CHALLENGE THE SILENCE

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This collection of personal essays about incest, abuse, and depression explores the lasting effects of an invisible childhood. The essays follow the protagonist from the age of five to her early twenties. Her brother, at a young age, becomes sexually abusive of her and her sisters, and her parents fail to protect their daughters. The family is divided as the older girls strive to defend their little sisters, while their parents attempt to excuse their son. When her brother is finally sent away, the protagonist is left to salvage what remains of her relationships with her parents.
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by

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Enter the Labyrinth

I. No Great Writer

When I was a child — twelve, thirteen, then sixteen years old — I was doing what I thought was the important work of my life. During my homeroom periods, on the school bus, at night in my bed, I was writing. I had separate notebooks for poetry, lyrics, diary entries. I memorized poems by Shakespeare and Robert Frost, and could recite any one of my own, in its latest incarnation — none was immune to another revision. I signed up for online classes through colleges and websites to learn poetic forms and meter. Along with copies of my favorite poems by writers classic and amateur alike, all of my class notes were printed, hole-punched, and committed to three-ring binders. Those notebooks and binders, I still have them all.

However, I must have been about seventeen when I began to realize I was no good at writing. I had thought for years that I would grow up to be a poet, but I had to think about college, about what I was going to do with my life, and I couldn’t conceive of any way to turn my writing into a career. It seemed to me that I had to know then what my path would be. My father had told me for years how unfortunate it was that people must make the most important decisions of their lives when they are young. It was a warning and a command: decide now, decide correctly, don’t mess up. It seemed to me, also, that people were born with certain skills and aptitudes fully developed within them, that these only had to be accessed and a spontaneous excellence in one’s chosen pursuit would emerge. Great athletes were naturals, great musicians were prodigies. I
looked at my writing, compared it to the work I liked to read, and knew I was no great writer.

I decided to major in English in college and to eventually become a book editor. There was never any question in my mind that I would study English; I loved to read; reading really was innate to me. I had learned to read before I was old enough to attend school, listening on my own inclination to my big sister’s Hooked on Phonics cassette tapes. I needed no encouragement to read, and to read everything that was presented to me. Unlike many of my peers in college, I never changed my major, didn’t flirt with nursing, or business, or photography. If I had to study something, it had to be books. I just didn’t believe I would ever write one.

Nevertheless, I did choose to minor in creative writing. The creative writing program at my alma mater was small, comprising a husband-and-wife team that taught poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. I worked with both of them over the course of three years, and both were supportive. Laura, who taught the prose courses, particularly helped me to see that I was not, as I had always believed, a poet. Despite my skill in its technical aspects — my knowledge of the line, of the rhyme, of meter — my limited understanding of the purpose and significance of poetry allowed me to write with reticence. In poetry, I thought I could conceal my meaning, or allude to it, without giving it away — that is, without giving anything to the reader. My poems were misinterpreted, or declared inaccessible. The highest praise I ever received for a piece as an undergraduate was, to my surprise, for an essay I wrote in Laura’s advanced nonfiction class. The story that was driving out of me, the one I had been trying to tell since I was a teenager, was the story of my own life, of the truth of what happened to me when I
was growing up — that I was abused, and that I was still trying to see what my life could be beyond that fact. I was supposed to be writing nonfiction.

Reading the praise Laura wrote on that essay was almost enough. When I applied to graduate school, I applied to only one program. The University of North Texas offered a hybrid master’s degree, an English program with a focus in creative writing. I was not confident enough to try for an M.F.A. program; even if I had gotten in to one, I would have been concerned that I was wasting my time, that I would never be good enough to make it as a writer. I was afraid that if I left academic studies behind — the literary analysis, the literary theory — I would not be prepared to enter a Ph.D. program, and my education would be over. I was afraid, too, that if I left creative writing behind, I would never make it past that one good enough essay I had written, the one good enough thing I’d produced in three years of study. I didn’t want to be an almost good enough writer. I applied to study nonfiction in the hybrid program.

And I got in.

Two years of study, and I am so far from what I was. I am still no great writer, but over two years, the key piece of information, the thing I wish I had known all along, slowly dawned on me. I had been told before, but I didn’t understand it at the time. My undergraduate poetry professor, Laura’s husband Tim, had once told this story to our class: When people asked what he did, he said he taught poetry. “But you can’t teach someone to write,” people responded. “Yeah,” Tim told people, “it would be like trying to teach someone to play piano.” He paused, let that sink in to my mind, the minds of my classmates. “Listen guys,” he said, “maybe you’re not great. But you can get better.”
If I have absorbed anything in two years as a graduate student of writing, it has been that I could get better. I used to think, like the people in Tim’s story, that you had to just know how to write, that you had to be born with it. But now, sitting on the floor in my closet and looking through the notebooks and binders of my teenage years, I am sorry I ever questioned that I was a writer. I page through the poems, comparing the ones at the beginning of a notebook to the ones at the end, and I’m sorry for the seventeen-year-old me, who could see that she was no great writer, and didn’t see that she had been getting better.

II. The Story I Have to Write

My thesis collection is composed of personal essays about my efforts to grow up as I suffered depression caused by years of sexual abuse from my brother. The three essays that follow are a culmination of eleven years of exploration; the stories I tell herein are the same ones I’ve been writing since I was twelve. I no longer believe this is the important work of my life, though; it is simply the important work of my life right now.

I have said that I began this important work when I was about twelve years old, and I recognize that the time when I turned to writing roughly coincides with the time my brother’s abuse began and my depression set on. Part of my struggle to acknowledge myself as a writer is a struggle against crediting my negative experiences with what I consider a positive aspect of who I am. I never wanted to think I became a writer because I was abused. I liked to think I was and would have been a writer anyway, and I tried to prove it to myself by refusing to write about my brother — or, at least, by
refusing to write about him explicitly, for in all of my early writing, my undergraduate work, there is a hint of his presence, even if one so slight that only I would recognize it.

In the two years that I have been in this writing program, I have had to grapple with the dual knowledge of my writing self. I believe writing is in me, that it is, in fact, a part of my nature — after all, my twelve-year-old self could have turned to many things to deal with her pain, and she chose to write. At the same time, it was her circumstance — her fear of her brother, her inability to communicate her pain to her parents — that made writing important, that made it essential.

When I began to study writing as an undergraduate, and then when I decided to continue my studies in graduate school, my desire was to leave that essential writing behind. I knew that as a student of nonfiction, I would eventually have to write a piece about my brother, but I thought I had largely dealt with my feelings about my family situation when I was still living in it, that I had written enough poems and diary entries to nearly exhaust the material. I didn’t realize I would be dealing with the aftermath of those feelings for as long as I now have been. I didn’t know, at least not consciously, that there was still so much work to be done.

So, for my first workshop piece in my first writing workshop as a Master’s student, I wrote about being fired from a waitressing job. I wasn’t comfortable with my history of sexual abuse being the first thing my classmates would know about me. I wanted to be known as a person first, and not as a victim. Even more ardently, I didn’t want to be thought poorly of — I didn’t want my peers to think of me as melodramatic, as someone who publicly aired her dirty laundry, as someone who asked for sympathy. For my second piece, though, I wrote a version of one of the essays that follows,
detailing the history of my brother’s adoption and his descent into perversion and criminality. I thought when I wrote that piece that it was the piece — that is, I thought it was the only piece in which I would have to confront the material about my brother head-on. In it, I attempted to cover roughly thirteen years of my life, all of the thirteen years in which I knew him. It wasn’t a successful piece. It was only a start.

In a later semester, I sat down with Professor Bonnie Friedman, who had led that first writing workshop, to talk about the piece. I told her that while writing it had seemed necessary, presenting it to the class for consideration had seemed needy and self-satisfying. I was aware that there was high writing and low writing, and that I was in the program to study the former. Writing about incest seemed inherently low. I told Bonnie that the story of my abuse was not the story I wanted to write. I said, “I want to write about something else.”

Bonnie said I was wrong. She told me to write the story I needed to write. She didn’t seem to think it was low. She recognized that it was important.

I would find later in my studies that I was not the first writer to face the problem of the story that demands to be told. As part of a research paper, I picked up two memoirs I’d heard about from other students: Lucky, Alice Sebold’s story of her rape and the following battle to prosecute her attacker; and The Kiss, Kathryn Harrison’s story of the sexual relationship her father initiated with her, and her eventual break from his grasp. I read the books because I hoped I would learn something about dealing with perverse material gracefully. I don’t know that I took from the books what I had expected; the memoirs are radically different in style, Sebold’s prose being simple and clear, Harrison’s more poetic and fragmented. No exact formula for depicting the pain of
sexual abuse presented itself. What I was surprised and heartened to find in interviews from the authors, though, was that both writers claimed that without having written their respective memoirs, they could not have continued to write. They, like me, had stories that pressed from them, that had to be written.

*Asked to compare the descriptions of rape in* Lucky *and her later novel, The Lovely Bones*, Sebold said:

> I did write the beginning of The Lovely Bones before I wrote my memoir. . . . I think in order to separate the two stories, to make sure that Susie was not doing any of my work for me when I returned to the novel, I stopped to write Lucky. And one of the things that was very important for me to do was to get all the facts of my own case down, so they had been written, they existed whole in a whole other book. (Sebold, Interview)

Harrison, on the other hand, had already published three novels when she wrote her memoir. She says:

> I believe it’s valuable to have accounts that people present as truth rather than fiction, as I had in my first novel. . . . Telling the story as nonfiction, owning it, was my only way back, the only way to reclaim my place among the rest of humanity. I don’t think I could have written any other books. I don’t know how I would have gone on with my life had I not done it. (Harrison, *Life After*).

I cannot project my own feelings and motivations on Sebold and Harrison, but I can try to pinpoint exactly what makes the story of my life with my brother the one that must come first for me.

> Though I have not always been able to see myself as a writer, I have always written. In the absence of a computer, or a pen and notebook, I talk to myself out loud. My thoughts are tangled and shifty; I can’t take hold of them. Perhaps there are people who can follow a thought down to its core — deep thinkers — but my mind seems to cast a net that captures all the associations and emotions swirling around one idea, and presents me
with that mess of material to consider. Thoughts are not helpful to me in finding answers until they become words, because words, spoken or written, can be organized and directed toward a solution. I write and I talk, showing my work like I did in high school math classes, to solve a problem. Like Sebold and Harrison, I have to do the work of writing the story of my brother and myself; I have to “own it,” to “get all the facts of my own case down” if I ever want to free myself to consider other stories.

The writing that follows — three personal essays about my family, the abuse I suffered from my brother when I was growing up, and my struggle with depression — is all directed toward answering the questions that plague me now: How is it that I can love my parents, but not forgive them? Will my brother ever be out of my life? And is taking my medication, an antidepressant, a denial of the person I was meant to be? I have no expectation that the essays answer these questions completely, because none of them can be answered correctly — after all, my life is not a math problem. But I do feel that exploring the complexities of the questions, and striking out again and again the words that haven’t done those complexities justice, only to start from scratch on a blank page, has finally put me on the path to becoming a capable writer.

III. Interfering in My Writing

When I began work on the essays contained herein, my inclination was to leave my family, aside from my brother and myself, as much out of the stories as possible. My reasons for doing so had much to do with an unwillingness to jeopardize my strong relationships with my parents. We don’t speak, if we can avoid it, of the trials my brother
put us through over the course of his thirteen years in our family, and to show them the work I’ve done on my own to sort through those experiences will remind them of the pain I was in, the pain they didn’t want to see. I will be telling them, when they inevitably see this collection, that in many ways, they failed me. I don’t want tell them that.

I believed I could reduce their presence and thus their culpability in the stories without sacrificing the power and significance of the pieces because I believed that in order to write nonfiction, all I had to do was remember what happened and type it out. In early drafts of these essays, I used the simplest sentences, and often the coarsest of words, to describe the moments in which my brother victimized me. As narrator, I offered no emotion and little context. I was able only to say that I was hurt, and that my parents didn’t care enough about me to see it. I strove for simplification, believing I only needed to tell the truth in order to tell the story. Then Professor Friedman pointed out to me in a writing workshop that my brother was merely the situation in which my family was put; the way my family reacted to his behavior was the real story.

The phrasing Professor Friedman used was borrowed from a book, The Situation and the Story, which was on the booklist in the next workshop I took with her. A cross between literary analysis and creative writing manual, the book, by Vivian Gornick, was enlightening from its first pages. I found my own struggles explicated within:

> When someone writes a Mommie Dearest memoir — where the narrator is presented as an innocent and the subject as a monster — the work fails because the situation remains static. For the drama to deepen, we must see the loneliness of the monster and the cunning of the innocent. Above all, it is the narrator who must complicate in order that the subject be given life. (35, emphasis mine)

My early drafts failed to convince because there was a brutality and defensiveness to the writing. I was a cursory narrator, presenting each scene in a raw, bare state, with no
reflection on the events, no guidance for the reader. It was as if I was saying, “This is what happened. Now you, reader, deal with it.” I hadn’t recognized yet that in order for the reader to take anything from the essay, I would have to deal with the material first.

Part of the problem I was facing was another misunderstanding of what it meant to write. Just as I had thought I could be reticent when writing poetry, I thought prose was supposed to be sharply directed toward an end point. As an undergraduate, I had been told to write in scene, not to summarize, and from this I surmised that the inner world was unessential. Only the scenes, the events that took place, were what mattered.

Again, it fell to Professor Friedman to confront my shortcomings. She insisted on more meditation, on more narrative mediation, to temper the starkness of the scenes. Initially, I was hesitant to comply — I somewhat believed she was wrong. Scene-based writing was what I had been taught, what had been drilled into me, and it made sense to me. It was interesting. It kept the story moving forward. I eventually came to realize, though, that without the reflection Professor Friedman was demanding, the story moved forward and ended up nowhere. There was no connective tissue holding the scenes together, and more importantly, there was a distant, dispassionate narrator with whom no reader could sympathize. I had to learn to interfere in my own writing, to insert myself — my emotions, my voice — into my pieces. But description and reflection were alien to me; I didn’t know how to use those tools properly. I had been taught to show and not tell. What did it mean?

I found an answer, again, in my reading. About one-quarter into Tobias Wolff’s memoir, This Boy’s Life, I stopped and marked a page. It was a stunning passage,
which Wolff stops the forward movement of the plot to show a character, his future stepfather:

Dwight was a short man with curly brown hair and sad, restless brown eyes. He smelled of gasoline. His legs were small for his thick-chested body, but what they lacked in length, they made up for in spring; he had an abrupt, surprising way of springing to his feet. He dressed like no one I’d ever met before — two-tone shoes, hand-painted tie, monogrammed blazer with a monogrammed handkerchief in the breast pocket. . . . His attentions to my mother were puppyish, fawning, as if he knew that the odds of getting his hands on her were pathetically slim. . . . (63)

The first sentence of Wolff’s description of Dwight is almost mundane, giving the height, hair color, and eye color of the character. It is elevated only by Wolff’s generous use of adjectives: curly, sad, restless. But Wolff goes on to give his reader the scent of Dwight, a sense of his movements, a look at his manner of dress. In the final line of the quote, I feel, and am repelled by, Dwight’s desperation.

I’m certain I must have read excellent character descriptions before I came across this one; what made this one stand out was its audacious length. Rather than weaving Dwight’s physical description into a scene, as I would have tried to do, Wolff unabashedly devotes four consecutive paragraphs to the illustration of the man. I read the passages again; they didn’t compose a scene, but they were certainly not “telling.” Wolff was showing character and even showing emotion — I felt the repugnance for Dwight because Wolff shared it with me — where I had only been able to conceive of showing action.

It is, of course, one thing for me to acknowledge the possibility of showing more to my readers, and another to apply that knowledge; my descriptions and evocations don’t yet approach the skill of Wolff’s. What I began to understand upon reading Wolff’s memoir, though, was that I needed to do more — to be a more complicated and involved narrator, to craft and shape the characters and events — in order to tell my story. Reading this
passage from Wolff was one of many small striking moments that have occurred during my time in this program, moments which added up to inform me that the story couldn’t tell itself.

As my understanding of what it means to write well has evolved, so have the following essays. With the knowledge that what my brother did to me is not a story per se, I’ve made efforts to move my parents and my feelings into the foreground, crafting what I hope are weightier and more moving pieces. The consequence of having done so, though, is that I have had to relive, and will force my family to relive, the experiences we never wanted to have.

The versions of these pieces that follow were measurably more difficult for me to write than their earlier drafts. It wasn’t until I knew I had to interfere in the writing that I had to discover what I felt as the adolescent living in the scenes and what I feel as the present-tense narrator reflecting on them. Reading Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, I related to the universal hero he describes, not in that I find myself to be particularly heroic, but in that the writing of these pieces has been for me a journey. I entered the labyrinth, so to speak, in search of the Minotaur — the monster, my brother. But, as Campbell says, in the labyrinth, “[W]here we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world” (25, emphasis mine).

When I started work on these pieces, I wanted to slay my brother. I wanted to expose him, as he had exposed me. Through the journey of writing and sharing and revising these stories, though, I have moved from seeking some version of revenge to
seeking some version of peace. I thought I would travel outward, pushing my memories
onto the world. Instead, I have indeed traveled inward, exploring and incorporating not just
the memories — the scenes — but the trapped feelings, the anger I no longer thought I felt
toward my parents, the sadness and sensitivity I thought I had overcome. Rather than
slaying my brother, I have shown him in order to slay myself.


PART II

ESSAYS: CHALLENGE THE SILENCE
The Appearance of a Familiar Person

The balloons are already glowing when we get back to the field. I quick-step through the crowd of spectators, dragging my boyfriend Casey toward my father's hot air balloon, a special shape that looks like a pirate's head, with an eye patch, a blue bandana, and a gold hoop earring dangling from his inflatable ear. Next to him, a new balloon, an astronaut, is glowing. He has a white helmet and an orange uniform, and the image of the earth seems to be reflected in his eyeshade. All of the balloons, a dozen or so, are tethered to the ground. The sun has set, and the pilots fire their propane burners, shooting flames into the envelopes, which light up from within to entertain the crowd.

Casey is slowing me down, less familiar with the scene, wanting to look at the balloons we pass. I'm feigning a slight impatience with his interest, tugging on his hand. Casey and I have been together for more than four years, and he's seen a lot of balloons, but not as many as I have. I've been ballooning since I was six. Most of them look pretty much alike — baskets, burners, inverted-teardrop-shaped envelopes in a variety of colored patterns. My father's pirate, named High Jack, is only different from the norm in that he has a nose and ears appending from the standard shape. I just want to get to that balloon, my balloon; I don't need to look at every one on the field. But Casey's interest, less than actually exasperating, is flattering. This is my world, and only I can share it with him.

Casey and I arrived at the glow directly from a balloon chase. My mother had taken off in her little blue balloon earlier in the afternoon, and Casey drove the truck while I navigated the unfamiliar roads of Plano, attempting to follow my mother's flight.
path and have the truck nearby when she chose a landing spot. When she landed, we packed up the balloon in the back of the truck, stuffing the envelope into a heavy canvas sack and disassembling the basket. Casey is athletic and upbeat, good to have around for balloon events; my father jokes that whoever classified hot air balloons as “lighter-than-air” never had to pack one up — everything about them is heavy.

When we finally make it across the field to my father’s site, the glow is coming to an end. Pilots are deflating their balloons, laying the baskets on their sides. The envelopes billow to the ground, fabric shifting and sighing. The pirate is coming down. My big sister, Leona, intercepts me by the truck, where she’s standing with our father; while Casey and I had been assigned to my mother’s crew, she was assigned to Papa’s. Her hair, piled into a blossoming bun on top of her head, is escaping in red wisps around her dewy face. Even after sunset in September, Texas is hot and humid. “Hey, will you go get a funnel cake?” she asks.

I’m happy to avoid the work of packing up another balloon, and of course I want funnel cake. “Yeah,” I say, and hold out my hand for money. She looks over her shoulder at Papa.

“Get two,” he says, digging in his pocket for his wallet. “But hurry up. We have to be off the field in twenty minutes.” That’s when the fireworks will start, and no one will be able to drive on or off the field until they’re over. We still have to replenish the balloons’ propane tanks before going back to the hotel, and then we’ll get up at five a.m. to go to tomorrow morning’s flight briefing. We don’t want to stay for the fireworks.

I jog off the field to the tables of vendors, sans Casey — he dived right back into crew mode for my father’s pack-up. I weave my way through the slow-walking people
sending text messages and pushing strollers, but when I arrive at the funnel cake stand, it’s no fewer than fifty people long. I stand at the back of the line for a few minutes, reasoning that it might be moving quickly. A girl passing by says to her companion, “People need funnel cakes that bad.” I think of the workers behind the counter, drizzling batter into fryers, a couple of minutes for each cake. They are sprinkling powdered sugar, making change. I left my phone in the truck, so I don’t know how long it’s been, how much longer until the fireworks start, and we’ll be stuck on the field for another half-hour. I tap my foot. I glare at the faraway people receiving their funnel cakes.

Twenty minutes, no way. I head back to the field.

The crew is still packing up when I get there. Casey has his arms around the fabric of the balloon, squeezing the air from the envelope so that it can be stuffed into its bag. I look past him, toward the basket, and for the first time in four years, since I was seventeen, I see my brother, Shane. He is helping to pack up my father’s balloon, just across from Casey. My face twists and my head cocks back involuntarily; I am actually turning up my nose at him. I see him see me, and he balks. I don’t notice whether his hair is still cropped short, if he is still heavy, if he still has bad acne. I only register that moment of hesitation, his step back, his uncertainty, as if I am the one who should be feared. And then I turn away.

Leona is standing by the truck, much the same as when I left her to get the funnel cakes, but alone, without my father. “What the fuck?” I ask her.

“I know,” she says. “I sent you a text to stay away. No funnel cake?”

“There were, like, fifty people in line.”
She snorts. “That would have been perfect. You could have stayed gone for a long time.”

I scowl and walk around the nose of the truck to climb into the driver’s seat. I slam the door behind me, even though the windows are rolled down, and it won’t keep anyone out. I pull my father’s tan Chihuahua, Peanut, into my lap and scratch his head. My sister, still outside on the passenger side of the truck, rests her head on her arms through the rear window. Through the windshield, I see my mother approaching. “Can’t you make him go away?” I yell. She turns back the way she came, without responding. Her hearing isn’t very good. But maybe she’s avoiding me.

“We’re working on it,” Leona says.

I sit for a minute, petting the dog, watching the crew pack up the balloon outside. On the field, people are wandering around, pilots directing their crews, spectators making their way back to blankets and folding chairs, and thrumming diesel trucks are hauling disassembled balloons. This is nothing to them, it does not signify. Why should it? I don’t know what this signifies to me.

My brother molested me for six years, from the time I was twelve until I moved out of my parents’ house to go to college when I was eighteen. And three months later, years too late, my mother called to tell me that she and my father were done with him. He was being sent to a group home in Houston, and he would never come back.

He has come back, and I am sitting in a truck, petting my father’s dog, calling to my mother for help, when I know that on the matter of my brother, she has never heard me. For years, I asked her, “Can’t you make him go away?” and it seemed that she was deaf to me, and blind to the pain I was in. I could have grabbed Casey’s arm, led him
back to the car, and gone home. I am a grown woman. Instead, I subject myself to the situation, as I always have, as I did when I was little, waiting for someone else to take him away, instead of running like I ought to.

A woman with dark hair approaches my window, and Peanut stands up to greet her. “Are you Leona?” she asks.

“No,” I say, and point diagonally behind me, at my sister. “That’s Leona.”

“Oh,” the woman says, but she does not then address herself to Leona. She does not walk around the truck to speak to her.

“Did you need something, you had a question?” I ask. Spectators frequently approach the truck with questions about the balloon.

“No,” she says. “I’m a friend of Shane’s. I brought him.”

“Why?” The word slips out of me without a pause. I am not being sarcastic; I am truly puzzled.

She looks at me. “Because he wanted to see his family,” she says, as if that were perfectly obvious. I realize she doesn’t know who I am. Shane has taken it upon himself to help with the pack-up, and this woman wants to speak to his sister, Leona, in the meantime. She doesn’t realize I am his sister, too.

I don’t know how to respond to her, so I just don’t. My mind is whirling around the words he doesn’t have a family, but they don’t pass my lips. The thought that he isn’t my family presses against my skull, trying to escape at this woman, but it doesn’t reach her.

My father is approaching behind the woman. He needs something from the trailer that’s hitched to the back of the truck. Leona, having overheard the woman’s words, screams, “Papa, this bitch is trying to start some shit!”
My father is surprised, glances over. He sees the woman standing at my window. Leona will tell me later that while I was away among the vendors’ stands, everyone saw the woman arrive with Shane. Leona had been casting dirty looks her way, which was why the woman hadn’t tried to speak to my sister when I pointed her out; the woman had realized then that the girl she was looking for was the one who clearly didn’t want her there. My father, knowing that this woman is with Shane, shakes his head and walks on to the trailer. He wants nothing to do with this. “She is starting shit!” Leona repeats. Our father is gone.

I spend a moment or several in worry; time is condensing, and I’m not sure what is happening, but the woman is petite, and Leona, without thought or hesitation, would happily punch her. Leona is thin, pale, and freckly, but she has punched me before, and she’s good at it. She is coming around the truck to confront the woman, and I am opening my door to hop down from the driver’s seat. The woman is backing away, Leona and I are standing together. And then, instantly, it seems, I am watching the woman and my brother walk away; perhaps he saw what happened, heard my sister yell, and went to join her. That seems to make sense.

I have to do something, so I force the persistent thought from my head. “He doesn’t have a family!” I yell after them. My voice is clear, but the sentiment seems weak, too little to convey the extent to which we don’t want him, not enough to suggest that if I could erase his existence, blot him out of history, I would do it. That if I could kill him, I would do it.

For a moment, I’m not sure they heard me. Then, the woman turns her head and shouts back, “I know.” But she can’t possibly.
Hand in hand, Casey and I walk from the balloon field to his car. It’s very dark now, without the light from the balloons, and the crowd has dwindled. “What happened?” he says. “Was that Shaun?”

Casey and I have been together for four years. He has lived with Leona and me, in our little house in Euless, for more than two. And he doesn’t even know my brother’s name. We never speak his name. If we have to refer to him, we refer to him as “him.” He is an elusive monster, obese and oily. He is made of malice.

“I didn’t even know,” Casey says. “He was there, helping me milk the balloon. If I had known, I would have…"

He intends to make a threat, but is still a little stunned, I think. Before tonight, he had never met my brother. I moved out of my parents’ house to go to the University of Texas at Arlington, the school Leona had been attending for a year, a few days before my eighteenth birthday. I met Casey at the diner where I found my first college job, waiting tables — where, in fact, he waited my tables, since I was a terrible waitress. I was a wreck at that time, smoking pot, skipping classes, and he fell absolutely in love with me, anyway. I needed that love to strengthen me, and after some time, it did.

I had been with Casey for perhaps a month when I got that call from my mother, telling me Shane was gone. So Casey, who knew about him, never really knew him. Casey doesn’t like to hear about what Shane did to me; it makes him uncomfortable. Casey is sunny and somewhat young for his twenty-four years. I both like and resent this about him — he shares his brightness with me, but I am not allowed, or not able, to share my gloom with him. This is usually okay, because I don’t want that darkness
between Casey and me. I want what I have wanted for years — to leave my brother behind me, to never let him affect my life, my relationships, again. But now Casey has seen him, he has faced the man who damaged me, and Casey is deeply devoted to me. He is angry now.

By the time we get on the highway, he is ready to complete his threat. “I should have just beaten the shit out of him!” I am glad he’s angry, because it means he wants to protect me, but I also wish he weren’t. I want him to feel sympathy toward me, instead of anger toward my brother. I want him to respect that I am not angry, not eager to hear his voiced raised in threats of violence. I want silence, a chance to sort through my confusion and sadness. I want to put my head on his chest and feel his heart beat.

“He probably weighs two hundred and fifty pounds,” I respond. Casey is well-muscled from his job in the bag room at a golf course, but short and lean, smaller even than I am.

“So I’m faster,” he says. “What you should do is get four really huge guys to just—”

“You’re not helping.” This is perhaps the worst thing I could say. Casey always wants to help, not just me, but everyone. He helps to pack up balloons, he borrows my truck to help his friends move, he once fixed the neighbor’s air conditioning, once painted another neighbor’s front door. He is an optimist, and a man in constant motion, playing golf, playing Ping-Pong, playing softball, volleyball, jumping out of helicopters on Grand Theft Auto. I sit in a green leather recliner reading or watching television with my gray cat, Mrs. Dorian, sleeping in my lap. I reflect on my readings and watchings in my
journal. Athletes have short memories; when bad things happen, they brush them off and keep playing. I have a long memory. I analyze, I linger.

He can see that I’m brooding, so he lightens his tone. “Well,” he says, “the worst thing you can do is dwell on it.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” I say. I wave at the clock in the dashboard. “Has it been almost a half-hour since I saw the guy who molested me for six years, and I’m still dwelling on it?” Sometimes, when Casey upsets me like this, I hit him. He taught me to throw a punch, and I’ve used them against him ever since. I hate to argue, I don’t like raised voices, so instead of fighting with him, I usually give him a solid punch on the arm, or a soft-but-firm one to the side of his head.

He lives with it because I don’t ever really hurt him, and because most of the time, I am his pet. I greet him at the door, hopping up and down, when he comes home from work, and I grab him and hug him tightly. When he lies down next to me in bed, I wriggle my head under his arm to rest on his chest, and I tell him over and over that I love him, I love him. I love that he is a happy person. I want to be a happy person, and he can bring me so close to that. But not right now. I can’t hit him because he’s driving, so I give him the silent treatment instead. We don’t speak for the rest of the ride home.

When we get there, I greet Mrs. Dorian and then go into the backyard to smoke a couple of cigarettes. I started smoking when I was fifteen, as an occasional alternative to cutting — I took any route to self-harm, because I felt I was not worth anything. After I moved out of my parents’ house, I spent a few months smoking pot and doing ecstasy. Once I got a job, made some friends, and started seeing Casey, I felt that I didn’t need those things, but I didn’t quit smoking cigarettes. I never even tried. I wanted that one
bad habit, the thing that would let people know I was not pretty and sweet. I wanted people to see me as the girl who was killing herself — it was who I was, who I am, who I cannot not be.

Casey follows me into the backyard, because he doesn’t want me to be alone. He apologizes to me, though he has nothing to be sorry for. I didn’t communicate with him, I didn’t tell him what I needed, so he gave me what he thought was best, what he thought was support and encouragement. I tell him I’m not mad. It’s true. I’m not mad at anyone, exactly.

I am sealed up tight, letting nothing in, letting nothing go. My brother came, and I didn’t let him in. I didn’t let out any of the misery that he gave me over six years, I gave none of it back to him. That’s what it was for me, four years later, to face my abuser. After such a long time fighting him in my own home, and such another long time away from him, it wouldn’t pay to get angry with him. I couldn’t win. The anger still lives in me, and it rises up at the wrong times. I hit my boyfriend. I fry my own lungs. But when he came, when my brother came, I turned inward and became passive. I pet a dog, and I let the world act on me, like my brother acted on me, and I just gave up.

I have two cigarettes and talk to Casey. I keep my voice neutral, because I don’t want to alarm him. He knows my history, he knows I can be volatile. God knows he has seen me become violent. His unspoken concern right now is that I am going to cut myself, though that is something I have not done since we’ve been together. I haven’t cut myself in four years, and yet his concern is valid. I would very much like to do it.

When we go back inside, he stands behind me at the kitchen table, where I’ve begun sifting through piles of homework. I am in graduate school. I have stacks of
books and papers and notebooks, things I need to deal with right now, more important
things to deal with than my feelings. He wraps his arms around my waist and strokes
my stomach. “I just love you so—”

“Get off me,” I say. His body feels disgusting.

Casey goes to bed. I do not go lie with him.

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I walk in this world, and so does my brother. Our roads diverged, and then they
met again. I used to know him, and now I only know what he is — a monster,
remorseless. At some time, when we were children together, I must have loved him,
and now I feel sorry for what he became. He was a part of my family, before he wasn’t
anymore.

I would like to put him away somewhere, to contain him in the words on these
pages. But his presence is real. He is a solid physical being, a body. He is a nightmare,
a memory, he is incorporeal. He stood before me, and I saw him. He is absent now, and
I feel him. Someday, I know, I will have to see him again. He will just appear, forcing
himself on me like he does. Until that moment, and then again after it, I am the vessel. I
am a sieve. He will seep out of me, into everything I do.

I wish this were a story. If it were, it would be over by now. Ten years ago, my
brother started molesting me — the beginning. Four years ago, my family disowned my
brother — the end. But this is not a story. It is a life. It is my life, and it is his. And it is
not over. For four years, I have remembered my brother — an interlude. Tonight, my
brother appeared — the beginning, again.
Stop moving, Time. Stop appearing, Brother. I am trying to tell this story. I am trying to write the end.
When I was fifteen years old, my parents checked me in to the Behavioral Health Center in Tyler, Texas, an hour east of our home on Cedar Creek Lake. It was October, early in my sophomore year of high school, and the school counselor had already had to call my parents twice. I was entangled in a dangerous situation.

Throughout elementary and middle school, I had been an honor student, a teacher’s pet, never in the principal’s office, never causing trouble. I was pretty, too, five and half feet tall with shining brown hair past my shoulders; I was just the slightest few pounds overweight, but with high cheekbones and full lips.

I wasn’t popular, but I wasn’t an outcast; I tended to form a tight friendship with one other girl. The girl changed over time, from Rebecca, to Caitlin, to Heather, but I never formed a real social group. This isn’t to say I was shy. Actually, I was loud and bright, with strong liberal opinions that contrasted severely with those of my small-town Southern peers. If I could have viewed myself from their eyes at that time, I imagine I would have seen an odd girl, without religion and with too much money, her clothes too revealing, and her friendship with the school’s single openly gay boy a sin. I would have seen a girl who didn’t exactly fit in, but a girl who was protected from bullying and derision by wealth, good grades, and good looks. I would have seen a girl for whom nothing in life would go really wrong.

I surprised my parents, my friends, and the entire office staff of my high school — counselor, principal, vice-principal, and secretary — by becoming suicidal.
The first time I was called to the counselor’s office, it was because I had dropped a journal on the school bus. For some reason, I had stopped carrying a backpack, stacking my books in my arms instead and lugging them around in a pile from class to class. Perhaps it made me feel more studious to be hidden behind a load of textbooks and notebooks. Perhaps I just liked being hidden. The bus monitor, thinking to discover to whom the journal belonged, read it. My name was nowhere inside, but I had written of my friends and my home situation enough for her to realize it was mine. I had also written about cutting myself, drinking cough syrup, and taking prescription painkillers. She turned in the journal to the counselor.

On the morning I was called to the office, I had been distraught at the loss of the journal. Before my mother dropped me off at school, I instructed her to contact someone at the bus barn and get it back for me. I insisted that she not read it, and she promised. Then I went to my first-period algebra class, in which I was supposed to take a test, and realized I had left my pencil bag in the car — another problem that could have been avoided by the use of a backpack. I asked my teacher, Mrs. Johnson, a kind, twenty-something woman with wispy light-brown hair and a relaxed classroom demeanor, if I could go to the office and call my mother. She agreed, without even asking the reason — if she had known I only needed a pencil, she would have given me one — but when I called, my mother didn’t answer her cell phone. From the office, I went to the girl’s bathroom at the back of the school, the one nearest my math class, sat on the tiled floor, and cried.

I might not normally have cried over the lack of a pencil, but everything about the day was going wrong. If my mother didn’t bring me my pencil bag, I couldn’t take the
test. I couldn’t take a math test without a pencil. I didn’t like to ask people if I could borrow their things, because it made me feel weak somehow. When people asked to borrow my things, I thought they were irresponsible and unprepared; when certain people asked, especially for things like lunch money or change for the soda machine, I even thought, snobbishly, that they were trashy, too poor to get their own. I was arrogant. I was so arrogant, and so overwhelmed by depression, that the idea of asking to borrow a pencil cleanly defeated me.

I sat sobbing into my knees, in a position with which I was unfortunately familiar, until an older girl came into the bathroom and found me. She reached out a hand and pulled me to my feet — we weren’t friends, but it was a small school, and everyone knew everyone else, at least a little. She handed me some paper towels to dry my tears and blow my nose, told me to wash my face, and sent me back to class. The test had, of course, already begun. I borrowed a pencil from Mrs. Johnson.

During the test, the room-to-room phone rang. The school counselor was asking that everyone in the class write down his or her name, intended graduation year, and intended college major. Because I was in advanced math, with students in the Junior class, I asked the teacher if the counselor only wanted Juniors to complete the exercise. “She said everyone,” Mrs. Johnson replied.

Reflecting on the queerness of the morning — the loss of my journal, followed by Mrs. Johnson’s unquestioning agreement with my request to call my mother, her unquestioning acceptance of the prolonged absence I took to cry in the bathroom, her seeming unconcern with what must have been my swollen eyes and blotchy cheeks when I returned to class, and then her unquestioning compliance with this strange
request from the office — I can only suspect that she, and perhaps all of my teachers, knew something was wrong with me. Someone had told them something, though I will never know what, or in how much detail. I wrote down the requested information on a sheet of notebook paper with my borrowed pencil, and one of the other students delivered all of our answers to the office. A few minutes later, the phone rang again, and the counselor wanted to see me.

I sat in the chair opposite her, facing her across the desk, and she pulled out the journal. It was a tiny spiral notebook, with a yellow cover depicting butterflies, sweet and happy-looking — very much out of sync with its contents. “Do you recognize this?” she said.

“That’s mine,” I said. I didn’t occur to me to deny ownership, I was so affronted by her possession of the book, and by the way she wielded it at me in a tight grip, as if I might lunge forward and try to snatch it from her hand. In fairness, that is what I felt like doing; I felt the push of blood in the muscles of my legs that could have thrust me out of the imitation leather chair, across the desk, and — notebook in hand — through the doors of the school into the parking lot. That push could perhaps have even carried me all of the six miles to my home outside of town. It was something I was as familiar with as crying, that push to run.

I stayed in the chair, fuming, reeling. Even though I had admitted the journal was mine, the counselor went on to present the evidence against me. She said that based on the content of the journal, particularly the entry in which I wrote of sneaking out one night to go to a party at my gay friend’s house, she and the bus monitor and the principals had suspected me of being its owner. So, she had contacted my math class
about graduation dates and college plans as a way of obtaining a sample of my handwriting. Even at fifteen, I realized she was grossly mishandling the situation. It was so presumptuous, for her to think herself qualified as a handwriting analyst, and she seemed so pleased with herself for resorting to that trickery. I could read in her face, and in the smile that was waiting to emerge until after she had victoriously intervened in my distress, that she was glad to have such a drama on her hands, something more salacious and unexpected than another teen pregnancy.

I knew all of this, but I didn’t know how to articulate it, so I just said, “Give it back.”

“I can’t give this to you,” she said, as if my journal were something that belonged to her now. “I’m going to have to call your parents.”

“I’ll call them,” I said. “You don’t talk to them.”

My mother came to pick me up from school alone, since my father was an airline pilot, out of town flying a trip. I didn’t let her enter the counselor’s office at first, but blocked the door with my body and pushed us both out into the school’s main office. I closed the counselor into her office behind us. I showed my mother the cuts I had made on my shoulder, deep welts that were still scabbed over. I told her everyone had read my journal, which was something of an exaggeration, but it had been shared with the principals, so I felt justified in the phrasing I chose. My mother, ever unruffled, hardly spoke with the counselor. She breezed into the woman’s office, voiced her concern and her control over the situation, retrieved my journal, and took me home. Though she wouldn’t give the journal back to me, she still promised not to read it. She made me an appointment with a psychologist, two weeks out.
But before two weeks had passed, I was called to the school counselor again.

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At that time, when I was fifteen, my brother had been molesting me for three years. He was a voyeur. I had lived for three years with eyes outside my bathroom window, and in three years, the calls from the school counselor were the first calls for help my parents seemed to hear from me. They had always fought against his behavior, in a half-hearted, perfunctory way. They shook their fingers at him and told him he was bad, and they took him to therapy to learn to be better. But they didn't ask me how I felt about it.

My parents viewed my brother as a problem to them. He frequently got into trouble at school, and occasionally with the police. He stole from my parents and from family friends, he vandalized the neighbors’ property, and he was unruly in his classes. He had been this way since he was a small child. When he began to molest me, my parents viewed the behavior as something else on a list of things into which they would have to intervene. It was, to them, just one more problem. To me, it was the problem. The other things he did were wrong, and it was my parents’ responsibility to address them. Teachers and officers and neighbors demanded that my parents address the problem of my brother. But the molestation was private, it happened in our home. I, too, demanded that my parents address it, but I was a child, with no authority even over my own body, and certainly no authority over them.

If they had asked me what it felt like, I would have told them I couldn't bear it. I would have said I felt left out, abandoned. I felt alone and afraid. And, having three sisters, I felt that the responsibility my parents were not taking for the abuse had fallen
onto me. I would have told them it was too much for me, that I didn’t want to live that way. I would have told them I didn’t want to live.

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The second time I was called to the counselor’s office, I had cut up my left forearm badly, and then showed a girl in my gym class. I thought, in some way, that she was with me, that I had her sympathy and understanding. I didn’t know her well, as she was in the class below me, but she didn’t seem like a girl who came from a good home situation herself. She commiserated with me to my face, and then strode right to the counselor’s office to tattle. When I was called out of class during the next period, I knew what classroom she was in, and I entertained the idea of knocking on the door, telling her teacher the counselor had sent me to get her — which I felt was an entirely plausible story — and then beating her down in the hallway. I didn’t do it because I was essentially a good girl, terrified to get into trouble. I trudged right past her classroom to the counselor’s office.

I slouched into the imitation leather chair and glared at the counselor. She asked to see my arm. I refused to roll up my sleeve and show her.

“If you don’t show me, I’ll have to call your parents,” she said.

I shrugged. I knew she would have to call my parents, anyway.

This time, my mother and father both arrived, in separate cars. The counselor had reached my mother at home, and my mother had called my father, who was running errands in town. My mother must, at some point in the interim, have told my father about her first visit to the counselor’s office, but neither of them had mentioned it to me since. I don’t think they were overly concerned — or even appropriately
concerned — about the situation, because I had always been a sensitive child. My father, a large, tough man with a salt-and-pepper Richie Cunningham hairstyle and a Top Gun mustache, said I was too damn emotional. My mother, a graduate student in psychology, joked that I had Histrionic Personality Disorder. Sometimes I cried without catalyst, and I frequently slept through the day — in my classes, and then when I got home from school — and woke up at night to read, alone, in the dark. My despair engulfed me at times, and I couldn’t stop it from flowing out. My father asked once what the hell was wrong with me, why I was crying, and I had no answer. “Sometimes girls just need to cry,” my mother said, rubbing my back. To them, my sadness was a symptom of being fifteen.

I didn’t stop them from coming into the counselor’s office that time. I just sat in the chair. When my father asked to see my arm, I showed him; I could not face him with the same obstinacy I had showed to the counselor. He was my father, and I had been trained to obey him. I have no memory of the words that were spoken between my parents and the counselor — only a vague impression of my mother standing somewhat behind my father, and both of them nodding, making some agreement with the counselor. The three of them seemed to know what had to be done, and I was only there to receive the action, not to be a part of it. I was swept out of the office again.

In the parking lot, I attempted to follow my mother to her car, but my father barked, “You’re coming with me.”

I grimaced. I was afraid. My mother would have been kind to me; my father, I knew, was going to be angry.
In the passenger seat of my father’s truck, I leaned my head against the window, staring out and away from him.

“Show me that again,” he said.

I rolled up my sleeve and flopped my arm on the console, with my forehead still on the cool windowpane.


I mumbled an answer into my seatbelt strap.

“I can’t read that! What does it say?”

I raised my voice right back at him, though I still didn’t have the courage to look at his face. “I’m going to jump off the roof!”

He didn’t say anything. He started the truck and drove me home, where we met my mother. They told me to pack a bag. I was going to a hospital.

I hated having my self-injury discovered by the counselor, because I didn’t like her enjoyment of it, and I resented how I thought she must view me. She didn’t know I was being abused, and she never thought to ask why I was cutting. I knew she must have assumed I wanted someone’s attention. But she didn’t know how badly I really needed it.

I hated that my self-injury was discovered in that way, but I didn’t hate that it was discovered. I did want my parents to hear me. I wanted them to hear that I was in pain. I had imagined they wouldn’t hear it until they found me dead. But something in me must not have wanted to die, because I was thrilled that I was going to the hospital. My parents were acknowledging me, finally. They had to know something was deeply wrong.
During the hour-long check-in process, a nurse sequestered my parents and me in a narrow white room to question me about my medical history. I sat across from the nurse at the rectangular, lunchroom-style table, as my parents huddled at the table’s end. I don’t remember the questions the nurse asked, except for one: “Do you have any family history of mental illness?” My mouth was already open to say no, when my father leaned forward to pull the nurse’s attention from me. He looked intent; he was going to impart some important piece of information.

“Well, my mother killed herself,” he said.

I knew his mother had died when he was about ten, and that he had been adopted, but the moment in the hospital was the first I’d heard of a suicide. I had never asked my father what had happened to his mother, because I didn’t ask my father about much of anything. I didn’t like him. He wasn’t an awful man, or even an awful father. He could be caring, more nurturing even than my mother. But while my mother was consistently gentle and distant, as if nothing worldly could touch her, my father was volatile. When he got angry, he got angry with the whole household; everyone was to blame, and no one measured up. I never knew how he would react to things, or what kind of mood he might be in, but the times he hurt my feelings stuck out stronger in my memory than the times he lifted me up, so I tended toward expecting the worst, and I tried to avoid him.

He was furious with me for the cutting, and had told me so on the ride over to the hospital. He thought I had planned the timing of my capture by the counselor to interfere with a family trip that we were supposed to take in a few days. He thought I had hurt
myself to spite him. Nevertheless, he gave me something that day, when he told the
nurse — and, by association, told me — about his mother. I couldn’t stop to register
what it was there in the narrow white room, because I had to answer the rest of the
nurse’s questions, but what he gave me was a new perspective on who I was and who
he might be. He drew a connection between my grandmother and me, and I pulled
some small understanding of him from that, because he was the only thing between us.
As the only thing between my grandmother and me, he had to be a part of what
connected us. It meant — and I would only perceive this slowly, over a great length of
time — that he must have known something of the sadness that lived in us.

More than giving me knowledge of him, though, that long-concealed kernel of
truth, that my grandmother was a suicide, revealed me to myself. Even before I knew
about Helen — that was her name — I felt that my depression was rooted in my own
mind, and that it had always been there. It was certainly the abuse from my brother that
caused me to break, but even when I was small, before the abuse began, I had known
that pain did not affect me in the way it affected others. My parents were not of the
coddling type. When I skinned a knee or banged up an elbow falling off the monkey
bars, I often had to comfort myself. I used a mantra to do so: “Pain feels good.” By
closing my eyes, gritting my teeth, and chanting those words over and over, I could
achieve a kind of transcendence, and the sting of an injury became a pleasant tingling
of heat.

I tried to cut myself for the first time when I was about twelve, scratching at my
wrists with a disposable razor. Following that failure, I quickly learned to disassemble
razors, often nicking my fingertips as I pried the blades from their plastic encasements. I
cut myself because I wanted to look the way I felt — damaged, tortured. I liked the bloodiness, the rough scabs that grew over my skin, and the pain didn’t bother me. In the cutting state of mind, I felt I had encountered a person I truly hated, one who had hurt me personally, gotten into my system and really torn things apart. Cutting was like killing that person, violently and at close range. I wanted to dig her out of myself, to punish her and my brother and my parents.

In the hospital, the nurses checked the scabs on my forearm twice a day, to make sure I hadn’t been picking at them. I went to group therapy three times a day, and mostly listened to the other patients, all teenagers like myself, all having trouble at home. Many were self-injurers like me. I liked it there, the attention of the staff, the needlessness of wearing long sleeves. I was put on a small dose of an antidepressant, and was called each night to the counter to take the little pill. The nurse who administered the pill checked my mouth to make sure I had swallowed it, but it wasn’t necessary. I happily took it, because I wanted to be helped. If I had to be helped, it meant I was really sick. I didn’t want anyone to think I was a faker — I knew I was really sick.

What I didn’t like about the hospital were the constant calls from my mother. I had been checked in during an evening, and starting the following morning, she called several times a day to ask whether I could be released. The trip, our family’s annual trip to Albuquerque, was still pressing. Though it was my mother who made the calls, I can be sure that it was my father who was demanding my discharge. On my third day of treatment, the hospital psychiatrist agreed to let me out if I said I was ready. I obediently did so, even though I didn’t want to go, and even though I was supposed to have stayed
for seven days. I left with a prescription for the medication I had been taking for the past two nights. My parents did not fill it, because they said I didn’t need it.

Anger still rises up in me now when I realize how much my parents risked me. I was in danger from my brother, and I was a danger to myself. I had a suicide threat cut into my skin before my parents offered any help to me — and then they pulled it away before I had a chance to benefit. I had stood at the edge of the roof of our two-story house, a cigarette burning in my hand, and stared at the concrete driveway. Neither my mother nor my father pushed me over. But neither of them pulled me back. I was suspended there. It all depended on me.

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After my family and I returned from Albuquerque, I finally went to the appointment with the psychologist that I was supposed to have had following my first visit to the school counselor. Dr. Davis was thin and very tall, with blond hair and little rectangular glasses. I called her by her first name, Julianne, though it occurred to me after I had known her for some time that her friends probably called her Julie, and her patients probably called her Dr. Davis; I thought I might be the only person to call her Julianne, and I liked that idea. She loved horses, so her office and waiting area were decorated in a western theme, and she often wore riding boots. Since many of her clients were children younger than I was, her bookshelves contained the poetry of Shell Silverstein, and in a corner of the spacious room there was a little sandbox filled with shovels and buckets and plastic starfish. In the three years I spent as her patient, I never asked to play in the sandbox, though I was sometimes tempted to.
During therapy, I sat on a plush beige couch. On my first visit, I was surprised that I wasn’t supposed to lie down on it. Instead, I faced her where she sat in an armchair and I just talked. For our first several sessions, I don’t recall that she contributed much to the discussion, but later she advised me, and comforted me, she told me a little about her life, and I believe that she loved me. I cried about my parents and my brother to her, but also about ex-boyfriends and kittens that had mysteriously died. When I turned eighteen and moved to Arlington to go to college with my older sister, I drove almost two hours every other week for the first few months to see her, but gradually our appointments trailed off.

It was soon after I started seeing Julianne that she recommended to my mother that I be on medication. My father had been an airline pilot for almost thirty years, and it was only a few years ago that the Federal Aviation Administration approved pilots to take antidepressants. He was profoundly opposed to my being medicated, because he thought that seeing a psychiatrist could prevent a person from ever getting a respectable job, just like tattoos, piercings, and non-traditionally-colored hair. So when my mother followed Julianne’s advice and took me to a psychiatrist, we didn’t tell my father. Eight years later, I still see a psychiatrist, and my father still doesn’t know.

My first psychiatrist, excepting the one who I saw a couple of times while I was in the hospital, was Dr. Schack. He worked out of a dim and crowded office in Corsicana, and I left school early once every three months to drive three quarters of an hour to see him. He was an immigrant from Mexico, and spoke with a slight Spanish accent. I found him to be an amiable man, but the most incompetent doctor I’ve ever met.
His appointments were scheduled beginning at noon, but he never made it to the office until half past, so patients waited for him in the hallway when the chairs in the waiting room were full. Furthermore, he didn’t see patients in the order of their appointments, but in the order they had checked in, so I might have to wait for him to finish with patients who had been scheduled after me before I was called in to see him. None of the appointments took long, though; I used the stopwatch on my cell phone to time them one day, and no meeting lasted more than five minutes. He rushed us out with refills for prescriptions that worked well enough for his standards, even if they did not work well enough for ours.

On our first meeting, he gave me a sample pack of Zoloft. I returned a couple of weeks later and reported that I didn’t feel any more suicidal than usual, so he wrote me a prescription for the pills. The full dose of the medication, though, made my mind spin and kept me awake at night. I told him about the side effects, but he didn’t seem concerned. I continued to see him every few months, when I was supposed to need a refill, but I didn’t take the pills. I stored them in a fat, white, ninety-day generic prescription bottle, and I continued to be depressed. I hated the pills so much that one night — I must have been sixteen or seventeen by then, because I had moved from my little bedroom upstairs to a larger one downstairs — I poured a handful of them into my palm and took maybe twenty or thirty of them all at once. I wasn’t trying to kill myself, exactly, but I thought I might die, and I didn’t care one way or the other. I knew overdosing on antidepressants wasn’t a typical suicide attempt, and if I had been really trying to make one, I would have done a better job of it. I don’t know what I was trying to accomplish. I can just remember thinking, in my teenaged way, “Antidepress this.”
I don’t know how much time passed before my jaw clenched and my teeth were grinding uncontrollably. My face hurt, and for as long as I could focus on my jaw, I could keep it relaxed, but the moment my attention was drawn elsewhere, it snapped tight again, and my teeth were grinding away. I had thought one pill made me dizzy; I didn’t know the definition of dizzy. My thoughts spun so fast, and I was trying, there in the dark, in my bed, to fall asleep, but my head ached, and it wouldn’t slow down. I had never, and have never since, felt such great bodily pain.

I rolled out of my bed, retrieved a pack of cigarettes from their hiding place in the back pocket of a pair of jeans in a duffle bag in my closet, and stumbled to the front door. It was just across from my parents’ bedroom door, but it always opened and closed smoothly, without a creak. I softly clicked it shut behind me. Getting outside, though, had taken all the balance and strength I had. I crawled down the concrete driveway to my house’s detached second garage, perhaps fifty yards away, a safe distance should my one of my parents come looking for me. I sat on the stones inlaid in the driveway there, and smoked two cigarettes in the dark. Then I vomited, expelling whole pills, only somewhat eroded. I wretched again and again, the acid taste of the pills on my tongue. I lay down on the stones, for how long, I can’t say. And then I crawled back to bed, not sure if the vomiting had just saved my life.

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When I moved to Arlington, I did not make the drive to see Dr. Schack, as I did with Julianne. I didn’t immediately begin seeing anyone about medication. I continued to cut myself sporadically, and I smoked cigarettes and marijuana, and I took ecstasy almost every weekend. I lost more than twenty pounds in less than three months, so
that my ribs stuck out and my thighs didn’t touch. Soon, though, I wasn’t satisfied with skipping classes and coming down from the highs. I dragged myself out of the hole I was in and made an appointment with a psychiatric nurse practitioner at the university’s health center.

She was round, with short hair and glasses. I appealed to her, at our first meeting, to change my medication. I told her I couldn’t take it, because it made me sick; following the night that I took so many of them, my stomach had turned every time I swallowed one, which wasn’t often. The nurse said Zoloft was “too activating” for me and switched me to Celexa. I made it though the sample pack with no problems, and was still satisfied after a couple of months, so she kept increasing my dose. It didn’t produce any significant side effects — just a little fatigue, so she advised me to take it at night instead of in the morning. Still, I didn’t take it very often.

At that time, I had been living with a consciousness of my illness for almost three years, and I had become defensive of it. I wanted my difference to be acknowledged and appreciated. I believed my depression made me sensitive and creative. When I took my medication, I felt dull, and safe, and rounded like a spoon. Without it, I could reach out and touch euphoria, despondency, or a violent rage. I could cry just by thinking about it. I had little control over my emotions, but I was fully committed to them. I wasn’t happy, but I viewed myself as having been born with a particular sensibility, a particular state of mind that was me. I thought the medication would take me from myself.

I kept the pills around, and took one only when I began to feel overwhelmed by a feeling — frustration, anger, or sadness. And as soon as it slipped down my throat, I felt
better, more in control. I understood this was a sort of placebo effect; that it would take
weeks of the medication in my system to regulate the serotonin transmitters in my brain
(or some such thing) and actually make me feel better, but it worked for me. I took a pill
perhaps every couple of weeks, and I continued to store the refilled prescriptions in a
bottle in my medicine cabinet.

For seven years, I never took my medication daily for more than a few weeks at a
time. I made it through college and began graduate school. I felt fairly stable, but I was
prone to moods; I might snap at my sister, or I might hide under the covers of my bed
and wail as my boyfriend tried to peel the bedspread out of my clenched fists. My
relationships were suffering. I was not producing the quality of work I wanted in school.
Since I had graduated from the university in Arlington almost two years prior, I had seen
a psychiatrist once. I wanted to do better, so I began taking the pills I had left over from
my visit to her — in two years, I hadn’t taken three months worth of medication — and
then I made another appointment.

I hadn’t liked this doctor the first time I met her, because the waist of her pants
was unflatteringly high, and she’d indirectly advised me to get to know Jesus. Besides
that, her receptionist was tactless; commenting upon her need to promptly address a rip
in her desk chair by putting a piece of Scotch tape over it, she said, “I can’t stand stuff
like that. See, I’m just like you people!” The woman had never met me. I had no such
difficulties. I often wore clothes with holes in them.

At the second appointment, the doctor refilled my prescription, but warned me
that she couldn’t continue to prescribe to me if I didn’t check in regularly, at least every
six months.
Six months passed, and I kept another appointment with her. I had taken my pill almost every night, and I was, for once, running out. I had feared that they would change me, or fix me. In some ways, they did. I could no longer feel that push to run, the sensation that my own force of rage, or joy, or misery could carry me home. I felt more tired, the fatigue from the pills. But I deserved to rest. I had felt and followed that push for a long time.

It is likely that I will need the medication for the rest of my life. My prognosis is unfavorable. People like me, those who have experienced major episodes of depression, are always likely to experience another.

It is unlikely that I will continue to take them so diligently for the rest of my life. That push is a part of me, and I still have plenty to run from. I want to have both. I want to know myself, to experience myself as I was meant to be. And then I want to give that girl a break.

Eight years of treatment amounts to this: one hospital, one psychologist, three psychiatrists, hundreds and hundreds of pills. Six years of abuse equals three years of therapy. One grandmother’s suicide equals one granddaughter’s lifetime of medication.

I could say I owe my life to a group of people, to a bottle of pills, or to a series of accidents. None of it would be untrue, and I am grateful. I am grateful to be here, alive, twenty-three. I thought, when the whole thing started eight years ago, that I would never make it to see eighteen. I still find it remarkable that I did. I could credit a lot of things with my survival — all the doctors, all the treatments. But when I reduce it all down to the common denominator, I find myself. I have spent so much time wanting to die. And yet every time my life needed saving, I saved it myself.
The Intensity of Experience

My parents promised me a brother in the way they might have promised scoops of ice cream. I remember my mother, holding my hand in a parking lot as we walked toward a store, asking me if I would like one little brother or two. One, I said, though truthfully I didn’t want any. I was five years old, had no interest in boys. I wanted a little sister, but my parents had already narrowed down their search for adoption candidates — boys only. However, though not ideal, I was still excited. I had a seven-year-old sister whom I worshipped. Leona was a scrawny, freckly, bespectacled redhead, and the coolest girl I knew, since she got to go to school and had friends who didn’t live on our block. I wanted to be a big sister, too. If it had to be to a boy, I was willing to accept that.

We met Shane, a chubby, blond, blue-eyed three-year-old, and his foster parents, Troy and Alicia, at a restaurant. I imagine it was lunchtime, but I don’t remember the meal. When we left, my father tried to strap Shane into a car seat in the back of our white Chrysler sedan. Shane beat Papa with his fists, crying and screaming, “Troy-licia!” I remember the repugnance with which I viewed someone hitting my father. Hitting, in our family, was not allowed.

In the family Shane came from, not Troy and Alicia, but his biological grandparents, hitting was allowed. Almost all of Shane’s baby teeth were reinforced with silver caps, since they’d rotted from malnutrition. As an infant, Shane had been given beer in his bottles, because it was cheaper than baby formula, and it kept him quiet. He was only poorly potty trained, and wet the bed every night. He was afraid of water in any context — baths, showers, thunderstorms — and had to be held down in the tub to be
washed. He constantly antagonized Leona and me, contradicting anything we said for
the sheer fun of disagreement. On one occasion soon after he came to live with us,
Leona was rolling on the floor in the hallway, playing with her Boston Terrier, Alice, and
Shane peed on her.

I told my parents I hated him.

“Hate is a strong word, Ricki Lyn,” Papa said.

“No, Ricki, you love your brother,” Mama said.

“I hate him, too,” Leona said.

But my parents were right. I didn’t hate him, didn’t know what it meant to hate
someone. I had never known anything but love. I was wealthy and well-cared-for, by
every standard a spoiled child. Before we adopted Shane and moved to a larger house
in the country, I had attended a suburban Montessori school and been raised at home
by Adriana, my young Venezuelan nanny, who taught me Spanish and made me
cachapas for breakfast while my parents were at work. My father is an airline pilot, and
we went on lots of vacations. I have photos of myself in Costa Rica, feeding a sloth, and
wearing a blue dress with long lace sleeves for fancy-dress night on a Caribbean cruise.
When I was little, hatred was not in me. It would take me years to learn to hate.

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My family lived in a big, lakefront house in East Texas, about a hundred miles
outside of Dallas. It sat on eighteen acres of land, on which berries, plums, and roses
grew wild. In the backyard, Papa built us a playground out of bare lumber. Two swings,
monkey bars, a slide, and a picnic table. At one time, when we were little, Shane,
Leona, and I collaborated with some friends who lived on our street — our dirt road,
really — to carpet the upper level of the playground with moss painstakingly peeled from deadwood in the thickets around the property. We attended a small rural school, where all three of us made good grades. Shane got in trouble more frequently than Leona and I, especially for stealing. When Leona and I noticed that our allowances had come up missing for several weeks, we told Mama, who found a layer of crumpled bills floating free in the bottom of Shane’s backpack. But for some of my early years, I have no memory of major strife in our household because of him.

Very soon after the move to the country, my mother got pregnant again. It was a great surprise, since she was thirty-nine, but also a great excitement, especially to my father. It had been his idea to adopt Shane, not only because he was adopted at the age of eleven, after his mother died, but also because he loved children, and wanted a large family. And I was actually going to get a little sister this time. Then, three years later, I got another one. My mother was out of town when Child Protective Services called about a newborn little girl who hadn’t been picked up from the hospital; after Shane’s adoption, my parents had remained on the list of available foster parents. My father went and picked her up, and we never let her go.

Now there were five of us, Shane situated as the middle child, in between two big sisters and two little sisters. It was not long after this that he developed from a somewhat troubled child into a cruel and unfeeling adolescent. But he was also the only son, and perhaps more importantly, the adopted son. He meant something to my father, something deeper than I can understand, something so big that Papa’s love of all his daughters would become overshadowed by it, would entirely disappear from sight, though not, I know, from existence.
In my best estimation, I was about thirteen when my dog Ashley, a blue heeler, went missing. She’d been gone for a week and a half when my father stumbled across her in a big cage in the woods off our house. It was a chain-link fenced area, maybe six by six feet wide, with a large doghouse built into the back wall. The former owner of the house had kept a couple of German Shepherds, and perhaps lodged them in the doghouse when he was away for the day. We knew about the cage, but the trees and thorny vines had grown over it, and I, at least, hadn’t thought about it in years.

In the days after Ashley’s disappearance, everyone, including Shane, helped look for her. Papa thought she had been taken by a coyote. When he found Ashley and brought her back to the house, she was starving, but less concerned with eating the food we tried to give her than with nosing at my sisters and me in turn, seeking forgiveness for the imperceptible thing she must have thought she’d done wrong. Outside, Leona and I sat on the concrete curb that separated the driveway from the front yard, stroking her and hugging her narrow shoulders, as my father bore down on Shane with accusations. I averted my eyes.

I’m sure Shane would have liked to shrug, to turn his back on my father, but Papa can be a terrifying man. He is filled with love, but also with anger. He is six feet tall and broad, with dark hair and eyes, a Roman nose over a heavy mustache, and a voice that booms even when he sneezes. His anger, when it comes, consumes him — he can stay acutely furious for days, grumpy for weeks. Without having watched him yell at Shane that day, I can see the spray of spit that must have flown from his lips, his shoulders hunched as he got close to Shane’s face.
“I forgot that I put her in there,” Shane mumbled, head low.

He was lying. More likely, he checked on her every day, to see if she was dead yet.

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The house originally had four bedrooms, but with five children, my parents saw the need for more. They put up a dividing wall in a long, rectangular room upstairs, which my mother had been using as an office, to create two tiny square bedrooms. This gave us a total of six, three downstairs and three upstairs. Everyone shuffled around. My mother moved her office to one of the downstairs bedrooms, and moved my little sisters into the other, the one nearest the master suite. Leona, being the oldest, got the large bedroom with en suite bath upstairs, and Shane and I each moved into one of the little bedrooms.

I had a twin-sized loft bed, to save space, with a desk underneath, a tall dresser beneath my window, and a closet just large enough for a middle-school-aged girl to crawl into during a game of hide-and-seek. The attic space was off my room, and uninsulated, so in the summer it was so hot I threw my dolphin-print comforter to the floor, and in the winter I wore thick socks to protect my toes from the freezing, creamy-pink tile. An enormous old tree scratched at my windowpane.

I shared the upstairs bathroom with Leona, who would have been in eighth or ninth grade when I got my own room. She had brought home a Garbage CD, and in the shower I listened to the song, “Only Happy When it Rains,” on repeat. Sometimes the album would begin to skip, though there was nothing wrong with the disc, and I would step out of the shower, dripping, to adjust the CD player on the bathroom counter. But
before I touched it, the skipping would just stop. I was suspicious of Shane. I glanced at
the gap beneath the door to Leona’s room, then at the door to the den, the large
common space upstairs that separated my room and Shane’s from Leona’s room and
the bathroom. There were no mirrors being manipulated in the cracks. I didn’t know
what to make of the skipping song, I didn’t know how I was being lured into view, but I
knew that I was being watched. It’s true that you can feel it. There was no way for me to
explain that I could feel him there, at the edge of things, near me and invisible. I didn’t
tell anyone.

I didn’t say anything until the night I got out of the shower and was shaving my
legs — I’d found that standing under the water, I tended to lose my balance and nick
myself with the razor. I had a leg propped on the counter, and a voice I couldn’t locate
said, “You can’t see anything, she’s wearing a towel.”

I screamed. I opened the door to the den, then slammed it shut. No one was
there. I did the same with Leona’s bedroom door. No one. Still in the towel, I darted
across the den to Shane’s bedroom door, and tried to open it. It was barred. He had
pushed something, maybe his dresser, in front of the door. I kept screaming, I don’t
know what. I don’t know if I used words, or just howled. I don’t know if I called for my
mother or my big sister. I went back to the bathroom, shut the door, slumped on the
floor, and cried. By the time someone came — again, my mother or my sister, I don’t
know — Shane and the friend he had over for the night were both in his bedroom, the
doors now open, playing innocent. No, they said, they didn’t know what was going on.

It took a little while for my mother and my sister and me to piece together that
Shane’s bedroom window opened over the roof of the garage. He had been climbing
over the roof and onto the ledge of the second story, and peering in my bathroom window. He had cut one string on the blinds, so that the edge of one slat hung down; the night I heard the voice speak while I was shaving, his friend had been defending his view through the peephole Shane had made. My mother bought Leona and me a new set of blinds. She did not relocate him to another room, one without access to the window, though it would have been as simple as making the two of us trade. The new blinds got cut again.

I was twelve when we found out Shane was spying on Leona and me. He was ten. For a moment in time, a few weeks or months, it could perhaps have been said that he was only curious. I had matured early. In the sixth grade, I had large breasts, and was the tallest person in the class. I had begun wondering about sex. Apparently, so had he. But six years passed, the entirety of the time that I spent growing from sexual curiosity to sexual activity, and for six years he was watching me. He stood on the ledge outside the window, he drilled holes in the wall between our bedrooms, and for six years the hatred I had failed to feel toward him when I was a little girl evolved in me, not only for him, but for my parents, and most acutely, for myself.

***

I was young the first time I tried to cut myself. I don't know how old, but I was in my upstairs bedroom, and I was old enough to shave and own disposable razors, so perhaps twelve. My parents had upset me, and we were about to leave the house, but I felt the pressure of anger building inside me. I stood with my back to my bedroom door and hastily scratched at my wrists with a razor, trying to nick myself in the way that I did
by accident in the shower, drawing little spots of blood. I barely broke the skin, and then covered my wrists with my sleeves, and left with my family.

By fifteen, I knew to pry the blades out of the razors. I knew kitchen knives weren’t sharp enough. I knew to take a hand towel to bed with me, so I didn’t bleed on my sheets. I didn’t hate cutting, but I hated being a cutter; it meant, to me, that my mother was right when she called me “histrionic.” I often just traced a razor blade over my skin, but the thought that I was only doing it for the attention — a platitude that I’d heard directed at cutters in general — drove me to bear down and really cause some damage.

Within the first month of my sophomore year of high school, I was called to the counselor’s office after my diary, detailing my cutting sessions and occasional drug use, was found and read by my bus monitor. My mother came and picked me up from school. She made me an appointment, two weeks out, with a psychologist. Before the appointment came, I was in the counselor’s office again; I had cut the words “I'm going to jump off the roof” in messy block letters on my left forearm. My parents took me for a stay in the Behavioral Health Center, where I spent three days on a ward with other suicidal teenagers, receiving treatment. We met individually with a psychiatrist, attended group therapy three times a day, played games that were designed to build our self-esteem.

I was supposed to stay for seven days, but my parents didn’t want to cancel our annual family trip to Albuquerque. My mother called the hospital several times a day, to ask whether I could be released yet. On my second day there, one of the nurses informed me that I wasn’t required to take her calls. I knew that not to do so would make
things worse though, would make my parents even angrier. In order to make the trip, my mother asked me to tell the psychiatrist I was ready to go home. I thought then, and I know now, how wrong she was to do it. I didn’t want to go home. I felt good in the hospital, with kids I saw as being like me, away from my brother and my parents. I needed, for a little while, to be taken care of. I was failing, splendidly, at taking care of myself.

At school and at home, I was a pretty enough girl, tallish, with long brown hair and full lips. I was a smart kid, a straight-A student. I came from a wealthy family. I felt that when people looked at me, they would see someone normal, even fortunate, but I did not feel like that person. I knew I was pretty and smart, and I knew no one was going to love me or save me because of it. I didn’t matter. I cut myself because I didn’t want to look fortunate. I wanted to look like I was in pain.

Eight years later, the scars on my left shoulder are still the worst I have, five welts, like a scratch from a wildcat. I also have light scars on my right shoulder, the deep mark of the capital letter "I" from “I’m going to jump off the roof” on my arm, and a mess of raised, intersecting lines on my left inner calf. I don’t hide them, and I’ve never used anything to fade them, even though I hate when people ask how I got them. I don’t wear them proudly, but I do wear them, because sometimes I don’t believe how bad it got, I can’t remember how bad I felt about myself and my life. I can stroke the scars on my shoulder, and know it was real.

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After we had realized how Shane was spying on Leona and me, I had vicious arguments with my parents over Shane’s presence in the house. I once found a
notebook my mother was using to document Shane’s indiscretions, so she could later
give the list to his psychologist. One entry noted that my little sister, six years old at the
time, had come to my mother and told her Shane put his penis in her mouth — of
course, my sister couldn’t have used those words, because she couldn’t have known
what was happening. My mother understood what had happened, though, and she
didn’t tell me. She didn’t warn me or my other sisters. She kept it a secret. I brought the
notebook to her, and told her she was disgusting.

I hated how worthless my parents made me feel, how they seemed to value
Shane more than my sisters and me, to fight harder for him than for us. I had long
stopped being quiet; I became a hell-raiser. I can remember standing on the stairs
below my father as he yelled at me to just stop it, stop telling him what was being done
to me — I had asked him when he planned to add my little sisters to Shane’s harem of
girls, since he didn’t seem to have any problem with Shane targeting my older sister and
me. I was actually jeering at my father, belittling his impotent attempts to control his son.

Shane was there for that fight, skulking in the shadows in the hallway. I can
imagine his face, flushed and screwed up small in anger, because he hated being
exposed. He was maybe even ashamed, when Leona or I brought up his watching us.
Like all bullies, he was really a coward.

In response to my accusations, Papa said, “My father is dying!” My grandfather, a
man that my father respected and loved, had terminal cancer. My uncle, Papa’s brother,
wanted to move Grandpa to the Philippines for an experimental treatment, and Papa
was opposed. He thought it was idiotic to try to move Grandpa, and that the trip would
be a waste of money, which might leave my grandmother in need when the cancer
inevitably killed Grandpa. The fighting between them had alienated my grandparents, who I think essentially wanted to be left alone together for whatever time they had left. Grandpa died at his home in Washington State that year, and Papa hasn’t spoken to his brother since.

I know that during that time, my father was filled with grief over Grandpa’s illness, but I was unsympathetic. “I am dying,” I responded, “and you should kill yourself.” I believed what I was saying.

***

When Shane was twelve, my parents finally sent him away for a few months to a “boys’ ranch,” essentially a camp for troubled boys. At the time, I wasn’t sure what had broken my parents, but I saw it as a sign of hope — I thought they had realized that Shane’s problems were more than they could solve, more than anyone could. I thought they understood, as I did, that the only right action was to take him away from his sisters, away from all little girls, to a place where he could be managed and monitored, and couldn’t hurt anyone.

I can somewhat understand, now, that they looked at him and at me as children, as their children. They did not see that at fourteen, I was developing an identity, even a sexual identity, and that I was being influenced and restricted by my brother’s desire for me. I couldn’t even look at my own body in the bathroom mirror, because I wouldn’t have been looking alone. During the years that he slept on the other side of the wall from me, I sometimes heard him masturbating, and I felt filthy and defiled by the sound of his bed creaking. I worried he would come into my room at night. There was no lock on my door; Papa didn’t like locked doors in his house. When the enormous old tree
scratched at my window, I imagined Shane was sitting in its branches, watching me. I had nightmares. I still have nightmares.

Shane sent Leona and me each a letter from the boys’ ranch, saying that he was sorry and would not “peep” on us anymore. My parents made us read the letters. Shane had purported to his counselors that he spied on Leona and me because he hated us and he wanted to make us angry, but not because he wanted us sexually. My father passed on this information to me. “See,” he said, swirling a scotch and water in a glass. “If you’d quit making a fuss about it, he’d quit doing it. When you make a scene, you’re giving him exactly what he wants.”

I have forgiven my father, or at least tried to forgive him, for many things. For his anger, for his lack of understanding. I forgive him for being an airline pilot, for having been gone days on end; it was not my father’s fault that he was the only person Shane feared, and that his job allowed Shane the freedom to act on my sisters and me without punishment from our fatigued and conquered mother. But for telling me to take it quietly, never.

***

Still, I am able to forgive my father more than my mother. Like Shane, Papa came from an abusive family. He was abandoned when his mother, my biological grandmother, killed herself. Like Shane, he got new parents, another chance. He wanted so badly for Shane to get better, for Shane to become like him: educated and honest, wealthy and successful. He flipped a coin; it was Shane or his daughters, and he picked Shane. He lost that toss, did Shane no good, did his daughters a lot of damage. And when he lost, Shane lost, and I lost. We all did.
I forgive him more than my mother, even though, and perhaps because, he called the shots. I believe my mother, a student of psychology, should have been a better judge of Shane’s true nature, and a better judge of the severity of the pain I was in. Because she was a woman, I think she should have been more able to empathize with my fear of exposure, and ultimately of rape, something I never suffered, but which I always felt looming, a terrible possibility. It is unfair of me to judge her, because Shane was her son, and she must have loved him, and wanted to see the best in him. But I can’t grant her the same license to blindness that I grant to my father, because she did not have the same experiences, the kinship of the orphaned sons. She was simply too weak, too absent and detached, to speak for us.

In many ways, I acted as the mother figure in our family, especially once I was old enough to drive. Leona had moved to the Dallas area to go to college, and my mother had finished her Master’s degree and moved on to a Ph.D. program. I took my siblings to school, did the grocery shopping. When my father was home, I usually made dinner in the way he liked — a main course with sides and bread and sometimes dessert, a full meal. When he wasn’t home, we ate separately, frozen dinners or a collection of snacks; my mother called it fending for ourselves.

She had never wanted to be a stay-at-home mother, didn’t even want to have children, in particular, though she wasn’t opposed to it. She loved us, but she didn’t want us to be her life. She wanted her own life. Shane was too much of a burden for her; she didn’t want to deal with him. And I was volatile, sometimes screaming and crying, hurling accusations and insults, sometimes morose and impassive, sleeping
days away, nearly catatonic. It is possible that she could have reached me, but she didn’t try.

The mother of a friend of mine once told me she had enjoyed her daughter as a child, but liked her more as an adult, and I recognized the sentiment to be true of my mother, as well. Mama does not, I think, really connect with children. She has no understanding of the intensity of experience to a child or an adolescent. If a ten-year-old boy had been looking in her window as she undressed, she could have shooed him away; it wouldn’t have affected her psychological and sexual development. She was so unable or unwilling to understand the difference for a child that she brushed off Shane’s behavior at first, only grew concerned when he and I were both well into our teenage years. It was too late. She had already set the precedent for allowing him to look at us, and he knew there was nothing she would do, though she had begun to see that the relationships between my brother and his sisters, her daughters and herself, had gone terribly wrong.

Years have passed, and the intensity of experience has faded even for me. There is an active forgetfulness at work on my family — we speak and act and pretend as if my brother never happened. We do it because we want each other — I want my father, I want my mother. Does anyone want to lose her family? Now that I’m grown, I call my mother when I am heartbroken, disappointed, or upset, because unlike my father, she doesn’t tell me to suck it up. I can depend on her to tell me the job I got fired from was terrible anyway, and the man who didn’t love me back is an idiot. In return, she can depend on me to edit her letters and papers, to meet her for lunch when she comes to the city, to pick up gifts for my little sisters or my father at Christmas and on
birthdays. She is what a mother should be to a grown woman; she is my friend. But she wasn't what a mother should be to a young girl.

I will never forget two nights from my teenage years, separate instances, when she slighted me, made me feel so small and helpless I wanted to die. On the first occasion, Leona and I had formed a plan to catch Shane spying outside the window. It was after he returned from the boys' ranch, after his promise to stop watching us. Leona and I both knew he had not stopped, and never would.

We waited until my father was on a trip, because Shane never molested us when Papa was home. In the evening, Leona turned on the shower so Shane would hear it, and then she went into her bedroom, ostensibly to retrieve something — a hair product, a towel — as if she were preparing to get in. Downstairs, I slipped out the massive, hardwood front door, and latched it silently behind me. I stood for a moment in the driveway, looking up at Shane's back. His face was to the bathroom window. And then I spoke. "Watcha doing?"

He turned. I wanted him to fall. He was stupefied. "I was just walking across here," he said, as if there were somewhere to go from the ledge.

I left him there. I went back inside. I told my mother what I had seen. She said that since she hadn't seen it, there was nothing she could do. She told me I should have come to get her, to show her what he was doing. She told me there was nothing she could do.

On the second occasion, again on a night that my father was gone, Leona woke up screaming. Shane had picked the simple lock on her door with a screwdriver — by that time, even my father allowed her to use the lock, though I still didn't have one —
and gotten into bed with her. He put his hands on her. When I heard Leona scream, I bolted down the ladder from my loft bed, but even I was too late to see him scamper back to his bedroom and shut the door. Leona came to her own bedroom door in tears, agonized. By the time my mother appeared upstairs, weary of us, weary of her life, Shane must have been back under his covers, pretending to have slept through the screams. I don’t think my mother even looked in on him. She stood in front of my sister and me and she said, again, that she hadn’t seen a thing. She said she couldn’t punish him for something she didn’t see him do. She excused herself again. She acted as if she couldn’t believe us, when she knew.

I told my mother this story once, years later. “I don’t think that’s exactly what happened,” she said.

And I said, “Mama, I was there. I remember.” I can see her tired face, her impuissant gesticulation, how she threw her hands up as if to release something, the fact that she wasn’t going to help us.

More than anything, it was my mother’s disinterest that damaged me.

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I was fourteen years old when Shane went away to the boys’ ranch. He was sent away again, to juvenile detention, when I was sixteen. He had been on probation for one of his crimes, I don’t know which — it could have been for stealing a switchblade from my father’s friend, or for vandalizing a neighbor’s house by slinging mud all over it. I believe, though, it was due to an assault charge filed when he shoved one of his teachers at school. He violated his probation by continuing to spy on me, and my
parents had to call the police. At that point, it would have been a crime for them to conceal it.

I was almost eighteen when he was released. I was planning to move into an apartment with Leona, to go to college with her. I had graduated high school a year early, as she had two years before. We wanted out, and our parents wanted us out. They paid her rent and tuition, of course, she wasn’t on her own; they just didn’t want the trouble of having the three of us, Leona, Shane, and me, under the same roof.

But I was anguished by the news of his homecoming, news which my parents asked my psychologist, whom I had been seeing since I was fifteen, and who was dear to me, to deliver. They couldn’t even tell me themselves.

I had two little sisters to think of, then about ages ten and seven. Shane was large, obese and fairly tall. He suffered from bad acne, and in order to correct his behavior — the aggression, the stealing, the minor acts of vandalism — my father, believing military discipline was the solution, had for years taken him to the barber shop every week or so for a buzz cut. He made Shane wear a belt, and tuck in his shirt, so he looked nothing like a teenager, but in fact frightening, like a prisoner.

I hated so much to be watched by him, but I much preferred him to target me than my little girls. I was, at least, older than Shane, and big enough to defend myself. If I were gone, could he convince them it was not wrong to be touched? For them to touch him? I didn’t know. I only knew they would be enough for him, if they were all that was available. I don’t think he was a pedophile, I don’t think he preferred babies, but he was a pervert, and he would take what he could get. I was terrified to leave them.
Shane came home, and for a couple of winter months, we lived together again. On the weekend before my eighteenth birthday, I moved into the apartment with Leona, to start classes in the spring semester. I left my little sisters behind, though I could not trust my parents to take care of them. If he hurt them, I don’t know about it. Maybe if he did, they don’t know it, either. Maybe it’s better that way.

After only three months in the apartment, when our lease was up, Leona and I moved to a duplex my parents owned, a relic from my mother’s time as a real estate agent, when my parents acquired several rental properties. I got a job as a waitress, and started dating one of my coworkers, a kind boy, understanding, one whom I told about my brother too soon, and who later fell in love with me anyway. I finally began to pick myself up. And then my mother called one day to tell me that she and Papa were sending Shane away again, and he was never coming back.

I couldn’t, in the moment, pinpoint an actual feeling in response to her words. I was reeling. I was confused. I asked why he was going away, and she told me he’d stolen a neighbor’s credit card to buy minutes for his pre-paid cell phone. He had stolen many things since the time when he was little, when he stole my allowance. He had twice robbed the fire-safe box in my parents’ closet, once to buy himself a gold watch, the next time to buy a sound system for his friend’s car, in exchange for rides to school and social events. I wasn’t sure how to process that stealing was the crime that would make my parents give up on him for good. It was nothing new. It wasn’t violent.

Before I could acknowledge the absurdity of the event, before I realized how disgusted I should feel that a neighbor’s credit card was more off-limits than my body, I forced a reaction. It was almost maniacal, the way I ran to my bedroom after I hung up
with my mother, the way I flopped on my back on the bed, and threw my arms wide, as if in bliss. My new boyfriend was there, and I told him what my mother told me, that my brother was never coming back. I told him how great it was, how much it meant to me. I remember his discomfort at having to hear about the situation, of which he was aware, but which he understandably never wanted to discuss. I remember being upset with him for not sharing my relief. I remember I wasn’t relieved at all. I was nothing. It meant nothing.

I acted out, like people often do, the way I thought I ought to feel. I wanted to be excited, I expected the news would reassure me. For Shane to be gone should have made everything better, and in some ways, it was an improvement. My sisters were no longer in danger. I could be free of the worry for them, the anxiety that stayed and nagged at me not to be happy, not to recover, because they could be suffering. But everything was not okay when he left. He left me smaller than the five-year-old girl I was when I met him.

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It has been five years since my parents cut ties with my brother, and I still struggle to unwind the complexities of what happened to my family and to me. I struggle even to define it. My brother was adopted, so it wasn’t incest. My brother was younger than I was, so he couldn’t have abused me. I was never raped, so I wasn’t molested. But I feel like all of these words — incest, abused, molested — do apply. The atypicality of incest between non-blood relations, of the older child being the victim, of mental and emotional, rather than physical, sexual abuse — none of it makes me feel any differently. I was defiled.
And yet, I live my life now. Five years later, I’m still living it. I think of my brother every day, I’m sure. He crosses my mind, something evokes him. But I brush off those thoughts, and I go on. I’m sometimes tempted to credit my father for years of telling me it was no big deal that I was being abused, for telling me I didn’t have it that bad. I think, in my shallow, day-to-day thoughts, that he must have been right, because I’m fine now, I’m fine. I think I’m very strong. I do well in school, I do well at my job. I have good relationships with my parents, my sisters. I only feel the pain of the girl who slept on the other side of the wall from a monster when I choose to feel it. I am fine now, I’m strong.

But it is only those shallow, day-to-day thoughts that let me think it was never that bad. Because when I open up to the pain of that girl, it is like stepping behind the shower curtain to take off my clothes. I enter that locker of pain, and these memories drench me, and I am naked and surrounded by them. I feel them burning my skin, I feel the soap in my eyes, and there is no compassion in the water.