that one.” Margaret sat on the porch swing next to me, her feet curled under her to one side, her body depending on mine to hold her up. “What’s it look like to you?” She pointed, shaking her cheap gold bracelets, which jingled down her thin wrist.

“It looks like God to me.” And it did – it looked like something beyond anything I could describe.

“It doesn’t look anything like a face, Isby.” She only called me that in moments when her mind was somewhere else.

“I know. I’m not sure God has a face. If I had to describe Him, I probably wouldn’t have thought of this” – I motioned at the sky – “but seeing it. Being here. That’s what I see. That’s all I see.”

“Well. It is beautiful.” And she put her hand on mine, just letting it rest there, not taking it into her own. But it was enough, and I knew I had found a moment I would

come back to for the rest of my life. Every time Margaret called me with nothing to say. Every time she told me about some new affair that lasted only a few months or a few weeks. Every time I thought of her alone, without anything or anyone to hold onto. I knew I would remember this.

“Come on.” She sprung off the swing, throwing me off balance, causing me to spill my tea all down the front of my dress. Luckily it was black. She grabbed me by the hand and pulled me down the worn steps of our front porch, past our tire swing which now lay on the ground, the rope worn too thin to hold it up, and toward the creek. She got to the edge, and pulled her shoes off, nearly falling over onto the grass, finally balancing herself against a tree by the bank.

I don't know how long we spent in the water, splashing each other, laughing as we attempted to wade around in waterlogged black dresses, mascara running down our cheeks like black tears. I walked out of the water at one point to pull my nylons off so that I didn't have to drag my feet through the water like lead. As the water met my bare legs, I remembered the last night I had come to this creek, that summer, the water wrapping around me, embracing me. I'd like to say I thought of how far I'd come, but I knew I was still partly that scared little girl, forced to grow up too fast, unable to forgive those who had a part in it. I looked at my sister and wanted to cry, to take her in my arms and tell her that I loved her, that I was sorry we had let the world destroy each other, that I didn't save her when she needed me to. To explain to her that she isn't alone, that she never was alone.

But I could tell it wouldn't have mattered. Talking would have ruined it, ruined the moment, the memory of us just existing together, side by side, with nothing in the

world, at least for that instant, to take us from each other. We splashed each other and laughed, and she looked so happy, so careless and free. I thought of her frozen in that moment when I moved my family out of the city, pretending that that one memory of happiness represented my entire childhood, even though it took place years after we'd left our young lives behind us. I pretended that it justified the irrationality of leaving a lucrative life in the city for the quiet of a small plot of land and a three bedroom house that represented what I'd tried to run away from for my entire life.

But I also knew that the moment was just that: a moment. That the next afternoon I would fly back to Massachusetts, Margaret to Seattle, and that we would return to our respective lives. I knew that in a few months, she'd call me with news about some guy, possibly a married man, whom she had slept with at a party, that we would probably mention the news or something else as mundane, as unimportant.

I still dream of her. Now, I see her alone, no fire around her, no open fields. Sometimes she's crying. Sometimes she's singing the lullaby my mother sang to us before our father died. Sometimes she does nothing but sit and sway back and forth, as though trying to rock herself to sleep, occasionally kicking at the walls to try to find out what's on the other side. I always want to reach out to her, to tell her that the walls aren't as unbreakable as she may think, but I'm not in these dreams anymore. Margaret is always alone.

And despite it all, despite all the things I know of who she is and where she came from and of who she'll always be, I try to picture her happy. I picture her smiling in the one bedroom apartment that she shares with countless men from night to night. I imagine her as she is in the picture of Mama, her, and me, the one I found in the attic that

Margaret couldn't remember. Even I can't help but stare at it sometimes, amazed that such a moment existed, her face fresh and clean, with a natural glow her cheeks haven't known in almost two decades. It sits framed on my mantle. When I come home, it is one of the first things I see as I'm greeted by my three children and my husband.

That's not really how we were. Mama brought us up with threats and not enough love. Margaret and I had had each other, but spent too much of our childhoods searching for ourselves to realize it before it was too late. The picture was one of those rare moments when the three of us just fell together, crossed on our separate, but inescapably intertwined paths. Nevertheless, that is how I like to remember us these days, even if it is a lie, a chance click of a button, a split second slide of the shutter at a moment when we happened to be unaware that we would end up hurting each other, not saving each other like we'd hoped. And yet, I almost think that maybe we had to have known. That we had some idea what was awaiting us that coming summer. That we knew it was our last chance to hold onto each other, and to capture it forever.

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