TO BE THE CHILD OF THE PRIEST

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This collection of creative non-fiction essays is written from the perspective of a Protestant Christian church leader’s daughter emerging into adulthood and independence. She labors to define her relationship with God, family, and friends and to determine the complicated, but pervasive role of faith in her life while coping with depression and anxiety; a brain aneurysm and malformation among other health problems; working in an all-male environment in the *Houston Chronicle* Sports department; the death of her grandparents; the death of a Muslim friend in a murder-suicide shooting; and her troubled relationship with an agnostic friend. Although she expresses her doubts in each scenario, she identifies purpose in the trials and accepts the challenges that accompany being the child of the priest.
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PART I

INTRODUCTION TO THE CREATIVE WORK
To Be the Child of the Priest

_Whatever shines through my childhood years_
_still nameless and gleaming like water,_
_I will name after you at the altar..._

“Sacrifice,” Rainer Maria Rilke

Essays

Much of what I know about creative non-fiction teaches me that to write memoir is to carve a meaningful pattern out of chaotic life. So, like the good non-fiction writer, I labored to give my life a theme while crafting the introduction to this collection of essays. I struggled to title the collection—with one-word titles even—to share this flawless theme with others, thinking that somehow my writing must have an identifying label that would unlock the reader’s understanding of my essence.

This reasoning was a grand trick my mind played on itself; it is not the reader my soul is concerned about. No, it is more selfish than that. I look for a label to simplify my experience because I want to understand me. I am a good non-fiction writer because I am the one who needs meaning like water. I fight for it. I try on costumes. I search the Bible for characters I’ve been taught to relate to. I try the lens of archetype: the coward, the best friend, the daughter, the evangelist, the unexpected whore. I stretch and scrimp and turn, only to find nothing fits quite right.

When really, maybe it’s only me who needs the foolish simplicity. Maybe, in order to be understood as a complex human, I must convey the complexity of being any human, accepting the inconsistencies, the variants, the imperfections in the many selves that appear in the essays that follow.
The first essay, “Service,” describes the experience of a preacher’s kid, not by definition—my father has never led a congregation alone—but as a daughter of the church. My father was an Assemblies of God minister and is a non-denominational elder. He has done his share of preaching. Many people know him and my mother, who has worked alongside him teaching Sunday school classes, in children’s services, in nurseries, and in the weekly food distribution to the Lake Dallas community. With my parents, I have spent a life in ministry. Their friends know me, carefully watch over me, and monitor the progress of my life. What does it mean to be called by God and equally called by others? Am I myself or someone else’s? I am the perpetual kid.

That is one label, the title of my first almost-complete memoir, *Memoirs of a Preacher’s Kid*. I was twenty, and I thought I’d figured it out. Surely preacher’s kid was the right term. But even Wikipedia lists a “definition” of this term, listing the two common stereotypes attributed to P.K.s. I should either be an obedient, eagerly angelic child or a rebellious reactant. My external behavior is more of the former, but my heart is usually in pain, caught in between these extremes and unsure of how to communicate the doubt, the confusion, the anxiety, the pressure. I affected the stereotype more than it affected me. I grew up an incredibly sensitive child, neither eager and attention-seeking nor angry and rebellious, although I was gravely obedient and absorbed others’ emotions. I am told that when my granddaddy sang “Happy Trails” to me as a baby, I cried. For punishment, all my parents need do was look at me harshly. I carried heavy, invisible burdens and still apologize for things that aren’t my fault. Even if the church exacerbated my personality, this was how God made me.
In response to “Why Peter Threw Himself into the Sea,” even though I identify much anxiety as created by the church environment, readers have asked, Why are you anxious? Why are you sorry? Explain please, what is wrong with you. Yes, much of it is me—as long as it’s taken me to admit it—and I don’t know. God allows all kinds. It is not an easy thing. My heart was broken to hear of the suicide of Matthew Warren, son of Rick Warren, pastor of the massive Saddleback Church in California and author of *The Purpose-Driven* books. He shot himself in his home on April 5, 2013. A first instinct is to connect his lifestyle or his parents’ to his suicide, the way one might attribute the bad behavior of child stars to their career pressures, but it isn’t as though he developed mental illness over time. I watched Rick and Kay Warren’s interview with Piers Morgan on CNN. Matthew struggled with depression and suicidal tendencies his entire life. And yet, they explained, church gave him immense compassion for others and the opportunity to counsel many in suffering.

This leads me to believe the fault is not the church’s, per se, but the effects of being a deeply distressed person in an environment that covers up individuality and appears to set expectations for what one’s feelings should be. Performance expectations and group narratives pitted against the unique, hyper-aware human heart creates the conflict in the essays “Service” and “Why Peter.”

I do not struggle with mental illness in the same way Matthew Warren did, but I know the pain of performing with compassion, wondering all the while what is wrong with you and rarely being able to communicate perceived unacceptable feelings. This doesn’t mean Matthew didn’t serve willingly—his parents indicated he did love what he could do through ministry—but
his own relationship with God was filled with turmoil due in part to his own illness. Both he and I are preacher’s kids, with a lot more going on inside than we can communicate.

This label remains incomplete. In these essays, my settings are more often outside of church. The preacher’s kid is drawn outside. I see myself as some kind of cartoonish Frankenstein’s monster, squinting at the light as I drag pieces of the church glommed together with my personality out into the world I must live in. I have trouble communicating where I’m from and what has made me. But like others, I have to make friends. I have to survive, but without a common background.

“Lost Years” and “A Letter to Paris” demonstrate the difficulty of this position. In these essays, I write about relationships with two of my closest friends, who it turns out have similar personalities. They are bold, vibrant—so many things I would have wanted to be, had I the choice—and cared for me when I needed it, despite the differences in our experiences. Instead of throwing myself into these relationships as freely as they did, I wavered between conformity and judgment, unable to express the balance of compassion until much later or too late. Without knowing how to behave in the world after a sheltered private Christian school, I was often silent, a coward and a judge in my worst moments—a monster to myself.

Much time passes in between the two essays. In middle school, I did not know how to stand up for myself. I did not understand how others could have possibly seen the world differently than I did. I am adrift in a world changing rapidly for both me and all Americans in the wake of 9/11. By “A Letter,” however, I’m an adult who is finally coming to terms with these differences and beginning to understand how to respond to them while maintaining her faith.
Essays in between the two would have elaborated on critical portions of my life that changed my perspective on my relationship with others and God, which I do in *Memoirs of a P.K.* I skip most of high school in this collection, despite my dramatic relationship with and love for a Mormon my father did not want me to date. This connected me to the human beyond the religious in others. And although “Why Peter” makes reference, I do not have an essay solely on the medical crises that permeated my college years that caused me to question my faith—if not ignoring faith altogether at points to be self-sufficient.

However, I do include dark awakenings in this collection. I have learned lessons in church that have nothing do to with God. “Snake Eyes” relates my experience as an agate clerk in the *Houston Chronicle* Sports department, from which God seems to be absent. The essay shows how sexual awakening can happen for a child of the priest, even in early adulthood. It suggests that forms of prostitution are learned in church, that they are perhaps best applied by children of the priest, and that church members can be predatory without meaning to be. In this essay, I am not simply the innocent preacher’s kid: I am witness and participant.

I’m sure readers would like to know more about the doubt and intense anger I felt toward my father and God in high school and college. Rest assured, it was there. But these essays are about more. I have finally claimed my active role in these relationships. I claim faith. The conflict is now in determining the role faith plays in my life. Instead, I turn to building bridges.

Influences

When I think of building bridges between secular and sacred, I think of non-fiction writer Donald Miller. In his breakthrough memoir, *Blue Like Jazz*, he writes as though judgment
does not affect him. He writes directly about his rocky relationship with God. He reminds me it is possible to successful while doing so. He doesn’t compromise on his convictions about God—even when they don’t make rational sense—yet he writes with incredible humility and proffers dignity to all experience, which makes him a model for my work. Miller writes in *Blue Like Jazz*: 

Sooner or later you just figure there are some guys who don’t believe in God and they can prove He doesn’t exist, and there are some other guys who do believe in God and they can prove He does exist...I don’t believe I will ever walk away from God for intellectual reasons. Who knows anything anyway? If I walk away from Him, and please pray that I never do, I will walk away for social reasons, identity reasons, deep emotional reasons, the same reasons that any of us do anything. (103)

Similarly, in my writing, I am not fighting for a theological apology in the traditional sense. I am aiming for honesty and communicable experiences, even though my perspective on them may be different. With Miller, I choose the “social reasons, identity reasons, deep emotional reasons” that drive us because I think they testify to the truth better than any rational argument. I don’t surrender the rational argument, but that is not my purpose in this collection.

On the other hand, stylistically we are dissimilar. I think Miller tosses out too many easy words. This makes him a good apologist with the ability to speak to any stranger. It makes him accessible to larger audiences, and his simple grace in each of his memoirs is enviable, but I want to strike a different chord in my own writing. I cannot leave an end of a paragraph at “social, identity, deep emotional.” I find I have too much to say in between Miller’s words. While Miller would enter an example scene, I would carry on, packing in as much as possible. I am anxious to offer every explanation, each unpolished thought as I experience it, and carefully choose descriptive words. I like appositives and series of fragments that build energy.
I think, if only I could be poet-memoirist Mary Karr. A reader is able to pause after each sentence of Miller’s. Many of his thoughts stand logically alone. They are calm and neatly packaged. Karr pulls the reader into the depths of memory with a complex rhythm. Her points unfold in artful cadence. She requires several sentences. In this way, she begins her memoir Lit with a letter to her son:

…Through that fishbowl lens, you’ve been looking for the truth most of your life. Recently, that wide eye has come to settle on me, and I’ve felt like Odysseus, albeit with less guile and fewer escape routes, the lens itself embodying the one-eyed cyclops. You’re not the monster; my face reflected back in the lens is. Or replay is. Or I am…Still, I want to show that single eye the whole tale as I know it, scary as that strikes me from this juncture. (Karr 1)

While Miller allows the writer to color his general words, Karr paints a crystalline picture. She uses adjectives and descriptive phrases liberally. She defines. She renames in a way that I might (fishbowl lens, wide eye, single eye). Reading on, you see Karr is not afraid of the dash, impatient to explain in the same way she might orally. I connect to this method. And although you can’t see it here, while Miller often employs stand-alone dialogues and uses narration to complete them, Karr flawlessly weaves pieces of scenes and dialogue from family or friends to complete her narration. My technique is somewhere in between the two—but one day I hope to achieve her level of smooth and enrapturing narration, while telling a story from start to finish.

For the life of me, I can’t write linearly through a problem, like Miller or Karr, which is why I adore Nick Flynn and try to apply a smaller version of his technique in my essays. This second poet-memoirist writes in vignettes in Another Bullshit Night in Suck City and The Ticking is the Bomb. He combines short pieces of memoir like a mosaic with recurring images throughout. The entire picture rings true to the reader, regardless of the logical completion of
his pieces. Similarly, I have a tendency to break right after a poignant scene, ending on a key word or image—like a chapter ending—and move onto the next significant piece rather than to solidly connect them with exposition. I aim to create a poetic effect in short prose with this technique.

Of course, these essays weren’t intended to emulate any writer in particular. I’m sure I’ve absorbed more than I realize from reading and reading alongside peers over the past couple of years, but in general, I am drawn to ideas more than I am to particular styles. If I’m being honest, I read what interests me, like exegetical books about Biblical women, Spanish-language poetry, books about other P.K.s, books on high school classroom management. Really, with non-fiction my method is to convey my honest, anxious, picky, fearful heart and hope it shines through as valuable to someone. This sounds childish, but I have faith I will reach the people who need to hear from such a heart.

To Be the Child of the Priest

I finally decided on an open phrase for a title, To Be the Child of the Priest. There is a label in the title, but the title is not a label. It leaves room for any number of action verbs, positive or negative. Learning, trying, hating, doubting, loving. The terminology sounds a lot like “preacher’s kid,” but priest is different. A pastor/preacher relays the word of God; a priest stands between God and man. A priest is a ceremonial mediator. Priests build bridges between holy and unholy. A priesthood is a sacred tradition, carried from parent to child with high stakes. This is about more than being the biological daughter of a church leader. It is about a creation of the church, but an autonomous figure, choosing to serve or run from tradition and choosing the limits of faith.
“A Car Rolling Slowly” is missing from the discussion of the essays. This essay extends beyond my personal experience in the church to my mother and grandparents, to those affected by the JFK assassination, death in general, the universal. I preferred to save this one until the end because, if there is a defining feature or “label” to stamp on my writing it’s that I see purpose in my life—not my story, but God’s covering. Death is a part of all lives, and I have tried to write about my grandparents’ death in a relatable way; but despite its distance from the church world, this essay throws my perspective into sharper relief. In “A Car Rolling Slowly,” I see purpose in the fact that my grandparents lived, purpose in a chain of history, leading from my grandparents’ birth (and much earlier) to mine through events that were entirely out of my control.

In all of my essays, I see one thing: in the middle of my faithlessness, my confusion, my doubt, God’s story has been solid and infinitely good in spite of the speck that my life truly is—that all of our lives are. Sometimes it’s hard to see. Sometimes I am blinded by doubt and what others might call chance. Sometimes I am not ready to admit it, and so I don’t say it, even in most of the essays. But once I conquer my blindness, I realize what I do, what I am actively doing. It is like breathing, like gravity’s effect. I cannot stop analyzing my circumstances for God’s intervention. I am looking for Him everywhere to explain me to me. I don’t know how not to be the child of the priest—fearing, judging, conforming, changing, apologizing, bridging gaps, but—always driven by a greater design and always a child. I can’t help it. Time and again, I lay a question on the altar.
References


PART II

COLLECTION OF ESSAYS
As I am burning copies of the sermon at my home church—where my family has been for twelve years, where everyone who has known me from childhood to adulthood expects what they expect from me, where I have cleaned coffee mugs and hugged freely and changed diapers with the purest availability—my father, sensing my growing frustration with an old computer, entertaining my muttering about our church’s organizational lack or the fact that I was not scheduled to burn CDs and yet I am doing it, says to me, “Baby, your service is whatever you want to give.” As he forms the words, I have a cinematic impression of the exact moment in time. Caught off-guard, I stand outside of what we have become. After all this time, the story has changed. The father looks at the daughter and speaks a foreign, graceful language. She wants to crumble to her knees and believe that it’s true.

“Is it, Dad?” I don’t ask, but almost do. My relationship with my father is filled with these almost moments. We are on the brink of critical conversation, but I cannot bring myself to disturb his worldview. This is the second version of my father, the sweeter one. The earthly one who works 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. programming computers. The one who will stop whatever he might be doing to rescue me by fixing the sound booth’s four-tiered CD burner, changing my car battery, explaining how credit card interest works. I hold onto this father while I can.

Instead, I nod my head. The clock reads 12:50 PM. Church ended thirty-five minutes ago. Instead we pause, as we often do, in mutual understanding of what we won’t speak, and he stands looking over my shoulder.

“Are you coming home for lunch?” he asks instead. “Your mom is making enchiladas.”
“Yes, I’ll be over soon. I think I’m almost done.”

This is the first time in our family’s history he leaves church before I do. It is strange to find myself here. I end up in the dim sanctuary in the sound booth for twenty more minutes making labels on a handheld machine, peeling them and sticking them on CDs. I am alone, performing an unasked for, but necessary dance. I have to seek out a deacon to help me shut off the lights and lock the doors. I feel eerily cold inside. I am not unhappy to help those I love, but unhappy my service wasn’t planned and unsure if this is something I can keep doing, especially here.

We are a church that doesn’t grow. There are no young people here. We can’t figure out how to keep them. Only a few children, and an odd mix of broken people from multiple denominations that filter in and out as they need the church emotionally or financially—not that we are wealthy. We help a few people a month, fix what is broken, and feed the community free produce each Tuesday. Maybe this is what a church should be, a family that serves. But we are a dysfunctional family, without the full-time to dedicate to service, with few who know how to edit bulletins or even play drums. The leadership is unpaid. Our time and human resources are slim. I weigh this in the empty sanctuary: do I really want to jump on this limping train? And then, do I want to be on a train at all? I’m an adult now, it’s decision time, and the answer depends on how I interpret the call of God.

Here is the story:

Long before this church, from the time I was born to thirteen years old, our family of four lived in a small salmon-colored house on half an acre near the Trinity River bottoms in
Irving, Texas, a suburb of Dallas. We were nowhere near what could be called country, but we were close enough to the wooded park down the road to be visited by raccoons and possums at night and stray dogs in the day. The neighborhood was shady and green, populated by tall oak trees and crepe myrtles. I was in love with the feeling of the outdoors there, especially before afternoon storms, with the heat rising and the wind spinning me, and with the feeling of the nighttime breeze. In the backyard, I regularly walked under the moon. I imagined a thousand-mile long string linking my heart to the violet sky. This was God to me. I heard purpose echoing, believing my communion with nature uniquely qualified me to be His child. Why my parents let me wander the backyard at night, or what they suspected I was doing, I’m not sure. Playing or bug-catching maybe. It must have been summertime, only about 9 p.m., given my 10 p.m. bedtime. Our St. Augustine was soft. How to describe these walks? How to describe the silent voice and texture of God to any satisfaction? I only know I was swimming through the deep end of the night air. I prayed and paced, and with each step, the moon moved with me. I was leashed to the sky or something as like God as I understood. I lifted up my hands, and invisibly, He would hold them.

At this time my father was an ordained Assemblies of God minister at an Irving church called The Tabernacle—a complex, really, with full resources: room upon room for classes and prayers and children and luncheons. He was not the pastor, but he taught adult Sunday school classes, was head of the altar call ministry, and had his own office in the building. My mother managed a large nursery. Together they directed holiday productions and led children’s groups. There were Bible study nights at my house on Tuesdays, Wednesday church, Friday night prayer meetings. I and my sister Becky tagged along in flouncy dresses,
aesthetically pleasing additions to the ministry. Our cheeks were pinched, we were photographed often.

Jealously, I read about Moses in Sunday school. When God called Moses, He sent a flaming bush, unconsumed, to emanate His clear voice so that Moses trembled in his sandals and bowed low. Jealously, I read throughout the Bible of shocking and clear interventions—craters in the ground to swallow thousands of people, talking donkeys, a disembodied hand writing on a Babylonian palace wall, and people who fell dead immediately after a great sin. But I was wretchedly confused: contrary to my reading, my Sunday school and private elementary school teachers reported that God spoke in whispers. I should strain my ears for that still, small voice. One night I’d hear a pattern in the chirping of my bedroom window crickets. It would sound like yes, no, or hallelujah. God could be brothy, so I might expect a face to appear in my chicken noodle or my Spaghetti-Os, and I would swirl into subtle understanding. No distinctive words. Only pulsating. Something like Morse code with I, the only recipient, in full confidence of my salvation. I embraced this. Although I knew that God’s correspondence history was hardly still or small, I took to the moon because a shocking intervention did not seem true or possible in my orderly suburban Christian life. The moon was the closest natural magic. I believed God might call me in its pale glow.

One Christmas, my parents noticed my love of astronomy and bought me a telescope. Christmas morning I jogged out of my room and down the hallway to find a long, rectangular present under the tree. I raced to open this package first. When Becky and I were kids, it was rare to get presents bigger than we were. If those showed up, we knew it’d be something good,
or that special word, \textit{expensive}. Not only did we receive a huge present, we merited Mom and Dad’s coveted favor. I remember only three such presents from my childhood: a hand-built 3x4 Barbie doll house, a keyboard, and this telescope.

“A telescope, really? Can we \textit{use} this?” I asked, disbelieving I could get any closer to the sky.

“We have to set it up first, baby doll.”

I squealed and let out a string of thank yous, before sliding out the Styrofoam casing. The telescope was silver and black, measured about two feet long, and came with a star wheel and guide to the constellations. Neglecting the other gifts, I tried to set up its volatile tripod. One slip of the clip on its leg and an entire side would slide down. I was delighted.

For a while afterwards, Daddy would take me out evenings, sometimes on the roof of our salmon-colored house. He’d help me set up and steady the telescope. He taught me how to find the Little Dipper, the North Star, and Orion, how to identify planets. I had no idea he knew so much about stars until then. We’d examine the moon. I discovered its bumpy surface—it looked like the popcorn ceiling at Granny’s house to me— and wondered what might lie deep in the muddy gray of its craters. We’d find the planets every now and then: sparkling Venus, dusty Mars, and even Jupiter with several stony, little moons.

One Saturday night I worked up the courage to ask, “Can we take the telescope up onto the roof now?”

The roof was a sacred prize, won only when Daddy was in a carefree mood.

“We need to go to bed. Gotta get up for church in the morning, and you need your beauty sleep, baby doll.”
“What if we don’t want to go to church? Couldn’t we just sleep in one day?”

This was an unthinkable question. Always church, always routine, always bedtime by 10 was the answer. But I pushed. I hoped. I wondered if there weren’t a satisfying, alternative answer.

“Sometimes, in order to serve others, we have to do things we don’t want to do,” he said.

Instantly, version two of my father gave way to version one. I was eager to please, and so I was not angry at my father for enforcing service or reinforcing this version of God. No, it was not anger, but longing I did not know how to articulate. I craved an emotional connection with my father and God that was sustainable and consistent.

I was about eight when my mother yanked a lemon-yellow sweatshirt over my head and handed me a foam-covered microphone. I was to perform a duet with a church friend in a Christmas play called Psalty’s Winter Workshop. Psalty was a life-sized blue hymnal, a frightening Christian Chuck-E-Cheese character with bulging eyes and furry, over-sized paws. Like Moses, I was given a script for my prophecy, but without a chance to ask as Moses did, *Lord, what if they won’t listen to me?* I was thrust onto a stage, one feature in a million features of a million Sundays, like a flood of candy or coins spilling out in perpetual motion after the final blow to a piñata, all scattered and disorganized: brown laminate top tables where I shuffle through tissue-thin paper to find Scriptures. Sword drills. Junior Bible Quiz team. Flannel graphs on easels. I see long sanctuary aisles, carpeted stages, glass podiums. Jesus. Texas. Little clear plastic cups and crackers. Velvet-lined offering plates. A boy named Christopher Meek who
kissed my neck in the booth of a Red Lobster one after-service lunchtime and stunned me so that I dove under the table to sit next to Pastor Patterson’s son Kyle. I easily switch from sweatshirt to tunic in an Easter play, wave a palm branch and chant Hosanna.

Meanwhile, when my father decided he disagreed with some Assemblies of God denominational tenets, he refused to sign paperwork renewing his ministry, and we searched for a new church home. I didn’t know why we were leaving. Becky and I were only told it would be different this time. Mom and Dad said they were looking to “hide,” meaning they wanted to take a break from leadership and service. As I thrived on the praise I got as a child from service with minimal responsibility, I wasn’t affected by exhaustion in the same way. I was okay with changing churches, only scared of a new environment. They assured me it would be fine, we would wander, find a comfortable church with other kids my age, sit in the pews.

Instead, I was dragged to older buildings and rougher services. Not knowing where to go, we pilgrimaged to the non-denominational, where my father became an elder and my parents were running children’s programs within a year. To motorcyclist Servants of the Lord with ichthys tattoos and metallic studded chaps. Electric guitars. A 6.5-tall pastor in heavy boots. Gone are the days of the roof and telescope. In place of a call from the moon God, I see myself standing on a ladder. Having vowed not to look at the curse words or Satanic symbols, I scrape chipped paint off the vandalized nursery portable building, outside of a sanctuary in a dirty brown field in Flower Mound. In place of a call, I see me at eleven. Before the wide use of PowerPoint to display song lyrics in church, God sent me an overhead projector—the old kind you plug into the wall with mirrors, hot light bulbs, and knobs for focusing. I sit down in the front row of the sanctuary in the dark in my cushioned chair. Warm air spilling out of the vent. I
make it my own art. I use a blank sheet of paper to cover second verses. I give the congregation access to worship lyrics at just the right time. I am told we are needed at this church, that these people aren’t as experienced in ministry, that they aren’t as Biblically literate, and we have to help them. Our secret service. Now, I can discreetly be important—enough to content me with no clear-voiced call from my backyard God—which I do happily for a while, until there is the woman the tall pastor left with for Pennsylvania. Her tight, faded jeans. Her long, dark wavy hair. I hear her nasally voice. I see the pastor’s closed office door. Me on my toes trying to peek through the glass dividing window. My father inside. People walking in and out. Quiet crying and loud yelling. I see who is left and only know what I’m told. My mother says we were wrong, and my father and his fellow elder Ray attract half of the split church like magnets.

In Sunday school, I was told only one Bible story in which God calls a child, not an adult, and speaks in a still small, voice—a voice that apparently sounds like a man’s. This is the story of Samuel, whose mother commits him to the temple to serve God and the priesthood. It is dark in the temple, and old Eli the priest, Samuel’s caretaker and tutor, is nearly blind; his service is nearly done. They are both sleeping when Samuel hears a voice in the night crying, Samuel! Samuel! Likely expecting God to have sent something more obvious, like a blazing fire or an angel in a chariot, Samuel rushes to Eli. Samuel mistakes the voice of God’s for his patron’s twice before Eli explains Samuel is hearing God. I suppose I would point to this and say that God does speak to children in the night and that there is an experience like the still, small voice. If there is, I have no idea what it sounds like. So many nights under the moon, I cried *Speak Lord, for your servant listens*, and in return, did not hear words like Samuel.
But I took into account the evidence of Samuel’s story. I thought maybe it would take time as I became a more spiritual person, separate from the church I saw around me. It’s amazing: my faith was greater at eleven or twelve than it’s ever been. I tried to make up words I heard, pretend whispers in the rustling of my backyard. I believed God and I still had a special relationship as I rocked back and forth on the swingset in the dirty, brown field in Flower Mound. I sang and wrote mini worship songs in a sequined turquoise notebook. It had a beaded pink butterfly on it to mark it. I held onto a feeling, deep in my heart that I belonged to God and He favored me, even without a call. My relationship with God had nothing to do with church.

In place of a call, I see me at thirteen. In a new building in a strip mall next to a bar called the Red Lion with Ray, my father, and half of the congregation, I learn to speak when spoken to and to identify predatory male visitors. As a young woman, every man becomes my protective father. Ray becomes pastor; my father remains an elder. I write puppet shows for the children. I put their snacks in cups. My preteen sister and I perform, with voices and all. I practice with the youth worship team, although I am uncomfortable singing now. I help my mother paint a mural of the Garden of Eden in a boxy nursery. Animals and Adam and Eve in harmony. Gallons of green acrylic paint for awkwardly shaped leaves. I scar my knees on the carpet staples from kneeling too close to the wall base. I cultivate a writing life alongside church, in which essay follows essay, high school to college to adulthood—from How My Father Coped with My Dating a Mormon and I Thought God Wanted to Kill Me, or Wearing My First Bikini in high school, to How I Now Must Feel About My Sister Dating a Catholic. My turquoise notebook becomes Word documents of hundreds of pages of feelings I keep inside and
reassurances that God, indeed, does love me, even though I can’t seem to locate the moment he intervened in my life like so many others can, even though I can’t wrap my mind around the reasons for our service and our attitude toward it sometimes. God, I ask, at which point am I empty?

My life rolls steadily onward. I find I am never empty. I become an adult and heave it all around in an invisible suitcase of experience, experience that is becoming rarer, from what I can tell. When friends read about my family history, they tell me they are not familiar with growing up in the church and call themselves pagan or heathen, in a jokey, casual way. They tell me they are unfamiliar with my faith. I thought some of the details were predictable, what you might see on southern Christian TV. Children singing on stages. Hearty handshakes. In reality, I am beginning to see that my world is the foreign one. I am the stranger, characterized by religiosity. I sometimes worry that this is what others see from a distance: a collection of foreign acts that make up faith or a person of faith. Church people and church things jumbled together in a foreign world. I worry I have seen myself this way. It takes a while to shake me out of finding my identity in church and to remember I am human. I am just like everyone else who does or doesn’t love what they do, who acts authentically or hypocritically. It hadn’t occurred to me until that Sunday my father spoke those other-worldly words: willingness has something to do with it.

Here is a new story:

I visit my parents on Sunday afternoons to have lunch with them and use their washing machine. Last year, I tried living with them full-time to save money. It wasn’t
excruciating. We don’t argue or annoy one another too much. But their constant presence turns me into a whiny child who expects food and them into parents who ask their adult daughter why on earth she’d leave the house after 9 PM. Once a week visits better keep our relationship intact. My Sunday afternoons are peaceful and fond now. I think my week-long absence encourages my parents to talk to me more. The Newman household, full of introverts, has always been quiet. We shut our doors and read our books—but we now have open conversations on Sunday afternoons I didn’t think we were capable of.

My father spoke up some Sunday after my experience burning CDs, out of the blue: “Ray and I were talking—you don’t have to answer now—but if you’re up for it, maybe you’d like to start something up with the kids again.”

Covenant Fellowship Lake Dallas hasn’t had a children’s church program in over a year now. The woman and her husband who were one of two couples’ teams in charge of the program divorced and left the church. Leslie and Jeremy, the other of the pair, were too busy serving in other areas to manage it alone.

“Maybe,” I said. “I don’t want to commit to something if I can’t do it fully.”

I surprised myself. At this moment, I was not avoiding the subject or buying time. I had a choice, and I was answering truthfully. Since deciding I’m going to stay at my family church until I get married next year, I want to help with what I can. But I know the dangers. As I was reminded that Sunday in the sanctuary alone, our church is full of leaders who don’t really have the time, and so we end up with sloppy products, like the perpetually incorrect—and hilariously so—bulletin. On one Sunday, it read: “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wigs as eagles.” That Sunday I spent half the sermon
doodling bald eagles in curly, Victorian wigs and opera glasses on the bulletin while my mother watched over my left shoulder and tried not to explode. I have tried too many times to turn in corrections to the bulletin that are never fixed. Equally, I don’t know what good it would do to start a children’s ministry with one or two kids and a stressed out graduate student. But at the time that my dad asked me, I had been honestly praying about the best way to serve my church family, in a way that I would be talented, given that burning CDs did not thrill me. I had been thinking about kids in particular, so it seemed like God’s direction. Was this it? Was this the still, small voice Sunday school teachers spoke of? Did it come through others and circumstance? Through my own willingness?

A couple of Sunday afternoons after that, I announced my decision. It’s strange: I have trouble talking to my father directly and seriously. Perhaps it’s leftover emotional distance from my childhood. It still feels like I’m prying open a stuck door. Once we get there, we can talk, but I never know how to enter. So I began with what’s become our Sunday joke:

“Dad, I’ve decided I’ll work with the kids if you let me fix this.”

I held up the day’s bulletin, covered in my editor’s marks. “It’s awful.”

“Sounds like an excellent deal to me.”

What was happening to me? Why the ease, why the jokes? I suppose I needed a way into service that didn’t make me feel like I held the world in my hands with everyone staring and it would dissolve if I made a mistake.

For a while over lunch my parents and I discussed the logistics, like the need to find someone to partner with me before I can start up children’s church. We discussed how I could actually revise the bulletin without offending anyone. Our conversation poured out like a
bucket, long full, until my mother was tired and went to take a nap, and it was only me and Dad, and finally, with bravery, I came to my reasons for volunteering temporarily. I said something like I want to help the church while I can, but—

“Dad, I better not say.”

“No, please, go ahead.”

“I can’t stay. When Curry and I get married, we’re moving.” When he was silent, I continued, “I can’t handle this long-term, not here. It’s not that I don’t want to help, or that I don’t love you all, I just think I can do more good elsewhere.”

I paused to look up at his eyes, hoping with all of me not to have caused pain. No pain. Instead, he only nodded—no shock, no true disappointment. It was only understanding, as though he had been waiting for the day I chose this path.

“We probably could all do more good elsewhere. We talked about that once, Ray and I did.”

“What do you mean?”

“I knew we shouldn’t have stayed. I saw the signs a long time ago. It wasn’t long after Ray became pastor that I knew we needed to get out.”

“But—you could’ve made that decision, Daddy. You know that right?”

“Do you remember, this issue came up back then. We had a conversation right here at this dinner table? I told you we had an opportunity to leave, and you and your sister didn’t want to go. There were tears.”

He was right. Becky and I wanted to stay because we were settled, because we liked our church friends.
“I remember. You still could’ve moved us, Dad. Sorry we were such pains about it.”

How could he have left it up to us? Surely it wasn’t only us. I felt guilty for my part in it, but there was ownership and regret in his voice. For a miraculous moment, the versions of my father merged. We just didn’t talk about these things—feelings and church together. We never really have.

“I think it was a mistake. Your mom says it wasn’t. To think of all the people we’ve been able to help, through Veggie Tuesday and everything.”

“I guess—you can’t leave now?”

He began shaking his head rapidly and wrinkled his face. It was full of duty.

“Nope. Our feet are nailed to the floor. The infrastructure would collapse.”

I stopped here, without the guts to question if this were true. Did he feel as stuck as I felt? Or was it the little moments of grace that carried him through, or the people we have been able to help, as my mother said? Maybe it was both. Maybe he’s been as lost as I have this whole time, looking for a different call. How much I have underestimated my father! When he said, “Your service is what you want to give,” he meant service would be the most difficult choice I would have to make. He meant it is difficult to recognize that you do want to serve, that it might be God’s call. He should know: staying is the only thing more difficult than walking away.

On yet another Sunday, Ms. Cindy, affectionately known as Sister Foot, approaches me. She is a thin neonatal nurse with curly red hair, calm but assertive, the grandmother of a
toddler I babysit, and one of many church mothers I respect. She hands me a three-inch white
binder of Sunday school curriculum. I sink a little with the familiar weight.

“Can you teach the kids two weeks from now?” she asks. “Both Fern and I will be
gone that weekend.”

I get the odd feeling I am a part of a dance I did not choreograph, a movie script I did
not write. The words approach the daughter’s lips.

I see the choice in her question. It is the same language, but the meaning is entirely
different. I am being asked now.

I say, “Yes, of course. You’ll just have to show me what to do.”

The invisible audience watching the invisible stage boos. The daughter is not
supposed to say this. The daughter is free to walk away now. The daughter is a pushover! Yank
her.

No, the daughter is much stronger than this.

“It should be easy,” she says, heaving the binder open on a fellowship hall table. “The
lessons are numbered, and you read the questions down this column.”

Cindy flips through a few pages of goofy, cartoon-drawn Bible characters with words
in bubbles. The kids are on an imaginary quest to find a treasure. Each Sunday they pin a new
picture representing the lesson on a map on the way to the final X.

“I’m a bit nervous.”

“Nervous?” she asks. “Haven’t you done this before?”

“Only puppet shows.”

Saying yes is easier when I know I will leave here soon. But I also say yes because I see
grace in service now. It is freeing to yes, not oppressive. I know that after I leave, I can do it again because I want to, and maybe because I have wanted to all along.

Isn’t that crazy? As a child I believed in two versions of God. There was a God of grace, the one I preferred to listen for, and a God of duty, the one I rolled my eyes at, the one I was bored with, the one I took only a selfish sense of pride in serving. Service has never been what I want to give, and this is the problem. I wanted to hear, experience, and know God, but I didn’t want to do anything for Him. The split was in my personality, not His. All along I searched among the endless details of church, analyzing my circumstances for God’s intervention, when really, He was calling me every day. He was waiting on me to make the connection between my love for Him and my actions. There are no fiery chariots or earthquakes, but there is service—one long, consistent call to service.
The Lost Years

Some nights our dreams make clowns of us. This morning I was in a brush field, inflating multi-colored pastel balloons with helium in all shapes and sizes and tying each pair of my underwear to them. One by one, I sent them wobbling up to the sky. First, the cotton coral, then the silky black with lacy cream edge, until I had no underwear left. Maybe my subconscious wants to play a prank: across the metroplex, unsuspecting people will emerge from their homes to find women’s panties in their subdivision yards and on their roofs, dangling off the rain gutters, or brought in with the dog. Maybe I just want to go underwear shopping. I wonder at my brain—how it is that I can call this dream meaningless, when other nights I will see a face from my past, a person long gone from me to whom I was close, and in the dream I will feel nothing but normal, as though in my brain that person has been close to me all along, and the passing of time is for naught; but I wake with a shudder from these dreams, believing that this person may return to me in the present. I am haunted: the dream reminds me that yes, I know the shape of this person’s face, the sound of her voice, and I am shocked at my own memory. While the clown dream will fade in over-dinner descriptions and a barrage of new meaningless dreams, I walk through my day carrying meaning in the memory of one young woman’s true, solid face. There is something like the feeling of being lost to carry with it. Now, out of the dream, I’m in a wonderland all over again. Underwear floats to the treetops. As I walk through vast brush fields and swamp smoke, I fight to get the dream face out of my head. I try to make the guilt her face calls up make sense in my present waking hours, as with any feeling from a dream that sticks to you. I fight to get back home, to remember what is real and why I’m here.
For seventh and eighth grade, I attended The North Hills School, a charter school in Las Colinas in Irving that is now ranked among the top fifteen schools in the nation. It has one of the best International Baccalaureate programs, a stiff application process, and a worldly, multicultural atmosphere. Sometimes I like to think that if I had stayed there for high school, I could be at Yale right now. Speaking several languages. But I should not flatter myself. Those two years remain insulated, isolated like me at the time. In middle school, I had only a small group of misfit girlfriends; trembling, misshapen nerds with frizzy hair and out-of-date shoes to wear with our uniforms. We were the ones who didn’t roll up our plaid skirts, who restricted ourselves to only one neon bracelet on our wrists. I didn’t have much beauty to boast regardless. I was pudgy with bangs that traveled in a sharp, straight line across my forehead. My dirty blonde hair came to my shoulders, curled slightly at the ends. My face was oily and my teeth weren’t white. To my classes I carried a large cube of an insulated polka-dotted lunchbox and a mesh, lime green purse with sequins. I was thirteen and rarely thought of boys, except to mock them. I remember these lost years like a dream.

In U.S. history, Ali Kahn—a dark, lanky boy with pronounced eyebrows, a hooked nose, and pants he wore clamped on with a belt halfway down his butt to elongate his torso (that was the style)—and his partner in crime with the crooked eye, the always stupidly smiling Jinseung Lee, hijacked the class with anatomy lessons to impress their friends.

“Look, Mr. Williams, I’m grabbing my wenis!” Ali would say.

“I don’t want to see or hear, Mr. Kahn.”

“But Mr. Williams, it’s just the skin on my elbow, see? See? It’s my wenis!”
They cared about attention, but not from everyone. The overweight, outcast boys, they made fun of. The misfit girls in the back, like me and my friends, Sahra and Melanie, they left alone or completely ignored if they could.

In Algebra with Mr. Daniels, who was also the middle school principal, the pair could ironically get away with more. He wasn’t as sharp or hip as Mr. Williams. Poor, short Mr. Daniels, with his pink, bald head and slight lisp. He was doomed when he let us devise our own team names for Jeopardy. Some chose Gangstas, Fire Power, the My Little Ponies. He wrote these reluctantly on the white board as the names were called out. But Jin’s team name gave him extra pause.

“Pen fifteen,” said Jinseung Lee. He smiled at his fingernails, holding them up close to his unbalanced eyes nonchalantly as if to check them for chips or dirt.

“Pen fifteen is your team name?”

Mr. Daniels found it remarkably tame. Jinseung put his hands flat on the desk, hunching forward to make his plea. He shook his head, said sweetly: “I would be devastated if this couldn’t be our team name, Mr. Daniels.”

Poor Mr. Daniels wrote it on the board numerically. Pen 15, with the letters and numbers all-too close together. He realized his mistake too late.

The girls were different. Moody. Mean. Zeena Khalaf I remember clearly. Her face was symmetrical and tan. She was a tall, dark-haired Iranian, who straightened her hair into a glossy sheet. They all did. But the boys found her especially gorgeous, even though she had braces. She made braces look trendy, what with pink neon spacers and a line of bracelets down her
forearm to match. Her skirt was just the right length to show off some of her muscular thigh. (It barely passed the arms-length credit card test.) While I was huffing and stumbling to make the P.E. mile in under twelve minutes, Zeena Khalaf jogged lightly past the line at 8:50.

Zeena Khalaf. I once made the mistake of thinking she might be a nice person. We ended up in the girls’ bathroom together at the same time during Ms. Merritt’s science class and I tried to make small talk with her, a gesture of approval, to show I could be normal and not completely invisible. I emerged from the stall with a wan sigh and my green sequined purse over my shoulder, while she was adjusting her skirt in the mirror. I tossed my hair over my shoulder and said, “It smells in here.” I suppose I was expecting a “Yeah, I hate these restrooms” response. They were always gross, poorly cleaned. A nod or an “Mhm” at the very least. I suppose I thought myself brave for speaking at all to a girl I didn’t know, and maybe she would notice and take pity. Instead I got, “It’s a restroom,” before she smoothed her skirt and swooshed out the door.

I stayed for a moment to loathe myself under the fluorescents. I stood frozen in my insufficiency, a time warp of two years I didn’t believe I could emerge from. This is all I remember feeling, without knowing what happened in these years or when. The order of events hardly matters. I pushed my bangs up and back into a bump at the crest of my head. I didn’t have a bad forehead. Maybe I could pin them back like Zeena Khalaf. Maybe if I had better hair.

I shouldn’t have been surprised at Zeena’s shunning. I was a strange kid. My first impression on my peers involved me standing up each time I answered a question in class. I
didn’t speak to my classmates. I spoke to my teachers, and I was right every time. I had just come from seven years at a private school in a solid red brick building, where, after silently raising our hands, we were taught to slide out of our desks, stand erect with our hands laced before us, clear our throats, and then answer as articulately and politely as possible. You got extra points for mentioning Jesus or God in your response. There was no shrinking down into your seat if you were wrong. You took it like a man. We weren’t allowed to hunch over afterwards. We refolded our hands on top of the desk.

The North Hills teachers didn’t say anything about my carried-over classroom demeanor (thanks, teachers), so I continued to stand each time I answered a question for at least my entire first week of seventh grade. I know I noticed that other kids didn’t do this, which made me weirder for continuing. It was in science class with Mrs. Campbell that a girl named Andrea who wore buns and bows and didn’t button her top buttons finally asked me, “Dude, why do you stand up when you talk?”

I gave it up. And I soon gave up the idea that my middle school years counted for anything. I would go home each day to will myself into the future and past. I splayed myself across my bed in my pastel purple-and-green painted room to write letters to my elementary school friends. I emerged from the cocoon of these years gratefully, vowing not to return. It may be my brain’s way of protecting itself that I remember so little.

But then there is the girl that haunts my dreams.

Sahra Zarei was nothing like Zeena Khalaf. She was a short Iranian with frizzy and curly mouse-brown braids and bright, eager hazel eyes, framed by dark, pronounced eyebrows. At
4’5’’ and squatty, she made up for her stature with a determined walk, teacher’s pet intelligence, and commanding Brooklyn accent; when she spoke, she meant it. Because she was busty—a blessing not bestowed on the majority of our friends—her white uniform shirt gaped at the buttons. Because she was short, her plaid skirt covered her shins. You barely saw her legs. But when we met, she accepted me instantly, and we became best friends, the solid core to our small circle of girlfriends. She was always smiling a large, lippy smile at me, asking me about my weekends, ranting about Mr. Williams’ assignments. I loved her for it.

Mr. Williams’ favorite project—he credited himself for the idea and the catchy title—was called “Look Who’s Coming to Dinner.” Sahra and I teamed up to pick six figures from history to describe and glue on a trifold poster. If we could invite six real historical people, dead or alive, to one dinner who would it be?

We sat in the back row of Mr. Williams’ room, tapping our pencils to think, when Sahra suddenly slammed her hands down. I jumped.

“I don’t think men should be allowed at our dinner,” she said.

“What do you mean?” All I could think of was men, actually.

“I’m tired of dead white men. Let’s pick a woman that’s alive!” Sahra half-stood, raising her pencil in the air. Eureka. She yelled across the room. “Willy, our project is going to be awesome!”

“I think your Mom made your braids too tight today, Sahra.”

“Ha. Ha.”

“You do have a point though.”

“Right? Let’s pick someone smart.”
Our first choice was Marilyn vos Savant. Although her claim was tenuous, she was the last Guinness record holder for highest IQ in a woman, at 190—before people decided IQ meant nothing. Then, to be fair to men, we included Lincoln and Ghandi. I don’t know who else.

To work on the project, we spent a Saturday at her house. I remember her house looking like an Eastern temple. There was strong, spicy incense burning. All tiled floors and gold. Some odd statues. Massive Persian rugs. I thought they might be rich. They didn’t have a maid, but Sahra’s mom kept asking her, “What can I get you, mami? Do you two want some snacks? Should I make some popcorn?” She had just taken us for massive burgers at Fuddruckers in the Irving mall. “Do you need my help?”

“Ma, I think we can handle it.”

I had the sense that Sahra was in control, or at least that her mother was a pushover. If I had ever said that to my mom—if I had called her Ma— in that tone, I would have been smacked. I admired her boldness. I admired she could manage to be visible to herself.

When she burst into fourth period U.S. history the following Monday, she stopped suddenly, putting her hands on her hips like Superman.

“Okay, Willy, we know who’s coming to dinner. What do you have for us today?”

I was in seventh-grade Latin with Mrs. Kennedy when the towers fell on September 11. Mrs. Kennedy was a shortish woman with a red-haired bob, a graceful Southern voice, and bright blue eyeshadow. She was called out of the room while we were making flashcards of prefixes and suffixes and when she came back in, she said, “I don’t know what you all believe in, but if you have a god, I’d say some prayers.” This shocked us into silence. We briefly thought
we might have been in some grave trouble, until we were given an explanation at the end of
the class period. We couldn’t have understood the situation as well as she did. But when I got
home that day, I sat in front of the news for hours in equal silence instead of talking to God.
The news has been a drug to me since, my favorite segments being the national or world news.
I’ve always preferred ABC’s World News with Peter Jennings and now Diane Sawyer to anything
local. To watch makes me feel I am a part of the world, that I can know and care about exciting
things, even if they don’t affect me, that I can be a little less lost in the world.

Our group was sitting at a fold-down lunch table (only the cooler kids got the round
tables with chairs): Kelsey, Kelly, Roheen, Sahra, Melanie V., Leslie, Stephanie, and me.
Strength in misfit numbers. Girl power. We were usually quiet until someone thought of
something cool to say, as practice for our attempts at social lives outside of lunch.

This time it was Kelsey, a sweet girl with almost-gray hair. Braces. Skin so pale you could
see through it.

“Ya’ll, guys, before we left the other day, I looked back and the cleaning lady was wiping
down the table with a mop.”

Kelly, a girl who was so skinny she looked perpetually cold and was always pulling off
her wiry glasses to clean them, corroborated Kelsey’s story.

“Yes, yes. She’d mop the floor in-between and then hit the next table.”

“So, anyway,” said Kelsey, “that’s why the table always smells like throw up.” She
flashed her braces and grabbed Kelly’s thin wrist. They crumpled into each other, giggling.
“Or poop, really,” said Melanie V. She was loud, a thick-haired girl from India, who would sometimes talk so fast we had to calm her down. Melanie V. laughed maniacally, her unibrow scrunching into an even darker line. She started to say something else, but Sahra spoke over her.

“Ew guys, ew,” said Sahra. “You should totally report that. I might have to write a yearbook story on this.”

“Yeah, call it why the lunchroom smelled like poo,” Melanie chimed in again. This caught the attention of our neighbor tables.

Roheen initially looked up, disgusted, but she gave a half-smile before looking back down and picking feebly at an artichoke casserole. She had the smoothest hair out of all of us. Not a wave or split end in sight. She constantly looked down at her hands and her voice was so soft. If she said anything, we wouldn’t have known. Melanie was laughing too hard again.

Leslie and Stephanie, who were in their own world at one end of the table, peered down the line.

“Why did I just hear the word, poo?”

On our passing period from lunch, we were a pack of vandals, hitting flyers in doorways all the way down the hall with red pens. Mrs. Kistler, the English teacher, told our honors class that together we would form a group called the Grammar Bandits. We were to correct signs across the school, as obnoxiously as possible, saving the world from misplaced commas and adjectives that should be adverbs. Needless to say, we took this more seriously than others in the class. Sahra and I walked arm and arm, singing our anthem, Conjunction Junction, What’s Your Function? She convinced me to sing it louder until she switched to using her insulated
water bottle to mimic the pop star Selena we’d seen in a Spanish-class movie. I feigned embarrassment, but we were laughing so hard we had to pee.

We didn’t often talk about our religions at school. I don’t remember any religious or racial tension post-September 11, even though thirty to forty percent of the students at North Hills were from Islamic backgrounds. This wasn’t the case with the private Christian school I had left in sixth grade. We had some Indian students there, but all converted to Christianity. At BCA we would have been talking about how some world religions are violence-oriented, how the jihadists were Muslim. When we talked about the crusades or the Spanish Inquisition, we were reminded that those people were Catholic not Protestants. And the witch-hunting, torturing Protestant Puritans? A historical anomaly and largely un-discussed. But these differences meant little at The North Hills School. Even if I was not as self-aware as I should have been, I realized that none of the girls I had lunch with judged or hated me, like I was told they should or might. I was thankful to know my 70-year-old sixth-grade teacher Mrs. Anderson, whose skirts touched the floor, could be wrong. Praise God, finally.

And yet. The world is small and likes to remind you of your embarrassments. It is the bad memories that stick. I later saw Zeena Khalaf on a cruise my family took after my high school graduation. She was standing on the promenade in a billowing skirt with the deck wind attacking her glossy dark hair. I was bang-less, muscle-toned, in a bikini. Of course she didn’t recognize me, and I couldn’t say anything. In middle school I had watched her constantly, listened to her speak and get attention, begging God to make me as beautiful as her. But she wouldn’t have known that. I’d have no connection to go on besides NHS and a non-
conversation we had in a smelly bathroom. I chose to see through her and walk past her. I did not understand the unfairness of the universe. I did not know that as opposed to a chance-sighting of Zeena, whom I cared little for, I would never see Sahra again.

The last I’d heard of Sahra, she was a Dallas socialite in short, sexy dresses, her hair finally straight, hanging out in international clubs, with so many Persian friends. She loved the Mavericks. She made a big deal of being Persian, of having Persian pride. Some of her family owned a popular Iranian-American ranch. With her help on a world culture day, we turned our homeroom into an Eastern magical land with yoga music, spicy food, and colorful scarves. After I had moved on to a public high school, she’d stayed at the North Hills School, became wickedly smart, as she deserved to be, and went to UTD. I last talked to her once or twice on AIM, AOL instant messenger in my late high school years. The conversation was insignificant. We said we should see each other, hang out, that we missed each other. We never did see each other. Instead I saw her publicized picture on a news website with the faces of her family in the shooting. That large, lippy smile. Her prominent nose. I could hear her voice echoing, like in a dream.

It was the day after Christmas 2011. I was standing in the kitchen making Honey Lemon Ginseng Green tea when my mother beckoned me over to her computer, something she often does to show me some silly meme, a desperately cute animal, someone’s status update that I may or may not have seen. I can tell she is disappointed I am not as engulfed in the excitement of social networking, that I don’t read as many articles.
“Did you hear about the shooting that happened in Grapevine?”

“No, what happened?” I asked.

“This man shot six of his own family, then turned the gun on himself. Christmas Eve, can you imagine?”

“That’s terrible,” I said, and shook my head.

She read on, dictating the details to me. I stopped when I heard the names.

“This name sounds familiar to me—didn’t you have a friend named Sahra a while ago?” she asked.

I walked to the computer. She scrolled down. There were pictures. There was Sahra. Sahra Zarei, my short Iranian friend, looking beautiful in a silk cocktail dress, posed with her parents at some dinner event. She stood sideways with her hand on her hip, taller than her father who sat in a chair for the picture. He had speckled skin, was slightly bald. He looked gravely at the camera. I’d never met him, but heard he was a dear. Her mother, Zoreh, was half-smiling behind her father’s chair. Suddenly I remembered her graceful walk, the clack of her heels across her home’s tiled floor, the way she peeked into the room to check on us, even her fancy, loopy signature on the checks Sahra would bring to school for extracurriculars.

My mother kept on.

“Did you know this girl? Look, it was an honor killing,” she said. “They were Muslims, and Sahra’s aunt wanted to divorce her uncle. She had moved out into an apartment with her kids. I’m sure he couldn’t take divorce in his family.”

“Yes, mom. That was my best friend.”
She turned to me. She had not expected me to say yes. She now beckoned my father. “Chris, Katy knew this girl!” shouting it through the house. I left before her gushing could continue.

The news called it “Christmas Eve Massacre.” Sahra Zarei, her mother, and her father, were at their aunt’s apartment celebrating Christmas, opening presents, when her uncle came dressed as Santa Claus. Sahra sent a text message to her boyfriend at 11:13 AM, and twenty minutes later, they were all dead. Some neighbors said they had heard shooting, but it was Sahra’s uncle who called 911. *Help, I came over for Christmas and I shot my family.* Some stories say he was “dressed as old St. Nick” or that “opened presents were found among the carnage” as though to parody it sickeningly— as though to draw attention to the uniqueness of the crime, the bizarre elements of it, like in an odd Poe detective story, without any care for the people involved. I am reminded of Poe’s genius Dupin who cares less that two women are brutally murdered in the Rue Morgue than the fact they are murdered by an orangutan. Sahra’s uncle killed his estranged wife and his teenage children (the nineteen-year-old daughter I remember was so beautiful), his middle-aged brother Sahra’s father, his sister-in-law Zoreh, and Sahra herself. She was my age. Twenty-two.

I had no feeling after I heard the news. I went up to my bedroom, closed the door, looked out of the window. Creepily, all I could hear was the name of that stupid project. *Look Who’s Coming to Dinner. Look Who’s Coming to Dinner.* I could not and still cannot bring myself to think of her final moments. I’ve never been in a shooting. I can’t imagine the terror. I took
comfort in the fact that her earthly suffering was now over, but I wondered whether or not she’d be in heaven. Upon anyone’s death, I will never be able to shake the inward-turning reaction: should I have been a better “witness”? A question engrained in me from seven years of Christian school and my evangelical parents. Could I have been? I look for ways to blame myself, to turn any sadness into guilt that would drive me to fix something. Guilt is a more familiar reaction to me than sadness. I thrive on productivity, and sadness is so unproductive. But I came up short. I had not spoken to Sahra in at least seven years. We were no longer friends. Did I have a right to grieve for someone I’d abandoned over time? That I’d last spoken to without any feeling over AIM? There was nothing to fix, and I could not go back in time to change who I was to Sahra or anyone else.

Although September 11 had shaken me, I had not taken death seriously. People did not die at twenty-two. They did not die at thirteen or fourteen. At that age, I did not understand enough to even attempt to be a beacon for the unconditional love of God: instead, I was sometimes a moral vigilante. This was not an effective strategy.

I often sat on the indoor bleachers during P.E. with Coach Campbell with Leslie and Stephanie, whom I perceived to be the rebels of our group of misfits. Coach Campbell, who believed everyone should be in athletics, insisted that in P.E. we were still the Panthers and should have to work just as hard as “true athletes”. Green and gold pride! We wore mustardy-gold t-shirts and forest green elastic shorts, with floppy crotches designed for boys. On the bleachers in our ugly uniforms, I spent conversations with Leslie and Stephanie as the third
wheel looking down at my chunky white tennis shoes, listening only, with no room to interject my pious thoughts.

Stephanie was the anomaly: six feet tall, substantial, redheaded. She had actual boobs and needed an extra-large t-shirt. If she were skinny or at average eighth-grade height, she might not have been among our friends. Zeena might have thought she was cool. Stephanie talked about her encounters with older boys, which Leslie entertained—but I was in horror. Would she French kiss the sixteen-year-old who had invited her over to watch a movie? What should she say next to the convenience store manager-guitarist she had been chatting with over AIM? At some point I told her that both were dangerous. She told me to piss off, and I told her I worried about her soul. After that, we didn’t speak much.

But on one afternoon it was Leslie. I hadn’t expected it from her.

“We shouldn’t have to run a fucking mile,” she said.

The mile was an activity we collectively despised. It was the only school activity in which any of us made Bs and Cs. Under ten minutes was an A, ten to twelve was a B, and anything after was a C or failing. I agreed with her—athletics and school performance reports should be separated—but I nearly gasped at the word. This was the first time I’d heard it in person.

“Leslie!”

“I don’t care, it’s true. We aren’t all going to be fucking athletes.”

“You shouldn’t use language like that.”

Stephanie started laughing. Uncontrollably. It took me a second to realize it was at me.

Leslie merely looked at me, one eyebrow raised. We spent a moment locked in a stare in which I realized it might be uncommon for peers to correct each other’s language or for anyone
to care who said what. She turned back to Stephanie, and I shook my head and shrunk back into listening. This was the best I could do? I thought it was my job to bravely speak up on these occasions. I thought that was part of my witness. What then? Nothing. My middle school years were a perpetual state of being appalled. Appalled at the noise level and the language choices and confronted by worldviews so foreign to mine, even though I rarely spoke about it, even though it rarely came up. I was powerless to confront it, to say anything remotely Christian to people who had grown up atheist, or Muslim, or Hindu. Sahra’s family were secular Muslims. I realize though, that while I might have played moral vigilante on occasion with my Anglo-American friends whom I thought should be Christians, I would say nothing to Sahra or to Roheen or Melanie. They were also so much kinder, more devoted to their religions than any Christian I’d met, enough to go without food, enough to not be at school on holidays. And then Sahra, who was just a genuinely nice person. One of those people who deserves all good things out of life. All compared to me, a coward and a silent judge.

Capture-the-flag was the only thing we appreciated about P.E. We had to run a mile out onto a paved walking trail (Las Colinas is a swanky part of Irving, with random recreational areas for the wealthy—one of which was behind North Hills) but once we made it to a set of sparse woods we’d break out into teams for an hour-long battle.

I’ll never forget: miraculously, Sahra and I were deemed valuable assets to our team. We were hidden puppy-guarders. We weren’t fast enough to make it across enemy lines, but we were skilled at invisibility, so we camouflaged ourselves as best as we could in the bushes around our flag. When enemies approached, Sahra would yell
“Attack!”, and we’d break out of the bushes. Ali Khan and his pack of banshees would bolt so fast they had to grab their sagging pants.

But before the action made it to our realm of the wood, we crouched silently, looking at each other, as though waiting for our lives to begin. We brimmed with the excitement of waiting to be important. We did not think about how I would move away within the year. How she would stay and end up with more friends than we had combined. How I would change my views of people, myself, and history. I would go on to be as much of a teacher’s pet in high school. But I would secretly fall in love with a Mormon my parents didn’t want me to date. I would find myself naked in a baseball player’s living room, squealing in the passenger seat of his car on an icy January day. I would lie sometimes, but I would stand up for the helpless. I would become less invisible to myself. I would forget that Sahra was part of my transition, and it would take her death for me to have any gratitude for her as a source of security and her opening my eyes to everyone, all kinds of kind people, in my lost years.
Why Peter Threw Himself into the Sea

When I was nineteen, I discovered my brain was bleeding. I was on the floor of my Houston apartment stretching, trying to breathe out the weight of my Honors College course work, when I realized the right side of me had gone numb. Dead as a rock. Stroke! Stroke! Stroke! cried the Internet, and this was why my roommate took me to the ER, and a doctor told me he thought I was crazy (A stroke at nineteen? Preposterous.) until the radiologist found it on my CAT scan: a dime-sized shadow of blood in my left parietal lobe. Add to this an aneurysm, right on an ophthalmic nerve at the base of my skull. Then came the appointments, the pills, and the absences. A puffed up doctor. A surgery or two.

This is as fast as and small as it seems compared to what comes after it, what bleeds through it. I wish this were about the brain bleed, but it is about what comes after trauma and the thick bubble that hardens around it. It is about why, for a couple of years, I saw an on-campus counselor, had panic attacks, and cried through the book of Genesis. It is about why Father Abraham, its primary character, and I would have long conversations over my morning coffee in the two years following the bleeds discovery.

With the steam wafting upward, I sent up my sacrifice and a few choice words: Father Abraham, what do you know about faith that I do not? Father Abraham set out in faith for a God he did not know, away from his father’s house to a place he did not know. I huddled in my Houston apartment, far away from my parents’ home, and told him, Father Abraham, you spent years meandering in the desert, chasing the echoes of God’s voice off of mountains and altars. God must have given you a good reason. Of course, Father Abraham did not answer, but I thought something would come to me after reading his story over and over. There is much left
unspoken in his story. Perhaps one of the most baffling passages in the Old Testament is
Genesis 22: God asks Abraham to sacrifice his own son, to send up his own blood as a burnt
offering, and Abraham complies without complaint. Granted, God prevents this sacrifice at the
very last minute. He sends an angel to stop Abraham’s hand on the knife. But the point is that
Abraham did not need panic attacks or counselors in the recovery process. He did not need
anyone but God. And here I was, blasphemously needing so much more.

I can still see myself: swollen-eyed, wearing a loose sleeping t-shirt, my hair in a knot,
sitting Indian-styled on a rough, beige sofa, waiting for voices to materialize out of the thin
pages of Scripture on the coffee table before me. My tall red-headed roommate, a music
education major with an incredible voice and faith in God, would leave the apartment for class
early and composed, smelling like just enough hair spray and perfume. She had no need for
coffee in the morning. Bra-less and bug-eyed, I tried not to envy her calm or her tissue-smooth
skin. I parked on that sofa for as long as possible. It was safer inside than out there, where
women needed calm and hair spray for survival, where any number of things could trigger my
mounting anxiety.

A 72-hour bout of insomnia had occurred a week before I went into the hospital, before
I was experiencing the stroke symptoms. After I got out of the hospital and things calmed
down, I started seeing a sleep doctor at my mother’s recommendation, which felt like one more
thing to pull me under, just one more rock in the burden I was already carrying.

“Mom, I don’t want this,” I said. I drove with my phone tucked between my ear and
shoulder. I was going to get my face fitted for a mask, a part of a CPAP breathing machine. I had
been under the sleep doctor’s care for a couple of months, and he thought I might have a mild case of sleep apnea.

“Give it a shot. This may be what you need to sleep better.”

“You haven’t seen this thing, Mom. It wheezes and drips and looks like a big, plastic Darth Vader mask. It straps onto my head and covers my entire face. Wearing it causes me more anxiety. And then I’d have to clean it every day and carry it with me when I travel. It’s added stress.”

“You need to tell the doctor that.”

“I did. He didn’t care.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

My mother still believed that doctors cared more about me than making extra money from the insurance company off of equipment like CPAP machines. During this time, I never met a doctor that I liked. I was bitter.

“It’s true. He told me that once I got past that, I would be sleeping better. My body would want to sleep more and I’d wake up more refreshed than I have been.”

“I honestly think that better sleep will reduce your stress. And I would love for you to be off of the sleeping pills.”

These were not good conversations for me to have while operating heavy machinery. While talking to my mother, I got lost on my way to the mask-fitting appointment, even though I had been to this office at least six times in the past two months. The Houston roads began to look the same as I tried to explain that the issue was I couldn’t fall asleep with the mask on in the first place! My first experience with this awful mask was during my first sleep study. Sleep
studies are the strangest thing: they have rooms set up at the doctor’s office with beds. Floral comforters, lamps, dressers. I was to sleep in this room while they had me hooked up to monitors, had the CPAP breathing mask on me, and watched me toss and turn through hidden camera. After I got ready for bed, the technician came in to glue wires to my head. They were testing for electrical impulses in the brain. Hooked up, I looked at myself in the mirror in an all-too sterile bathroom adjoined to my fake bedroom in the doctor’s office. We had been reading Jane Eyre in my British novel class, and I appeared to myself a Bertha Mason—what I imagined she might have looked like. A crazy, Victorian shut-in with at least twenty wires stuck to my head, my hair splayed out like a medusa’s. I had a two-pound monitor strapped around my chest, an EKG in case seizures were affecting my sleep. And then, the CPAP Darth Vader mask. This evil, whirring piece of machinery that attempts to give you more oxygen and keep your airways open. To my surprise, they told me I did, in fact, fall asleep during this sleep study. In the follow-up appointment, the assistant used her pen to point out little “disturbances” on the monitor print out. They called these lapses of breathing, but I think I was probably crying. In a second sleep study for further experimentation, they would do all of the above and stick a skinny, plastic tube that dripped water through my nose and down my throat. I don’t even remember why. In any case, I had been for two of these sleep studies before it was decided I should wear the mask as a permanent medical treatment, and this day I would have one fitted to my face. It was no wonder I got lost on my way to the office: my subconscious was trying to protect me. Run away from this awful place with the simulated comfort, the plastic drip tubes, and the men who glue wires to your head.

I arrived twenty minutes late and walked into the office breathlessly.
The receptionist told me to please have a seat. That was it? The doctor wasn’t waiting on me? I hated this. Hated that I had tried so hard to get here, even though I didn’t want to, and the doctor wasn’t ready to see me. I hated that I had gotten lost, like the child I was.

My sleep doctor’s name was Gerald Simmons. His face actually reminded me of a bulkier Richard Simmons’, sans fro. He was a neurologist-sleep doctor, chosen because we wondered if the cavernous malformation—this cluster of bleeding cells in my brain—and my insomnia were related. He ran his bulky fingers and a tape measure over my face. Then, we tested masks.

“I don’t think I like this,” I said. I wanted to continue, to say more, to take charge of my personal healthcare. But I was nineteen. I was scared and alone.

Oh, well, would I prefer the extra nose cushion? The forehead strap? (That would cost extra.) The travel case for easier transportation?

The elevator doors had barely closed before I broke down. I was upset for being a baby, being anxious, somehow not being able to handle my adult life. Once I got back to my apartment, I went for my nightstand basket of orange thick plastic bottles, picked up the Ambien, pushed down and twisted to release the white lid, and shook out some sleeping pills into my cold hand. How many would it take to dissolve me into oblivion? To never have to suffer through insomnia or the anxiety? I turned off all of the lights in the apartment. I stood by the window looking through the blinds at a large oak tree wondering if I were special to God. Why me, in this place, here, right now. God could have placed any soul in my body. He could have placed my soul in the African Congo. In a small Canadian child’s body. A canary’s. If God was God, could I reroute his magnificent plan simply by sending my soul somewhere else? Let someone else be a sleepless Bertha Mason.
I had not taken the pills, but air wrenched itself from my lungs. I felt deep sobs coming up, deep spasms of the diaphragm. The weight of inescapable God on my body. He lived in the oak tree, in the wind rushing through it. I used to go out to the oak trees in my backyard as a child to talk to God—I suddenly realized I was shaking all over.

I called my mother again.

“Mom, I think I am having a—a (gasp) panic attack.”

“Okay, baby, I am going to count to ten, and I want you to breathe.”

Nineteen years old and a baby. But I held on a little longer. I stood with my fingers forcing the blinds apart, staring at the oak. One, two, three, four...God is still here...five, six...God made the oak tree...seven...the oak tree is here for a reason, today, now...I cannot escape God...eight, nine...

In my twenty plus years in the church, I have had to overcome certain myths about conversion. Within and without the church, people tend to understand the parroted “asking Jesus into the heart” as the moment of conversion to the Christian faith. Asking Jesus into the heart, believing in him for salvation, trusting in, calling on. In many ways, these words are cheapened by common use. Of course it sounds ridiculous: almost nothing changes so entirely or genuinely in a moment—especially not people. And what is the heart? What does it mean for a deity to enter it? “Jesus in your heart” sounds like a gift from the Wizard of Oz. “I accepted Christ as my personal Lord and Savior on the fourth of X in the year Y.” The natural response is Congratulations. It sounds like a graduation day. A lottery win. A big promotion. The phrasing is ironically repulsive to me. Fair or not, it reminds me of shallow faith. Shallow faith was the girl
on the couch who thought salvation was walking out of the door in a sea of calm and hair spray. Shallow faith thought that miraculous healing or resurrection should be enough to make her happy.

I thought I’d get over these things, I really did. The suffering and the wandering. Especially when, some time in the midst of those sleep studies, I turned out to be okay, I thought my trust in the Almighty was secured, a tight knot it took years of childlike faith to tie. The news that the bleed would most likely not be life-threatening should have been that moment of sweet relief, joy unspeakable, when God comes through after all his promises: No, Abraham, do not sacrifice your son. Or no, you will be okay. The bleed is contained. You will not lose your language skills, your memory. Should this not be a conversion of sorts? Evidence that God had been there all along? Shouldn’t I have not wanted to die when I returned to my apartment after my mask fitting, relieved a mask was all I might need?

For so long, I clung to the authenticity of the salvation moment. I don’t now deny that this quick conversion happens for some people; but for me, someone planted so deep near that river, who does not know when she took root, there is no miraculous moment. In my life, I have instead found seasons of conversion, myriad moments of the deepening of my faith in a God I find more mysterious the more I read about him. I actually think that if it comes down to semantics, you don’t ask. Faith happens to you. You stumble upon it like the edge of a nightstand on the way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. More often, it has nothing to do with you. You are only a click in a complex machinery, a flash in the window, a shell in the tumbling sediment of an invisible ocean. Thus, the years after my hospitalization for the bleed became a season of conversion I did not ask for. I was a shell in a raging ocean.
Yes, I was okay. I had the aneurysm stented, and the effects of the bleed controlled by pills, checked on periodically by brain scans over a two plus years period. But during this time, Father Abraham and I continued our morning conversations. I wallowed in Genesis. I developed a soul-slaying anxiety. Some days, I was so afraid of others, convinced they were coldly filtering each word I generated, that I could not make phone calls. I couldn’t look at myself in the mirror, fearing that I would loathe my appearance, and not want to leave the apartment. I wondered where all this had come from, enough to see an on-campus counselor the next school year. I was embarrassed at a problem that had not been solved by prayer, by Scripture-reading, by pleading with the Almighty to take it away.

My counselor, a dark-haired pre-doctoral student with a perpetual chipmunk smile, said she was going to help me become a “recovering perfectionist” in the span of my ten free sessions. I wasn’t sure perfectionism was the source of my anxiety, but when you’re too anxious to even make phone calls, how do you bravely contradict the perky girl in the swivel chair?

In her office, I sometimes feigned getting comfortable by wedging myself in between the cushions. This was to buy me time to think. Sometimes I tried very hard to put together elaborate explanations for my emotional problems. I wanted to help her help me. *Hi, my name is ____. I talk to dead patriarchs as intermediaries to a God who doesn’t speak to me—or seem to heal me fully, for that matter.* Other times, the answer came surprisingly easy.

“Do you feel guilty?” she asked me.
“Yes.” (Of course! How did she know? Do most people feel guilty the way that I do? I wondered. The way that it clicks into place in my brain as the explanation for the fundamental mysteries of my being? Guilt about what? It hardly matters. It’s just guilt. Straight up, I couldn’t carry the weight of getting out of bed in the morning guilt. My existence was a punishment, a traditional Jewish years-long desert-wandering, exile, famine...)

“What do you think you feel guilty about?”

She crossed her legs, leaned forward. Pressure. Pressure. Waiting.

“Uh, many things...Everything, I guess.”

This is the point at which I would clam up, when I had to get specific. She had a camera blinking in the corner. I had signed an agreement to be videotaped, so that her supervisor could review it with her and give her tips. I had wanted to help, but it didn’t help me. The camera seemed to stop time, its eye fixed on me coldly, permanently. It told me I needed to be a model test case. I needed to be easy. What would it make the most sense to say? Be specific, Katy.

“Do you feel as though you have to live up to a certain standard?”

Then, a toss of her dark hair and a quick mark on the clipboard. Pressure. Pressure. Waiting.

“My dad is a pastor,” I blurted out. (Did that make sense?) “Well, he’s not exactly a pastor, more of an elder, in my church, for many years...and I think that may have something to do with the pressure I feel.”

My counselor tilted her head up optimistically. We were getting somewhere.

“I can certainly understand that. Tell me more.”
More? Where did I even begin? That more represented the fabric that made me, the God I believed in. If I told her one thing, I’d have to tell her everything. In my heart, everything was connected. A million little strings tied from me to church, to my father, to my platitude-spouting mother, to a backyard I prayed in, to a private school, to Sundays, to my rebellious teen sister, to worship services, Christmas plays.

“There’s a lot to tell,” I said.

“Well, when did you start to feel guilty? Maybe we can pinpoint what is triggering this drive to be unrealistically perfect, the need to do everything right.”

I was cornered by the shape of her words. Unrealistically. The need. This was the first time my determination and discipline had been painted so negatively. I was foolish to try so hard, she seemed to say.

“ Probably in elementary school. I went to a private Christian school, I made all A’s, was kind of a teacher’s pet.”

“Did your parents expect this from you?”

“Yes, I’d say so.”

“And what were the consequences if, say, you made a B on a test?”

“It was more of something I could sense, in the way they spoke or acted...They didn’t send me to my room or anything—but they weren’t proud of me. They didn’t seem to be affected when I made A’s, or finished projects. It was just expected of me.”

And then she dropped a pre-doctoral psychology bomb.

So casually, coolly: “So you are wanting praise that you didn’t get.”
She was still looking down at her notes when I jolted in my cushioned seat. I leaned back and furrowed my brow, as if to take the force of her words. Whoa whoa whoa. I didn’t like either half of that sentence. To want praise is prideful. To say I didn’t get it means my parents were somehow unloving. It was okay for me to say it, to cope with it, but it was suddenly not okay for her to say it. Also, I realized, it wasn’t entirely true.

“Well, I mean, they told me I was pretty all the time. Told me I was smart. Told me I was wonderful. They actually did give me a lot of praise, now that I think about it.”

The camera blinked its cold eye. She was drawing it out of me.

“So you’re afraid of not receiving that praise on any given occasion, of not living up to those standards of pretty or smart or wonderful. To not be these things means not being yourself.”

“Yes, that sounds accurate,” I admitted. But there was something missing. I could tell by the shape of her eyebrows—relaxed and close to her brown eyes, almost sleepily—she had more in her arsenal. This was not her epiphany face or tone.

“Katy, you began by telling me your dad is a pastor. If feel your parents wanted you to be perfect, do you think the God you worship wants you to be perfect? Do you feel guilty about not living up to his standards?”

Then, the epiphany face. She nearly broke into her chipmunk smile. Suddenly, it had nothing to do with my parents. Everything to do with me. Me and “the God I worship.” It could all be inside of me, nothing to do with anyone else. That was more realistic to fix, after all. Our own brains are our own problems, she seemed to say, as though God were only in my brain.
What did I expect her to tell me? And not only that, she seemed to be telling me that high standards were unreasonable.

“Maybe you are right,” I said. “But, I mean, I am called to live up to certain standards. My parents aren’t entirely wrong to have given me standards…”

I didn’t answer her about God. I didn’t want her to touch my God. Maybe she could understand my relationship with my parents, but I did not think she could understand my relationship with God. I did not think there were any easy or definitive answers about that. In fact, I purposefully did not seek out a Christian counselor because I did not want the trite answers I had already tried. But of course here I was: staunch, stoic little Newman woman defending her parents, the super-Christians who formed her with many trite answers. Their hold was stronger than I thought. Was I angry at them? Plenty. But not angry enough to stop defending them or my own faith. My counselor’s “recovering perfectionist” was starting to sound a lot like “recovering Christian.” I wasn’t ready for that. Maybe God had let me go through things, but there was kernel of pride left in me. I was hanging on. I was doing the right thing by hanging on, by trying to get better, by seeing a counselor. Couldn’t everyone see I was doing the right thing?

“No, of course not. Not at all,” she said. “But we have to recognize that guilt is a mechanism for you. We have to determine what your standards are. When you don’t live up to those standards, you use guilt to push you to try harder, to feel better about yourself for having standards. Do you think this is the healthiest thing for you?”

Oh, this eloquent, perky woman. A part of me wanted to be more like her and to have these beautiful answers. Answers like, this was not the healthiest thing for me. Answers like,
God is only in your head. You have invented him and his standards. Read: I was still doing something wrong. So the guilt came tumbling down.

“Well, now I feel guilty about feeling guilty.”

She chuckled, but it wasn’t a joke. No, I took life all too seriously. The chain materialized logically in my brain: Be good, be perfect, give the right answer, go to Heaven. ...Go to heaven?

At the end of our hour, I realized it. Do you feel guilty? The question sounded like a whisper, synonymous with that question I once hated most. When did you first ask Jesus into your heart? The needle-in-your eye-question. A pinprick in time. The shot you’ll always or hardly remember. The one that requires a disclaimer: if you don’t provide the exact moment of your spiritual transformation, you leave them doubting it ever happened. In my Sunday school career or immature Christian life to follow, I can’t remember answering this question satisfactorily. Either I disappointed myself for fabricating the conversion or others for not having a good story.

“I think I was six,” I’d say to some Sister June or Sister Sherri, some co-Missionettes sponsor. As a church leader’s daughter, earlier sounds better than later.

Missionettes is an Assemblies of God program comprised of a few levels of girls’ Sunday school classes. Kindergarten Rainbows (which actually includes boys before they become unruly and are moved into the “Royal Rangers”), Daisies, Primroses, and Stars, each with a special motto and symbolic color combination. White to stand for purity, plus one more class-specific color that represents loyalty, kindness, or happiness.

“You mean you don’t remember?”
She’d nod to her co-sponsor monitoring the back of the classroom, to further insinuate that everyone should remember this. “Oh, Sister Sherri, I’d never forget the day, would you?”

“The day I was born again,” she’d say, and raise up a hand. “Clear as sunshine.”

It was a crime in my small heart to not know an answer. Everyone seemed to have an answer to this. Plus, I was a student with diligence, one of our key character traits at the private academy I attended and a word I was proud to know.

I remembered my kindergarten Rainbows motto. As a Rainbow, I will be a good helper, pleasing Jesus every day. I remembered what God made on each day of Creation, and on the seventh day He rested. I remembered what comes before and after “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” I remembered Moses’ siblings’ names and the list of the twelve disciples. But I didn’t remember when I signed up to remember those things.

“I remember a little bit—" I’d start, embarrassed. "I remember that..."

Here is the truth, the earthquake that rumbles in my mind when asked to give it, what I imagine to be the fearful scene of smoke and flashing lights Isaiah the prophet witnessed at the throne of God, what some will call a testimony. I don’t think most of us in generic, American Christianity have lived long enough by elementary school to earn a testimony, but if you want to know when I accepted Jesus into my heart, I hand this to you.

I was six or seven years old. It was one of many Sundays in Children’s Church. At the end, before parents would saunter from the sanctuary to collect us, when our leaders would have us bow our heads and close our eyes. Right after preaching of the gospel message that you have only to accept Jesus’ free gift to you. Sometimes they’d turn the lights out, since kids like to peek. To anyone else, it is odd, otherworldly, awkward: a collection of well-dressed first
through eighth graders standing in rows of mismatched fold out chairs, eerily swaying to music on low volume in the dark.

“If you haven’t asked Jesus into your heart, and you’d like to know Him today, could you just raise your hand for me? Nobody’s looking. Only Jesus and one of us leaders will see you. There’s nothing to be worried about.

“And if you don’t want to come up front, you can just say the sinner’s prayer silently. Okay? Okay. Repeat after me...Dear, Jesus...”

I had the impression it was an activity like a Bible worksheet to turn in before class ends, a step to be completed before I could be considered saved. As far as I was concerned, I had already accepted the message. I had a door on my heart Jesus could knock on, and I pictured Him already inside the little heart home with a rug, sofa and windows that existed in my chest, shaking around in there, witnessing when I committed sins. I wasn’t different from then on. I was the same child putting the same bows in her hair with the same mother curling her bangs and fitting her for those homemade lacy dresses. The Sunday I said the sinner’s prayer on top of wearing my curly bangs? I don’t know. More than one Sunday I repeated it, almost like renewing a subscription. I wondered if my previous prayers had worked, if I were really saved, unforgettably saved, clear as sunshine, reflecting brightly off of our backyard slide.

But before I could spit out some of that explanation to Sister June or Sherri, she moved the discussion right along to save us both from embarrassment. An easy question.

“Well, what made you decide to accept Jesus as your Savior?”
Since this is one of the standard follow-ups you are to know by at least third grade, the Primrose level, she had hopes I'd answer. I was the Newmans' daughter.

I paused. How could I redeem myself from the needle question flounder? My perpetual stutter, my clamming. All of my anxiety began in the church, I was sure of it then when I couldn’t sleep at night and remembered that pause, so many pauses like it, to have the right answer to sum up everything true and holy. These women were like cameras, blinking their cold eyes at me. Perfectionist? Maybe. But maybe also that I doubted I had been saved myself.

Then, she turned it into a class question.

"Girls, why do we accept Jesus as Savior?"

“Because He died on the cross for our sins.”

My head sank, and I would have understood if Jesus were crying in his home inside my chest, lamenting that He’d ever entered in, just to hear a girl who couldn’t retell how He’d changed her.

Did I feel guilty? Yes. Yes. Yes. I felt guilty because I didn’t know that I was saved, and everyone else seemed to be so assured. I didn’t think I was good enough for it. Part of this is the effect of many churches who allow legalism to dictate assurance of salvation. I do right, I do wrong. I reap heaven or punishment all on my own. I needed to realize that this was backwards. God saves me; I don’t save myself. Wasn’t that the Christian message? Yes, God was just, but he was also merciful. I could not forgive myself because I did not realize the depths to which God had forgiven me. I did not understand this as a child, and if I could change anything now about the modern church or my upbringing, it would be the environment that clouded this
truth of forgiveness and made me believe that my own actions would save me. It would have
cranged my young adult life.

At the time of my brain bleed and my foray with on-campus counseling, I knew only one
God, and I believed my story lay in walking with the fathers. In searching for the God who sees
me next to wells, over altar stones. There was a God who judges, who floods the earth, who
rains down fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, who allows Satan to take your crops, your livestock,
your children, and to inflict you with boils and sores. He gives you insomnia, brain bleeds,
endless appointments with doctors who forget your name and charge you money for it. You are
at his mercy. This was the God Job questioned and Pharaoh hated. I followed this God in
complete distrust. It was an un-faith. The needle question moment was only a conversion
because it caused me to understand I needed a different conversion story.

Because it was beyond the mountain-sized suffering. Even as I withstood my brain
bleed, I discovered I was not cut out for everyday brutalities, like a headache, the inexplicable
harsh glance of a passerby (what had I done?), a scratch on a pair of glasses, a bus running late.
And nothing, nothing fits the figure of anxiety like a crowded shoe store:

While shopping with a friend at DSW I panicked because I could not decide on flat-
footed or heeled boots—walking is so terribly important, and I didn’t want to look like a man or
the kind of woman who must wear heels to be womanly—and what could I do? She said, calm
down, it is only a shoe store. But no, no. It was a large shoe store, and behold: choices to
outnumber stars, and women to outnumber those, examining shoes like choice pieces of fruit,
swarming around like gnats into my ears. I overheated, cursed under my breath, felt the prickly
red approaching my face and the constant dizziness and headache that chase me with anxiety. It is only a shoe store, she said. No, life is a shoe store, I thought. In our shoes we stumble over molehills as well as mountains. Life is a constant getting-over of things great and small.

“Are you okay?” she asked me.

“No, I have to (gasp) have to to get out of here.”

“So no boots?”

“I don’t (gasp) don’t need boots. Let’s (gasp) go outside, where there’s wind.”

“Wind?”

We pushed our way out of the swarming women, through the automatic whoosh of the door. It was hot outside. I needed more air. I needed to see an oak tree. I folded my arms close to me and began to count: one...it is only a shoe store...two...life is just a shoe store...three...we need boots all the time...four...I will never stop needing boots...five....I must live despite the fact that I need boots...six...good things happen...seven...bad things happen...eight...but God is in them all... nine...He finds me in them all.

This is how at twenty-one, the New Testament finally pummeled me outside of a DSW: When Peter heard it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on, and threw himself into the sea. Just stopped thinking and flung himself into the wide open. If the Gospel of John had ended here in 21:7, it would have sounded like a suicide; it makes glorious sense.

Like Peter, I walked with Jesus. He called me by name as his disciple at the beginning of John, the beginning of my life as I knew it in the drafty church, and I followed and followed and listened to him speak his teachings, and I loved him, and I gave it all to him, I grit my teeth to
avoid sinning, to avoid disappointing him, and then I denied him three times at the moment he
needed me to need him most. At the brink of death, I said I didn’t know the man from
Nazareth. I forsook all of that following, all of that learning, thinking that in denying him I was
saving myself. That I needed to do it on my own strength. Thinking that God couldn’t be in this
darkest moment. When Jesus was crucified—if life wanted anything from Peter, this man’s
death was what he had to survive—he only wanted to go fishing, cast his own lines down, wash
away his faithlessness. He was only a fisherman before Jesus died, he could be one after. Like
Peter, I gave it all away for the sake of some Savior and settled for fishing again, not the trade
or the craft, but the activity, the back and forth of peace. The peace of nothingness. I like to
think that both Peter and I were tired of being children of God. (Dear God! I only wanted to go
shoe shopping! I wanted to forget I ever doubted he’d let me survive my brain bleed! To do
something direct, productive, simple. In every way, my heart was dead! Why couldn’t he just let
me buy boots without a panic attack?)

So when Jesus comes waltzing onto the beach in John 21, inviting Peter to breakfast
like he had not died (to breakfast!), like he had not killed Peter, too, multiplying the fish he
planned to catch on his own, what could Peter do? Jesus was back again to captivate him, and
Peter saw destiny’s form like the figure of a mountain across Galilee. Larger than him. So Peter
threw himself into the sea, swallowed himself whole.

For those who do not know Peter’s story, this may not be making sense. “Tell me
more,” you might say. But my understanding of Peter is like all those little strings I couldn’t tell
my counselor about, tied from me to the church, to my parents, to deep in my heart where the
story is tethered. All you need to know is this: I realized outside of that shoe store that God
would never leave me be, no matter how far I tried to run away. He would find his way into my
heart a million times to match every string, no matter what good or bad I did, no matter how
many panic attacks I would have, no matter my doubts or my guilt for not being perfect.

Of course, the Gospel of John tells us that Peter does not drown himself. He is, quite
piously, getting to the Almighty as fast as he can. But why? Why, when he nearly ruined your
life?

I figure that Peter had two options.

Option 1: Drown. Try to forget what has happened to you. Every moment of your life
has meant nothing. All of this effort to be a disciple. But shoulder an anxiety for the rest of
your life: you weren’t good enough to keep believing. You aren’t strong enough. You are not
only guilty of a lack of a conversion; you are guilty of giving up.

Option 2: Swim in, have breakfast, and keep walking. Whether he is alive and feeding
you, or you are hallucinating his resurrection doesn’t matter. It is too late for the Lord not to be
with you, real or imagined. In the depths, he would find you. You should at least eat some fish.
Take it as a gift.

Maybe Peter was just really hungry for breakfast. Maybe he had nowhere else to go but
down. Believe or die.

I know the DSW is illogical. I had every reason to walk away, blame God, or stop
believing in his mercy—what with the women swarming around me, the shoes themselves
taunting me. It should have been a final straw; I could have gone home and swallowed enough
Ambien to die. But the DSW taught me something about the walking: as I plod along day after
miserable day, waiting for the next brain bleed, God will show up in moment after moment of
converting shocks. Of course I could walk away, but sometime in the future something awful
would happen, and the very next thing I’d be rattling my fist at the sky, as though it could be
the fault of a God I didn’t believe in anymore. For the rest of my life, I’d have no one to blame
but myself or the impersonal universe. There would be no meaning to any suffering.

I felt so much guilt because I mistakenly believed I was completely in control of my own
life; I believed I wasn’t good enough to be perfectly healthy, that I could have done something
to prevent the aneurysm, that I should have been smarter than the anxiety. Peter may have
wanted to drown because he believed he ought to have been perfect in his faith. He swam in so
wholeheartedly because he realized he could not be. Faith is a rough thing. Some people see
the lack of God in suffering, but I take it as the Almighty behind the woodwork, shaking me out
of a slumber, asking me to jump out in some kind of faith. What else can we do in the middle of
all of this garbage? Where else can I go but down?

It has been requested of me to explain what I mean to say for those who are not
Christians. How should you continue to live? Whom is this message for anyway?

Well, first of all, I am not saying this in a Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!
way. I am not saying, believe or die, in the way the chorus of crotchety church ladies in my head
say, And the unbelievers shall be thrown into the lake of fire! (where there is weeping and
gnashing of teeth, I can’t help but add, on Bible-belted impulse). I am saying that I never asked
Jesus into my heart. Sister June or Sister Sherri asked what had made me decide, but there is no decide. If he wants you, he’ll find you. I mean to say that this is the way faith often happens. I am saying that when it’s all over, he’ll come after you in whatever shoe store you choose.

I cannot tell you, if you are not a Christian, to believe or die because it did not work for me. Hell fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth, can be nothing of a threat to those who don’t believe in it, so what would be the point in hanging it over anyone’s head? Besides, God doesn’t bring you in by threatening you. You must see that you need him regardless. I now sound like the rotten preacher’s kid that I am, but I believe is there enough of hell here and now, enough hell in the human heart—every excruciating moment we try to be what we cannot be— or in the news, in every day of the small, awful things, to believe we need rescuing. If perfection will not save you, what will? Someone or something saves you every day. And for the Christian: do not despair. The Peter who threw himself into the sea is the same Peter the Lord could coax out to walk on water. You only cannot do it on your own.

It has been a few years since the bleed, and I don’t yet know that I have all that I need, but I am looking for answers in the stories that raised me. I am looking back at that girl on the couch and trying to piece together how they have raised me. Why did I prefer the Old Testament to the New, Abraham over Peter? Is God the same in the lives of both? And having never met the Almighty face to face, how is it that I know him? How can I know him? If knowing him means salvation for my soul, salvation is so delicate. In order for salvation to be secure, it has to be the other way around: He has to know me. Every day, I have to count to ten, look at
an oak tree, and remember that I, too, am planted here for a reason through good and bad winds, and only God can keep me rooted.
Snake Eyes

Around 11:15 PM in the Houston Chronicle Sports department, the first edition proofs are rolling off the printer. The editorial staff has about an hour to correct any mistakes for the final edition that goes out to more readers, due at midnight, or extended to 12:30 on Saturday nights for late West coast games.

I don’t realize what is happening until afterwards.

I know I am standing up with one of the large printer proof pages and that I am wearing a shirt I had purchased online from Delia’s. Stuck in this dismal Sports job, I liked the idea of shirts that represented my artistic self, instead of football hoodies or business casual. The t-shirt is lined like notebook paper; it has pencil-gray loopy cursive written on it. It says I love you multiple times, as though a child had been punished to transcribe it. When I bought it, I didn’t care much for that, but I adored the notebook paper print. It was a primarily white, close-fitting shirt with a moderate V-neck, I’ll admit, but I wasn’t considering that when I left my on-campus apartment for work. And I wore it with a sweater. Like many women do, I thought, I like this.

This is cute. I will wear it.

I am only standing up. I am not leaning or swaying or even holding a suggestive smile. I am not trying to hide any incompetence. I am proofing this time, for real. I am not only pretending to concentrate, with the feeling that coworkers’ eyes are on me. I am actually doing my job, when Kevin asks:

“What’s your shirt say?”

At this time, I am twenty. Kevin might be forty-five years old, although I purposefully never ask him about his age. He has a receding hairline and nearly gray, curly hair. He looks like
he tans. He might have been handsome about ten years ago because his face isn’t bad-looking. There’s a strong jaw there. Ignoring the gut, there are strong arms, too. But he watches me like a snake, like I imagine the serpent wrapped around the tree in the Garden of Eden scoping out Eve. But for once in my life this is not Sunday School, my father is not here, and I am not Eve.

“My shirt?”

“Yeah. What’s it say?”

Shit shit shit, I think. I don’t like to admit that I think in curses, but I do sometimes, and I am going to have to spit out the words, I love you, to Kevin. I bet this is his dream. By this time, copy chief Steve Schaeffer is standing up, too. I feel compelled to answer because the copy chief and slot man, my bosses, are staring at me from over the cubicle wall. It’s Charlie’s night off.

“What’s up?” Steve asks.

“I was just asking Katy what her shirt says.”

“Oh her shirt, huh?” Steve is now looking, too.

“Well, I mostly like it because it looks like notebook paper. But it says I love you on it,” I say.

“It’s hard to read. I love you, huh?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Here, you have a misspelled word in this column,” I say, handing a floppy roll of white paper to Steve. “The subhead on the Aeros should be tough, but it reads through.”

“Good catch,” says Steve, and we all stand there for a good three seconds in silence. I don’t even think about the fact their eyes are scanning over my breasts, or had to be to focus
intently on my shirt, until I sink back down into my cubicle desk chair, and I realize the
temperature in my face has risen.

The computer screen blinks at me.

Mike has sent out a message over the agate AIM group.

Mdamante: THAT JUST HAPPENED.

Emblackwell: ....

Cmajor: Oh my God. It could have been a little less obvious.

HeathHam: Did Kevin really just ask to read Katy’s shirt?

Cmajor: I would tell Charlie tomorrow night.

I am just sitting. Watching the screen blink. Watching my agate clerk friends talk about
me being harassed, when I don’t know how to prove that I have been, and I don’t know that I
want to just yet. Shamefully, something so impossibly obvious can’t be reported. I don’t know
what to do. Nobody says anything except in jokes about it later, when they want to make fun of
lonely Steve or Kevin. Is it funny? I don’t know. I want it to feel funnier. I want to be okay with
it. I was okay with so much until now. I wrap my sweater more tightly around me. I am
exhausted, and I might feel my throat tightening, but I have golf scores to update, and Lester
Zedd to my left is getting crankier as it gets closer to midnight.

In high school, I was an academic UIL feature-writing champ. I could weave together
quotes with pithy transitions to highlight fake, mostly-mediocre people and win second place
out of dozens for my story. I also worked for The Dallas Morning News as a classroom voice,
writing a series of editorials from the perspective of a blighted high school nerd, irritated about
TAKS testing, the purpose of I.D. badges in school, and peers with no concept of proper
apostrophe usage. So, when I made it to college, I thought that choosing journalism as a minor
to pair with my English, creative writing major would be practical. I was a decent amateur
journalist, and a vouched-for ability to write for news seemed amenable to finding a real job in
a real world I knew nothing about. I didn’t actually like to write journalism, not at all. My heart
found it plain and contrived—but my brain liked it in the way I like things that I am good at
because I like to be good at things.

My first journalism professor was a gangly, bespectacled man whose teeth stuck out.
Charlie Crixell. Pronounced cri-shell. He was the deputy Sports Editor for the Houston Chronicle
and in charge of the agate staff. Physically, he appeared much older than in his mid-forties, the
age he claimed to be. He had a grandson living with him who worshipped Spiderman. But
although Charlie’s glasses sank down his nose and most of his hair had vanished, he had a
youthful knack for clever comebacks. He seemed caught up on our young adult jokes and
secrets. Our social networking. Our blasé attitudes. He smiled at us wryly. Laughed at us for our
ignorance and habits carried into college from high school, like the inability to form complete
sentences or to focus for long time periods. Is this what news will do to you? I wondered.
Would I become someone like this? Old-looking, but snappy and pretentious?

I quickly became Charlie’s pet. I was an English major, someone who understood
sentences well enough to condense them, enough standard English to catch all of the errors he
would pull up on the projector. I got his smug jokes. I was not just an average undergrad trying
to sneak into the media. I was not one of the communications majors, students he actually
called the “bottom of the barrel” at the University of Houston. All things he divulged to me in time.

“Newman,” I heard one morning, as I was filing out of class. I wheeled around, startled. Charlie had a nasally lilt. Sometimes his voice would hit a ridge and fall off, like Gopher on Winnie-the-Pooh.

“Come over here,” he said quietly, motioning toward the desk. I approached hesitantly, glared. Made it clear I did not like being summoned this way. I had a habit of glaring at him in class, which is how he would know I was bothered by this or that assignment. Of course, somehow, this only served to make me a more attractive student.

“Do you need a job?”

I had a job, teaching SAT prep part time for a company I did not like. I found the curriculum boring and wildly ineffective. I would have failed if I had to learn out of the book I was teaching out of. Poor kids. Each class for three hours, we filled in a workbook, answering multiple-choice questions. Working math problems repeatedly. I had no teacher training, and I was terrified of public speaking, especially to teenagers who recognized quickly I wasn’t a funny person.

“A job?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“What kind of job?”

He smoothed out a copy of the Chronicle Sports section on his desk. He pointed to an MLB box score with a bony finger.
“Doing stuff like this. Details on box scores. Doing some proofing for me. It’s called agate. How much do you know about Sports?”

“Almost nothing.”

“You’ll learn fast.”

“Are you sure?”

“My superstar agate clerk, Emily, didn’t know much at all to start, and she’s doing RIM for me now. Can you come to the Chron next Monday around 6 p.m.?”

I was flattered. I cut back on teaching hours. I ended up in downtown Houston having my picture taken for a white access ID card. Katy Newman, Sports, it read. I would have to learn to read Sports.

The Houston Chronicle newsroom is about as large as a high school gym, with high ceilings and floor to ceiling windows looking out to downtown. It’s on the fifth story of a seven or eight story building. On the floor of this large gym-like space, there are rows on rows of light gray cubicles and light gray laminate desks. The color of the room is all-around icky, muddy and muted, like a blur of newspaper. Only the cubicles aren’t high. The sides of the desks serve as dividers, and you can see everyone’s faces while seated. It is messy, not sleek, and surprisingly, mostly quiet. You can hear the clacking of keys, occasional socializing—but no phones ringing off the hook, no yelling back and forth. This doesn’t happen much until deadline around 11 p.m.

I learned the Sports department was divided between the young college-aged contractors, like me, who got paid per night, did copy/pasting and some story editing, and the
salaried over-thirty guys, who worked on the important pages. Each person had some specialty. Heath Hamilton knew basketball, Jonathan motor cross, Mike hockey, Kevin golf, Lester high school sports, ladies’ lacrosse, college tennis, and all forms of minutiae. Steve Schaeffer and Charlie shared copy chief. Of course they all knew football. And then, there were the females. Kayki, short for Keykeshan Dadwani, a journalism student like me, who knew nothing. Emily had some equestrian experience, but knew what she knew by emulation and deduction. But Charlie first paired me with Ciara Major, another contractor agate/rim clerk, deep dyed red-haired and twice my size. She wore high ponytails and bows. Hoodies most often, and bright red lipstick, an odd combination. She constantly pulled up jeans that sagged at her waist, but you could sometimes catch a glimpse see her black, snaky tramp stamp.

We sat in gray matching cubicles, with a gray desk space between us.

“I like your hair color,” I said, feebly, to say anything, wheeling to face her at my right.

“I do roller derby,” she said, as though that explained the whole of her appearance. Her derby name was Scarlett O’Hurtya. “Have you opened up DTI yet?”

“Umm, I’m trying. I can’t figure it out. It’s not letting me log in.”

“Move over. I’ll do it. But you’re going to have to learn to move fast.”

“Okay.”

“It isn’t working,” she said.

“I know. I think I typed it all in the right way, but then—”

“We’ll just use mine for now.”

I only later was able to work with Emily, Charlie’s superstar agate clerk. She was reserved like me. She had short, dark hair, freckles and wore converse and flare jeans. She
preferred vacations to Asia over Europe or the beach and didn’t pretend to know much about Sports, but she knew how to make stuff work. Emily’s tactic was to hover over me and nearly do my work for me, but I preferred this to Ciara’s constant, “What are you doing? No, no, no, honey.”

After we prepped as much of our pages as we could, Ciara invisibly tethered me to her for a brisk tour of the building. The rows of desks blurred to my right and left all the way to a break room and kitchen.

“This is the kitchen. There’s a microwave and a fridge here. You can put your stuff in there,” she continued, pushing her thick rimmed glasses up her nose, “but make sure you label it and take it out before the end of the night. I’ve had my diet cokes stolen.”

We went down some back stairs in a gray corridor. I got the impression that Ciara was delighted to have a trainee. That things hadn’t been this exciting in a while.

“This is the fastest way to the good vending machines.” I nodded. “Don’t use that one in the corner; it takes your change. If you can get it to work though, those sodas are cheaper than the ones in the machine upstairs in the kitchen.”

Ciara opened up the supply cabinet to discuss its contents, pointed out each printer and its purpose, the high school sports area, the regular, non-sports news people.

Back at our desks, she drew me a map of the floor with names on each cubicle. I best take notes. Ciara, Mike, Kayki, Jonathan, Emily, and Heath—even though he was over thirty and salaried—would be my friends. We would chat on AOL instant messaging in the agate group, mock Lester Zedd, and negotiate with each other for weekends and holidays off. The
newspaper comes out every day, even holidays, so the schedule would suck more or less. And I would have to work on holidays. Especially since I was new. Lester was Satan. Did I write that down? He and Kevin did slot most of the time. Slot is the person you talk to about whether or not the boxes will fit. Remember that. Kevin was a lot like Lester, but smarter. Keith was secretly hilarious, but silent and unapproachable. If you caught his one-liners around deadline, you were in for a treat. Pete was just old and grandfatherly and had a hip problem. Steve Schaeffer, the second copy chief, was often angry and talked on the phone loudly. Charlie was my real boss, so if I had any problems with the rest of them, go to him.

I looked out at the room, at cranky faces lit by computer screens, and back down at the paper. I had the feeling I had entered some bad sitcom or primetime ABC show. Maybe called Agate Clerks or The Paper. I felt immediately nauseous, but I made it through training with Ciara that first night for five hours. Charlie let me go home after the first deadline. Ciara led me to his computer. He stood up with his hands in his slacks. Unsmiling, he said, “That’s enough for tonight” as though I had been put through some series of tortures or a long workout or was a child who had been in time out. Ciara nodded. “We’ll walk you out,” he said. “You’ll never have to walk out to the parking garage alone.”

In time, I wouldn’t mind. Leaving the building was an incredible release. It was dark, but the Houston smog would hang heavy, and I felt like a city superheroine, like I ought to be in a trenchcoat and heels. Some Carmen Sandiego. There were two harmless homeless men stationed outside of the Chron at the corner of Prairie and Milam, one who sang to himself, rocking back and forth on a bench in his beanie and multiple blankets—Charlie sometimes brought him sodas—and one who slept under the light next to the garage in a pile of rags. He
would be peeing sometimes and mumbling to himself. For anyone that might be threatening, I had pepper spray. For the first two weeks at least, I felt this kind of superheroine invincible. I made it through a small battle each night. I would drive home down I-45 back to campus blaring 97.9 The Box and admiring the city lights, how six months ago I would not have been brave enough to be out working or driving this late or associating with people outside of the classroom. I had been in a deep depression, attending multiple doctors’ appointments in preparation for a brain surgery to coil an aneurysm. I was spiritually weakened. I would go to class, go to teach, go home, cry to God, take my blood thinner, take my sleeping pills. But on these nights initially, I felt validated, like some powerful woman had been in me all along.

But that was only afterwards. I felt like prey walking into the newsroom most evenings, dodging glances from people who believed me incompetent. Before I could hide in my cubicle and communicate only over AIM, we had a sports meeting at 5 p.m. to discuss the night’s budget, the big games, special deadlines, and issues with the previous paper. We sat in a small boardroom with a white board and glass window. Chairs were around the conference table, but not enough for everyone, so some of us, typically the contractors, sat in chairs lining the walls. I tried to sit in the corner and avoid speaking. The week’s Sports covers were tacked to the wall. Brad, Charlie’s boss, everyone’s boss, who worked several floors up, led meetings. He was this tall and tan man in a full suit, like I imagine a Ken doll come to life with gray hair. He had the voice of a radio or talk show host. This only served to make his “And what did we think of today’s paper?” that much more intimidating. There were times I was the only woman in the room, when Emily, Ciara, and Kayki were off. There were times they forgot this.
Kevin didn’t forget. He looked up each time I walked in. He asked me about things I carried with me. My homework. My dinner. Often over AIM. He asked me if I liked to bake, and I made him chocolate chip cookies. He asked me why I didn’t have any dessert, and I told him I couldn’t eat dessert all the time, and then he made that skinny comment people like to make and I responded with *Well how do you think I stay so skinny?* I am sure he initiated these conversations, but I did not reject them. In the end, I may have invited it. I may have let myself. He made me aware of my appearance. He told me I looked nice when I wore a floral skirt, and I took to wearing more of them. He asked me about what exercise I liked, and I talked about yoga, canoeing, running. He asked me to do special projects for him during College Football season; I did.

Of course it wasn’t just Kevin. I learned how to deal with each of my male co-workers by finding out which aspect of me they appreciated most. First, I made it a point to be good at my job, to be as bright as possible. I was meticulous. I looked for front-page mistakes. I secretly sought Emily’s help. I snuck out of the room to make phone calls so they wouldn’t see my nervousness or incompetence when calling the AP Wire Service. I made myself iron-clad, ready to explain my processes. I did as much of my work as early as possible. In this way, when I made a mistake or needed to ask a question, I could charm my way into it without seeming inferior. With Charlie I engaged in as much witty banter as possible, while remaining surly and stoic. He valued my intelligence over any of the college kids’ he had hired. With any mistake I made he would follow up: *You’re still the smartest one.* I took note. I glared at him whenever possible to remind him of the student he loved. With Heath, all I had to do was convince him of the creepiness of the men older than him. That way, he felt justified to flirt with me in less
creepy ways, or so I imagined, and he answered my basketball questions readily. With Mike, I functioned as an emotional confidante. I gave him the advice he needed to deal with his girlfriend. With Lester Zedd, I simply tried to be a kind person—no one else was kind to him—and employed periodic groveling and flattery.

Knewman: I think Lester isn’t so bad.
CMajor: oh you poor child
Knewman: Can someone explain to me what’s so wrong with him?
Mdamante: You’ll see. Just wait til you’re here on a Friday.

Lester Zedd. I laughed when I first heard his name. You can’t make this up. He’d been drawing layouts since they cut out and pasted paper squares for photo spots. He walked around wiggling his nose with neck titled upward. Every now and then you’d see something in your periphery, and there was Lester Zedd, mouse-nosing his peppery mustache just over your shoulder, critiquing your copy/paste/edit job, wanting you to fit more onto the page, in the way he wanted it done, than was humanly possible. Friday nights when he was on slot became micromanagement marathons. Even though he annoyed me intensely, I made it a point of spreading kind words about him, in case it got back to him. I would tell him I was so sorry to bother him, but I needed his expertise for this or that. Um, excuse me...Lester? Are you busy? I thought you might be able to help me with this high school tournament sked. ...I’ll just do it for you, he’d reply. Oh, okay, Thanks.

Knewman: I think we should be kinder to Lester. He had to have something really bad happen to him as a child for him to be this way.
Emblackwell: You’re so pure of heart. I would just go off on him.

The only exception was Kevin. I used Lester’s treatment of me to make Kevin feel superior to him, even though they could be equally nasty. I didn’t complain when Kevin simply
messaged me: *Come here*, the way Charlie had summoned me to his desk the day he hired me. He paused before typing *please*. I made Kevin feel like he was my patron, the slot man I would prefer to serve.

And I did, for a while. I began to appreciate Kevin’s attention. I began to pity Kevin, thinking he might be lonely, even though Mike told me he had a girlfriend. From night to night, I wondered what new thing he would say to flatter me. I sometimes messaged him to see what he would say to me because it entertained me, to have this strange, goddess-like upperhand when I knew he thought *he* was the predator. I had disturbing daydreams about Kevin stalking me back to the parking garage at night. But I entertained him, too. I teased him, called him Kester, when he turned sour or tried to micromanage me, and this softened him. All over time, over the course of a year.

Often I would stand in the bathroom and look at my darkened, computer-swollen eyes in the mirror. There is something you feel after being used, this strange duality. As repulsive as I found it, I recognized my appearance, my charm, as the key to my survival—or maybe I wanted it to be the key, and I could not tell which was the answer. My tiny-waisted sway though the cubicles in a light floral skirt. Kicking out this hip or that one and pushing bands of hair behind my ear. What was this high I was getting on Kevin’s attention? In the mirror, I felt the way I felt in high school, remembering a tall, tall, baseball player I only half-dated. He drove a white Mustang, and his couch smelled like cigarettes. I found myself on my back on that couch, sinking into the scent with my foot tucked up against his chest. He warmed my foot and ran his
hands up and down my leg from ankle to panty and back again. He said: *What were you worried about? You’re beautiful.*

I have long known it has nothing to do with not having a loving father. All my father did was love me, praise me. I had no reason to look for it elsewhere. But I don’t think I truly understood until my time in sports: it has to do with a high on a certain brand of love, with having too many fathers to love you, a lifetime practice of making men happy—even predatory ones. Even in the Sports department at the *Houston Chronicle.* From the time I ran down the church aisles in lacy bloomers, batted my eyes in the Easter play, kissed old men’s cheeks, to the time I met another pastor’s grandson, and could shake his hand in just the right way, make him choke in his tie, receive an offer for marriage via his mother via my mother. What I say, how I say it, how I sway through the door he opens for me, pick up a bulletin he drops, clean up his soda spill at an after-church luncheon, in the sweetest-most-servile-graceful-submissive-that-woman-could-be- *mine* way. A pastor’s daughter (dare I say it?) knows how to do this best.

There was another high school boy, one my father had forbidden me to love, who gave me the answer:

“What is it about me, really?” I asked him, on a day we were funneling through a crowd hand in hand into a gym assembly.

“It’s the way you carry yourself.”

“Really?” I asked, playfully tugging on his arm; but half of me knew and felt the rush of power to my palms. What I owned, an ability given to me by my father, became something I needed.
But then there is the night I find myself standing over a proof. Kevin takes it too far when he asks me about my shirt in front of others. Suddenly, the attention he gives me and that I offer to him is no longer private. He drags Steve into it, causes an explosion on the agate AIM group. He has a way of going so far and pulling back. Holding a door open for me, then criticizing my work on the baseball standings. Complimenting my hair, then not speaking to me for a week. He is much cleverer than any boy I dated in high school. He has a knack for innuendos:

Kpender: How are you?
Knewman: Doing okay.
Kpender: Why just okay?
Knewman: We haven’t been paid yet. The contractors’ checks are over a week late.
Kpender: I can offer you a loan.
Kpender:...a no-interest loan

I nearly double over. Oh my god. A no-interest loan? I copy/paste this to Charlie, asking him what this is supposed to mean.

Crixell: Probably exactly what it sounds like.
Crixell: It’s just not straightforward enough for me to do anything about it.

My Delia’s shirt is the absolute limit, and Kevin knows it. He knows Charlie is off and isn’t there to witness it. I’ve made myself ridiculous. I know it now, and there is no way to tell the others this. There is no Carmen Sandiego, no goddess-like upperhand. I can see it in his snake eyes.
A Car Rolling Slowly

My mother was born on November 14, 1963, in Washington D.C., eight days before Kennedy was shot in Dallas in a presidential motorcade.

Did you know I was born eight days before Kennedy was shot? She asks this periodically, as though she hasn’t said so before, or I don’t know her birthday and can’t subtract her age from the current year. She’ll ask anyone, as if to mark her place in history. Each time, I don’t retort that others were born on the same day of the assassination, which somehow trumps eight days before. I can’t blame her. I might say something similar to characterize my childhood.

Did you know I grew up in the nineties? When we sometimes still played outside, just before the Internet, DVDs and cell phones hit it big. And this isn’t half as romantic as 1963, as Jackie and John, as the decade we first went to the moon—the moon, for heaven’s sake. My mother is right about something. They all look so pretty in black and white—especially my grandparents.

In old pictures, Grandaddy has a full head of dark hair and holds a wry, charming, open-mouthed smile. He’s in a button up with a skinny black tie, always posed like he’s about to tell a joke—leaning warmly towards the photographer, his hand extended mid-gesture. Grandma’s sporting pin up curls, clutch purses, netted hats. She sits next to him demurely, a cigarette in hand. Her lips are pursed glamorously; her eyes are large, languid and brown. That they hadn’t always loved each other I wouldn’t have guessed.

By mentioning Kennedy and 1963, my mother keeps these pictures of them alive. She conjures up a time and a sequence. My grandparents lived, so she must have lived. She lives; therefore I will live after her.
And yet, I have this feeling it is too late. Selfishly, I want to connect the history of my grandparents back to the present, straight to me, but either I have gone about it stupidly, or time itself is against me. I feel I have been behind glass, watching history drive slowly by me. I have already forgotten. Someone will have to tell me my own life later.

I was the wrong age when my grandmother died. It was the wrong time. I couldn’t confirm what the pictures made me feel. I was a skulky and lovesick teenager. Too kid-like to know her as an adult. Too detached to ask questions. I can’t even remember the last conversation I had with her. In my last image of her alive, her skinny body is lying flat on the garage floor, and then she limps into the house, hanging onto the shoulders of my father and Grandaddy. She had fallen climbing out of the bed of a Chevy while we were helping my grandparents move. I heard a yelp and a smack onto the concrete. I might have asked her if she was okay. I might have told her I loved her when I left that day. She might have said it back to me before she got sick. Unfairly, I remember it was winter, her wearing a winter coat, but not what she said to me in it.

Now, my grandfather, the next link to the past, is dying willingly.

October 2011

“There’s only one thing I got left to do, Mike,” Granddady said. “And that’s die.”

He looked my mother’s cousin-in-law, Mike, directly, like he was shaking his hand on it. I knew Grandaddy felt this way—this was the second day of a hunger strike for him—but I wouldn’t have expected him to say it.
Grandaddy sat limply in a lawn chair on a patio at Autumn Leaves, his care facility. Physically, he was the picture of weakness. His face sagged toward his chest. His large blue eyes were empty, spackled with tiny red lines. Little remained on his head. His bald scalp was glossy over pools of liver spots. Only on the tracks over his ears wiry gray hairs sprouted like yucca plants off the side of a mountain. What he said, he said only in the full strength of his infamous bullheadedness.


And this is the thing.

I don’t think Grandaddy understood I was there, or if he did, he wanted me to hear that he was ready to go. As the adult daughter of his daughter, I was as against him as my mother. Along with one of my uncles, she was the one who “locked him up” in assisted living, “stole his driver’s license,” “took his money.” My mother says it isn’t true Grandaddy categorizes me with her. The man is in stage-five dementia. He doesn’t know what he’s saying.

But in that moment, I believe he did. Immediately after those words, his weak eyes latched onto mine and we spoke a million words silently. I couldn’t argue with him. I, too, have wanted to die. I miss my grandmother, too. He is old and sick, and I don’t blame him. Either he was saying to me he wants to leave us—he’s tired of living in the way we’ve confined him—or he looked for me to help because he knew I understood him.

“How are we doing out here?”

My mom and her cousin Betty, who was down visiting from Alaska, had walked back out onto the patio to join me, Grandaddy, and Mike.
Instead of answering, Grandaddy slipped his tobacco pouch out of his shirt pocket and shakily picked up his pipe.

“Fine,” I said, catching my mother’s eye and motioning to the patio table. Grandaddy’s food was left untouched.

Hoping to cure him of his hunger strike, my mother had picked up a Sonic chili dog for him and was going to have me hand it to him. Here, Grandaddy, I brought something for you. That’s what I was supposed to say, cute and kitten-like, at the age of twenty-two to a 75-year-old man with a death wish.

As Mom and I drove Betty and Mike to their hotel, we told them about how rapidly Grandaddy declined over the summer. Two months prior, in August, he had run away.

“Your granddaddy is in Mississippi,” my mother had said to me, late at night, under the glow of the stairwell light. “He called from a motel.” Her eyes pinched shut under her evening glasses. “He thinks we’re trying to take away his life.”

“Oh, Grandaddy.”

On his way to Virginia to his sister-in-law’s, he had said, with two thousand dollars cash in his pockets. That night had been on its way for the entire summer. In June he had a minor over-the-curb accident, and then a run-in with a brick mailbox down his street. The cops were working with my mother to get a medical report on his ability to drive. My mother and her brothers begged him not to leave home. What if the mailbox had been a kid on a bike, Dad? What if you were seriously hurt? Nothing made sense to him.
Meanwhile, he had been forgetting to take his pills, to turn off burners, to change his sheets. He refused to carry his cell phone, refused to admit he needed help. Any suggestions to clean or move out of his large house into something he could take care of became attacks on the memory of my grandmother, who died seven years ago. When his eyesight degenerated, he wouldn’t move his recliner closer to the television because my grandmother had positioned the furniture.

By August of this year, then, he’d finally had enough of us and decided running away was optimal. Of course, then he fell in his motel, broke the orbital bone in his face, landed himself in a Biloxi hospital, and we had to go retrieve him. Betty and Mike were more shocked still by our last point: in his justification for why he ran away, he said he had forgotten that his grandchildren might miss him.

“\textquote“I didn’t think of that,” he said simply.\textquote""

I try to think the best. We all forget sometimes. I even think childhood is a kind of amnesia, in which you can only put the pieces together later, as life and others tell you more. 
\textit{No, you were ten when you dragged your sister by the arm and dislocated her elbow} or \textit{Actually, the Florida vacation was in \textquote\textquote‘99. Growing up we can make fools of ourselves by revealing what we used to believe.\textquote\textquote} 

For example, I had a dream when I was child that the world was ending. Christ was coming back in the middle of the night. I couldn’t see Him in the sky, but the cosmos was visibly disturbed. I stood barefoot in the backyard in the soft St. Augustine, looking past the swingset. The earth shook. The moon was large and orange-yellow, rolling across the horizon, like a
billiard ball in fast circles right along the plane of the fence. My dream said I would die, sucked into the gravity of that orange-yellow blur before God scooped me up.

This was contrary to how I believed He would come back for me, on a bright blue day with powerful clouds. The sun would shine through in visible lines. Jesus would approach like a balloon drifting down from the sky, growing larger each second He neared the place where He would suspend Himself and speak to humanity. I would hear trumpets. I would rise slowly to him, like a magician into a spotlight. Or I suppose I wasn’t told this, but it was what everyone made it seem like in Easter plays and apocalypse movies.

When I stop my childhood forgetting, the dream makes much more sense than the Easter plays ever did. I remember that death, not rapture, is the common way to be taken.

October 2004

“Do you want to ride in the limo?” they asked me. Who is they? I don’t know. I can’t hear the voice, but I know the words were transmitted. Just as in dreams, my memory of this question occurs in an illogical place. My brain generates a picture of a different church and funeral, but I know well it is my grandmother’s. For a long time, I forgot the day’s date, but kept its meaning. Mostly, I remember myself in a bubble, with information seeping in like air, staying, and swelling.

I sat in the front row for the service. Why do funerals require the family to be closest to the casket? This is an awful thing: to be able to reach out and touch it; to sit there, knowing her body is before me, in mauve lipstick, a wig to replace hair chemotherapy melted away, a layer of skin-powder, her nicest jewelry, a navy blue dress she wore at Uncle Matt’s wedding. One
day I will look like this in my casket. I find that word nauseating: casket. Then, coffin is too dark. It’s too vulgar for her small frame and reserved disposition. There is no good word for a box that bears the dead.

And I do remember her looking dead. Sandi Kay Karnes rarely dressed showy alive. Alive, I can see her on the far left cushion of her floral couch, legs crossed in denim stretch pants, white Keds, and a loose t-shirt advertising an East coast cape. She’s from the Virginias. Cuticle scissors, a glossy-lettered Danielle Steel novel and a glass ash tray shine under the side table lamp. Maybe there’s a cigarette (that’s what killed her at 59; cancer shredded her lungs, then everything else) between her fingers. Maybe she’s clutching crochet needles. Maybe there’s three-year-old, brown-haired, blue-eyed me in her lap with a nursery rhyme book, stumbling through “Hickety Pickety, My Black Hen.” It’s not glamorous, until I remember her warmth behind me at a piano, with her hands on top of mine, placing my tiny fingers on the right keys. Her patience is golden, she smells sweet, and her necklace tickles my ear.

Suddenly, I’m a baby, a baby on this day in front of Grandma. Who is not? Even my giant Uncle Tim is crying. My mother’s other cousin Linda sings “The Wind Beneath My Wings.” My steady-voiced father reads a piece on her life. More sadness inflames me. I can’t speak to anyone when the service is over, and the congregation parades to pass Grandma in her pearls and casket, shake our hands and hug our necks. I don’t dare touch my broken Grandaddy. At this time he is still healthy and safe, a normal adult in his mourning. I look at each family member once, take in their grief, and shrink back inside. It’s selfish, but I do. I feel disgusting, forced to look at people with a snotty nose.
Soon, my sister Becky and I stood in the foyer like lost sheep. I felt gaudy and self-conscious. Who would wear this? I was in a low cut v-neck, black, flouncy skirt, and strappy heels with mascara tear trails down my face.

“Oh, you poor dears,” said a blonde-haired lady.

I said nothing. I looked down at church lobby carpet.

“You know,” she said, pushing a band of my hair behind my ear, “Your grandaddy reminds me of my dad.” I didn’t want to be touched, but I nodded anyway. She moved on to my sister’s tresses.

Then, the question and the limo, which is supposed to be an exciting thing for a teenager, I guess. But I was fifteen and unimpressed. Shamefully, I only remember myself, not who rode with me, not my sister, not the hearse somewhere ahead. After absorbing the grief, I could contain no more. That was my first limousine ride: a slippery, tan seat, a blur of field grasses outside of the window, a peach-colored rose in my lap, and numbness.

Two weeks later, I heard my mother curse for the first time while slamming cabinets in the kitchen. Becky and I remember this day differently. She thought it was her fault. I thought it was mine. I was defiant about doing my laundry, or Becky wouldn’t pick up her shoes.

“All I’m doing is the best that I can, and everyone keeps bitching at me!”

The way a word echoes when you’re not used to it.

“And whining and crying and carrying on…and…” She broke into something incoherent.

I regret not seeing Grandma in the hospital. “Grandma doesn’t look like Grandma,” they said. So I stayed outside like they told me. I don’t know why. In the same way, I regret not
seeing the changes in my mother. Her eyes were wide, she was bent over, and a small tear trickled down her red, wrinkled chin. My dad leaned against the counter near the fridge with his arms folded. He looked helpless and truly sad, tightly holding a furrowed brow and thin lips.

“Daddy, I didn’t mean to...” I said, expecting a reprimand. But he was silent. My mom had a mom, but now she didn’t.

I think this was when the past began to disappear.

2005-2007

In high school I tried to keep Grandma alive. Maybe I could have the chance to know her by knowing myself. I couldn’t at all place her in my mother, who was more frantic, more controlling, much louder. Not Grandma and me, I told myself. We were quiet. I looked at pictures and tried to identify that the look in my eyes and Grandma’s were the same. What makes you say that? Mom would ask, defensively. I answered it was nothing specific. I just knew. Perhaps we both appeared a little sad—tired and doleful. My mother denied this. Your grandmother was phlegmatic. Nothing made her that happy. She didn’t get excited about much. She went about life slowly. You are not like this. Instead, you are more like me.

As the first grandchild, I inherited Sandi’s piano. She used to give me piano lessons after elementary school on Thursdays. I was born with her long fingers, she said, which was good for reaching the bookends of a scale. And with my father’s aptitude for music, one day I’d be an expert.
Although I had long since lost my patience for reading music, I eagerly watched it roll through our foyer as a teenager, like she had sent it just for me to return to practicing. Eventually I learned to play many songs by ear.

“That’s a Newman ear, not a Karnes ear. I couldn’t do that,” Mom would say.

When I was sixteen, her feelings didn’t register with me. It hasn’t occurred to me until now that while I was trying to find me in my grandmother, she was trying to hang onto herself as a mother in me, and that I was cruel and ignored her. I forgot that she was grieving, too. In fact, I started having one-way conversations with my grandmother instead of my mother.

I was dating a boy at the time whose soul I thought I had to bargain with God for. When the moon was full, I’d stand in the backyard and attempt to mediate. I’d ask God to ask Grandma if she was proud of me, and what did she think about my parents wanting me to give this boy up, what did she think of me praying for him to be saved or that I would exchange my soul for his, even after he decided my love for him wasn’t worth it.

Slowly, I churned myself into depression. I stayed up crying at night, contemplating just how much hydrocodone from the medicine cabinet it might take to put me to sleep eternally, wondering why God had left me to contemplate that, turning to ask Grandma to ask God if he cared, developing a religio-manic insomnia I haven’t gotten rid of. Yes, Grandma must have been sad, just like me. I did know the look in her eyes. I only interpreted it later, like so much else about her.

October 2011

“I found a casket online the other day I really liked for him. A steel gray,” Mom says.
“Online?” Daddy asks. “Nice. For how much?”

I raise my eyebrows. Maybe I have not transferred into the state of adulthood in which the ability to talk about death with flawless practicality makes sense to me. We talk about its economy over spaghetti, like we’d talk about saving money on a car. Maybe the current sandwich generation has to adopt this attitude as a coping mechanism, I don’t know. But right over our dinner, in between forks to mouths and parmesan and pepper shakers, they go on, like it’s any other conversation.

“A little over eight hundred.”

“Really nice.”

Grandaddy is still alive, a few miles away in assisted living, probably eating dinner, just like we are, I think. I imagine it crudely, with the food spilling out of his mouth and onto his shirt. In his old age, he is tormented by essential tremors. His hands shake holding forks, pens, his pipe—when they used to be steady. He used to be a skilled mechanic.

“Oh,” I say, forcing a politeness, trying not to sound shocked. “I didn’t know you could purchase caskets online. Are caskets expensive?”

“Are you kidding?” Daddy says, “At the funeral home, they’ll take you for last dime. They practically prey on grieving families.”

“That’s dirty,” I say.

“Yes, absolutely. But your mother’s smart. Frugal. So glad I married this one.”

“And they do next-day delivery,” Mom adds. She smiles, tapping her index finger to her temple, while Daddy stands up and kisses her forehead.
“You won’t have to worry about this,” she says, turning to me, extending her hand on the table—not reaching to take hold of mine, but to pat the table. It’s a gesture of complacent finality.

“What?”

“We’ll have this all taken care of beforehand. The order will be picked out. All you’ll have to do is click the delivery button.”

I swallow hard. Spaghetti noodles fall out of my mouth. She is talking about her casket.

“Even if I get dementia, which is somewhat hereditary, it will all be written down,” she continues.

“Hereditary? Are you sure?” I ask. How long until I am the only one left here? I don’t ask.

“We want to make it as easy for you as possible,” Daddy says, nodding vigorously.

I look at them both looking back at me. Where did this come from? Sometimes the two of them form spontaneous, collective “interventions.” Together they talk their way into serious, adult advice, like I had asked an earth-shattering, worry-filled question. Like I am the one on the verge of collapse.

“Thank you,” I try very hard to say.

Later that week, when my mother and I go to visit my grandfather at Autumn Leaves, I ask her how much money he has to cover his medical care. Autumn Leaves is a pricey facility for memory care patients. His assets, she tells me, total around $360,000. When “it’s all said and done”—her words, not mine—I personally stand to inherit $10,000. When she says it, the
thoughts come to me mechanically. He has colon cancer that has spread to his liver. His eyes are jaundicing. He will die soon. That money will cover the rest of my grad school tuition. I can buy a used car when mine breaks down, which will also be very soon. All probably before Christmas this year. I understand my mother was already here, thinking about the economy of death daily. His death, unlike my grandmother’s, will be a relief.

1998

While shopping, my great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, sister and I were on our way to a K-mart sale, where ten-dollar CD-ROM computer games were advertised. I was a fanatic about our Windows ‘98 and enthralled at the prospect of games my thrifty mother would be likely to buy for it. Unfortunately it was raining, we were in traffic, and it looked like we would miss the sale.

So I whined.

“But what if they’re all gone? Ten dollars is a really good price,” I said, in my nine-year-old wisdom.

I was sitting in the middle of the back seat, trying to gesture widely while squeezed in between my busty great-grandmother Eloise and my fidgety sister kicking sideways at me and forwards at the passenger seat. Grandma turned around, unfazed by Becky’s kicking, by the rain, by my mother’s mutterings about the traffic. She smacked her lips at me.

“Then we weren’t meant to have them.”

Then we weren’t meant to have them. The words silenced me. Her voice wasn’t caustic or reactionary; it exhibited pure, calm understanding. Grandma knew things. At nine, I still thought I’d have to fight for what I wanted, but she knew it hardly mattered what you fought
for. The universe has an order, and you will only be a part of it, she seemed to say. You will get what you get. The time of your life and death, and much of what is in between, is out of your control.

2008

This year proves Grandma right. I have lost this year of my life. A good journalist until now, I have no personal writing from 2008. My identity disappeared into a cycle of stress, chronic insomnia, and finally a brain aneurysm and brain hemorrhage discovered in September, accompanied by seizures I couldn’t have prevented. A certain cluster of blood vessels had malformed in my mother’s womb; therefore I became a litany of pills, a puppet of doctors nineteen years later. Devoid of a written record, I know little about what I felt other than emptiness, fear, and further rage at God for emptying me. The year reduced me to a smudge on a CAT scan. I have it in a large envelope and can point to the 3.5 mm, illuminated in milky blue, that ruined the rest of me. I became one kind of person: unwell.

My fear of forgetting comes from this year, and subsequently my need to recollect. Not simply to indulge in my grandmother’s memory and her mysterious being, but to gather information, to remember her with some knowledge of the fact. Who was she and who was I?

This is the point at which all of us come together: my grandfather, grandmother, mother, and me. My grandfather died while still living. My grandmother lived only after she died. When she left, he went with her. In order for them both to live, they must merge in my memory so that one doesn’t cancel out the other. The chain of history is delicate. In order for
them to merge in my memory, I must solicit information from my mother. I am drawn inevitably back to her, whether I like it or not. Does this make sense? I live, so she lives, so they live.

2009

“Did you know I was born eight days before Kennedy was shot?”

This was two Junes ago, on a garage sale day with my mother. We all used to garage-sale together—my great-grandmother Eloise, Grandma, mom, and me. Now, only Mom and I are left to focus on the garage-sale morning ritual, the empty sequence of snapping card tables up to stand, laying blankets on the lawn, assembling the poorly-constructed hanging rack (guaranteed to collapse at least once under the influence of a strong summer wind), making the fruit peelers—a decidedly seventies-colored orange—and other misfit kitchen utensils look attractive, and marking them for fifty cents. Our rule is no more than a dollar for a clothing item, unless it is dry clean only. Then it costs five.

“You’ve told me before,” I said, groaning inwardly. But I should have expected it. That summer we enjoyed an influx of inventory: a lot of tapered stretch pants, glass angels, crocheted placemats, and boxed crafting supplies my mother had cleaned out of my grandmother’s closets. She was reminded of her mother, of her birth.

“Did you know I was a seven-month baby?” she asked, suddenly. She sounded like she was ready to attack something. She had something to tell me. I was now an adult with her, the only woman left who shared garage-saling.
I looked up from where I was sorting bras, dropping a lacy, cream underwire into a shoebox. She rarely spoke about herself just as herself.

“You mean premature?” I asked.

“No no no,” she said. “See Grandma and Grandaddy were married in April, and I was born in—”

“November,” I said.

“Grandma was already pregnant when they were married,” she said gravely.

I had seen pictures of their wedding day. Grandma wasn’t showing at all. She was in a fitted knee-length dress and a netted hat, clutching flowers. She looked beautiful, but wasn’t smiling on Grandaddy’s arm. Her lips were pressed together.

“Oh,” I said, not sure what else to say. Was my grandparents’ pre-marital sex some big secret she’d been keeping from me? Did she think this would somehow illegitimate the holiness of our family, that I’d think less of them or her?

“But it was the sixties,” she continued.

“Did Gracal know?” I asked. Gracal was what she called my great-grandmother because she couldn’t say Grandma when she was little.

“She found your grandma in the bathroom trying to kill herself—with a razor blade.”

“What?”

“She didn’t want me. She didn’t want to live with the shame.”

“But—how did you find out?”

“Gracal told me, and I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone.”
We were still in the dark, beginning to sweat. The garage door hadn’t been opened to neighborhood. One precarious lightbulb flickered overhead. I didn’t know what to say. But I began to think about 1963. If Grandma had succeeded, if my great-grandmother Eloise hadn’t found her at just the right moment, I wouldn’t be alive. God had wanted me to live.

On the same day, I came across a box of Danielle Steel novels, notebooks, and Steno pads. My mother found me rifling through it. There was Grandma’s handwriting, the flamboyant capital Ks, her sharp-tailed lowercase Gs and Ys—but before I could read any of her journals, before she could speak to me in the future, my mother told me to stop. Before she died, Grandma had instructed her to burn the journals. Even after I discovered the pain my mother was carrying, it took me months to forgive her.

October 2011

I am cleaning Grandaddy’s house. I go about it numbly because I have to. He wasn’t taking care of it. With what dignity I can hold onto for both of us, I try to pretend it isn’t his house I’m cleaning: his two bathrooms are soaked in urine. It’s everywhere, on the rugs, on the baseboards, the magazine holders. I have to hold out a bottle of spray bleach and turn my head to the side, holding my breath and backing away after I have wiped up as much as I can. The shower hasn’t been scrubbed in over a year. There are old razors rusting on the countertops, tubes of ointments and bandaids and a myriad of medical supplies caked in dust.

The kitchen is almost worse. I find vomit in an empty coffee container, bologna decomposing in the refrigerator.
I have cleaned his house once before with my sister, but much time has passed, and it is different because I am alone and his recliner is gone. They moved it to Autumn Leaves to make it feel more homey—even though he would rather it not have been moved at all. If he had it his way, he would be dead already. But none of this was my decision. I am under my mother’s orders to vacuum up the mess of crumbs forming an outline where the chair sat on the carpet.

I am okay until I see his slippers in the corner. Why the slippers break me down, I don’t know. The house is full of dusty objects of my childhood—thermometers, a Coca-Cola clock, photos that have been in the same frame for twenty years, my two-foot tall rocking horse, a collection of birthday cards from family members on the bar—each appearing sharper, more significant in my grandparents’ absence, in my numb adulthood. But something about the slippers makes me say, Grandaddy, you were here, weren’t you? You once remembered. It’s only that your shoes are empty now. I feel ashamed to pick them up and dust them off because it is like he is dead. I understand why he didn’t want to move a thing, why he didn’t want to move, why he either had to stay put and rot or run away to Virginia, where they met, where some piece of her might have lived, before he got her pregnant and she wanted to die. How could you be in a house like this, without feeling like you could erase her voice from the answering machine?

My mother would have put the slippers with his other shoes, but I have to put them back in the corner.

She would never let me read my grandmother’s journals. She read them herself and said I wouldn’t have wanted to, that it would have ruined my memory of my grandparents. She
finally conceded: *Your Grandma was a sad, sad lady.* It turns out she was genuinely depressed and paranoid for all forty years of her marriage to my grandfather. She also knew something was wrong—that she was sick, long before she went into the doctor and was diagnosed with cancer. Mom resents her for this, I know it. She resents Grandma for allowing her own death a second time.

If there is anything left under my control, I think I will have to break this cycle of hurt. I will have to cringe less when my mother asks me if I know she was born in 1963, eight days before Kennedy was shot. I will have to imagine my great-grandmother Eloise bursting into the bathroom, calling out, *Sandi Kay!,* ripping off a towel from the rack to wrap around her arm and saving us all. This is no less significant—that things had to file orderly through eternity so that we could live. If I could just get my mother to remember it, too.
A Letter to Paris

1.

The summer we turned twenty-two, you and I would go to Europe, but at separate times. I would go with my conservative Christian parents and rebellious, aloof sister on a short vacation, and you were to go as an au pair in August, to leave everyone behind: your mother and angry stepfather, your boyfriend Deon, your dog, me. Ten months teaching English to two children six miles outside of Paris, selling your furniture, streamlining your wardrobe—remember you read a blog on how to cut it down to twelve outfits?—learning French. If that doesn’t fix a person, doesn’t force them to find out who they want to be, what can? I went out of the country. Couldn’t find myself within a thousand mile radius. When I know how much of you is here, how many leftovers from high school, from four years of college. I’m here, and I’m part of you.

Of course, this isn’t a letter of anger about your leaving; it’s a letter of change. Our generation is getting married too soon, and we know better. We change better than everyone else. We’ll find ourselves better. As though at the beginning of time God had sorted us into baskets, those with ambition, who have interests like yoga, or photography, or scrapbooking, with the will to order, and those who are careless, who settle for community college, who don’t put away dishes or clean out their inboxes. In one basket, those girls who don’t get married before twenty-two. In the other, those who never leave our hometown. Those who do.

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I came down to Austin to drink wine with you and Deon on the fourth of July. I wasn’t supposed to drink, I know that. Two glasses, and I’m dizzy and numb in the heat. Then, a Dos Equis, a cosmo, a gin cocktail. Better not have said anything I regretted. Better not start joking about drinking. When did I start drinking? There was no alcohol in my house until I was fifteen, when Daddy started drinking Heineken to lower his cholesterol. Not like yours, I know. Not like your real father who only sends money and forgets every birthday.

There’s a lot I’d tell you, if I thought you’d listen, if I weren’t hiding behind making fun of myself for being a lightweight, to fit in with other young people. I’d tell you that secretly I am reading books, trying to be the Christian my parents think I am. I’d tell you I cannot be both young and Christian. I’d tell you it might be easier for me once you’ve left for Paris. I’d tell you nothing in this natural world or lifetime is going to make me happy. Not staying here and getting married, not going to Europe. Yes, I will go with my family, take pictures of old doors and stones, pretend with my sister we live in castles on the hills, like we used to with our dolls. In Paris, I will see the future ghost of you, a month ahead of me, strolling by store windows on the weekends, making friends more posh than I was destined to be. If changing locations is the key, most of the world is doomed to live in unhappiness, I’d tell you. I’d tell you, I think you will be lonely, but what do I know about freedom, about rebirth, about fathers?

I badly want rebirth, but my father is in the way of my burgeoning Christianity. I recently wrote him a letter much longer than this, a 137-page memoir about our nuclear family’s chronic conservative Christianity and need to control and his pastorship and my sheltered childhood, about why my rebellious, aloof sister is incorrigible and scared of loving men, about why we
don’t speak. You read it. You know that’s what I did with my four-year college degree. I left that long letter in his hands, and if he’s read it, he has not said so. Not so much as a word.

I feel like a kid at the top of a treehouse, calling into a tin can, down a line, and I ring so sure of myself, so clear and so true, but when I press my ear against the can to feel the vibrations of response, I hear nothing. I don’t hear my father, and when I look down, he isn’t there—or maybe he is, but he’s mowing the lawn or kicking the sallow grass at the tree’s base. He waves, walks back inside. He has again confirmed my fears about God. That I will look out one day, and there will be no one who had listened to me.

2.

When the Paris plans fell through and your visa wasn’t accepted, I don’t think you expected that the universe disallowed you the change. You don’t believe in God like I do, no matter how far away and silent he is. When my father and I walked European streets and sampled beers and wines, I expected we could chat, that I could open up and he could open up and we’d heal over the wound of that entire letter I’d written him. He’d say, at least, we could have done some things differently, that I was right about the kind of love we should have shown to others, how we were snotty, near-bigots and could have stood to communicate more. That’s all I wanted. But it’s like I told us. Location changes nothing deep. Not even Paris.

In September, you moved back in with your parents two blocks from my home, where I live with my parents. At twenty-two, who knew? Now, we needed gym memberships, nights out of the house, full-time work or school to maintain our self-esteem, therapists and anxiety workbooks to help us cope with our return to dependence.
At least your neighbors were entertaining. We called them the desperate housewives of Briartree Dr. I should not have been surprised you found a way to be included in it, to involve yourself in others’ lives in ways I cannot. Had wine with Linda when she was kicking out the cheating husband she had just let move back in. When she did it, all of his furniture had already been moved back into the living room, his flat screen hooked up. Their kids were little. I don’t know what to say when you tell me these things. I have no experience with broken homes. All of my feedback sounds like judgment.

“You should let me clean your headlights,” your angry step-father, Big D, said to me one night. My car had 170,000 miles on it. A thick fog had caked onto its headlights. When he said this, it was one of his better evenings—the kind of night he tries to be like a neighborhood dad—but it was ruined by Amy’s husband Mike from down the street, who was over at your house, half-drunk on six Miller Lights. He looked at my chest, squinted his eyes behind his glasses, tipped his bottle forward.

“I don’t see anything wrong with her headlights.”

He burst out laughing.

“Mike,” said Amy. She was at your house, too, newly pregnant.

“What?” he said. “I don’t see anything wrong with her headlights.”

He continued laughing, his eyes still pinched, his head rolled back.

“Wow,” I said, and zipped up my jacket, trying to be light-hearted, trying to pretend he hadn’t embarrassed his wife or me, like I didn’t feel guilty or that I had brought it on myself (Was my shirt low cut? Was my skirt too short, like my sixth grade private school teacher would have blamed it on? Like my father on Sundays when I was fourteen?), or how this would have
never happened in my home, and how am I ever going to make it in the cruel world if I can’t handle one comment by one half-drunk man?

Big D on his good day did not defend me. Maybe he remembered a conversation we had, in which I called him *abrasive*, my apparently upper-level five-dollar vocabulary word. He asked me what I thought about him and why could I not level with him. Why couldn’t he be my neighborhood dad? And I told him. He *is* abrasive.

Then, “What happened to the nice little Christian girl who used to come over here in high school? Now you’re calling me abrasive. Fuck you!”

I had to sigh, had to hold my tongue. It hurt me; it scared me. I can only say it simply. I don’t know what to do with that stupid, mocking look on his face, even though I could have told him I could instantly have seven large men, bikers, called the Servants of the Lord, from my church hunt him down and bury his body in a remote corner of Lake Lewisville. I could summon an army. I could have told him how he just proved my point.

You didn’t say anything to defend me, even though you were sitting there each time, with Mike and Big D. You just looked at me, to see how I would react. Had I changed since high school? Was I still meek, still scared? What kind of Christian was still in me? I do not blame you, really. What would I have done? In any case, by this time, you are a mess because you have left Deon, afraid he is not ambitious enough for you, that he does not have enough interests, that you wouldn’t have withstood Paris even if you had gone, afraid you would have to mother him for the rest of your life. That he’d let you.

That fall, there was a war in my body. Christianity was doing it to me. I’d wake up in the morning remembering that all I do should count for the eternal, that in 100 years those living to
judge me—including you, including your step-father—would be dead. I would be dead, and what was I doing with my life living at home in order to pay for graduate school, finding the right nook and cranny in the abyss that is professional English to angle my work into, work that 98 percent of the world would not read or understand—masculinity this, feminism that, ahem, no I am really more of a nineteenth-century Americanist, and yes, in fact, I am familiar with these thirty-seven writers and how their work informs my..., conference papers and schmoozing with more people, some as abrasive as Big D in one way or another, who found ways to angle their work into the right nook and cranny and stand on top. I attributed it to God that I made it in, all while not knowing why. I thought He was trying to kill me again, this time with anxiety and self-doubt. I thought, I should be feeding homeless, giving blood, affecting someone directly every day.

You did things like learn to cook new meals. You still do. You look into the prices of wedding floral arrangements, of good French bistros. You are educated on the best makeup, especially eyeliners. There’s an eighteen-dollar one you like from Ulta. I wouldn’t know what to do with that. I’d end up dropping it in the toilet. I don’t know what to do when we’re shopping for nail polish together and you open the bottles to swipe a bit on each finger, deciding which color you want to buy, which looks more peach, more coral, more dazzling beside your tan skin. Loving you does not prevent my cringing. What if they saw you? Don’t you know that’s stealing?

I really wish you’d gone to Paris.
That Christmas, the summer after you and I turned twenty-two, two people died. First, my best friend from middle school, a short and bright Iranian girl with frizzy hair and large lips, Sahra, S-a-h-r-a, so beautifully spelled, was shot by her uncle on Christmas morning in a Grapevine apartment. He came over dressed as Santa, said her final text message to her boyfriend, said the news. While the family began opening presents he gunned Sahra down, along with her mother, and father and aunt, who was divorcing him. Then, he shot himself. He couldn’t live with that shame. The news called it, “Grapevine Christmas Massacre.” A massacre. My friend, who was my friend when no one else would be, was shot in a massacre. All I could think about for days after is how she and I did a project in our eighth grade U.S. history class called, “Look Who’s Coming to Dinner.” Sahra and I made a trifold poster with glued-on pictures of famous people, dead or alive, whom we’d like to invite to dinner.

Michael, my boyfriend’s uncle, was the second death. He was an Aggie, a round man with a shiny, red nose, an infectious smile, and a King of the Hill intonation to his voice. His eight-year-old son, Bobby, was adopted from Kazakhstan a few years ago, and had a Christmas play the night that he died. Uncle Michael suffered from seizures and felt one coming on the night of the play. To not embarrass his son, he stayed home and in bed, but when he got up for the bathroom he seized, fell to the tile floor and against the wall in such a way that his neck was pushed up against his chest. He suffocated before his wife found him.

Rightfully, you wonder about death, about the permanence of life and love. Rightfully, you ask why massacres and seizures happen on Christmas to bright Iranian girls and good men who take in orphans. But why you thought Paris could give you any indication of the meaning of
your life, why you chase after nailpolish and ambitious men, neglecting that you, too, can die, I
don’t know. I do know I could help you understand, if I were only brave enough.

You know that bad things have happened to me, too: at nineteen, I had a stroke. I can’t feel the right side of my body or hot and cold as well I could before nineteen. They found an aneurysm behind my left eye and a pocket of blood in my brain that can’t be operated on because it is too deep, too close to the part of my brain that manages language and memory, the only parts of me that matter to me. If the blood spot grows, I am doomed. Sometimes I get nauseous and my speech slurs. I get numbness and tingling down my right arm and leg, in my face. My blood spot is affected by alcohol, stress, and lack of adequate sleep, a graduate student’s dream.

But—I did not die at nineteen; I had not died of the following depression. I did not take my life, despite the heavy hand of God, forcing me to face him. It had taken me years, but I had turned it around. That’s the part that you know, but you don’t know how I did it: I started reading those Christian books, absorbing the stories of father Abraham and Job, listening to sermon podcasts on my cold knees every morning, rocking back and forth with a cup of coffee. I found a different peace in that. I thought God had finally found me like my father could not, after years of a blind and weak faith. But, I told you it was “quiet time,” some weekly trips to the on-campus counselor, meditation on the fact that “things would be okay” and “everything happens for a reason.”

That Christmas, I knew it was cowardly to not tell you how I had not died.
4.

By February, you were becoming someone I did not know. You started going out all night, to bars in our hometown no less, with a girl from high school that was and is my opposite, wearing shorter things and flirting with drunk men. I won’t pretend I haven’t done this, too, but I was scared at the rapid changes. You found another friend, loud and opinionated, not unlike yourself. Before I knew it, you were calling me “girl” and “boo” and “baby,” neglecting punctuation in your text messages, offering me a collection of essays by women writing on sex you figured I wasn’t getting with my boyfriend to pique my interest in breaking up with him and explore like you did. No, maybe that is not why you did it, but I know you wanted something we could both relate to again.

Now I am being judgmental, cruel, sarcastic—this is not who I am, I am sorry, I am sorry—but I would like to insist this is not who we were. You told me that after Deon, the “domestic” you was over. Staying home was not living. But this was not just the opposite of staying home; this was the opposite of our deep-thinking, our self-control, our sense of commitment to those we love had bonded us. Now my commitment to my boyfriend scares you. You and your new friend tell me five years is the death knell.

When I finally went out to a bar with you, I almost could not show you the ring. You had ordered some white wine, and I had Merlot. As our feet swung down off the barstools, I suddenly grew sleepy, heavy with all of this time you’d spent with others. The televisions roared dully in the background. Now that it was me out with you, I had nothing to say, nothing besides that I couldn’t wait to get married, have a girl and name her Eloise, and I was a
Christian, you’re not going to be happy if you’re out searching for happiness with those girls you call boo and baby, and what were you going to do about it?

Why I chose then, I don’t know. I guess I was excited. My mother had offered me my great-grandmother’s wedding band, and I took several pictures on my phone to show my boyfriend.

“Okay, I don’t want to scare you,” I said. I scrolled through to pictures of a tiny diamond, nestled into four squares of silver and mounted on a gold band. I held it down where you could see. “But look.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” you said. “What is this?”

“It’s my great-grandmother’s. Mom said I could have it.”

“Katy, he’s so young. You’re young. We’re young,” you said, as though I didn’t know that.

“But it’s right. I know that it is.”

“Don’t you think he’s the least bit curious about other women?”

“Why should he need to be?”

“I don’t know; it just seems a little early to settle. How do you know what’s going to make you happy?”

“You don’t understand. It’s not right because I’m happy. I’m happy because I know it’s right.”

And you know that I said these things, as our legs swung limply and we drained our glasses. But you do not know how much more I was trying to say.
Later in the spring, you and I stood on my grandparents’ grave. You had come to the First Baptist Church for the service, and instead of mourning my grandfather, I mourned for the moment in high school you told me not to pray for you anymore because it belittled you. You found it condescending that I should worry about your soul. You’d rather go to hell than live with the restraint I do. And when the other girls found out, I was asked pointedly, *Doesn’t it bother you she’s not a Christian?*, but I said no, that I loved you. That they’d even ask that made them different from you and me. I could not leave you, cannot leave you. You have not left me, knowing where I stand after eight years. Instead of thinking about my grandfather, I watched you take in the sermon, considering there were not the same blessings in your life that would lead you to believe what I believe, and it might as well have been me with the thrice-divorced mother, the plans for Paris, the eighteen-dollar Ulta eyeliner.

I pointed out the gravestone to you and how beautiful the inscription was, as far as gravestones go—*Bob and Sandi* with the hearts inter-locking and connected by a ring. The wedding anniversary date indicated they had been married forty-one years. I was sweaty from all the crying. It was hot wearing our black sweaters in Texas spring, uncomfortable with our heels sinking into the ground, but you hugged me closely and spoke through a sob into my hair, “I want someone to love me like that.” We haven’t been serious like this in a long time.

“Someone does,” I said. “Someone will.”

I have been promised that I will find God if I seek Him with all of my heart. What is all of my heart? And where is the courage to tell you so? Is it like how hard I slam down the hammer
at a carnival? The bell at the top will ring, and the meter will tell me it is all of my heart. Where is Paris? How old is twenty-two?