SOMEBODY ELSE’S SECOND CHANCE

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Charles Baxter, in his essay “Dysfunctional Narratives: or: ‘Mistakes Were Made,’” implies that all trauma narrative is synonymous with “dysfunctional narrative,” or narrative that leaves all characters unaccountable. He writes: “In such fiction, people and events are often accused of turning the protagonist into the kind of person the protagonist is, usually an unhappy person. That’s the whole story. When blame has been assigned, the story is over.” For Baxter, trauma narrative lets everyone “off the hook,” so to speak. He would say that we write about our bitter lemonade to make excuses for our poor choices, and “audiences of fellow victims” read our tales, because their lemonade and their choices carry equal bitterness, and they require equal excuses.

While trauma narrative can soothe us, as can other narrative genres, we should not dismiss trauma fiction because of a sweeping generalization. Trauma fiction also allows us to explore the missing parts of our autobiographical narratives and to explore the effects of trauma—two endeavors not fully possible without fiction. As explained in more detail later, the human mind requires narrative to formulate an identity. Trauma disrupts this process, because “trauma does not lie in the possession of the individual, to be recounted at will, but rather acts as a haunting or possessive influence which not only insistently and intrusively returns but is, moreover, experienced for the first time only in its belated repetition.” Because literature can speak what “theory cannot say,” we need fiction to speak in otherwise silent spaces. Fiction allows us to express, analyze, and comprehend what we could not otherwise.
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PART I

“NARRATIVE BORROWING AND POSSIBILITY”: TRAUMA VICTIMS, MEMORY, AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE
Introduction

In her 2010 book *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*, Gabriele Schwab writes: “There is no life without trauma. There is no history without trauma” (42). I believe, and think she might as well, that no life is without trauma because no history is without trauma. My parents’ history of trauma becomes my own, resulting in trauma in my life that becomes the “family history” for my children. Seen in this light, trauma becomes a dismal, inevitable truth. Life hands everyone lemons, and nobody’s lemonade tastes quite right—so we turn to narrative.

As a result, the twentieth-century American novel and short story offer provoking tales of familial trauma. Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) exposes working class and immigrant poverty and the corruptive nature of power. John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937) portrays the loneliness of farmhands scraping to make a living during the Great Depression. William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” (1939) questions community loyalty over family loyalty. Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” (1955) reveals the deceptive and evil nature of the world. And Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) retells the unfathomable ramifications of slavery, murder, and sexual violence. There is no trauma too big or too small for fictional exploration. When we allow narrative to explore the most painful and complicated depths of life and human existence, we allow characters to live through the same trauma held in our histories and waiting in our futures.

Regardless, many people trivialize trauma narrative when they view trauma fiction as simple narratives with little purpose. Charles Baxter, in his essay “Dysfunctional Narratives: or: ‘Mistakes Were Made,’” implies that all trauma narrative is synonymous with “dysfunctional narrative,” or narrative that leaves all characters unaccountable. He writes: “In such fiction,
people and events are often accused of turning the protagonist into the kind of person the protagonist is, usually an unhappy person. That’s the whole story. When blame has been assigned, the story is over” (7). For Baxter, trauma narrative lets everyone “off the hook,” so to speak. He would say that we write about our bitter lemonade to make excuses for our poor choices, and “audiences of fellow victims” (19) read our tales, because their lemonade and their choices carry equal bitterness, and they require equal excuses. For Baxter, the trauma narrative can do little more than provide a cathartic experience with flat characters and predictable and unsatisfying conclusions. By this line of thinking, we use trauma for little more than to make ourselves feel better.

While trauma narrative can soothe us, as can other narrative genres, we should not dismiss trauma fiction because of a sweeping generalization. Trauma fiction also allows us to explore the missing parts of our autobiographical narratives and to explore the effects of trauma—two endeavors not fully possible without fiction. As explained in more detail later, the human mind requires narrative to formulate an identity. Trauma disrupts this process, because “trauma does not lie in the possession of the individual, to be recounted at will, but rather acts as a haunting or possessive influence which not only insistently and intrusively returns but is, moreover, experienced for the first time only in its belated repetition” (Whitehead 5). Because literature can speak what “theory cannot say,” we need fiction to speak in otherwise silent spaces (4 – 5). Fiction allows us to express, analyze, and comprehend what we could not otherwise.

I first provide a brief overview of selective ways trauma damages memory and autobiographical narrative. I also discuss first-generation and transgenerational trauma victims and the difficulties they have in constructing cohesive autobiographical narratives. I use these discussions to provide a foundation to discuss “narrative borrowing” and “narrative versioning,”
two methods first-generation and transgenerational trauma victims use in an attempt to create an uninterrupted autobiographical narrative.

After my overview of trauma and autobiographical narrative, I apply the concepts of “narrative borrowing” and “narrative versioning” to Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* in order to show the complex nature of trauma fiction. I chose to discuss this novel because of the novel’s unique focus on the first-person narrator’s struggle to create a fluid autobiographical narrative. I argue that Ruth “borrows” a Judeo-Christian narrative to imbed fragments of her life story into, thus creating a cohesive autobiographical narrative—though fabricated. I also provide a brief discussion of “narrative borrowing” and “narrative versioning” in two stories of my collection—“Somebody Else’s Second Chance” and “Crimson Pearl.” I conclude the preface with an explanation of *The Muck & the Mire*, including my vision for the completed novel as well as the past and current craft and theoretical challenges I face.

**Narrative Construction in Transgenerational Trauma Victims**

In 2006, James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*, Oprah Winfrey’s 2005 Book Club selection, created quite the upset in both popular and literary cultures. *The Smoking Gun* published “A Million Little Lies,” an article outlining the ways that Frey appeared “to have fictionalized his past to propel and sweeten the book’s already melodramatic narrative and help convince readers of his malevolence.” Frey’s supposed autobiography duped millions of readers, including famed Oprah Winfrey, into believing lies about his alcoholism and drug addictions. As a result, many writers and readers began to ask the questions such as: “What is truth?” or “What is the difference between non-fiction and fiction?” and “Are non-fiction and fiction actually all that different”? I spent numerous workshops discussing the complexities with my colleagues,
and we never reached a consensus. Some of us saw a hard and fast division between the two genres (i.e. events that never happened cannot be labeled “non-fiction”). Some of us believed that the “line” looked more like a wide guide, perhaps the width of the entire United States of America, and that what matters most is the intention of the author and the authenticity of the “truth” represented in a particular piece of literature.

Frey’s fictionalized memoir offers an ideal platform to discuss the legitimacy of memoir, a product of autobiographical narrative, as a method of “identity” production. We identity others by their autobiographies, or memoirs, and we know ourselves by our own autobiographies. As Kay Young, author of “The Neurology of Narrative,” explains: “Autobiography imposes narrative’s form on the consciousness of an ‘I’s’ experience, and it exists as a consequence of how the ‘I’s’ brain organizes experience. What then an autobiography is, how it is told, and the drive we feel toward its narration we conclude to be brain-based and deeply human” (80). Without narrative, the human mind could not organize life experiences, thus we would not know how to define “I.” In other words, “to be without one’s stories is to be without knowledge of one’s own life” (76). The truth is, however, that we fictionalize much of our own autobiographical narratives.

A very real difference, I argue, exists between purposeful and accidental deception. Even more distinction exists between deceiving the self and deceiving others. However, all autobiographical narratives include deception—or “misrepresentation”—in some sense because of the structure of our brains. Our minds do not link together every intricate detail of our lives, especially before language acquisition. In most cases, we do not recall every conversation or outfit we’ve worn—we tend to remember only those “big moments” or those details that “for some reason” decided to “stick” in our minds. From there, we use narrative to link those ideas
together into our “autobiographies”—we find our identities in the personal narratives we construct. As a result, when I tell myself who I am, or when I look back over the course of my life, I cannot avoid self-deception, however accidental, because I cannot remember all the facets of my life.

However, this basic process becomes interrupted even more as a result of trauma—an unfortunate truth most of us will face in our lifetimes. Physical trauma to the brain, yes, can cause memory problems. But trauma in general—emotional, mental, physical—inhibits the mind’s ability to accurately recall negative events of life, leading to the inability to understand or make sense of trauma’s consequences. When we’re traumatized, our knowledge of our personal lives becomes compromised (Young 80); our autobiographical narratives deceive us, and we cannot trust self-perceptions. Aside from motivation or intent, our minds become no less deceptive than James Frey’s memoir.

Trauma and Memory

As Anne Whitehead observes: “Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (Whitehead 3). Experienced trauma informs the way writers express trauma. And writers often use the same narrative tools of fiction to authentically communicate trauma that the human mind uses to process trauma. Because of this, a productive discussion of trauma fiction requires a basic understanding of trauma as processed by the human mind. Whereas, treating an individual as synonymous with a literary character becomes problematic, a refusal to recognize the similar nature of narrative autobiography and the craft of writing fiction trauma can become just as
problematic. Fiction strategies allow the individual to create a necessary autobiographical narrative and literary fiction allows these processes to play out on paper, at a safe distance from our minds, as a protected form of exploration. Therefore, to understand the ways that trauma necessitates fiction, we must understand the way trauma interrupts memory and perceived identity in the human mind.

Cathy Caruth describes the effects of trauma in the Fall 2008 issue of *Studies in the Literary Imagination*. She says trauma “evokes a particular unlocatability in the experience of the event, a temporal enigma at the heart of severe or catastrophic experience that gives it the quality of a history without end, an event that refuses the closure of events and historical narratives and remains on after its own empirical ends” (125). As Ruth narrates in *Housekeeping*, “The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted… So memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory” (192) and later adds, “Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it” (194). Ruth references the delayed sense of trauma that extends beyond the duration of the trauma. Trauma acts as a form of writing that continually places meaning on memories of events leading up to the trauma, on the trauma memory, and on the events post-trauma. Trauma creates a moment that memory attempts to engage, repeatedly, that colors the past and helps predict the future; in most cases, trauma never ends, but continually reoccurs in memory—a producer of “meanings that have attached themselves to it and created the familiar worlds we now have lost” (125). Even when we cannot remember a traumatic event or express the event clearly, the event interrupts our autobiographical narrative, and in its mental absence or presence, affects self-perceptions.

The already unreliable nature of memory becomes even more unreliable after trauma, because the mind typically does not store memory in an accessible way. When trauma occurs,
victims often experience what theorists term “speechlessness” or “the wordless nothing” (Larabee 353). As Gabriele Schwab explains in *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Traumas*, “Trauma attacks and sometimes kills language” (41). As a result, the victim might not possess the linguistic memory to clearly express or communicate the event. Studies suggest there are dramatic differences “between the ways in which people experience traumatic memories versus other significant personal events,” supporting “the idea that it is in the very nature of traumatic memory to be dissociated, and to be initially stored as sensory fragments that have no linguistic components” (Van Der Kolk). In other words: the result of trauma “killing language” leads to dissociated memory that includes sensory components only—rather than linguistic or narrative memory.

In a study of trauma victims, Van Der Kolk and his team found that memories of traumatic events do not follow the same narrative structure that memories of day-to-day events follow, and the memories do not include language memories. Van Der Kolk describes his findings: “When asked about the traumatic memory, all of these subjects reported that they initially had no narrative memory of the event; they could not tell a story about what had happened, regardless of whether they always knew that the trauma had happened, or whether they retrieved memories of the trauma at a later date” (Van Der Kolk). Not only did victims of all ages and backgrounds report no narrative memory of the events, but they also only remembered “the trauma in the form of somatosensory flashback experiences. These flashbacks occurred in a variety of modalities: visual, olfactory, affective, auditory and kinesthetic, but initially these sensory modalities did not occur together” (Van Der Kolk). Initially, and often even after extensive amounts of time, victims cannot remember events in narrative forms, as they
can with other events. As a result, trauma victims often cannot verbally express an event, in a sequence but can only share sensations or feelings.

In many cases, traumatic events aren’t consciously stored in the victim’s mind so that the victims aren’t even aware of the trauma. When trauma “does not register on, let alone become integrated into, the victim’s consciousness,” the individual’s perception or testimony of a traumatic event is compromised (Bernard-Donals 1303). A trauma victim whose mind does not allow for conscious memory storage during a traumatic event cannot offer a reliable account of the trauma. Regardless, “in order for trauma to heal, body and self must be reborn, and words need to be disentangled from the dead bodies they are trying to hide” (Schwab 41). Because our minds require narrative, the trauma victim must learn to develop narrative by other means—a need that leads to “narrative borrowing” and “narrative versioning,” as described in more detail shortly.

For Caruth, memories are fragmented not only because of the missing language component associated with trauma memory, but also because “at the heart of any memory is forgetting” (1313). Memory relies on “the loss of the original event and that loss’s destructive force on any subsequent testimony,” and “this is all the more true of traumatic memory” (1313). When a moment is forgotten, any remembrance of that moment demands re-inscription, and often trauma is not witnessed consciously until its inscription (Ramadanovic 58), not only resulting in “delayed temporality” but also meaning that a trauma victim can only remember an unclear version of the event (Caruth 126). Anytime a person remembers, even a non-traumatic event, one memory must be forgotten and replaced with another. The repetition of memory causes changes in the events, and the memory is never an “original” but always a version of the original. In the cases of traumatic memory, the trauma victim never stores an “original” memory
of the trauma but holds only an inscription of the memory, creating an even greater division between the actual events that happened and the version in the victim’s mind. Rather than give “rise to a unified, integrated identity,” as a straightforward history does, the history of trauma “is an ongoing process that has no predictable point of termination, but repeats an undeniable, unerasable, even if unknowable, truth” (Ramadanovic 58). For the trauma victim not consciously aware of the trauma, nor for the trauma victim who remembers bits and pieces of trauma, the resulting narrative identity cannot lead to a clear picture of self, because the trauma victim does not readily possess a clear picture of personal history.

Trauma memory is as unreliable as it is uncontrollable and destructive. Schwab explains: “Traumatic memories come in flashbacks or nightmares. They come in the memories of the body and its somatic enactments” (2). So while trauma memory sometimes remains irretrievable and not expressible in the human mind, other times the memories interrupt life. Unless properly dealt with, the feelings and sensations associated with the trauma surface at the mind, disrupting sleep, relationships, and physical wellbeing (3). Schwab agrees with Caruth and Ruth that “traumatic memories entrap us in the prison house of repetition compulsion” (3). She also views trauma memory as that which either is repeated and dealt with or repeated and ignored, leading to physical impairment of the body. Schwab writes: “To the extent that we are successful in banning thoughts and memories, we become a body in pain, leading a somatic existence severed from consciously or affectively lived history” (3). Unless the trauma victim addresses the traumatic interruptions, then that victim will suffer and pass this suffering to the next generation, resulting in a phenomenon known as “transgenerational trauma.”
Transgenerational Trauma

Transgenerational trauma occurs when “the damages of violent histories can hibernate in the unconscious, only to be transmitted to the next generation like an undetected disease” (Schwab 3). Even though “parents are supposed to function as protective shields against trauma for their children. Traumatized parents instead tend to pass their trauma on to their children” (125). Whether parents want to or not, if they have not allowed themselves to heal from trauma, their own autobiographical narratives and, subsequently, the autobiographical narratives of their children will suffer from fragmentation.

Because language always carries traces of experience, we can’t erase the effects of trauma, nor can we keep from passing the effects to the next generation. Even when a traumatized parent actively attempts to not allow the trauma to pass to their children, “the linguistic scars of trauma” carry over to the next generation due to “cryptonomy” (4). Jacques Derrida’s idea of “cryptonomy” or “a traumatic designification of language to ward off intolerable pain” (4) marks “traces of this endocryptic identification leaves in language that can only be deciphered, de-encrypted in a symptomatic reading, mindful of a secret in language” (4). It is “through the unconscious transmission of disavowed familial dynamics that one generation affects another generation’s unconscious” (4 – 5), a transmission that—in part—leads Ruth and her living family members, as well as the narrator of “Somebody Else’s Second Chance” to experience the pain of trauma never witnessed.

Especially in Ruth’s case, family members attempted to avoid discussing traumatic events of the past, but Ruth and her sister Lucille learned to read the silences and nonverbal cues. For Schwab, these instances occur when “a silencing of the past that is covered up by empty speech, coldly distancing information, or a clutter of defensive storytelling” (57). For instance,
Ruth recalls when her mother receives a letter from Ruth’s estranged father and proceeds to destroy the letter. Ruth remembers the moment with “some astonishment” (52) and that “there was neither doubt nor passion in her destruction of the letter, neither hesitation nor haste—and with frustration—there was only that letter and never another one, and nothing else from him or about him at all—and with anger...” Following Schwab’s observation, Ruth focuses intently on her mother’s nonverbal cues and especially that she refuses to speak of the letter or the girls’ father.

Through silences or fragments of stories told, the transgenerational victim of trauma learns that the family’s history and, therefore, that person’s personal narrative has become compromised, due to “postmemory.” Trauma victims who learn to silence their own pain must “live with the scars of memory so to speak—gaps, amnesia, distortion, revision, or even fugue states or intrusive flashbacks” (Schwab 14). And, as result of the trauma victim’s pain, their children “live with a ‘postmemory’ that comes to them secondhand.” Postmemory “is fragmentary and shot through with holes and gaps, but in different ways” (14; Hirsch 103). Because children of trauma victims must attempt to understand their personal identity through an incomplete family history, they “need to patch a history together they have never lived by using whatever props they can find—photographs and stories or letters but also, I would add, silences, grief, rage, despair, or sudden unexplainable shifts in moods handed down to them by those who bring them up” (14). However, data collected tends to disappoint, because of its nature to remind rather than to reproduce or explain. In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes attempts to “search for the essence of photography” (Barrett 87), and finds that photographs possess “the sense of an irretrievable past.” The image of a person or event preserved via photograph insists “on a subject’s or an event’s pastness,” and reminds the observer that “endless repetition only reminds
us that the particular moment is itself unreproducible” (87). The still image of a photograph closely resembles the images or sensations of memory, both experienced and imagined—they both remind the observer of the inability to possess an exact moment again or ever at all; no event can be recreated with the exact same variables, and affairs cannot return to their pre-trauma state.

For the person who experiences the original moment of trauma or loss, the pain associated with both the “unlocatability” and “unreproducibility” of trauma hinges on their inability to regain that which was lost, despite the presence of “data” and “artifact”—or that which was taken or altered by the trauma. For the transgenerational victim of trauma, however, the pain of “unlocatability” and “unreproducibility” are compounded, because that victim wishes to know life, or the family’s state of affairs, before the trauma. A victim of transgenerational trauma can only long for speculation of the past, rather than a version of the experienced past, and must process the trauma and loss through speculation only, an unstable and unpredictable ground for interpretation and closure, creating the need for narrative construction. Even if provided artifacts, or “data,” to interpret, the transgenerational victim might agree with Ruth when she says, “fact explains nothing” (Robinson 217). “On the contrary,” she says, “it is fact that requires explanation.” Verbal stories or stories understood through artifact “are told to register a truth that cannot be found in the simple telling of facts” (Schwab 41). Transgenerational victims must find another method to understand the trauma that occurred chronologically before their existence but cannot be shared in a straightforward manner.

Narrative Borrowing and Versioning

Despite the difficulties storing and retrieving trauma memory, first generational and
transgenerational trauma victims produce a great amount of literary texts, memoir and fiction, and other forms of art (Schwab 48) in order to “endow [trauma] knowledge with a symbolic form of expression and thereby not only change its status but also make it indirectly accessible to others” (8). Schwab asserts, “Writing is performed in the shadow of a lost object. Writing is the shadow of an absent voice. Writing assembles an ungrounded body’s fragmented speech” (60). Even in this midst of painful experiences, we turn to writing to express and explore what we cannot. He further says, “attacks on language are the material manifestations of attacks on memory, and yet it is language that preserves traces of the destroyed memory: this is the paradox of writings from the crypt” (49). Schwab does not disagree that trauma memory creates barriers for autobiographical narrative, but he does disagree that trauma memory always remains “unrepresentable” (48). We can represent trauma, and we rely on narrative strategies of fiction to do so.

Here, I would like to begin my discussion of “narrative borrowing” and “narrative versioning”—terms I created in order to identify two common methods transgenerational victims use in order to create an autobiographical narrative. Transgenerational victims must learn how to “recognize and mourn the losses of former victims and simultaneously to find a legitimate way to represent and mourn for their own losses without having a self-directed process occlude victims’ losses or enter into an objectionable balancing of accounts” (LaCapra 697). I suggest that two “legitimate” methods of mourning for their own losses and creating an autobiographical narrative, as well as two methods of approaching trauma fiction as a writer, are “narrative borrowing” and “narrative versioning.” Subsequently, writers of trauma fiction must rely on these same techniques in order to advance a piece of writing from the flat, “dysfunctional narrative” Baxter defines to a piece of writing that explores that otherwise inaccessible areas.
I use “narrative borrowing” to reference the technique of borrowing well-known narratives and melding them with ancestral narrative. In *Housekeeping*, I later argue, Ruth imbeds her interpretation of the Foster family narrative into a well-known Judeo-Christian narrative of the fall, the flood, and the crucifixion of Christ. In order to give continuity and significance to her fragmented autobiographical narrative, Ruth “fills in the gaps” by borrowing from a well-known narrative.

I use “narrative versioning” to refer to the tendency of transgenerational victims, aware of their inability to form a concrete autobiographical narrative, to create multiple “narrative versionings.” For instance, in “Somebody Else’s Second Chance,” the narrator creates several versions of narrative versionings when considering her grandmother’s murder. She incorporates data from her life, such as photographs and clothing, into versions of her grandmother’s murder based on variant stories of the trauma told to her by family members. While “narrative borrowing” can seem to create a more satisfying and coherent autobiographical narrative, narrative versioning allows the transgenerational victim to a type of trauma memory.

In order to properly participate in either strategy, transgenerational victims must be able to function on a certain interpretative level. In his essay “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” Jerome Bruner outlines ten characteristics of narrative in order to discuss how narrative “operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality” (6). For the transgenerational victim, narrative helps to “explain” the “facts” gathered as well as the lacking—narrative allows the victim to construct a form of reality for a more stable ground for interpretation and closure. Of the ten characteristics Bruner outlines, the two most pertinent to this brief discussion of narrative construction are “hermeneutic composability” and “narrative accrual” (18), though
each narrative characteristic Bruner identifies does hold true to narrative construction in 
*Housekeeping* and in my dissertation collection.

A transgenerational victim must possess “hermeneutic composability” in order to construct a narrative based on fragments of facts combined with speculation. As Bruner explains, the term “hermeneutic implies that there is a text or a text analogue through which somebody has been trying to express a meaning and from which somebody is trying to extract a meaning” (7). However, the meaning expressed and the meaning extracted is not guaranteed synchronous. In order to overcome this dilemma, the interpreter must view the “whole in the light of the constituent parts that make it up,” but this only leads to the even greater dilemma of “the so-called hermeneutic circle.” That is to say, that a reading of a text is not determined as “true” by a type of rational reasoning or logical deduction but rather by its alignment with other readings, creating the problem of the hermeneutic circle that “is probably nowhere better illustrated than in narrative” (8). Hermeneutic composability refers to the idea that “a story and its comprehension… depend on the human capacity to process knowledge in this interpretative way” (8)—which Bruner argues always happens in narrative, whether or not the need for interpretation seems hampered or restricted. In order for someone to participate in hermeneutics, that person must be able to interpret the parts and the whole in order to develop an overall interpretation. The need for interpretation becomes blatantly obvious when “a hearer is made suspicious of the ‘facts’ of the story or the ulterior motives of a narrator” (10). In these instances, the hearer becomes what Bruner refers to as “hermeneutically alert.” Meaning, when a hearer has reason to believe that a narrative does not line up, that the narrator is unreliable, the hearer must interpret the pieces personally.
Transgenerational victims, made hermeneutically alert by the lack of detail or unreliability of fact provided to them, cannot merely gather facts and piece them together, but must interpret the facts while simultaneously constructing a narrative. The victim must first construct a narrative based on facts and then retain, discard, or inherit any facts that do not align with the narrative, thus aligning the parts with the whole. Throughout time, the victim can alter the narrative based on interpretation of new facts gathered. This process could result in either the need for “narrative borrowing” when interpreters rely on a pre-constructed narrative to provide a context for their own narrative, or for multiple narrative versionings, when interpreters recognize their own inability to accurately understand traumatic events and their ramifications. The other characteristic of narrative outlined by Bruner pertinent to this discussion of transgenerational victims of trauma is “narrative accrual” (18). Bruner uses this term as a means of explaining how events, or parts of narrative, are pieced together in order to form a whole. This accrual of events or parts into a whole “eventually create[s] something variously called a ‘culture’ or a ‘history’ or, more loosely, a ‘tradition’” (18). He says, “even our homely accounts of happenings in our own lives are eventually converted into more or less autobiographies centered around the Self acting more or less purposefully in a social world” (18). When we write autobiographies, we do not remember each event in our lives, but we consider only those events that seem pertinent to the predominant perceptions of our lives. These autobiographies, these stories collected may evolve into a process that unfolds “through individual as well as collective histories, and it becomes particularly significant in the presence of unhealed wounds, unbearable secrets, or unspeakable violence” (Schwab 51).

Transgenerational victims, especially victims of multiple events of trauma in a family line, must rely on narrative accrual in order to create a “history” for their family lines that they
have not been told in a perceived complete or reliable way. For instance, in *Housekeeping*, Ruth uses narrative accrual to describe the way common character traits of her family lead to her behaviors. For instance, Ruth uses her family’s history of intelligence and social aloofness to justify her own interest in books and lack of interest in social ties. She writes: “We had been assured by our elders that intelligence was a family trait. All my kin and forebears were people of remarkable intellect, though somehow none had prospered in the world” (Robinson 73).

Shortly after, she adds: “People always interpreted our slightly formal manner and our quiet tastes as a sign that we wished to stay a little apart. This was a matter of indifference, also, and we had our wish” (74). Ruth describes the nature of her family, thus her own nature, by selected certain supposed characteristics of her family and then relating them to herself. She also uses narrative accrual to justify her decision to leave Fingerbone with narrative accrual. She relates the pain in her life to the separation of family, and therefore takes whatever actions necessary to hold onto her only remaining family tie.

**Narrative Borrowing in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping***

Ruth’s family line suffers multiple traumatic fractures that leave her with a fragmented identity, leading Robinson to navigate the “narrative paradox” of trauma and trauma literature (Caver 111) and find narrative strategies to express “that which renders us speechless” (111). Robinson might have chosen any number of methods to affirm the “female difference” and to present “a new narrative for the new American Eve” (Ryan 86). For instance, if narrated by an omniscient, third person narrator, Robinson could have still shown “her rejection of a traditional, linear narrative” for American females (85), but instead she gives Ruth, deeply traumatized and silenced by abandonment (Caver 112), the opportunity to convey “speechlessness through
language” (116). Caver argues that Robinson represents Ruth’s speechlessness “through a dualvoiced narrative” that allows Ruth to narrate her family’s history through “sophisticated and lyrical interior monologues” even though she doesn’t speak often to those around her (116). In these monologues, Ruth strives to create a streamlined version of family narrative found in the history, hidden below the surface.

She often remembers “pictures, images, in places where images never were, in marble, in the blue net of veins [in her] wrist, in the pearled walls of seashells” (Robinson 90)—a literary representation of Schwab’s assertion that transgenerational trauma victims rely on piecing together artifacts. Ruth constructs memories to the gaps of information that she cannot know or that she experienced but cannot understand. Ruth uses both narrative borrowing and versioning throughout the text. Though I will only discuss narrative borrowing in Housekeeping, I suggest reading Housekeeping in terms of narrative versioning as well, especially in regard to her mother’s suicide and the concluding scenes of the novel about Lucille’s whereabouts.

I first discuss Ruth’s first-generation and transgenerational trauma in terms of true damaging nature of trauma on Ruth’s attempts to form a cohesive autobiographical narrative. I then briefly discuss the ways Ruth borrows from the Judeo-Christian narrative in order to achieve a clearer view of her own identity as well as to justify her decision to become transient with Sylvie in fear of separation.

The Trauma in Ruth’s Life

The trauma in Ruth’s life is quite extensive, making her both a first generation and transgenerational trauma victim. From the first chapter, Ruth attempts to place her life story in a typical linear telling, but her “temporal narrative is threatened with disruption from the start by
hints of a familial strain of peripheral awareness—hints of the long-drowned grandfather's eccentricity, of the distracted grandmother's and mother's perceptions of more than can be said or even contained” (Bohannan 72). In the second line of the novel, Ruth outlines the abandonment she and her sister experience as children. Ruth says: “I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher” (3). The first instance of trauma in this statement occurs in whom she fails to mention—her mother or father. Ruth considers herself an orphan, because her father leaves the family, for reasons barely referenced in the novel, and her mother commits suicide. The first instance of Ruth’s “speechlessness” appears here, and her “dissociation of memory sets the tone for the rest of the novel, the ever-present ‘not said’ around which the novel revolves” (Caver 116). Rather than explain these painful circumstances, specifically her mother’s suicide that she obsessively ponders throughout the bulk of the novel, she merely identifies her grandmother as her first caretaker, followed by her great aunts and finally her aunt, Sylvie.

In the third line of chapter one, Ruth’s description of her family’s life moves from succinct, staccato lines to descriptive tales of family events, including surface descriptions that cover the family’s depths of non-assimilated behavior. Ruth says: “Through all these generations of elders we lived in one house, my grandmother’s house, built for her by her husband, Edmund Foster, an employee of the railroad, who escaped this world years before I entered it. It was he who put us down in this unlikely place” (3). Here, Ruth does not yet reveal the traumatic circumstances of her grandfather’s death, but she underscores her bleak outlook of life by explaining that her grandfather “escaped this world”—somehow her grandfather manages to leave the suffering of the traumatic life she knows.
According to Ruth, her grandfather’s death does not immediately lead to more traumatic events but instead leads to “years of almost perfect serenity” (Robinson 13), a time that Ruth and Sylvie look to for much solace throughout the novel. Because Edmund had “sometimes spoken of disappointment,” life without him caused “no reason to look forward, nothing to regret” (13). Ruth says the day-to-day lives of her female relatives spin “off the tilting world like thread off a spindle” after her grandfather’s death—with ease and smoothness, without a tangle or knot. But in a few short years, Ruth’s mother and aunts desert her grandmother and the family house, indicating that “their seeming freedom 'from the troublesome possibility of success, recognition, advancement' is a description not of serenity but of trauma-induced paralysis, of a family unable to get beyond the shock they cannot speak of—in part because they are unable to speak of it—until, finally, they barely speak at all” (Caver 120). Though Ruth depicts life after her grandfather as mostly calm, its eventually spiral into complete isolation of each family member indicates otherwise.

The most painful abandonment for Ruth and Lucille in Housekeeping occurs when Helen, Ruth and Lucille’s mother, abandons her daughters at her mother’s house, and then kills herself. Helen brings Ruth and Lucille back to Fingerbone and stays only “long enough to settle [her daughters] on the bench in the screened porch, with a box of graham crackers to prevent conflict and restlessness” (Robinson 19). What Ruth and Lucille, two young girls, originally think is a vacation to finally meet their estranged grandmother quickly turns into deliberate abandonment by their mother. Helen borrows a neighbor’s car and drives her daughters to her mother’s house in Fingerbone, a final act of maternal kindness, and then drives north and off “the top of a cliff named Whiskey Rock” and “into the blackest depth of the lake” (22). Helen’s first suicide attempt fails, but when two boys find her sitting atop her car in the mud, they help push her car
back to solid ground, only for her to sail “off the edge of the cliff” again, and find her final resting at the bottom of the lake alongside her father. Helen’s death greatly saddens Ruth’s grandmother, so much that she doesn’t come out of her room for days, but she soon cares for Ruth and Lucille as though she is caring for her own girls once again (24). Ruth cannot know why her mother chooses to end her life, and she spends much of her life attempting to formulate a reliable and cohesive narrative to explain the fact of her mother’s suicide.

After going through a number of female caretakers, Sylvie arrives to care for the two girls. Initially, Lucille and Ruth both work to appease Sylvie, to motivate her to stay, and neither of them fit into social norms well—they both cling to their family’s narrative of oddities and trauma. However, Lucille begins to keep a diary with “lists of exercises she had done and pages she had read. She had copied from somewhere a table of grace, which had an aristocratic sound…” (133), in efforts of learning how other families, not so worn down with trauma, thrive socially. Lucille comments on Ruth’s oddities, and Ruth speculates that Lucille surely sees the ways Ruth is more and more “the image of Sylvie with everyday” (133). Lucille begins to sew socially acceptable clothes. She socializes with new girls and abandons Ruth. She learns to assimilate herself into society. Lucille eventually seeks out adoption with a schoolteacher, and neighbors stop by Sylvie and Ruth’s to express their concerns about Ruth’s wellbeing. Lucille gains an “illusion of self by uncritically adopting the identity and voice of her community,” while Ruth “escapes conventionality with silenced voice and disappearing body” (Caver 112).

By the novel’s conclusion, Ruth and Sylvie, attempt to burn the house down and flee. After the Sheriff tries to coerce Ruth from her family’s home and from under the supervision of Sylvie, Ruth explains: “… we had to leave. I could not stay, and Sylvie would not stay without me. Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping” (Robinson
The community assumes they both drowned in the lake, and the two never return to Fingerbone except to pass by on train ride to Montana. They “try to catch a glimpse of the old house” but “cannot see it from the tracks” (216). Yet Ruth knows “someone is living there. Someone plants sunflowers and giant dahlias at the foot of the garden.” She imagines that her sister, Lucille, who earlier rejects Ruth and Sylvie and chooses to live with another woman in town, is taking care of the house, “stalemating the forces of ruin.” But despite her imagination—her use of narrative versioning—she knows Lucille is not at the house. She knows Lucille is not in Boston either, a city Lucille had spoken of often. Ruth knows the facts of the situation, but she allows her imagination to create the explanation of the facts, because she believes “fact explains nothing” (216). She says, “On the contrary, it is fact that requires explanation.” It is this very need for explanation that urges Ruth toward narrative borrowing and versioning, and it is the same need for explanation that requires Robinson to choose narrative borrowing and versioning as narrative techniques.

Ruth’s Narrative Borrowing

From the first line of the novel, Robinson situates Ruth’s narrative into a biblical framework and also identifies her life as one interrupted by traumatic abandonment. The first line of the novel reads: “My name is Ruth” (3). This simple statement not only references Moby Dick’s “Call me Ishmael” (Melville 1) but also signals Housekeeping as a possible great American novel from the female perspective, as noted by several scholars. Her name, “Ruth,” also immediately references the story of Ruth and Naomi. The name “Ruth,” meaning “faithfulness” comes from Ruth’s faithfulness to her mother-in-law Naomi after the death of
Ruth’s husband, Naomi’s son (Hartshorne 56). Because of Ruth’s faithfulness to Naomi and God, Ruth finds a husband in Boaz who takes care of Ruth and Naomi (Ruth). Though the story ends with male protection, the female bond between Ruth and Naomi leads to the reward. Just as Ruth follows Sylvie out of Fingerbone, Ruth promises Naomi to go wherever Naomi goes (Ruth). Ruth and Sylvie look to each other for protection and financial security rather than to a male figure—a decision symbolized in their attempt to burn down the family, patriarchal home.

Ruth also alludes to Noah on several occasions in the text, beginning with her direct reference in chapter 8—the chapter directly after Lucille’s decision to leave the family. Sylvie wakes Ruth up for an early morning visit to the lake—their personal refuge. Ruth describes the clouds as “bellied like cherubs” (171) sailing across the sky over the “azure” surface of the lake. Ruth compares the lake to the Flood. She speculates that “when the globe was a ball of water” and “the day of divine relenting finally came, Noah’s wife must have opened the shutters upon a morning designed to reflect an enormous good nature” (172). She imagines that the water rippled and glistened the “purely ornamental” clouds hung in the air. Despite the beautiful scenery, Ruth paints Noah’s wife as a woman who “might have wished to be with the mothers and uncles, among the dance of bones, since this is hardly a human world, here in the fatuous light, admiring the plump clouds” (172). To Ruth, Lake Fingerbone looks very much like the Flood and also covers the bodies of her lost family members.

Ruth’s desire to be with her lost family is so strong that she imagines Noah’s wife longing to have drowned in the lake along with “the accumulated past.” To Ruth, the thought that Noah’s wife “might have walked into [the water] till her widow’s dress floated above her head and the water loosened her plaited hair” seems entirely possible. Her son’s would be left “to tell the tedious tale of generations,” even of those “who were never found an never missed, who
were uncommemorated, whose deaths were not remarked, nor their begettings” (172). At this time, Ruth feels more tie to the accumulated past as well, and she situates her own experiences with that of the biblical account of the flood. But rather than focusing on redemptive purpose of the Flood, as some do interpret, she focuses primarily on the loss and the sadness.

In the following chapter, the sheriff visits Sylvie and Ruth, clearly expressing the concern of the community, and Ruth revisits her discussion of Noah and the Flood. She writes, “Imagine that Noah knocked his house apart and used the planks to build an ark, while his neighbors looked on, full of doubt. A house, he must have told them, should be daubed with pitch and built to float high, if need be” (184). Ruth imagines Noah taking apart his typical house in order to build a boat that would float, in preparation for the impending Flood that would destroy all of humanity, save Noah’s family. While Noah prepared for the future, his neighbors watched him and criticized, just as Ruth and Sylvie’s neighbors criticize them for their non-traditional family life and housekeeping style. Ruth points out how a lettuce patch or a foundation would be “worse than useless” for Noah in the Flood—he needed a house that would float; he would need a home with “a compass and a keel” (184). But the neighbors, unaware of their soon deaths, would stroll back to homes they wanted “in ways they could not understand.” Ruth speculates that her neighbors, just as Noah’s neighbors, do not wish to merely judge her but wish not to see Ruth “pass into that sad and outcast state of revelation where one begins to feel superior to one’s neighbors.” Ruth attempts to understand her world by placing the events of her life inside of a biblical context, while also creating additions to the narrative in order to explain her own life circumstances. Though Noah’s home at the time would not have had a lettuce patch or a foundation, the homes in Ruth’s time do have these necessities. And while Ruth and Sylvie are not pulling their house apart to build a boat, they do live in a type of preparation for the future.
They want to hold onto the past, they want to experience the world in an intimate way with family before they all pass on, before a Flood comes again and destroys them.

Ruth’s final mention of Noah’s wife appears at the end of Chapter 10, when she and Sylvie play hide and go seek, and she finds herself sitting out in a cold orchard, while the sheriff stops by again looking for her, to check on her. As she sits out in the orchard, she looks at the house, “large, and foreign, and contained, like a moored ship” (203). She tells the story of a girl strolling through an orchard, seeing the house, would walk to it quietly and “be transformed by the gross light into a mortal child” only to find that “the world was gone, the orchard was gone, her mother and grandmother and aunts were gone” (204). She compares this girl to “Noah’s wife on the tenth or fifteenth night of rain” (204) when she would realize “that the world was really lost” (204). Though the girl had just become a human, she realizes she had previously chosen to haunt the orchard for a reason, because when she finally became human, she found the loss too great. The girl would “walk into the lake without ripple or displacement and sail up the air invisibly as heat” (204). But she wouldn’t have to remember the pain of the loss once she was back with her kind, once she had allowed herself to die once again. Like the girl, Ruth learned that she would she does not resist the fold of the orchard, that if she can “simply relax and accept it,” she would “no longer feel the cold” (204). Here, it seems that Ruth finally accepts life as a lonesome girl, as a sad girl, as a “transient” forever in search of the souls lost to the past.

Ruth also borrows from a biblical narrative in Chapter 10, where she fully imbeds her family story into a greater story of human loss and pain. Just after advising the reader to understand that breaking up family is “a terrible thing,” she zooms out from the discussion of her family in particular and places her situation in a larger biblical narrative. She states, “Cain murdered Abel” (Robinson 190). Just as she begins the first chapter of the novel with a short
sentence, she begins this shift in the novel with a short sentence as well, but immediately connects the action to the consequences: “…and blood cried out from the earth” (190). Then she writes of Job’s loss of his family, Rachel’s longing for her children and David’s longing for Absalom—she places her situation in the larger narrative context, focusing primarily for the longing of family, and the unbearable sadness of the loss of a family member. Here she describes exactly why she believes family separation is “terrible”—it leads to an unquenchable longing. She connects the suffering of these biblical characters with her own suffering by describing the passage time as propelled by “a mourning that will not be comforted” (190). Ruth does not need to analyze her own family’s peculiarities when she considers herself in the larger context of humanity, when she recognizes her mourning not as a new, personal pain, but as a force that has moved time since the beginning. By placing her own suffering in this narrative, Ruth can view her life as a “fragment” of time that is part of something greater, just as she celebrates fragments as whole objects previously in the novel when she says: “If one should be shown fragments arranged on a silver tray and be told, ‘That is a splinter from the True Cross, and that is a nail paring dropped by Barabbas, and that is a bit of lint from under the bed where Pilate’s wife dreamed her dream’ the very ordinariness of the things would recommend them” (72). Ruth can see herself as part of humanity, as one of the many spirits “passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has come to look and not to buy.” She and Sylvie are not the only transient beings suffering—all souls are transients, moving from this life to the next, mourning along with them.

She places her own circumstances not only in the company of other humans but also in the company of God. She says that Abel’s murder is “a story so sad that even God” (Robinson 192) takes notice of it. She views her family’s continual trauma as part of “ramifications of
certain of His laws,” as part of the “shock” that “suspends itself in waves.” Just as a rock drops in the water and creates ripples, she identifies Abel’s murder as an impact on the surface of humanity that creates waves of shock, showing themselves in “images that will mimic every gesture ten, a hundred, or a thousand times.” Cain, made in the image of God, murdered his brother, and “gave the simple earth of the field a voice and a sorrow,” making Cain the creator of sorrow. To Ruth, every generation since Cain’s time becomes his children, “all of them transients,” who could not escape the sorrow created by Cain. And, to Ruth, this causes the flood sent by God, in the Bible and in her own life.

Though many critics insist that Ruth’s obsession with images of death (Caver 113) indicate only a person damaged by trauma, a person speechless and socially excluded, these thoughts, when connected to this larger narrative, show Ruth as a hopeful transient, trying to make do in this world in the best way she knows how. Narrative borrowing and versioning allow Marilynne Robinson to explore the fragmentation of identity as a result of trauma and such pieces of trauma fiction provide a unique venue to observe the intricate processes of the mind. In examining the same issues in the stories in this collection, I found myself relying on narrative borrowing and versioning as well.

**Narrative Strategies in “Somebody Else’s Second Chance”**

The narrator of “Somebody Else’s Second Chance,” a transgenerational trauma victim, first introduces the reader to the trauma, the moment of speechlessness, in her family line. She says, “All I know for certain is that my grandmother chose to date a serial killer who eventually murdered her. And that’s not the kind of thing a family gets over” (44). The narrator clearly states the “facts” of the situation; however, because her family provides conflicting and
incomplete versions of the murder, she lacks a cohesive autobiographical narrative and relies on “narrative versioning” to construct a type of cautionary tale. The narrator tries “to imagine it all”—her grandmother’s murder and relationship with the murderer—in order to “avoid a similar outcome” (44). The narrator negotiates the “false memories” of her family and her “fake” memories (45) through narrative versioning. She incorporates photographs, oral tradition, and personal artifacts, such as clothing, to create instructive versions of the murder that do not “explain” but only raise more questions.

The first line of the story, meant to grab the reader’s attention, identifies the narrator’s need of an altered family narrative. She begins with a single statement, “I died before I was born” (42). Because of transgenerational victimization, the narrator does not separate her own narrative from her grandmother’s but merges the two, an idea later solidified by her presence at the murder. She does not watch the murder from a distant vantage point but places herself at the crime. From her perspective, her grandmother’s murder creates circumstances that do not allow a “life” separate from her grandmother’s death. She explains further: “My slate wasn’t clean but with marred half-erased sentences and distorted images.” Though the narrator has tried to “smooth the etchings” placed on her “slate” before birth, because of a lack of narrative cohesion, she cannot fully explain the event, and cannot comprehend life before or what is lost or absent from her life as a result of the event (LaCapra 701). The markings on her slate are not straightforward but incomplete and misshapen—she feels the effects of her grandmother’s murder although she does not entirely understand the event.

As a result, the narrator creates versionings of the event to help provide a context for her own life. She first pictures herself “at the crime scene” (42), and provides three versionings of the discovery of her grandmother’s body. In the first scenario, she says: “I find her body in the
midnight blue dress with the crimson piping that drips around the edges of her neck. That’s what she wears in the picture on my parents’ piano” (42). The narrator “fills in the gaps” with details from photographs. She describes: “A single bobby pin holds her dark brown hair back on one side of her skull like in the picture, but she doesn't pose for pictures in my imagination” (42). Though the narrator cannot know her grandmother’s hairstyle at the time of the murder, she creates the memory using the little visual details she does know of her grandmother. The piping on her grandmother’s dress is not merely red but is “crimson” and drips around her neck, an image of blood, thus melding the details she does know with the facts of a murder.

The narrator’s next version of the crime scene reads: “Sometimes, I see her in the van on the abandoned mountain road in the middle of the summer. I scuff my feet along the gravel, and the man with the horse waves at me to walk faster. He hops off his horse and looks through the window and yells, ‘Oh, no. Get over here’” (42). Here, the narrator speaks to a man, possibly from a version of the story she heard previously, and the man interacts with her and asks her to come look through the window. The man wears “a plaid button-up shirt” like the one her “father wore in the seventies.” The narrator pieces together images of the man based on details she has seen and heard in order “to make a seamless narrative to explain this all away.” The narrator inserts many details that show her construction of a narrative based on ideas that she knows. In the next paragraph she explains that the pony “swishes its tail from side-to-side” (42) the way her own pony used to do. In this extended scene, she also wears “a yellow tank top” that was her “favorite shirt in kindergarten” (48). While waiting for her grandmother, she wears “a yellow tank top and matching shorts and tennis shoes with little pink flowers all over them”—her “favorite outfit” from around the time she learned about her grandmother, her disappearance, and her eventual murder.
In yet another version of the crime scene, she unzips the sleeping bag her grandmother is in, and she sees “monarch butterflies like the ones in the picture on the wall in [her] mom and dad’s room flutter out of the bag” (43). This indicates the way that the reader tries to make sense of the story she has been told through details that she can try to comprehend. Her grandmother, zipped in her very own cocoon, does turn into another creature that can flutter away like a butterfly. She admits that these instances are imagination (44). She doesn’t “expect anyone in the family to know for sure,” meaning she doesn’t expect to ever fully know the details of the crime scene—she never expects to know more than her imagination.

She continues to create narrative versioning throughout the story, blending details from her own life with versions of her grandmother’s murder. After she images the crime scenes, she says; “Sometimes I try to find her before he kills her to understand what she saw in such a man” (44). Still in the process of learning how to avoid a similar outcome, she places herself in the setting where her grandmother and murderer met. She says, “I go to the criminal hospital she worked in—that’s where she met Kevin, her murderer” (44). As she follows her grandmother down the hallway, she tries to match her footsteps with her grandmother’s step (44)—an attempt to learn to move as her grandmother in order to learn how to avoid a death like her grandmother’s. Having never been to the criminal hospital, she can still only base her imaginative narratives there on stories she has been told. She writes: “My father appears as a young man; he told me he was young when he visited her at work. I blend all the details I’ve been told into one fluent story—trying to make sense of it all” (44).

By the end of the story, the narrator also visits her grandmother and Kevin at home after the release from the hospital and ends the story with narrative versionings of the murder. She writes: “It's almost the end of all I know now. The ride up north to North Dakota is chilly,
because they won’t roll the windows up, and thin yellow shorts and a tank top do little to cut the breeze” (46). She pictures herself in the car, wearing the same outfit she wore when she learned about her grandmother’s murder in kindergarten (46), and further melds her identity with her grandmother’s identity. In the first version of the murder, Kevin kills the narrator’s grandmother while after “he pulls over on the side of the road while she climbs over the seats until she finds herself in the back assembling sandwiches for them” (48). In the second version of the murder, the narrator pictures the couple at a “vacant rest stop on the side of the road” (54) where her grandma uses the restroom. The narrator puts herself on guard, and attempts to warn her grandmother, but when “the gunshot sounds” (49), the narrator feels no closure.

Instead, the narrator writes: “The bullet darts through her brain and into mine—a wound that never heals./ She falls to the ground, and I'm alone with him./I turn away and run—I run as far as I can from her until I start from the beginning again” (49). Each line here evokes the feeling of urgency. The narrator, even with narrative versioning, cannot prevent the past from happening, and as a transgenerational victim with very little explanation of the trauma, does not know how to prevent herself from searching for a reliable version of the traumatic.

Narrative Techniques in “Crimson Pearl”

Jess Baker, the narrator of “Crimson Pearl,” is best described as a first-generation trauma victim as opposed to a transgenerational trauma victim, because she experiences many forms of trauma firsthand. Throughout the story, Jess rejects several narratives presented to her by her parents and her best friend, Caleb, as she attempts to linguistically express the trauma she experiences: her mother’s adultery, domestic violence in her own household, her father’s decision to leave her mother, and a form of religious rejection. Jess’ mother, Mrs. Baker,
attempts to use narrative borrowing as an attempt to re-define herself as a “woman of God” and gain a new husband. Mrs. Baker tries to take on the appearance of the religious women. Jess rejects her mother’s attempt at narrative borrowing and also rejects her other moments of narrative borrowing, because she sees the technique as self-deception.

In the first line of the story, Jess introduces one of her mother’s attempts to remove the effects of trauma from Jess’ life. Jess says, “I’m like a clam. That’s what Mom’s been telling me ever since I can remember. She says that I have a pearl inside of me somewhere, but I’m still busy compacting all the sand together and making sure it’s perfectly round” (50). As long as Jess can remember, her mother has placed an identity narrative onto Jess—she wants Jess to believe that she possesses valuable internal qualities that will keep her from allowing other people to take advantage of her or take away from her value.

Mrs. Baker’s unsuccessful attempt to borrow a religious narrative in order to gain a life she wants leaves her with few options to create a life not marred by trauma for her daughter. She attempts, then, to provide a new narrative for Jess. However, Jess does not fully believe her mother’s insistence that Jess will not make the same mistakes. Instead, she wonders if she will “deserve” the same treatment her mother deserved—she wonders if she will make the same mistakes her mother made. Jess does not accept her mother’s insistence that she will not make the same choices in life, resulting in the same trauma.

Jess rejects common narratives she hears others say in order to justify their parents’ behaviors. She says: “I will never say that she did the best she could with what she had. Broken children excuse broken parents all the time. Maybe they’re just making excuses for themselves” (50). Jess refuses to believe a common narrative phrase children say in regard to their parents’ behaviors. She will not allow herself to excuse her parents’ behavior. She rejects the sentiment
even when her best friend, Caleb, tries to situate his father’s behavior into a softer narrative:

“Caleb finds himself removing guilt every time we talk about Mr. Vail. We’ll be lying in the back of Caleb’s truck during free lunch and somehow his dad or my mom will come up in the conversation. We can’t think about one without thinking about the other” (50). Jess views Caleb’s attempt to justify his father’s behavior by borrowing a common narrative that people “do the best they can” as an effort to misrepresent, or to take away his father’s guilt. Jess says:

“Without fail, he defends his dad, ‘You know, he might’ve . . .’ done this or that ‘ . . . but he did the best he could with what he had’” (50), but Jess informs the reader that she doesn’t “buy that.” Instead, she suggests ways that Caleb’s dad could’ve done better—she creates other narrative versionings that could’ve led to less personal trauma for Jess and for Caleb.

The next paragraph, an important structural shift in the story, allows Jess to express her views of narrative borrowing as well as to link Caleb’s narrative borrowing to her mother’s borrowing of religious narrative. She says, “Caleb doesn’t want to admit the truth to himself, but I’m not afraid to admit anything—to myself or anyone else. Not even why my mom suddenly found interest in attending the same Pentecostal church Caleb’s family attended” (51). She views Caleb and her mom’s attempts of narrative borrowing as self-deception. She believes, in an attempt to remove guilt or justify behavior, is a refusal to admit the truth—whether narrative borrowing appears in wise sayings or religious adaptations.

In the midst of an affair and tumultuous marriage, Jess’ mother exclaims, “Today is a new day” (54). She and her mother dress up for church to fit in with the “polished women” and “clean-cut men” at Marbur Hill Pentacostal Church. Jess doesn’t think the church’s “beliefs” attracted her mother to the church (54). She says; “I am positive she didn’t know the difference. But she did know that the Vails attend church there, and Mr. Vail, she probably thought, would
be her salvation. From a life of loneliness, at least. He was going to fix what he had broken in the first place” (60). Jess refuses to believe her mother found a genuine interest in religion but instead looked to a type of marital salvation through Mr. Vail—Caleb’s father, and the man whom with she has an affair.

While at church, Jess and her mother take on the traits of the other attendees—they raise their arms, but do not fit in well. Mrs. Jenkins, the preacher’s wife, questions Mr. Baker’s absence and offers advice to remedy their appearance—Jess’s “floral skirt and slightly mismatched shirt and skin-bare legs” (55), and her mother’s plaid shirt and denim skirt. Her mother’s red lipstick, symbolic of “sin” as well as “blood,” contrasts with Mrs. Jenkins’ pink lipstick. When driving home, her mother’s “long denim skirt hiked high above her knees so that she could push the pedals” (55), indicated that her attempts to take on the characteristics of a particular narrative will not be successful.

The next Sunday, Mrs. Baker provides Jess with nude pantyhose, in a further attempt to align herself with a borrowed narrative. Jess describes her experience trying to put on the pantyhose: “They popped out like a jack-in-the-box, springing into the air and down to the ground. Putting them on felt like trying to tie my legs in a strait jacket. The hose came up so far, that they rested up under my armpits” (59). Mrs. Baker does not provide Jess with any guidance about pantyhose, instead she leaves Jess to attempt to transform herself in a godly woman on her own. She feels hindered by the religious expectations, and a pantyhose malfunction thwart her attempts to follow her mom’s lead and participate in the religious service. She says, “As we began singing some hymn or another, the hose began to sag more and more—Jack was trying to go back into the box. I hunched my back. The hose kept giving into gravity” (59). It is clear to Jess that the pantyhose do not fit her, that she and her mother do not belong at the church. After
the service, she tells her mother, “I don’t feel much like a proper lady” (59). But her mother continues with the ruse even on the way out and engages Mrs. Jenkins in another conversation. Mrs. Jenkins compliments Jess’ pantyhose to which Mrs. Baker replies, “‘Well, Mrs. Jenkins, it goes without saying that a woman of God should dress the part’” (61). Mrs. Baker seems willing to pretend to play a role, but Mrs. Jenkins calls her out on her deception and replies, “‘Oh, Mrs. Baker, this is very true. But would you agree that not all women dressed like proper ladies are actually women of God?’” (61).

Mrs. Baker’s affair and attempts to portray a religious appearance results in two broken marriages. Though she certainly cannot be entirely blamed for the separations, Jess refuses to follow her narrative lead. She rejects any attempts to borrow narrative and instead relies on fear and her wisdom.

**Explanation of The Muck & the Mire**

*My students assume that when well-respected writers sit down to write their books, they know pretty much what is going to happen because they’ve outlined most of the plot, and this is why their books turn out so beautifully and why their lives are so easy and joyful, their self-esteem so great, their childlike sense of trust a wonder so intact. Well. I do not know anyone fitting this description at all. Everyone I know flails around, kvetching and growing despondent, on the way to find a plot and structure that work. You are welcome to join the club.*

—Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

I use Ann Lamott’s quote as a place of departure to discuss my experiences writing *The Muck & the Mire*, my current challenges, and my vision for the completed novel manuscript. When I first started writing *The Muck & the Mire*, I didn’t plan on an easy writing venture, but I also did not plan on the amount of flailing and despondence I felt at times. I planned to add to the
discussion of transgenerational trauma and to write the life of a young woman, Livy Turner, who finds redemption in—or from—her traumatic past. Though I could not put these words to my goal at the time, I wanted to find a way for Livy to find the linguistic power necessary to become disentangled from the personal and family secrets she tries to hide (Schwab 41). Like Ruth Stone, the narrator of “Somebody Else’s Second Chance,” Jess Baker, and Clara Moore, Livy Turner must learn to construct a cohesive autobiographical narrative despite the jarring nature of her traumatic past. Narrative borrowing and versioning provide a narrative solution to the predominant challenges I face in completing this novel, including proper handling of a traumatic plot and narrative voice.

As I wrote my novel, I found that my plot became increasingly complicated, leaving me with an immense number of threads to interweave. At times, I felt that I had written myself into an inescapable mess. The main character of my novel, Livy Turner, is a college student majoring in history. When the novel begins, she receives an assignment from her ancestry professor to research her family line and present her project at the semester’s end. This particular project both fascinates and troubles her because of her traumatic past. Her legal parents, Alex and Sandra Turner, adopted Livy and her little brother, Benjamin, when their mother disappeared after a house fire. Because of a family line of early death, criminal behavior, and mental insanity, Livy and Benj became orphans. The Turners first took them on as foster children, but when their mother is declared dead seven years after the fire, the Turners adopt Livy and Benj. Livy faces a personal dilemma when given the ancestry assignment, because although she is legally a “Turner,” she feels unworthy for such a prestigious family name. She remembers her life as “Olivia Blanchette,” and she knows that her mother, Barbara Blanchette, was not kidnapped, as Livy led the police to believe as a child, but that Barbara actually locked her children in a closet,
started the fire, and fled town. Livy’s secrets lead to chronic nightmares and anxieties connected to memories of her mother’s declining mental health before the fire, the moment of abandonment, abuse, and neglect, and her mother’s subsequent disappearance. Despite her emotional upheaval, Livy chooses to research the Turners for her ancestry project in an attempt to further ignore her past.

However, Livy’s research goals become interrupted when she begins to receive cryptic messages. For instance, in some versions of the manuscript, Livy and her best friend, Jess, research their family history at a local, historical cemetery. While there, Livy finds a note on the windshield of her car directing her to a “Carr” tombstone—Barbara’s maiden family line. Livy also begins to notice that her brother, a ninth grader, becomes increasingly despondent and distant. He seems unhappy and disappears for hours at a time. About half way through the novel, Livy discovers that Barbara has come back to town, has been communicated with Benj, and hopes to reunite with her children and take them from the Turner family. For several weeks, Livy allows Benj to meet with their biological mother at her camper in Trail of Tears State Park along the Mississippi River. By the end of the novel, Livy must reveal her past deception, the whereabouts of Benj, and her mother’s return, otherwise Benj might disappear along with her mother. Versions of the novel also include a love interest for Livy with a character named Paul. Livy also must manage a friendship with her longtime friend, Jess, as well.

I originally intended only to deal with adoption, transgenerational trauma, and the secrecy these create in a literary novel. During my writing process, though, my manuscript experienced its own identity crisis, and became several types of genres, including mystery, young adult, historical, and romance. Though these detours have delayed the completed version of my novel, I value the opportunity I had to attempt different possibilities and to explore various topics. In the
story Livy narrates in this collection, “The Mire,” she deals only with the ancestry project, memories of her traumatic past, and her brother’s difficulty dealing with adoption. I found that limiting the plot threads allowed me to better handle the traumatic material. I also found that removing the “mystery” from the selection detracted less from my main goal of exploring narrative techniques of transgenerational trauma victims.

I also face the challenges of structure, point-of-view, and tense. I wrote many sections of the manuscript in both first- and third-person, both in past tense and present tense, and in any combinations thereof. While the distance of the third-person point-of-view allowed me to provide omniscient details, I learned that the point-of-view did not offer the same mental and emotional exploration of Livy’s mind as I had hoped. I decided to return to first-person narrative in the past-tense, because I felt this combination provided me the distance of the past but the nearness of the point-of-view, as is necessary to discuss memory, imagination, and trauma. However, I wanted to also provide Barbara’s point-of-view, in an attempt to write a complex character, not a flat character without redeeming qualities. As a result, I wrote several sections narrated from Barbara’s point-of-view. I hoped to write a novel that included two points-of-view that would merge to provide a complete picture of the transgenerational trauma. I first allowed each character the opportunity to narrate every other chapter. However, I found this confused the reader, and detracted from a cohesive narrative rather than providing a complete narrative. Barb does narrate “The Muck,” the first selection from my novel in this collection, and I find that several elements of the story work well, such as Barbara’s relationship with Kevin. However, as I work through future manuscripts of the novel, I will likely choose to eliminate her sections.

My research about trauma and memory, transgenerational narrative, as well as adoptive narrative, has given me a greater understanding of the concepts I hope to address in my novel.
Transgenerational narrative provides a rich set of concepts to explore, and the addition of adoptive narrative provides an additional layer of complexity. As expressed by Margaret Homans in “Adoption Narratives, Trauma, and Origins,” “Life stories of adopted people often have complex narrative lines, since to the already insurmountable difficulty of any human effort to know and fix one's origin is often added the extra difficulty of lack of information about birth parents, date, place…” (4). My future plans for the novel include removing several of the subplots I have considered. In view of the immense importance of autobiographical narrative and the current scholarly focus on trauma and memory, combined with my vested interest in the topic, I plan to focus primarily on transgenerational trauma and adoptive narrative in the final manuscript. Upon revisiting Marilynne Robinson’s Housekeeping, I am re-inspired to invest my energies into a literary text that can creatively utilize narrative borrowing and versioning. These techniques will allow Livy to create an autobiographical narrative that might relieve her of nightmares and anxiety, and they will provide an opportunity for me and the novel’s audience a unique opportunity to observe trauma and its effects on our lives from a safe distance. I hope that The Muck & the Mire, like other pieces of trauma fiction, will offer us the opportunity to redefine personal trauma and identity—not as a means of excusing our choices but as a means of facing what we could not face without fiction.

Works Cited


PART II

SOMEONE ELSE’S SECOND CHANCE
I died before I was born.

My slate wasn’t clean but marred with half-erased sentences and distorted images. I’ve tried to smooth the etchings, but it’s difficult to repair a damaged surface. All I know for certain is that my grandmother chose to date a serial killer who eventually murdered her. And that’s not the kind of event a family gets over.

As a child, I tried to imagine it all—the murder—in my mind. I still do.

I look for any semblance of a resolution, so I can avoid a similar outcome.

I picture myself at the crime scene. I find her body in the midnight blue dress with the crimson piping that drips around the edges of her neck. That’s what she wears in the picture on my parents’ piano. A single bobby pin holds her dark brown hair back on one side of her skull like in the picture, but she doesn’t pose for pictures in my imagination. Instead, her body lies limply in the backseat of her vintage Volkswagen van. Sometimes, I see her in the van on the abandoned mountain road in the middle of the summer. I scuff my feet along the gravel, and the man with the horse waves at me to walk faster. He hops off his horse and looks through the window and yells, “Oh, no. Get over here.”

I pick up my pace, and as I start to get closer to the van, an odor of baked fleshed overtakes me. The man looks at me. He wears a plaid button-up flannel like the one my father wore in the seventies. I saw the shirt in pictures, and my mind puts all the pieces together—tries to make a seamless narrative to explain this all away.

The horse swishes its tail from side-to-side, the way my real pony used to.
He says to me, “Look in here.” I lean closer into the backseat window with my hands around my eyes and jerk back when my bare skin barely touches the car. The summer heat is almost unbearable to me, so I look at the man. He says, “No, go head, look.”

I turn my head back to where I know she is. I’ve found her there before when I tried to imagine how her kidnapping ended.

Her arm dangles off the seat, and her hand grazes the hot plastic of the floor cover. But she keeps her hand there, because I’m the one who does the feeling now.

Her other arm bends slightly and lies atop her stomach, and she lies there like Sleeping Beauty, her cheeks the color of Red Wood Sequoya, and the piece of her shot-off head, neatly placed next to her, hair sprouting from it like prongs on a crown.

“This must be that lady they were looking for,” the man says.

“Must be.” I know exactly who she is.

I exist in this way, caught up in my mind.

He rides off down the mountain for help, I suppose, because that’s what he’d always done before—just like in the stories my family told me about her disappearance. I put my hand inside the bottom of my yellow tank top—my favorite shirt in kindergarten—and try to open the car door to pick her hand off the matt, but the door is locked. I start to sweat. And she lies there with her arm still on the matt, but there’s nothing I can do to stop her flesh from scorching. I can’t resurrect someone from the dead.

So I stand there by her van in my yellow tank top and matching shorts and tennis shoes with little pink flowers all over them—my favorite outfit when I found out about her. The outfit I wore twenty years ago before I knew how one person’s murder devastates generations. Next to the van, I crack the spine of my John Steinbeck novel and begin from the first page, because Dad
told me he’s her favorite. Grandma, and I need a distraction until the man gets back with the police.

That’s how I find her sometimes—me with the man on the horse, her head already shot off. But other times it’s me with the police at the top of the North Dakota mountain. There’s no van or bench seat, just a sleeping bag—one of those heavy green army ones that zips across the top. The police dogs sniff about the muddied ground and chunks of half-melted snow.

My mind concocts multiple versions because no one in my family can quite get their story right—no one’s details match up. So sometimes I am with the man on the horse like my dad talks about and, other times, I am with the police and she’s in a sleeping bag like my aunt says.

The police say, “She’s around here somewhere boys.” I start to feel cold, and snow seeps into the tops of my shoes until my socks become wet, but I don’t own an extra coat in my mind, and there’s no way to warm up. I kick at the lumps of snow, but don’t want to move around too much, because I knew her body is up there just like the police think, and I don’t want to tamper with the evidence.

“No one goes missing for a year and makes it alive.” That’s why we bring the dogs.

I already know she doesn’t make it, but I don’t remember exactly where we find her in the sleeping bag. Soon a dog sniffs her out, and all the cops notice a glint of shimmer where the sun’s light bounces off the zipper flap. “Come over here,” they call to me.

I rush over now to an uncovered sleeping bag, shaped like a cocoon, and sopping wet from the melting snow. Instead of baked flesh, I smell a rotting moistness this time—a bloated scent of violence. I bend down on my knees, bare skin pressing into the mud, and I grab hold of the zipper flap and pull it down, half expecting monarch butterflies like the ones in the pictures
on the wall in mom and dad’s room to flutter out of the bag. But, instead, I first see her forehead, then nose and eyes, her full lips shaped like mine, and finally again I see the navy dress, and the back of her skull. Human beings don’t become beautiful creatures after hiding away.

But these are just the ways I can imagine it. No one's ever given me all the details. I am not sure if they even know. Maybe the man on the horse…maybe the police, but I don’t expect anyone in my family to know for sure.

They have the false memories. I have the fake ones.

***

Sometimes I try to find her before he kills her to understand what she saw in such a man. I go to the criminal hospital she worked in—that’s where she met Kevin, her murderer. She wears a white jacket with the flap on the front with side buttons. White nylons cover her legs from the knees down and disappear in the white nursing shoes.

I follow her down the hallway, and try to match my footsteps with hers.

Dark brown hair falls out from under her nursing cap as she turns from left to right, looking into each room—her head completely intact and perfectly round like mine. Our heads have so much in common I’ve often been told.

My father appears as a young man; he told me he was young when he visited her at work. I blend all the details I’ve been told into one fluent story—trying to make sense of it all.

My grandmother stands in front of a room, “She stabbed all of her victims to death.” The woman’s hair is red and sticks up in tufts. The side of her face touches the inside of the glass so that we only see her profile with the one eye the looks directly at my father but past him at the same time. Her hand is balled in a fist and she rapidly stabs an invisible knife—I presume—at
the glass. “We’ve tried to sedate her with enough medicine to kill ten men, but she still stabs all
day.” My grandmother explains.

The fluorescent lights down the hall pulsate and bounce off the newly waxed floors.

Before much time passes, we find Kevin’s room—“This is Kevin.”

“He in for murder, too?” My dad asks her.

Sometimes I hear her say, “He tried killing someone with a baseball bat when he was
thirteen.”

Or sometimes she says, “He’s a pedophile.” No one can get the details right, and I own no
documented records.

Less often she looks at my father and admits, “Yes, he’s killed four people already.” They
look into his room just as they did the others. Kevin doesn’t come to the window, and his eyes
did not have the same distance as the others. Instead, his face, angular, looks directly into my
grandma’s for a moment.

“He’s innocent.” She announces confidently.

***

After the hospital, I arrive at my grandma's small house. She's living with him now,
surrounded by an Arizona yard measured in square-feet. Their voices carry out of the windows,
almost making each tiny blade of grass vibrate.

“What did you tell your children about me?” His voice sounds accusatory.

“I tell them you’re innocent.” She's pleading for something. Maybe she already knows.

“Why would they tell you not to be with me then?

“They don’t believe me, because you were in the hospital.” A bold move.
I move around the gray-sided corner of the house, following the sounds of their voices, until I stand at the sliding door outside of the dining room. I see him there, sitting at the table, while my grandmother moves about the kitchen, putting together enchiladas and chocolate cake—her family recipes I have eaten at birthdays and holiday meals.

“Tell your daughters that you’re with me now; they have no say.” His young face looks straight into the sliding door. He gets up from the chair and comes to the door. I step back. He never sees me, but I always hide my face.

Grandma comes to the door with him. She stands behind him and puts her chin on his shoulder and wraps her arms around him, “Baby, you know I believe you. I got you out, didn’t I?”

“I know. I just can’t stand people not believing me. Especially your kids. I love you, and I want a normal life with you.” He turns and hugs her, and her face still looks at mine, but then she closes her eyes and squints them, like she’s actually in love.

I try to grab her arm or yell to her to get away, but she never hears me. She hears no one, except him. Maybe she doesn’t actually hear what he says. Perhaps she only hears herself. I doubt she ever saw far enough ahead to realize what he might do to me and how I’d spend my life looking for them. She never knew I’d exist. And maybe I don’t exist really.

I stay there and try to find the signs. I try to memorize what I must never do. I try to memorize the kind of man I should never love.

***

It's almost the end of all I know now. The ride up north to North Dakota is chilly, because they won’t roll the windows up, and thin yellow shorts and a tank top do little to cut the breeze.
They sit in the front seat. He’s in the driver’s seat. She sits in the passenger seat, her hand on his leg. She wears cat-eye glasses with little diamonds on the corners and one of those sheer scarves wraps around her head. She doesn’t wear the blue dress, but a polyester skirt and matching blouse like the one she wears in a different photograph. I don’t know why my mind constructs the scenes this way.

Sometimes they get in an argument about where to stop for gas or what kinds of music to listen to, but I don’t care much about those times. I pay more attention to the reasons. I want to know why she’s with him. I listen when she tells him that his “eyes are so pretty” or his “hands are masculine,” although I am not sure if she likes those kinds of things, but I do. I try to figure out why they’re heading up north, but they keep it a secret. At first, I imagine that they had hoped to move to North Dakota. “I can’t wait to get away from it all,” he says. “All I want is to be with you up in the mountains.” He looks at her and smiles.

“Me, too. I’ve never loved someone so much.” She replies. These are the times I like the most.

Usually, he scares me. I see the handle of the gun bulging out of his pocket and she sits tensely in the passenger seat, rarely looking at him. Instead she keeps her eyes straight on the road except for occasional, staccato glances to the rearview mirrors. Sometimes I think she sees me, but she’s always looking at herself. I can’t tell whose eyes are in the mirror, hers or mine. Even though I now I’m invisible, and this whole memory’s fake.

“Now when we get to North Dakota, you’re not telling anyone who I am, you hear?” Kevin says.

“Of course,” she says, keeping her eyes on the road.

“Don’t think I won’t take care of a problem if I don’t have to.”
She says nothing. The noises from the outside get louder, the air picks up.

It’s as though the volume everywhere turns up—almost a deafening level. Then I see his lips moving, but I do not here what he says. I yell at the top of my lungs, “Why did you do it? Why did you do it?” But he doesn’t say anything, and I am glad he can’t hear me.

I move behind grandma’s seat, and I put my arms around her neck and hug her. I lean forward and whisper in her hair, “Get out of the car” or “leave him at the next stop.”

I know she won’t hear me, but I have to try. I desperately want to get out of the car, but can't unless she does. I don’t know how to live a life separate from hers.

***

Sometimes I ride in the car with them all the way to North Dakota—I ride along with them all the way to the end of her and the beginning of me. “Baby, I can’t believe we’re finally to North Dakota,” they both agree.

They trade smiles. I can't tell who is fake and who is genuine. He pulls over on the side of a barren road while she climbs over the seats until she finds herself in the back assembling sandwiches for them. I see him pull the gun.

Other times, he kills her before she makes lunch and then hauls her body to the mountain in the back of the van. Just before the murder, I find them at a vacant rest stop on the side of the road. Grandma and I hop out of the van to go into the bathroom. “You better hurry back, you hear?”

She doesn’t answer him.

“Woman, did you hear me?”

“I heard you just fine,” she yells now from the sidewalk near the entrance to the bricked bathroom building. “I heard you just fine,” she mutters again.
I follow her to the bathroom and stand in my yellow shorts at the entrance. I feel the concrete floor beneath my feet and hear the life of my grandmother echoing in the background. I watch him from the doorway, and the angles of his face become more acute from far away. He leans down between the seats. I see the glint of his gun through the windshield.

My heart quickens, and I run to my grandmother’s stall as she turns the knob to walk out; I stand in front of her body, trying to keep her from leaving the stall, but I do not deter her at all.

I watch her every move while she quietly observes herself in the mirror. She draws her face closer to it. The navy of the dress brings out her eyes and contrasts with her dark hair. She reaches into her handbag, pulling out a fresh tube of lipstick and applies a new layer. I marvel at her last moments, hoping she might say another word, explain something, tell me something about the reasons why.

The water from the faucet spurts and splatters tiny droplets around the edges of the sink when she washes her hands.

“Grandma, don’t go outside.” I yell this repeatedly, but she will not listen. She doesn’t even know I’m there. I grab her leg and struggle to keep her inside the bathroom, but she walks through my resistance.

The gunshot sounds.

The bullet darts through her brain and into mine—a wound that never heals.

She falls to the ground, and I’m alone with him.

I turn away and run—I run as far as I can from her until I start from the beginning again.

It’s as though I can’t run from her without running also to her, and I wonder whose fault her death is: Kevin’s or hers or mine?

But mostly, I can’t tell who died: her or me?
Crimson Pearl

I’m like a clam. That’s what Mom’s been telling me ever since I can remember. She says that I have a pearl inside of me somewhere, but I’m still busy compacting all the sand together and making sure it’s perfectly round.

“One day,” she’ll say, “you’re gonna show the world that good you’ve got inside of you. Baby, people are going to try and take what you are. But you don’t let them string you up around their own necks.” I didn’t really understand what she meant when I was younger—maybe I still don’t.

When I was about ten, I’d watch her fix herself up in the living room, looking in the fulllength mirror next to the front door. She’d rub on her red, not dark enough to be crimson, lipstick, smack her lips together and add, “You won’t make the same mistakes I’ve made, baby. Don’t you worry about that.”

I’d half-listen to her words, wonder what guy she was getting all dolled-up for, then forget she’d said anything at all. But now it’s like I remember everything.

I will never say that she did the best she could with what she had. Broken children excuse broken parents all the time. Maybe they’re just making excuses for themselves.

Caleb finds himself removing guilt every time we talk about Mr. Vail. We’ll be lying in the back of Caleb’s truck during free lunch and somehow his dad or my mom will come up in the conversation. We can’t think about one without thinking about the other.

Without fail, he defends his dad, “You know, he might’ve . . .” done this or that “. . . but he did the best he could with what he had.”

I don’t buy that.
Mr. Vail could have picked anyone’s mom, but instead he picked my mom: Caleb’s friend’s mom. It’s like he never even thought about Caleb the whole time.

“He tried,” Caleb insists. “Love is complicated.”

Caleb doesn’t want to admit the truth to himself, but I’m not afraid to admit anything—to myself or anyone else. Not even why my mom suddenly found interest in attending the same Pentecostal church Caleb’s family attended.

Mom hadn’t been religious her entire life. She hadn’t even been religious my entire life. Her pursuit of a pure, feminine life didn’t rear its muffling head until just after Dad left because he found out what mom had been doing one Saturday night. Mr. Vail had dropped Caleb off at my house before dinnertime and stayed to visit my mother for a few minutes.

“Why don’t you two head out to the backyard? It’s really nice out tonight.” My mom suggested, her lips blood-colored and moist from a fresh application.

The backyard became our haven for playing Ninja Turtles and Barbie by the white Dogwood I brought home from school the year before.

Caleb crouched under the tree, his glasses fogging up from the Missouri humidity, “Barbie, what you don’t know is that the Brain has already captured Ken. I am here to rescue you.”

“And your friends?” I questioned.

His hands grabbed up the other turtles, “At your service.” One, by, one, he bowed them all in front of Barbie.

“True gentlemen.”

My father’s car pulled up. The game had ended.
I had never spoken to Caleb about my parents, but he’s the kind of friend who knows.

And I think he knew that whatever happened with my parents really had to do with all of our parents. But I didn’t know that then.

“Barbie, quick, come with me.” Caleb sought shelter for us away from the adult problems inside of the shed in the back yard.

We heard the side door slam into the house and my father took off his work boots, letting them thud loudly on the kitchen linoleum. “What’s for dinner?” My mother left the kitchen window open when after doing the dishes and we were privy to all their adult pain.

“. . . thought we’d have some of that leftover spaghetti from last night.”

“. . . sounds about right . . .”

Inside the shed, Caleb busily created a playhouse for Barbie and her rescuers out of some bricks lying around on the floor. “Come on. Help me. We’ve gotta save Ken.”

“. . . have you been doing all afternoon? . . .” Dad questioned.

“. . . cleaning, and Caleb is here in the backyard . . .” Mom frenzied.

The bricks were rough against my hands as I stacked them one on top of another to form the walls of the house. “Be careful. I don’t want this to fall over.” We both knew that man-made houses could be fragile.

The bricks felt heavier than my entire body.

I saw my parents through a crack in the door. In front of the kitchen window stood my parents, their faces contorted in the same ways I had seen them many times before. “. . . you and Ed Vail talked for awhile? . . .”

“. . . yes, after he dropped Caleb . . .”

My parents became the action figures in their own scene.
“... Louis... don’t...” Then mom grabbed a glass of water and threw it at my father’s face.

“Oh, yeah? You want water?” My father asked.

Caleb stopped building.

I stopped breathing.

My father lunged toward Mom and cupped the base of her skull. The other hand turned the knob on the faucet. Water rushed. He forced her head into the sink. Mom’s arms waved.

“Louis! Louis!”

He let the water run over my mother’s head still in the sink. He grabbed his keys and jumped into the Suburban. Mother lifted her head and stared out the back window to the shed. Water dripped from her scalp down onto her shoulders.

I stood. Stunned.

“Come on, Jessy.” Caleb grabbed my hand, and I backed up from the shed door and stumbled over the brick house, knocking it over. Caleb set the house back up, and we both faked some enthusiasm for the rest of the game.

I put myself to bed that night; Mom and I never spoke about the event, but I think of it sometimes when I’m in the backyard and see my mother standing at the window. Or sometimes I think of it for no reason at all. And I wonder if that will ever happen to me. Sometimes I feel like I don’t have an option. Sometimes I wonder if she deserved it for what she did because she took Caleb’s dad and ran mine off. Will I deserve it? This is mostly the part that I haven’t figured out yet.
It was the next morning that her church-going ways began. She woke me up, pulled a skirt out of my closet and said, “Jess. Today is a new day.” She tossed the floral fluff on my bed and I knew well enough to not ask any questions.

Marbur Hill Pentecostal Church met every Sunday at nine and eleven. I had been there for a Vacation Bible School with Caleb a few summers before, but everything looked different that morning. The colorful banners and streamers were no longer in the parking lot. There were a few other churches in town—Baptist, Catholic, Methodist—and I don’t think the beliefs won my mother. I am positive she didn’t know the difference. But she did know that the Vails go church there, and Mr. Vail, she probably thought, would be her salvation. From a life of loneliness, at least. He was going to fix what he had broken in the first place.

Polished women, complete with hair to the ground wrapped above their heads, and elegant skirts and dresses, paired with clean-cut men filed into the sanctuary. We lagged behind and found our place in the back row. Caleb and his family sat in the front left section of pews. Mr. and Mrs. Vail saw Caleb make a face at me, and both—eyebrows neutral—acknowledged my mother. Mrs. Vail looked away last. My mother smiled at her, lipstick bloody in the light.

Reverend Timothy Jenkins spoke with emotion that seeped out of his pores. He constantly dabbed his face with a handkerchief and the people hung on his every word until they were too caught up in God’s glory to control themselves. We sat in the back. During the singing, everyone’s arms seemed to rise automatically, as if pulled up by angels. I remember how Mr. Vail straightened his posture as his arms were raised. He wasn’t limp like everyone else—like Caleb was—but left his arms straight up. No movement at all. Mom’s arms went up, too. She nudged my arm with her elbow and I raised mine also. Imposters. The three of us.
After the service, Reverend Jenkins and his wife met us at the back of the church, “So nice to see you here, Lilith.”

“Thank you. It’s nice to be here.”

“And where’s Mr. Baker?”

“He’s busy working today. This is our daughter, Jess.”

I stuck out my hand, “Nice to meet you.”

“Yes. You’ve been here with Caleb Vail before.” Mrs. Jenkins encased my hand inside of both of hers and sent a knowing look. “Well, just grab yourself a pair of pantyhose next week and you’ll be a proper Pentecostal girl.” She glanced at my floral skirt and slightly mismatched shirt and skin-bare legs. Then she said to my mother, “I heard from Mrs. Vail that perhaps your husband had unexpectedly gone out of town.”

Mother said she didn’t know how such a silly rumor had been started. Mrs. Jenkins smiled, a pink smile, and added, “Well, I’ll have to check her sources.”

“No need.”

And we left just like that.

In the car, I looked over at mom, in her button up plaid shirt and long denim skirt hiked high above her knees so that she could push the pedals.

I wondered how long dad would be gone.

He came over on Tuesday that week to pick up some of his clothes and the monogrammed bowling bag out of the back closer. “You want to watch the old man at the bowling tournament this coming weekend?”

I followed him around, watching his big hands and picturing them on my mother’s head, almost oblivious to anything he said to me.
“Can you hear me, Jess?” Mom wasn’t home right then. He had timed it that way. “You know, Jess, I’m sorry you had to see that. And what I did wasn’t right.”

“Then why’d you do it?”

“I was angry, I guess. Hurt. You’re mom and I . . .” He had stopped in the hallway, plaid shirts and khaki work pants hanging over his arms and shoulders. “Babe, sometimes adult things hurt.” But I didn’t see how being hurt meant that you could then go and do what he did.

“But how’d she hurt you? She was just making dinner.” I followed him into the living room and three his stuff down on the couch and patted the seat next to him. I flopped on the couch next to him, unsure of how close he wanted me to be, but he drew me in closer.

“It wasn’t about the dinner. She’s been . . . seeing someone else for a while now. And we tried to work through it, but . . .”

“Like having an affair?” I’d heard the kids at school talk about their parents. One girl, Brandi told me all about how her mother had an affair with a teenage boy and her parents broke up, and then her parents got back together. I never understood such a thing.

“Yes. But what I did wasn’t right.”

“Are you going to come back home and stay with us?”

“I can’t, baby. She had her chance. But I don’t want this to affect me and you. You’ll always be my girl. And I would never hurt you.”

But he already had hurt me. And I don’t understand how he didn’t know that what he did would change me forever. How what he did makes me never want to be with a man ever. How what he did makes me want to do anything to make sure he doesn’t get angry with me. What he did to her was irreversible in my mind. What he did to her, he did to me. But I didn’t know that, then, and I told him I forgave him and he left.
I laid on couch until mom came home, staring at the ceiling and trying to count all the speckles in the spackling until I couldn’t count anymore.

And nobody else was there.

Mom pulled up in the garage and called in through the back door, “Groceries. Help me unload the car.”

“I got your favorite cereal for breakfast.” A peace offering?

I lugged three or four bags into the kitchen at a time, hoping to get the job done as soon possible.

Mom continued to speak, but her lipstick bled off her lips and over face until I couldn’t even hear her words because the red glistened in my mind covering all she was until almost I all I could hear was the sound of red and my father pulling away in his car and telling me he wasn’t coming back and telling me it was her fault.

“Listen, honey, I know it’s been hard, but your father and I, we both still love you. But the two of us couldn’t work it out.” I continued unloading the bananas and bread and spinach.

“Cheer up. I ran into Mr. Vail at the grocery store and he’s bringing Caleb over so the two of you can play.” I hid out in my room until Caleb got there. Mr. Vail sat on the left side of the couch where my father and I sat earlier that day. “Hey, there, Jess.”

I didn’t say anything. Maybe I already knew. Mom piped up, “Honey, be nice. Mr. Vail is a very nice man and he’s brought Caleb over to play with you.” Red over and over again.

“Hi.” I forced it out of my lips and Mr. Vail smiled at me and then looked to my mother. But Caleb and I left and went to the backyard like we always do. The shed held the remains of our brick house and neither of us said much.

Until Caleb broke the silence, “You know, don’t you?”
“Know what?”

“About our parents?” Caleb kept his eyes on the Ninja Turtle, making ninja noises as he kicked their legs into the air.

“What’s that?”

“What?” He looked up. Confused.

“The Shredder.” And I pointed. “He’s coming for Barbie. Save me, Michelangelo.”

Caleb and his father stayed late into the night—later than usual.

Near dark, we ran back inside for a glass of water and the two of them were on the couch. Too close. I’ve imagined my mother being unsure of where to sit and then Mr. Vail pulling her in closer just the way she wanted. I’ve tried to imagine that she didn’t know what she was doing.

The rest of the week, I kept to myself. I questioned everything. Over and over. All the possibilities. How everyone was wrong, and Caleb was wrong. It took me all week to try and undo it in my mind.

The next Sunday, mother made sure to provide me with the appropriate nude shade of pantyhose, “Why do I have to wear these?”

“You heard the Reverend’s wife. I want you to be proper.”

“You better be wearing some then.”

“I am.” She pulled up the hem of her denim skirt to reveal her pantyhose, covering her slender legs. The red of her nail polish shone in tiny squares and rectangles through her pantyhose.

“Why do we have to go to church?”

“Because we’re starting things over. You and me.”

“What about dad?”
“He’s starting over, too, just without us. Now put those on. We’re gonna be late.”

The hose came inside of an egg-shaped container. They popped out like a jack-in-the-box, springing into the air and down to the ground. Putting them on felt like trying to tie my legs in a straight jacket. The hose came up so far, that they rested up under my armpits. “Come on, Jess, we’ve gotta go.” Mom yelled up the stairs.

I fumbled to put my dress and shoes on and awkwardly zombie-walked to the car.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“These things you’re making me wear. They’re too long and too small. I don’t understand them.”

“You’re just not used to being a proper lady, that’s all.”

Church was crowded by the time we arrived. She walked ahead, her denim skirt sweeping the gravel of the parking lot, carrying part of the world along with her. My feet shuffled along the best they could. All the other women buzzed past me, chasing their children, following after the husbands, all perfectly accustomed to their flowing skirts (none touching the ground) and pantyhose.

The usher located a couple of seats in the middle of the pews for us. The other families in our pew had to move their legs to the side to let us through.

I tried looking around the sanctuary, without being too obvious because everyone else sat board stiff. Caleb and his mother sat near the front of the church with Mrs. Reverend who kept passing Caleb and her mother tissues. His father was not with them. Mother seemed to be looking around the sanctuary, too.
She grabbed my hand and squeezed, but she kept her gaze on the Reverend. My hose began to lose their resolve, and the waistband slowly began to roll down. They found themselves just a few inches above my belly button. I used my free hand to try and pull them back up. Mother squeezed my hand again, and I stopped in mid-adjustment.

As we began singing some hymn or another, the hose began to sag more and more—Jack was trying to go back into the box. I hunched my back. The hose kept giving into gravity. Mom poked my back with her index finger and whispered in my ear, “Stand up straight. You look like a wet noodle.” Slowly, I straightened my back and my hose retreated even more. They hung just above my hips.

We raised our arms. The panty hose now sagged between my legs. Church finally ended, but we had to wait through the processional line to say goodbye to the Reverend and his wife. I shuffled my body from side to side, refusing to move my leg and take a step forward, “What are you doing?”

“I don’t feel much like a proper lady.”

“Behave.” She still held onto my hand. Squeezing.

Mrs. Jenkins approached and encased my free hand with her hands. “You know, I checked that source.”

“Excuse me?”

“About your husband being on a kind of vacation?” My mother stood speechless.

“It seems he and Mr. Vail have decided to change their lives at nearly the same time.”

“I don’t believe I follow you.”

“I find it to be ironic. Do you not?”
My mother did not respond. Mrs. Jenkins directed her attention towards me, “I see that you took my suggestion.” She glanced at my pantyhose.

Mother chimed in, “Well, Mrs. Jenkins, it goes without saying that a woman of God should dress the part.”

“Oh, Mrs. Baker, this is very true. But would you agree that not all women dressed like proper ladies are actually women of God?”

Caleb and his mother waited near the back of the line. Streaks ran through Mrs. Vail’s make-up, and Caleb tried not to look at me.

Us and our mothers—we’d all been left.

Mother stammered in front of Mrs. Reverend, and red filled my ears.

Caleb finally caught my eyes. The brick building around us to began to crumble, and the ground flooded with a red that overtook us all.
The Master of Blindness

To Clara Moore, the world outside of her bedroom window looked like a watercolor painting. Each year, as her vision weakened, the pencil pine trees fanned out and slouched a bit more, the end of the backyard fence melted into the edge of her brick red house more smoothly, and the square garden rounded its corners and filled itself with red and yellow dots rather than roses. Every morning, before putting her glasses on, eleven-year-old Clara pressed her skin on the glass and squinted her eyes trying to see if she could make the colors of the world stay within their lines. She’d try to remember the way the shapes looked the morning before and determined if they shapes expanded or oozed out at all—she needed to gauge how much time she had left before she would go completely blind, though she hadn’t figured out how to time something so unpredictable. On occasion, black amoeba-like dots floated in her field of vision, and she’d blink and blink to make them go away, but they’d continue floating every which way. She’d learned to ignore them as best she could.

When Clara first began seeing the black dots and the vague areas of filmy color, she told her mother who, in turn, called the optometrist who referred Clara to a local ophthalmologist. “Don’t you worry,” said Clara’s mom as she patted her leg in the car on the way to the appointment, “I’m sure everything’s going to be fine. It’s probably just a short term thing that will clear itself up.”

But, somehow, Clara was not surprised whenever Dr. Richardson placed a globed magnifying glass on her eyes, one at a time, and shined a bright light into it and announced that Clara had “lattice degeneration.”

“Degeneration?” Her mother’s voice sounded alarmed, and her hand squeezed Clara’s.
Clara had not been given her glasses and she could not see her mother’s expression to see just how worried she was, but the scent of her mother’s lavender perfume multiplied—something that always happened when she was nervous.

“Yes.” Dr. Richardson sat on the rolling stool.

“I thought you had to be elderly to get that. Clara is only eleven.”

“This is different than macular degeneration. As you already know, Clara suffers from extreme near-sightedness.” Her mother’s hand squeezed harder. “The shape of Clara’s eyes is so large, that the inner matter of the eye has too much room to move around. Because of this excess room, it’s breaking apart. The little black dots that you’re seeing, Clara, are bits of your eye floating around.”

Dr. Richardson handed her a notepad of white pages with a black graph in the middle.

“You need to look at this everyday, and if the lines start to wave, you need to come back in immediately. If they change at all, tell your mom.” Clara nodded her head.

“Is there any chance she may…” her mom lowered a voice, “…lose her vision entirely?”

“There is a chance, yes.”

“Is there anything we can do to slow it down or stop it all together?” The room was pungent with lavender.

“Not really. If it was a different form of degeneration, we could try vitamins, but that’s not going to help Clara with this diagnosis. These kinds of diseases generally take their natural courses.” Dr. Richardson lingered a bit at the door before leaving.

Her mother treated Clara to an ice cream cone with chocolate shell and a trip to the bookstore. Clara made sure to appear pleasant for her mother, and maybe even tried to believe the best, but she kept wandering to an image of her eye slipping out of her face and landing on the
ground, like Humpty Dumpy, and all its pieces, oozy and broken, lying strewn about her carpeted bedroom. “No one will be able to put me back together again,” she thought to herself over and over, her fear of the future intensifying with each repetition.

Not until her piano lessons the next week did the incessant phrase leave her.

“I can tell you’ve been practicing your piano, Clara.” Mrs. Cook, Clara’s piano teacher, encouraged from the couch where she always sat when Clara played her pieces.

“Thank you. I do it every night.”

“The more the time the better. You know what people say about practice?”

“What?” Clara questioned out of politeness.

“It takes 10,000 hours of practice to master anything. Practice one hour for 10,000 days, dear Clara, and you will be a master of the piano.”

Clara’s mind was struck with brilliance, “That works with anything?”

“I believe so. That’s what they say.”

Right then and there, on Mrs. Cook’s piano bench, Clara Moore knew that if she could not stop her eyes from going blind, then she would practice being blind, as much as possible. Her mission, she wrote inside of the front cover of a notebook that night was to become a “Master of Blindness.”

She kept a log inside of her notebook, hoping to fit in 10,000 hours of blind practice before her eyes completely fell apart. In a matter of two weeks, Clara already had ten hours of practice logged in her book. According to Clara’s logic, she wouldn’t need anyone to put her back together again if she could function perfectly without her eyes.

In a very short time, she had almost every detail on the walk to school memorized even though she had only stopped riding the bus at the beginning of fifth grade a couple months
before. West Lane Elementary was rather close to her house, only a few blocks away; otherwise, her mother wouldn’t have given her permission to walk to school. On especially cold days, or whenever Clara spent too much time reading her books in the morning or staring out the window, her mother drove her to school, but on most occasions, Clara walked to school and did not mind it at all because she was determined to learn to see without her eyes.

When walking to school, she’d close her eyes for a few moments at a time and attempt to take normal steps, timing how long she could go. Initially, her steps shortened involuntarily and her hands reached in front of her for fear that she’d run into a stop sign or tree or fall into the road. Memorizing the outside world seemed too difficult, but soon enough she could tell whether she was walking on the sidewalk, over driveways, or on the road. All of the surfaces put unique pressures beneath the soles of her feet, depending on any slant or cracks in the pavement. She counted the paces from one stop sign to the next and only occasionally walked into the bushes that lined the sides of the sidewalk. Each walk to or from school allowed Clara to record 15 minutes of practice in her notebook.

The outside world did prove to be more difficult to memorize than the inside world, but she encouraged herself because at home she quickly trained herself to maneuver everything with her eyes closed. She memorized the grain of the hardwood banister beneath her palm and the scratchiness of the carpet stairs. It took her exactly six paces to walk from her bedroom door to the top of the stairs.

Clara didn’t want to upset her mother and figured that most people wouldn’t understand her need to master blindness, so she kept it to herself. But twice she got caught, once by her mother and once by her teacher. Her mother found her practicing being blind while Clara took her evening bath. Clara began the habit of plugging her ears with her thumbs, holding her nose,
and closing her eyes all at the same time and then immersing her entire body under the surface of
the water. She would’ve preferred to keep her nose and ears open, but also didn’t want to chance
water getting stuck in her ears again. Her mom forced drops into her eyes whenever this
happened, and she couldn’t stand the echo of the added liquid in her ears.

When her entire body was under the water, she’d concentrate on the tickle of liquid
moving in currents around her body until it settled again to a flat surface. The curls of her hair
softened and moved as tendrils around her face, lightly brushing her cheeks. She imagined
herself as a mermaid at the bottom of the ocean. Sometimes she pretended to be a sailor in a
submarine. If she left the water running in the faucet, the sounds echoed on the porcelain, making
such a whir that she could almost see the lobster or sailor friends in her mind.

One night, as she wiggled four fingers on her hand to wave “hello” to them, her mother’s
real arm reached into her colorfully focused world and pulled her body out of the water, forcing
back into reality.

“Are you okay?” Her mother’s panicked voice startled her, and even with her glasses off,
she could see the brown of her mother’s brows knit downward and a red hue make her cheeks
flush. “I knocked and yelled your name. Didn’t you hear me?”

“No. I’m sorry.” Clara feared that her mastery of blindness might be compromised if her
mother found out the truth.

“What were you doing? You terrified me. I thought something happened.”

“I was playing a game.” Clara found the excuse quickly.

“Playing a game? Clara, we don’t play games in water. It’s too dangerous. I thought you
knew that.”
Clara promised never play a game under water again. But Clara understood that going blind is no game. She recorded 20 minutes of practice.

Practicing at school was more problematic than practicing at home. Mrs. Humphries, her fifth grade teacher, wrote Clara’s name on the board for “sleeping during class,” but Clara had been doing no such thing, she had merely been practicing her homework with her eyes closed. Mrs. Humphries had a habit of walking around the room while lecturing to make sure none of the kids were doodling or writing notes. During a science lesson on the three different states of matter, Clara closed her eyes and tried to picture Mrs. Humphries in the back of the room standing next to Jeremy, one of the troublemakers. His partner-in-crime, Matt, sat on the other side of the classroom. Mrs. Humphries strategically placed them this way and made a path through the classroom by walking from Jeremy’s desk to Matt’s and back again. Rarely did she come to the front of the room while lecturing.

On this particular day, Clara guessed in retrospect, Mrs. Humphries left her pen in the chalk shelf in the front of the room. Mrs. Humphries stopped speaking for a few moments, and Clara anticipated her next few words. Instead, she heard the soft yellow chalk leave its mark on the board. She opened her eyes to see Mrs. Humphries writing “Clara Moore” on the board.

“Falling asleep in class, Clara?”

“Sorry.” She apologized to Mrs. Humphries but dutifully recorded 5 minutes of practice in her notebook later that night. Regardless of her fears of getting in trouble, being an unpracticed blind girl scared Clara more, so she pressed on in her endeavors.

One particular morning, when memorizing the world outside her bedroom window, Clara noticed a blobbed orb steadily floating above the grass. Her plastic-rimmed glasses sat atop her nightstand, and she placed them on her head quickly enough to identify the orb as a blurry
Wiggles, her cat, high-stepping its paws across the side yard in hopes of avoiding the morning dew. This reminded her of the brand new kittens waiting for her in a box in the garage. Hurriedly, she logged that morning’s practiced (“Looking our window: 5 minutes”), stuffed her notebook in her book bag with her homework, tied her shoestrings with her eyes shut, and yelled, “Mom, can I go pet the kittens?”

No reply. She grabbed her book bag and stomped down the stairs, “Mom, can I—”

“Clara, you sound like a herd of buffalo.” Clara’s mother stood at the bottom of the stairs with short bushy hair and a pink ruffled housecoat.

“Can I play with the kittens before school?”

“This explains the panic,” her mother hinted at a smile, “You may. But I expect to see my beautiful young lady walking to school across the front of the house within five minutes.”

All five of the kittens looked like fluffy balls on top of the old bath towels in the computer monitor box. Clara sat on her knees and closed her eyes. She craned her head over the box and breathed in as deeply as she could. With her eyes closed, she reached a hand into the box and gently lifted one of the kittens, trying her best to memorize the feeling of the soft fur and fragile ribs. She placed her cheek against the kitten’s body and heard a tiny squeak. None of her senses seemed to be more alert with her eyes closed, but she knew that these amplifications came with more practice. In the meantime, she’d do her best to memorize any sensation that she could so that could recognize it even when she couldn’t see it. Later she’d pencil this time in her log: “Playing with kittens: 5 minutes.”

“Clara, you better head to school now.” Her mother called from the back steps. “Come in and look at your chart first.”
“Okay.” She opened her eyes to see her favorite yellow tabby in her hands. She placed him back in the box with its brothers and sisters, then took a moment to pet each one of them, the yellow tabby, one gray, and three solid black. Her mother stood at the back door holding a piece of graph paper. Clara glanced at it hurriedly.

“The same?” Her mother questioned.

“Yup.”

“See, Clara, we’re doing just fine.”

“Yeah, we are. Okay, bye, love you.”

“Love you. Don’t forget that I have to work tomorrow, so you’ll have to take care of yourself all day.”

Clara rushed around the front of the house, waving off her mother’s reminder, but secretly running through the events of the upcoming day in her mind. Her mother rarely left her home alone, and Clara intended to use as many hours as possible for practice. Already, she had placed the blindfold in her nightstand and a long stick she had found outside under her bed.

Her lists of tasks in her notebook for the unprecedented day included: “Making/eating breakfast: 30 minutes;” “Take bath/get dressed: 30 minutes;” “Homework: 1 hour;” “Practice piano: 1 hour,” “Watch TV: 1 hour,” “Play with cats: 30 minutes,” and “Go outside: 1 hour.” She figured the list seemed kind of full, but hoped to get it all done since her mother would be gone for at least eight hours. Even if tasks ended up taking longer than she thought they would, she’d still get them done.

As soon as she heard her mother’s car on the road no more the next morning, she took the paisley scarf out of her nightstand drawer where she had stuffed it a couple days before and
grabbed her stick from under the bed. Except for these two tools, her morning began just as any another—just as she hoped and expected.

She stood by her bedroom window, and looked at the fence, the garden, the back of her neighbor’s houses—but in her mind’s eye. To her, everything looked just as it did the day before. Satisfied that her plan seemed to work out, she felt for her bed for a reference, then walked to the wall and fumbled for the light switch to turn her light off. From the edge of her bedroom, she counted six paces and walked to the top of the stars, grabbed the banister with one hand and held her stick in the other, and slowly walked down, one step at a time. She reached her foot out at the bottom of the stairs and felt for the surface of the floor, found it, and stepped out completely on it.

“Success,” she said to herself in jubilation.

With her feet firmly planted on the floor of the lower level, Clara turned right into the living room, placing her hands on the bumpy wall and over the wide trim of the arch. Her first task of the day was to make herself breakfast: cereal and milk for the first run. She flung her stick around on the way into the kitchen, from side to side, whapping this and that, until she could tell that she went through the other door and into the kitchen. She turned right and swung her arms around, trying to find the refrigerator door. Her body turned circles and circles, arm flailing, her feet stepping a few steps right and left and back and forward, until finally she bumped into the refrigerator, “Here you are. Just where I thought,” she said, though the refrigerator could not be fooled, having seen her entire dance.

She felt around the door for the handle, grasped it, and pulled on the door—the suction giving much more resistance than she remembered. Cold, stale air met her face. She held the door with the hand that held the stick and felt the contents of it with the other: small bottles, large
bottles, glass bottles, plastic bottles, sticky, soft. What she assumed to be the milk carton sat next to another bottle of the same size.

“Orange juice?” she thought. She let go of the door, it swung back some, and she poked the bottles with the stick, to no avail.

Soon enough, she realized that her only option of deciphering the between the two drinks was to taste them. She unscrewed a cap, lifted the heavy carton, placed her lips on the crusty top and delighted herself by having picked up milk on the first try.

The rest of the breakfast was similar, much reaching and poking. When all was said and done, she believed she could write 45 minutes in the logbook. She was excited to have more time in the book, but a bit upset that things weren’t as natural to her as she had hoped they would be. Homework and getting dressed were on the docket next, but she realized that she would never do her homework right after breakfast and decided to watch television instead.

Returning through the dining room into the living room wasn’t much of a hassle, because she had already practiced this move several times. She searched the couch and the loveseat for the remote. Once she found it, she felt around for the power button on the remote, not too hard of a feat. The television powered on and a dramatic male voice filled the room—she recognized her mother’s soap opera. She flipped the channel button up and up until she heard the voices of her favorite sitcom. “How are you going to get out of class to go to the concert?”

“Don’t worry. I have a plan,” replied a female voice.

Clara imagined the characters of the show standing in the hallway of their television school. She’d seen this episode and had a decent time imagining where they stood, and the movements they made. Watching television: 30 minutes. She guessed.
The smell of burning leaves filled the living room, distracting her from the television. She left it on, and slowly walked through the dining and kitchen and to the back door, moving her stick about and waving her arms slightly. The heavy metal screen door’s hinges creaked, and the smell of leaves became stronger. Once outside, the thought of her kittens distracted her from the smell, and she fumbled into the garage and shuffled until she ran into the box of kittens. She felt the kittens, trying to decide which one was her favorite yellow tabby. She put her head into the box, trying to remember which scent belonged to him. She picked each of them up separately, tried to concentrate on the feeling of the fur and how their weight felt in her hand, but she could not discern one from another. A small voice of panic entered her mind, but she ignored it skillfully.

“Oh, here you are,” she said out loud to the cats, and to herself, trying to believe that she could indeed differentiate one kitten from the other merely by touch.

She cuddled the kitten close to her cheek and sat Indian leg style on the ground, patting its head. But, surely, she thought, little skill was necessary in order to pet a cat. She estimated her with the kittens as merely 5 minutes, and she decided she needed to do something else with her cat. In a moment of inspiration, she decided to attempt the most complicated feat yet: riding the bike down the street.

Clara’s free hand easily identified the bike seat, handles, and finally basket in the front. She rolled the bike outside with one hand and placed the kitten in the basket on the front. The autumn breeze felt crisp and cut through her pajamas, but she pressed on, convinced that today she might master blindness well ahead of her logged practice hours.

Once she found the sidewalk, she steadied the bike, pushed up, and lifted her right leg over the bike. Initially, she biked at a steady pace. The kitten squeaked in the basket, the air still
smelled of a smoke, she felt as though she might be able to accomplish anything during her blind destiny. But just as her the steps of her walking soon slowed on the way to school, so did her biking. She began pedaling slower and slower and, after biking over a crack in the sidewalk, lost her balance and crashed to one side. Her blindfold loosened enough to see a black kitten, rather than a yellow tabby, tumble out of the basket just as the bike landed on the sidewalk. Her elbows and knee on one side throbbed, but she did not consider her own pain as she scooped up the kitten and cuddled it in her hands.

He seemed to be fine, but the vision of him falling out the basket would not leave her until eventually her mind took her again to her Humpty Dumpty eyes and their inevitable, she had already decided, destruction.

She lay on the concrete in her pajamas for a long while, running the images through her mind. The rapid click of the back tire hitting the spokes steadily slowed and eventually stopped altogether. The scent of leaves burning in the autumn air dissipated, and the kitten calmed within her palms, no worse for the wear. She rotated her time between blindness practice and sight. With her glasses on, she could see the neighborhood clearly, except for a few black spots here and there. With her eyes closed, it was true that she could not see the neighborhood, she told herself, but she still heard the familiar noises. She still knew where she was. And no matter whether her eyes were open or closed, the kitten remained snuggled in her hands just the same. He didn’t know the difference.
“Hey, Maude… come here a second.” Kevin stared at the small plants breaking the surface of the garden in long rows from the opening of the compound to the front line of trees.

“Well, look at that,” I put my hand on his shoulder and stared at the fruits of his labor.

“You did it.”

“I did. I did. I told you gardening wasn’t going to get me this year.” Kevin patted the sides of my hair… “I’ve never seen someone with such wild hair.”

“You act like you’ve never seen it before.” I leaned in close to him.

“I know. It’s just because I can’t believe someone like you, with such crazy hair, loves me and wants to live a life like this out here with me.” He loved my hair. He said that always, since day one, and I had assumed he would get over it—Brian eventually got over it, I think.

“Our dreams were meant to be, I guess.” And I really thought—in that single moment—that maybe life with Kevin actually was my happy ever after.

“I guess so,” agreed Kevin, and put his hands in his pockets. “Looks like spring is coming early this year.”

“Looks like it. You going to the market?” I eyed the paunch hanging over his pants.

“Yes, m’am. Gotta feed the baby,” he said, patting his belly. “I’m also gonna pick up your medicine.”

“Well, hurry back, okay? Making something good for dinner tonight.”

“Can’t wait,” Kevin yelled, as he got in the truck and slammed the door. The engine started, and I waved him off until I couldn’t see him down the county road.

The living area in the compound was dim, seeing as it was entirely underground, except for the entrance, and the sun was just beginning to set. I lit a few candles around and made sure to
throw the matches into the little bowl of water I kept near the couch. “The last thing we need is a
fire,” Kevin had said once when I threw the match on the ground and rubbed it out with the toe of
my shoe.

“That would be bad,” I had replied.

“Put the matches in here from now on. Okay, babe?” He had picked up the little matches
and threw them in a glass jar setting on a table. “They’re contained.”

“Sure,” I replied, even though I knew better than to think a match could start a fire on the
concrete.

I liked when I had the place to myself. I liked sitting by myself with no one around for at
least ten miles, except for Kevin on the road going into town. I liked being alone.

Kevin and I met five years before just outside Oklahoma City at a Doom’s Day
convention. I had been working at a concession stand, going by the name Maude Johnson, and
took a break from work to walk around the convention, check out the stands, and overhear the
conversations by the “crazies,” as her coworkers who had worked the convention before called
them.

There were special talks for people who believed the world would end by some sort of
natural disaster, like an earthquake or flood, talks for people who believed an asteroid would hit
Earth… global warming, the return of Christ—how people thought they would outlive that, I
never knew—and then generalized talks about producing oxygen underground in bunkers or how
to grow your own food, make your own poison, properly cook rodents. I found it to be so
ridiculous, but then there I was in a bunker with Kevin.

We met at a weaponry booth.
Kevin sold bows and arrows and offered instructional classes about how to shoot small wild game in the woods. I wandered past the booth, slurping a soda, when I heard a soothing voice ask, “Would you like to learn how to survive in the wild from a real, live Cherokee?”

At first I didn’t respond, not thinking of myself as a participant, as someone to try to make a pitch to. “You there, miss?”

And then I looked over the booth and saw Kevin—jet black hair and green eyes, square shoulders. He reminded her of someone I knew before. “Are you a real, live Cherokee?”

“That sounds like a question someone who doesn’t know much about my people would ask. See my beautiful green eyes?” He asked, dramatically batting his eyelashes.

I tried not to laugh, but couldn’t help, “The famous Cherokee green!” I said, not really knowing anything about the Cherokee people.

“Looks like I might be just the right person to give you some lessons.”

“You just might be,” I said, and shook the hand he extended, “Maude.”

“Hello, Maude, I’m Kevin.”

“Kevin?”

“I know… I know… not very Native American sounding, but it’s my name nonetheless.”

“How much do lessons cost?”

“About $30 an hour,” he replied, but added, “but, for you, I’ll throw 3 lessons for free, just so you can see if you even like bow hunting.

“Oh, really?”

“Sure. Sure. Maybe we can go have a lesson and dinner… this Friday night?”

“And the rest is history…” Kevin would sum it up this way, when he told people about his beautiful girlfriend back at the bunker. I kept an eye on things when he was away. He’d
rather I accompany him, but I had convinced him enough that it would be better for me to stay at home. I didn’t want to chance being seen by the wrong people at the wrong time. Trying to work in public at the convention center was foolish, all things considered. But the powers that be took care of me, kept me safe and led me to Kevin.

With the candles lit around the room, the bunker seems romantic; the dancing flames cast shadows on the wall. I went to the bedroom and pulled out my lock-up box from under the bed and came to the living room and sat cross-legged on the couch. The little box, not even half a foot wide, held any proof I had of a life before Oklahoma and Kevin. If not for that box, I sometimes feared I would forget about Brian, my deceased husband, and my son and my daughter. Olivia is all grown up now, in college somewhere I assumed. And Benjamin would’ve just started ninth grade.

I unlocked the box and opened the lid, to see all my folded papers, the ones I printed off at the library back when I had that job at the Convention Center and roomed in a little apartment in the basement of an older lady’s house. I would go to the library on my days off and read books or flip through magazines or search the Internet. Only on few occasions did I chance looking anything related to my life before online. I found a picture of Olivia in fourth grade, on a trip to the Cape Girardeau Fire Station. She has my hair, curly and rebellious. But her new mom styled it well. I could tell someone took really good care of her. She wore a private school uniform, khakis and a polo. In the picture, she’s standing with her classroom, holding hands with another little girl. She looks really happy in the photo. When I found the picture, I could barely contain myself, but I held it together in the library long enough to print the picture, log off the computer, and make it a couple blocks down the road on the sidewalk before crying almost uncontrollably,
a wild woman let loose on the streets. I could never find an updated picture of Benjamin. But I know what he looks like. I can see him, tall like Brian, so tall. He used to have blonde hair, the Blanchette blonde hair, but I picture it darker now, like mine. He has my nose. Brian’s chin. I imagine him running down the soccer field and scoring the final goal or on a skateboard at the park doing one of those flips or jumps boys his age like to do. I also picture Benjamin in motion, always a boy in motion, just like Brian used to be.

I can admit it now: after Brian died, I lost it.

But who wouldn’t? There I was, a 27-year-old single mother, with a daughter in kindergarten and a son still in diapers. And not a single family member in sight. I had Tammy. She tried. She really did. But one friend doesn’t do much—or didn’t do much for me—after a watching my late husband battle cancer for eleven long months. Not that she didn’t try. Almost a year of fighting with him, encouraging him. But then I’m suddenly alone.

Poof. Just like that.

One minute Brian’s alive, the next minute he’s not.

One minute a wife, the next a widow.

One minute hopeful, the next minute…

I didn’t lose it right away. I really thought it would happen faster—after seeing what happened with my aunt before we had to put her in the hospital, how fast she went. How fast we knew her, and then we didn’t. But that was all a long time ago. Back when I was a kid. Was her name Wanda? Or Aunt… Nancy? That was all a long time ago, in a different life. Now I’m here in Oklahoma with Kevin, and I didn’t end up like her after all. My kids are taken care of. I had time to regroup, and soon we won’t have to be separated anymore.

It was finally time for me to go back, for me to finally get my kids.
I felt a peace about it.

**

I dreamed up the trip a few months before. Or maybe I had dreamed it up long ago, but it had to float all the way from my deep recesses up through the surface water for me to know about it. Sometimes that’s how things go. I did what I had to do to protect my children. I left them to protect them. And they’ve been protected. “It’s been long enough,” I told myself. “It’s been long enough.”

Brian wouldn’t me to stay away from them forever. I knew that.

I didn’t know if I would be able to find them. But it wasn’t difficult. I know from the newspaper that Olivia was a Turner, adopted by some wealthy family in Cape that owned some furniture store downtown by the river. When Kevin left the house a few months before, I called the operator in Cape, and I asked for the furniture store owned by the Turners. The operator connected me, and a woman answered the phone. “Is Olivia there?” I asked, afraid of the response on the other end of the line.

“You mean Livy?” The woman asked, a bit confused.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. Alex’s daughter? I need to talk to her about… an internship opportunity I thought would be great for her.”

“Great. She isn’t here right now, but I can take a message. Do you want to leave your name and number?”

“Oh, no. That’s fine. I’ll call back later.” I hung up the phone quickly and immediately deleted the call history.

“They’re still in Cape…” I muttered to myself, thinking that reconnecting with my kids might actually be possible, that maybe I could have my family back.
I knew I couldn’t go knocking on their front door without causing a commotion—Alex would need to call the police and report my whereabouts. The police would investigate, and I would need to provide information… information I can’t actually provide. I remember parts of it.

I remember covering our windows with tape. I remember a man barging in our house and Olivia telling me to run outside; my body felt paralyzed.

And then fire. I remember fire.

I knew I had to leave, to keep everyone safe.

But then all the memories spin together, like my mind’s a paint can and someone shook all the colors inside of me up to make a new color, and there’s no way we can actually separate the colors back out into their own colors. I know I am here with Kevin. I know I had to keep my other life secret for a long time. That’s my color—the one color. I don’t know what else is there.

**

Kevin had caved easily.

He came back to the bunker swinging his grocery bags into the front door, whistling a tune.

“Well, someone is certainly in a good mood.” I called to him from the bedroom.

“How could I not be, coming home to you?” He winked, almost laughing at his lame joke.

“Okay, Romeo. Have a seat. I made your favorite meatloaf.”

“With the swiss cheese and mushrooms?”

“Of course.” I said and sat the dish in the center of the table and sat down across from him.
He took a few bites, and we sat in silence, hearing nothing but the clicking of silver ware on plates and cups placed on the table.

“Listen,” I said, “I want to take a trip.”

“A trip? I’ve been waiting to take my lady on adventures. Sounds wonderful.” He stuffed a big piece of meatloaf in his mouth, and I didn’t know how to do anything but smile.

Time passed silently, until I could finally muster up the courage: “Just me, I mean. I feel like I need to go alone.”

“Oh,” he said… “should I be worried?”

“No, no, no. Not worried.”

“Then why alone?” He sat down his fork and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms.

“It’s my family,” I said. “I need to go make things right with them.”

“Oh… I mean, how long has it been?”

“Too long,” I replied, trying to leave out as many details as possible.

“Well, you know I support you reconnecting with your family.”

“I know. I know.” This was going better than I had hoped.

“I want to meet them someday… do you want that?”

(Of course. Of course. That’s partly why I am going.” I really did hope he might get to meet them one day.

“It would be nice for our kids to have grandparents and aunts and uncles—the whole nine yards, you know?”

“That would be nice,” I took a drink of orange juice. “That would be really nice.”

I didn’t know how to tell him I already had kids and no grandparents or aunts and uncles to offer.
Kevin arranged for me to take a train ride from Oklahoma to Cape. “That way, your family can meet you right at the station, and you’ll get to see the countryside on the way.”

“That sounds beautiful,” I had responded, thankful to avoid airports and rental cars. “You know, I’d rather have a hotel, though.”

“Not gonna stay with your family?” He knelt in the garden, patting down the soil.

“I can cancel the reservation if I need to… but it’s been awhile, and I don’t want to be a burden.”

“Maude, family is no burden.”

“Oh, I know… plus, hotel rooms are relaxing.” I sat across from him, cross-legged in the garden.

“That’s true. Maybe I can come down and join you sometime—experiences the comforts of the hotel life together?”

“Hopefully.”

I spent the next few days packing my belongings, billowy dresses and baggy shirts, sunglasses and hats. Just in case.

Despite the lazy nature of a train ride, I managed the wind myself up most of the time, imagining what Olivia would say if she saw me. Or if Benjamin would even recognize me—he was so little when everything happened. If I hadn’t gone, Benjamin could’ve done all those things he dad wanted him to do. Fishing. Brian was a big fisher. Me and the kids would wear bulky life vests down to the waters edge—they’d be too little to chance on the shore without one—and we’d sit in lawn chairs and throw the lines out. Catfish. Blue gill. Or maybe Benjamin
hates the outdoors. Maybe he’s more like I used to be. Maybe we would spend time finding model car sets at the art store downtown and spend hours every night building Thunder Birds and Impalas. Then Olivia would come home from her part time job at the Ice Cream Shack where I worked as a kid. She’d bring leftovers, and we’d kick back in front of the television—we’d watch movies until bedtime. Then we’d wake up the next day and do it all again.

I daydreamed out the window until we made it to Cape Girardeau, Missouri—my home sweet home. I didn’t remember those murals on the Mississippi River Wall—I don’t think they were there before I left. I didn’t much care for the style of the paintings, a little too interpretive—Sacajawea would not wear a bright blue dress like that and Mark Twain’s suit was not purple. But I guess the purpose of the wall isn’t really to show the famous Missourian’s in their most natural clothing, but to give a bit of history about the area, give the people of Cape some things or some people to be proud of. I can understand that.

I really did hope that Kevin could meet my family one day… I had faith: the substance of things hoped for. And I really did hope Kevin might meet my family, at least part of them, someday. But it wouldn’t be when he wanted to meet them. I agreed to the roundtrip ticket, but I really didn’t know when I would come back, you see. It all depended on how things happened in Missouri, how fast I could get around to finding my family.

My biggest concern was that they wouldn’t understand why it took me so long to come back for them after I got away and became free. “But you can’t worry about that now,” I mumbled to myself, and the train chugged past Rush Limbaugh’s portrait.

I turned away to see the familiar strip of downtown stores, buildings from the late 1900s, pass by.
“Did you see that?” my row mate, a man from also from Oklahoma on his way to Chicago, asked me rather suddenly.

“No. What?”

“We almost hit a woman.” I pressed my face to the glass and looked out on the road.

“No… on the other side, the river side.” He said, almost panicked.

“Oh,” I said looking back. I didn’t see anything.

“Some lady not paying attention, I guess. I saw her midair as she was diving into the ditch to get out of the way.”

“Close call.” I said, only half believing what he said. “I wonder why the conductor didn’t slow down?”

“Don’t think it would’ve done anything, I guess. But he should have. Could you imagine someone dying out there in the ditch like that?” His voice trailed off by the conductor announcing that we had almost arrived to our destination.

The train stopped, and a handful of us filed off the train and grabbed our bags from the pile on the platform. I felt a bit nauseous, and the familiar headache was coming up, but I didn’t want to chance going into a local place, so I took one of the pain pills from my bag, wishing I could have more and upset about my underestimation of how constant the headaches could become when I started to wean myself off the medication.

“Maybe I can ask for some in the hotel,” I thought to myself, figuring that no one from my past would be working at the front desk of the hotel, fearing of the slim chance they would recognize me even though I look so different now. But I needed to trust myself a little more than that, echoing Kevin’s words to me when he was teaching me to shoot a bow and arrow during our dating phase.
I found the small hotel very near the train stop, and I was pleased to find myself correct: I did not know the front desk worker. I didn’t recognize any of their voices or names any time I had called in, but I still was afraid I would mess this whole thing.

But I signed in to my room, and although I realized the coast was clear for then, I went straight to my room anyway. I needed to calm down—a long trip on a train toward a place like this filled with people like this and a past like mine kind of takes it out of a person. I triple locked the door behind me and switched on the bathroom light, and splashed cool water on my face.

“You’ve got to trust yourself, Barb,” I said to aloud to someone in the mirror—almost startling myself.

**

I stayed cooped up in the hotel, except to go to a gas station down the street every other day or so for groceries. But on the second week there, I knew I needed some sort of transportation, some way to get around town. Some time to let my kids know I was in town without letting everyone else know. I managed call a used bike store downtown, and arranged to come pick the bike up one evening right before they closed. They fit me with a bike helmet, and I felt almost invisible when I rode down the street back to my apartment, able to swiftly flee from anyone who might identify me.

My newfound independence let me travel the town much more easily, let me check things from a distance much easier. The first day I rode by a few high schools in town in the morning and around lunchtime, hoping I might see my son get out of a car or spending time with his friends. But I made sure to stay a few blocks a way, because I couldn’t even imagine how it must look to see this woman riding by on a bike, especially one who probably seemed so manicured
and put-together, so much different than what I used to look like. But, then again, a lot had changed throughout my life by that time.

My nausea came in the afternoons and evenings, and I tried to be gracious with myself and take a nap when I thought I needed to. “You’ve got to be patient with yourself,” I said, echoing the voice of someone else I knew once before.

After several days of unsuccessful venturing, I realized that I was going to have to be a little more proactive if I was going to get anywhere with this. So I finally did what I thought before I would never do but knew I had to, and I looked up their address: the Turners.

And I decided to ride by that evening, between 7 and 8, so that I could bike by when the sun was setting, and it wouldn’t be that late, but not so late that I would look suspicious and catch the attention of neighborhood watch or anything like. I knew that a family like the Turners, though this seemed like a new part of town that I had never been to, would definitely live in a neighborhood where there would be some sort of neighborhood watch. And I was right. Through there wasn’t a gate or any type of security guard like I had feared, I was right about the neighborhood and about the kind of life the Turners probably gave my children. They did a really nice job with the time they had. I knew that. I could really tell that just from biking in there.

The neighborhood was a maze. I had to bike around more than I had wanted to. Then I saw the numbers 4275 on Thistleberry Street, and I saw it there: like a castle in a dream my mind couldn’t fathom up no matter how hard it tried or how far deep in the recesses of my mind my dreams would go.

There was a little park type area down the street with a little bench surrounded by bushes near a gazebo, so I thought I would sit there for awhile, just look at the house, hope someone
might come, hope I could figure out a way that I could make contact with them, explain things to them.

Their home looked so much more like home than what I had offered them—or even what Kevin and I could ever offer them. But I felt like I could do it right. I felt like Kevin and I could make it happen, and I could make them proud, and their father proud. But I couldn’t still to let myself think about him much, because then I would have to think about what happened to him, and my mind would spin around, trying to figure out how I could’ve stopped the whole mess from happening. But there’s no way I could’ve stopped it at all. And I had accepted that… but I knew there was a way I could make it right.

I can make everything right, if they’d just give me a chance.

I thought I had better get home. I looked at my watch: 7:23pm.

Then a car pulled up to the driveway, and no matter how much I knew I should leave, I realized that I couldn’t. It was a Malibu. Red. A man was driving. Alex Turner. He looked just liked the pictures I saw of him online.

The garage door came up, and he pulled the car into the organized garage.

Everything had a place in the Turner house.

Then the garage door lowered, but at the same time, I saw another car pull up. Silver. A Lexus. Driven by a woman. A young woman. It was her: my Olivia. In the driver’s seat, and in the passenger seat was a young man, a teenager, someone I couldn’t even believe I once held inside myself: Benjamin. They laughed with each other. Olivia looked manicured, slick hair pulled back in a low ponytail, sparkling of necklaces around her neck. He looked so much like his father, his high cheekbones, long neck. Ben’s hair looked disheveled and curly.

He was my son.
No.

He is my son.

I deserve him.

They pulled up in front of the garage door, and I strained to hear their voices, but I couldn’t make anything out from my point down the road, even though I felt closer to them than I had in a long time.

Before long, several other cars started to show up, with families, and other kids who looked about Olivia’s age. The backyard lit up. Looked like a party.

On my bike ride back to the my hotel by the river, I felt a sense of peace like I had never felt before. No, a sense of… pride? Is this the pride a parent feels, I wonder. And I knew, just by seeing their faces, by hearing the faint distant voices in the parking, that I had been right by going there.

“You’ve got to trust yourself, Barb,” I said to myself, as I pulled my bike onto the elevator with me and punched the “2” button.

**

I successfully took a taxi to a 24-hour grocery store around midnight, sure that no one would be out and about then, except maybe some college students.

I knew I should’ve been trying to avoid running into people altogether, but I couldn’t help but want to run into my precious boy and girl, just to see in person if she looked more like me or her dad or to see how she walked, whether she liked to walk quickly to the items she needed or stroll slowly down the store. From what I knew, she was still in town going to the local college. Good for her—that’s something none of us ever managed.
I thought maybe it would be okay if I saw her… maybe she has wanted to see me, too. Maybe she’ll understand. I really felt that way. But I learned that it’s better not to trust my feelings like that when I get them. I’m never really sure which feelings are substantiated and which aren’t.

Other people seemed to know when to follow their gut feelings or not, but I learned a long time ago that somehow my gauges got all out of whack, and I had already come this far, and I wasn’t going to mess it up by chancing seeing the wrong person in a grocery aisle. Too much could fall apart if I decide to take a chance at the wrong time, especially for a selfish reason.

I reluctantly paid the driver and asked him to stay, surprised to see the parking lot so full of cars. The town really had grown since I left. I only needed a few items. Cereal. Milk. Fruit. Lunchmeat. Bread. I wanted to get in and out. “I should’ve brought some more food with me,” I thought, thinking of the canned and jarred foods back in Oklahoma with Kevin, the local honey and jam.

The cold air of the store hit my body as I walked in the door, and I pulled my jacket tighter around my body. I tried not to let myself look around too much, suddenly aware that finding Olivia like this would not bring anything but confusion to her and probably harm to me. I picked up a few oranges and apples, a bunch of grapes and put them in a little handled basket. I could barely seen the milk and cereal signs down at the back of the store and knew I should make a run for it, instead of chancing another visit to such a popular grocery store.

I found the milk. I found the cereal.

I went to the check out, purposely picking a young checker, knowing there was no way she would recognize me. She didn’t do much talking, thankfully, and I made in and out of the store in less than 15 minutes, but when I got back out to the parking lot, I didn’t see the taxi
waiting for me at the front, like I had hoped he would. Instead, I saw him sitting at the far end of
the lot with his lights off, relieved he hadn’t left me after all but annoyed that he would make a
paying customer walk that far out of the way.

I walked briskly through the parking lot toward the car, trying to keep my head but also
not look suspicious, feeling a little bit silly, because I had to see one person I recognized. But just
as I reached the taxi, a minivan pulled up beside me, a woman yelled, “Barbara?”

I spun around, expecting to see Olivia, but she wasn’t in the car.

I wouldn’t have recognized her on my own, maybe, but she had aged. Her hair shorter.
But I recognized my only friend in Cape without a doubt: Tammy.

Tammy refused to leave me alone before I left Cape, so it would stand to reason that
Tammy would be the first to find me when I returned.

“Who?” I asked, then hopped in the Taxi and hope Tammy wouldn’t follow me back to
the hotel.
You know how those adopted adults who go on talk shows? And get matched up with their long lost relatives? Like their mothers who gave them away? Or their dads who didn’t even know they were born at all until much too late? Or those grandmothers who apologized because they hadn’t wanted some little bastard babies in their families?

I am not one of those people.

I am adopted. And I am an adult.

But I have never wanted to find my genetic family.

They’re long lost for a reason.

My story’s a little different maybe. I wasn’t adopted as a baby but as a seven-year-old.

Most of those orphaned adults on talk shows didn’t have any interactions with their families to remember.

But I remember a lot.

I really wish I didn’t remember—I don’t sit around and try to think about my life as Olivia Blanchette. But it’s like my mind won’t forget. Of all the curses I received, a bad longterm memory is not one of them. And my mind most often jogs my memory at night, in my dreams.

My little brother, Benjamin, doesn’t remember anything. I don’t think. He was two when we became Turners. He never talks about life before the Turners. And I really hope he never does.

We are Livy and Benj Turner. We have loving parents, Alex and Sandra Turner, an older adopted sister, Caroline, and a younger brother, Mitchell.
Other people see us as Turners, and I will not give some daytime television host the opportunity to show people otherwise. I refuse to give that family, those people, a place in my heart. It’s enough I can do to keep this all together after the nightmares and the flashes of the past. In my most common nightmare, this is what I see:

I lie flat on the floor inside the bedroom closet.

I peer through the crack at the bottom of the door and see a small sliver of my bedroom. Benj sleeps behind me in the back corner of the closet. I hear his soft breaths come in and out of his little nose—he’s deep asleep, completely unaware.

I hear the bedroom door open, and I see a pair of feet enter the room.

I whisper “mom” almost inaudibly.

I want to get her attention.

I want to hear her voice, to make sure the feet belong to her, but I’m too afraid to speak any louder.

The feet move closer to the door. Then it opens, and the slit of the room becomes wider, and I look up to see Mom standing in front of the closet, looking at Benj in the back of the closet.

Her hand clutches the top of a red container with a long spout on the top. White rags stick out of her jean pockets. I stand up and look directly into her face.

I want her to hold me.

Dim light from the window hits one side of her face, illuminating the paleness of her skin, the patch of freckles across her cheeks. Her shoulders, elbows, knees, make sharp points in her baggy sweatshirt and loose jeans. Her dark hair, wild and big, encircles her head like a lion’s mane.

She does not smile—I see no teeth.
I break the silence with a mutter: “I got Benj to be quiet last night.”

I’m her little mirror image: wavy brown hair, pale skin, spindly body.

“You did?” she asks, without emotion. “You did. Yes, you did.” She answers herself.

“Can we come out now?” I ask.

Her body blocks our exit.

She doesn’t reply, but her eyes glance back to Benj. “He’s been sleeping a while?”

“Yeah. I think he was hungry. I fed him.” I respond, almost proudly.

I’m the one who helps her.

I’m the one who shuts him up.

“Oh, good. Good. Such a smart girl. You’re my smart girl, Olivia.” She smiles a little then, part of her mouth lifts slightly, a crooked smile. “You’re such a smart girl, Olivia.”

She touches my face with her hand. “Listen,” she says. “I need to get away. I think they’re coming soon.”

“Where are we going?” I ask, relieved.

“I’m the only the one going. I want you to come. But you can’t. You can’t. You just can’t.”

“Where are you going?” I whisper quietly, trying to hush the truth.

“I’m going to leave, but I’m going to make sure no one hurts you, okay? I’m going to make sure you’re safe and all taken care of, okay?”

“Is your friend coming over to watch us? Betty?”

“No, no,” she says, kneeling down now, looking into my face. “Give me a hug, okay?”

She pulls my body forward and hugs me tightly.

I bury my face in her hair alongside her neck.
She doesn’t even smell like Mom.

“Give me your brother,” she demands suddenly, roughly, and pushes me away. “I need to do this in a hurry before they come and hurt you.”

I try to steady myself and pick up Benj from the back corner of the closet; his body rests heavily in my arms.

I hand him over to her—he’s out of my hands.

She cradles him, and I stand by myself in the darkness of the closet.

My brother’s body blocks me from her, and he isn’t even awake to know it’s happening.

“Can we go with you?” I ask, still whispering. “I’ll make sure Benj doesn’t cry. I’ll make sure he doesn’t mess it up.”

“No. No,” she says, looking at me now. “You can’t. Don’t you trust me?”

I begin to feel nauseous.

I retreat back into the darkness. I don’t let my eyes meet hers’.

“Here.” She hands Benj to me. “Let him sleep through it all. Let him sleep until the end.”

“Okay.” I respond, not sure what she means, but intent to do what she says.

“Can we come out for dinner later?”

“No,” she responds firmly, standing back up now, clutching the red container in her hand again—her hair more unruly now.

“Do you want someone else to hurt you? I’ve told you. If anyone sees you… You’re a smart girl, Olivia. Try to understand: Mommy loves you. And Benj.”

“I know.”

“Of course you do.” She begins to shut the door.

I put my palms flat against it. “Let us come out just for a little bit. We’ll be good.”
“No. I said ‘no.’”

I know not to ask her again.

She shuts the door so there’s only a crack left, and I see her lips move, “I love you. Mommy loves you. Remember. You’re my little helper.”

She shuts the door and turns the lock, and I want to scream out and cry, but I don’t.

I lay Benj back down, and then I peer at her feet through the slit under the door again.

“This is for you, Olivia.” I can’t see her face, but I feel like she sees my watching her from under the crack. “Don’t you dare wake up Benj.”

Rags drop all over the ground. Liquid pours over them.

The smell of the Gasoline fills in the space under the closet door and burns my nose.

The back of my throat feels scratchy.

I cough.

Then I hear the swipe of a match against a box—four five six times.

Lit matches fall onto the rags.

Her feet walk out the door; the door slams behind her.

Flames of fire dance across the floor, lick the edges of the far wall and move from the bed toward the chest of drawers. I keep my body pressed against the bottom of the door. Smoke seeps under the crack of the closet, aggravating my open eyes. They water---they don’t have any option but to water.

I scoot my body against the back wall of the closet. Benj still sleeps to my right.

I feel the bumps of the plaster through my shirt and onto my skin.
The wall pressed against my back feels so cool compared to the heat building on the other side of the door. I pull my shirt over my mouth and nose and cover it with my hands, cupping my face, trying to protect it from the smoke.

I look at Benj—he still sleeps, but I don’t know how through all the noise as loud as a tornado, or even as quiet as the forest when an ice-covered branch breaks off a tree and falls to the ground, echoing off in the distance.

I feel like all the house around me is falling, falling down.

But all I can do is cough.

Then Benj wakes up. He straightens out his little legs into me and begins to cry. He coughs, too, while he opens his eyes wide and then stares at me. He stands up and looks down at me.

I peer back at him, looking over the hands still covering my face. His little hands reach for me. His blonde curly hair frames his little face, sweaty at the temples, and matted to his skin. His mouth contorts, and his eyes clamp shut, and he still tries to grasp at my arms—his little fingers pull at my wrists.

But I’m afraid to move my hands and offer them to him.

He gives up eventually, and stands there, looking at me, his little belly pooches out and shoulders sag.

I close my eyes again to shut him out—to shut it all out.

And then—it feels sudden—I wake somewhere I don’t know where I am.

But then I realize I’m in the closet. I can barely see Benj through the thick smoke.

I can barely see his back to me at the door, his hand grasping the metal door handle.

I reach out and grab him immediately, and pull his little body into mine, ripping his little
hand off the handle.

He screams.

I pull him into my body and curl around him, lying on our sides in a fetal position, in a belly of the oven burning around us.

He kicks me, and I use my free arm to hold his legs down. He squirms, still screaming, and I try to scream over him. He eventually becomes a motionless lump in my arms, and I stare at the door. He’s finally asleep, I think, relieved.

For a few moments, I can make out Mom’s figure standing on the other side of the door, and I think I almost see the door open, blending in with the haze.

But I’m not sure what’s real; I’m not sure where she is and where she isn’t.

**

And then I’ll snap awake.

That’s my most common memory—I wish it were a nonsense dream, some fictitious blending of bits and pieces of my life here and there. But it’s not.

That’s my real mother, God rest her soul.

She really did put us in the closet like that.

She really did set the house on fire.

She really didn’t protect us—like she promised.

The same body that housed the irrational thinking also housed my body.

Sometimes after I relive that pleasant flash of my past, I don’t snap awake. Most of the time I snap awake, with a sudden realization that I am not in the closet anymore, that Mom is long gone, that for freedom I have been set free.
But other times, I don’t fare so well. Sometimes I’ll wake up in my room, slowly and
groggily. Sometimes I’ll be in the dream but awake at the same time, a kind of quasi-awareness.
It has happened in my room, my best friend’s house, or summer camp, or that time at grandma’s,
or once when I fell asleep during history class. I’ll know I’m in my room, but I’m not able to
separate the sensations.

The blankets on my bed feel like the carpet in that closet.
The darkness of the nighttime smells like the smokiness of the fire.
My tiredness will feel like light-headedness, not like I am waking up but like I am
passing out.

And when I would do finally wake, a heavy weight would tugs at me all day long.

I can tell myself, “Liv, you’re not there anymore. That was a dream.”

But it’s no matter to my psyche: the force of the memory tries to suck me into the ground.

Each step to the bathroom feels like a fight. When I make breakfast, I can barely reach the spoon
to my mouth because the memories like weights strapped to my arms. I strain to focus on the
forefront of life and to ignore the behind-the-scenes whispering my story to me in flashy images
and real-time scenes.

And, eventually, maybe a few minutes or a few hours or a couple days later, if I refuse to
give in, if I ignore those tattered snapshots, suddenly, I feel free again. But it feels like the
absence of pain to me. Like when I get a headache and each second is agony, each minute until
the medicine kicks in is pure torture, but soon enough I no longer have a headache. But I don’t
even notice.

Sometimes I don’t even notice that the residual emotions of my dreams have dissipated
until much later, maybe when I lay my head down the next time. “The was the last time,” I’d say.
I’d always promise myself that, which is a joke of a promise, because I do not have the power to control that sort of mind travel.

Last week after my dream, I woke up post-dream in that groggy way, like the dream was a piece of paper stuck on my shoe. I finally surfaced to the reality of my bedroom. At exactly 3:56am. I knew I was in my apartment. I knew my roommate, Jess, slept in the room next door. I knew I had class that morning. I knew Mom and Dad and my little brothers, Benj and Mitch, were sound asleep at their house. I knew my older sister, Caroline, probably didn’t go to sleep until an hour before, because she was too busy out doing who-knows-what, worrying everyone in my family sick. I knew I wasn’t supposed to be that little girl anymore. Part of me knew I wasn’t her anymore. “I am not a Blanchette anymore,” I even said to myself out loud, to let myself hear it.

But I didn’t know how not to feel like a Blanchette in that moment.

And I certainly didn’t want to fall back asleep.

So I crawled out of bed to organize my closet, to sift through memories I can put skin to. I pulled down a lopsided pile of jeans and tried them on, one by one, and stood before the fulllength mirror—the frayed jeans I wore all the way through ninth grade, even after Mom told me emphatically, that her daughter would not wear jeans with “holes the knees.” The ones I’d stuff in my bag and change in the bathroom at school. I liked the way they felt. I liked the hole from hiking with Paul and Jess on the weekends. I liked knowing those jeans. I like knowing all my jeans—the bigger jeans from eleventh grade after I gave up intramurals and before I found running, the wide-leg jeans from my personal seventies re-enactment.

So I tried them all on, and sorted them in piles on my floor: keepsakes, wearable, donations.
Then the dresses joined them.
Then the shorts.
The sweaters.
Shirts.
I spent that morning, clearing out the piles the old piles and making new piles on the floor, spreading them all out, giving each a label, until I knew I thought I might be able to come out of my room without drawing suspicion from Jess.
But a best friend knows better than that.
And Jess knew me better than that.
“Good morning.” It was a little after 7:00am, and Jess was already in the kitchen table eating a bowl of cereal. “How’d you sleep?”
“Pretty good. You?” I opened the refrigerator door, and pushed the containers aside to get to the juice on the top shelf.
“I slept great. Except for when I had to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night.”
She talked with her mouth full.
“Very attractive.” I set a glass on the table and filled it to the brim. “Probably should stop drinking all that soda at night,” I said jokingly, referencing Jess’ well-known pop addiction. Every other week she tries stopping, but she still drinks at minimum 6 cans a day, no matter what.
She ignored my comment. “I saw your light on. Were you awake?”
“Yeah. For a little bit.” I tried to act nonchalant. I know Jess knows I have the dream. But that doesn’t mean I want to sit around and psychobabble about them early in the morning.
“Liv. Maybe you should talk to someone about your nightmares. Seriously.” Jess took her bowl to the sink and turned around, crossing her arms over her stomach. “Don’t you think?”

“I can’t talk to you when you’re wearing those glasses.” I joked, laughing at her thrift store frames she got for $1.00 a year before, completely unaware of “who would get rid of such beautiful glasses.” No one, especially me, understood her love for the speckled plastic frames that engulfed her small face.

“Very funny. I love them.”

“I know. That’s what’s funny.” I left the cup on the table walked back to my bedroom, “I’m gonna go running on the river trail I think.”

“This early?” she asked, following me down the hall.

“Yeah. Thought it might clear my head.” I grabbed my workout clothes from the piles on my floor, hoping she wouldn’t make a big deal out of that, too.

“Girl, you must’ve been up for more than a little bit. Look at this.” She pointed to the piles on my floor. She stood in my doorway, a little tiny body engulfed in sleepwear, giant glasses.

“I know. I just couldn’t fall asleep after…” I completely failed to come up with some sort of excuse.

“After your nightmare? I really feel like you should talk to someone.” She sounded like a broken record.

“It’s just a dream. Is it really that big of a deal?” I sat on the bed and tied my shoestrings.

“I mean, it’s up to you, I guess. I just love you.” She let down her mess of red hair. “I’m gonna take a shower. See you at class later?”

“Yes. For sure.” I grabbed my headphones and headed out the door.
“Be safe,” she yelled from my room.

“Of course.” And I shut the door behind me, glad to be out of that house finally, away from someone who pushed so much. She meant well. I knew that. But I wish she’d understand when enough was enough and that sometimes it’s best to let things go, to forget, and to move on.

And I knew I better figure out a way to move on from my latest episode before picking Benj up from school later that day. Benj has hit that terrible teen phase—the one where he seems to be making bad choices, and that does nothing but to push me into a Turner frenzy, trying to keep Benj from reverting to full-on Blanchette.

**

Autumn leaves—oak, maple, elm—coated the ground, even in the middle of the train tracks where I walked, convincing my mind that it didn’t need to obsessively figure anything out—this is one of my redirecting tricks I had picked up along the years to help manage my way, to help keep me sane. They always seemed to work eventually. Sometimes they didn’t kick in until I rapidly approached that fine line between crazy and a state that appeared quasi-normal, at least.

I could see the Illinois side of the Mississippi River.

On occasion, I crossed the bridge to the Illinois side by foot, and I felt an entire lifetime away from Mom and Dad and my brothers and sisters and friends in Missouri. I felt I couldn’t have night anxiety attacks if I stayed in Illinois, nothing to jog any haunting memories or relentless curiosities.

I would stare across at the place I usually sat on the Missouri side, and squint my eyes, and imagine I saw my own form sitting there, crying, or staring off blankly, or. Because I was on the Illinois side, the problems I had encountered in Missouri seemed like they belonged to
someone else. When I was in Illinois I could be anyone I wanted. In Illinois, I was free to be Livy or Olivia or anybody at all, really. I could pretend to be Jess, with all her dates and overly simplistic family life, wishing that things didn’t have to be real to be true.

I was by myself, except for a few groups of teenagers and an elderly couple also visiting the river on such a peculiarly cool morning in Missouri at the end of September, nearly 40 degrees. My track pants and a t-shirt were normally enough in September, and I should have wrapped up in a jacket and scarf, maybe even a coat. But I was in such a rush that morning.

I put my headphones on, hoping to ignore the other people, and stared out at the river, curious about its vastness. I often wished I could see what fish or turtles that swam a few feet away. In that wide, long, brown ribbon that decorated the Midwest from Michigan all the way down through Louisiana, a whole other world lived. A whole other type of existence that I could never even begin to know—no human could know, for that matter—swam, glided just below the surface. Only by penetrating the surface would anyone even know life existed there at all. Either a human had to go down, or a fish had to jump up. Otherwise, the surface of the water divided life from the unknown, thus the non-existent.

I let classical music soothe away my troubles, while I pictured the carp, the salmon, the bass, the rainbow trout, all the fish she had learned about on Turner family fishing trips. But no matter how much I tried to picture a serene group or peaceful fish happily flipping and flicking their fins, she always ended up seeing some poor fish with its head stuck in some plastic soda rings, the kind with the holes for four or six bottles, like the ones I had seen on an environmentalism film during eighth grade.

I could see the rings pin the little fish’s mouth closed so he couldn’t eat, or maybe he’d shake his head back and forth so hard that he’d cause some kind of brain damage… but how big
was fish’s brain? Could that even happen? And before I even could realize it, I would find myself on a new track in my mind. I would head south instead of north, east instead of west. My thoughts were a powerful force but no match for the Mississippi.

If I looked at the river, focused on the ripples, or the lone tree or riverboat floating past, and if I realized that she switched tracks in my mind, I could stop those thoughts, and I could think about the vastness of everything, the vastness of life. Those thoughts, then, would stop my mind treading, because I never could comprehend what all that existed in the vastness of existence. Soon enough I’d give up, take a few breaths, stretch out my thighs, my calves, and head back to the apartment.

Mixed in with the muddied current of my thoughts that particular morning came a loud sound, almost like a force that I almost didn’t hear. But above my music, I finally made out the sound of a train whistle. I turned my head to see a train approaching on the tracks behind me.

The powerful locomotive sped past, enveloping my very existence in the wind of its movement and the whistle and clicking and shhhhhhhhhhhhh of the wheels on the track.

I wondered about the people on the train, where they were going, where they had been. I wondered what I was doing there and why they were on the train, working, or travelling. But for some reason I was where I was, and they were where they were.

One little thing could’ve changed a lot of other little things. And all those little changes could’ve meant something else. But instead the fish swam under the water, I sat on the bank, and the people in the train let the train carry them somewhere new.

This was life: whether I liked it or not. I am a Turner, and no nightmare was going to suck me down into some sort of Blanchette abyss.
Or, at least, that’s what I told myself before I left the river to get ready for classes up at the college.

**

As was likely obvious to the average person who saw me on the way back to school that morning, I still hadn’t shaken off that dream. But school called, and I didn’t want Mom and Dad to think they were paying for another college dropout to goof off and make pseudo decent grades. In short, I did not want to be Caroline. And Dr. Lori told us he would go over our final project in class that day, so no matter what kind of funk I fell prey to, I had to show up for class. Not to mention that Jess would ask even more questions and make even more assumptions if I didn’t show up for class after the clothes piling and early morning run type of morning I had.

I was the first one there, as usual. Participating in the last-minute parking lot fight was not my style. I took my usual seat in the back, and flipped through the pages of our text: Investigative Ancestry.

Might I add at this point: I am a history major. For obvious reasons, I would think.

As Dr. Lori often reminds me in the office: “We cannot understand our present, and we cannot anticipate our future, unless we’re knowledgeable of our past.”

I want to work in a museum someday, maybe the Smithsonian. And I figured I wouldn’t too much mind learning more about the Turners—learning more about my family I joined.

“How was your run?” Jess rushed into class, and I moved my books off the desk I saved for her. She plopped into her chair noisily and adjusted her bangs.

“Good. How was your morning?” Sometimes I have to lie to her.

“Awesome. Did some grocery shopping, stopped by the coffee shop…” She opened her eyes wide and smiled big.
“Was he there?” The week before, Jess ran into Boris, a thirty-something firefighter at the coffee shop where we study, and she conveniently went there during every spare moment of her day hoping to run into him again.

“He wasn’t there…” She opened her planner.

“You almost tricked me, what with your smile and all.”

“I like a mystery,” she said.

“You might need to go every morning if you actually want a real-life boyfriend.” I said, jokingly.

“In due time. In due time.” Then the entire class quieted, and Dr. Lori’s voice boomed throughout the small space.

“Good morning, class.” He shut the door behind him, and the class quieted down. “How is everyone?” We all murmured replies, and Dr. Lori organized his handouts on the front table and opened his attendance book on the podium. “Looks like we have some missing faces. Let’s begin roll.” He proceeded down the list of names, just as he did at the beginning of every class—a stickler for the rules.

“Livy Turner.” He called from his podium and looked back to me.

“Here.” Even though I start working for Dr. Lori as a student worker the year before as a freshman, he did not give me any special treatment in the classroom. He was friendly, yes, but he never gave me any preference in the classroom, that I could tell, even though Jess swore that’s how the only reason I got an “A” in military history our second semester.

“It looks like we’re only missing one student. That is unfortunate for him, because we are scheduled to review the capstone project for this course.” Dr. Lori took a small comb out of his back pocket and slicked his faded hair over into a part. He wore a plaid, button-up shirt and
khaki pants—the same outfit he wore everyday. “Let’s discover this assignment together.”

He circulated the handouts around the classroom, then stood behind the podium and waited until everyone had a sheet. Then began, in his best radio announcer voice. "Your assignment," Dr. Lori paused for a moment of emphasis, "is to determine who you are." I imagined he looked out into a classroom of faces with expressions unchanged, eyes blank and unmoved. We opened our mouths slightly, bewildered, overwhelmed. Tension built up in my neck when the student in front of me, baseball hat backward, t-shirt, and cargo shorts wrinkled, raised his hand. "Yes?" Dr. Lori said pointing at him.

"What if we already know who we are?" He asked, genuinely sarcastic.

"Who are you?" Dr. Lori went along with the student’s obviously obnoxious question.

"I'm Matthew James Rigley." He said, leaning back in his chair.

"Are you merely a name? What do those letters mean?" Dr. Lori leaned over in his desk and placed a hand under his chin, genuinely curious about how this student might respond.

"They stand for who I am, right?"

Dr. Lori moved from behind the podium to the table in front of the room and leaned back onto it calmly. "Ah, is a rose a rose by any other name?"

"Yes? Didn’t Shakespeare say that?"

"Exactly! Your name could be ‘Fido,’ and it would still stand for the same identity that you say 'Matthew James Rigley’ stands for. I would also think that a cursory search on the internet would reveal that you are not the only Matthew James Rigley in existence."

"Well, no, probably not." Matt leaned back into his desk chair.

"Then who are you?" Dr. Lori scanned across the room and asked the question again, “How can you know who you are?” He looked directly at me.
"Our history?" I replied, a bit nervous that I wouldn’t live up to Dr. Lori’s classroom expectations for me.

"Ah, history, Ms. Turner. Interesting idea. What do you mean by that?"

"Well, maybe," I guessed, "we can look at the things we've done before, places we've been."

"Interesting. That's one place to start. What else? Remember, the name of this course is 'Investigative Ancestry'."

Jess raised her hand. "Ancestry. We could figure out who we are by knowing where we came from?"

"I would argue that, yes. Ancestry is the first place to begin. Remind me of your name?"

“Jessica McDowell.”

“That’s quite a big name around here." Dr. Lori responded. “A Turner and a McDowell in the same course? This is quite a moment in history.” If another professor had said that same line, I might’ve been a bit offended, taken the comment as sarcasm. But I knew Dr. Lori well enough to know he meant what he said. Not to mention he had us both in class before.

And I hoped we were living up to his expectations.

Then he scanned the seating chart in the front of the classroom and abruptly looked up, "Yes! Ancestry is where we will begin. So for the next class, I would like you to fill out his family tree as best you can." He held up a stack of papers in his hands, "You may pick this up on your way out the door. Have a nice day."

I picked up a packet and waited for Jess in the hallway.

“You think he forgot my name?” Jess thumbed through the packet.

“It’s hard to say. I think he knew he knew you at least.”
“I hope so.” Jess needed professors to remember her.

“So we’re thinking Lorimier tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Jess replied, shoving her paper into a folder. “We’ve got this. What’s the rest of your day look like?”

“Classes. Then I have to pick Benj up from school. The family night.”

“Ah, yes, family night.” Jess and her parents rarely ate dinner together.

“I know. I know. See ya later.” And we departed, both off to our separate classes.

And on my way to the next class, I realized that bandaid had been yanked off at some point—my nightmare memory had dissipated throughout the day. Maybe earlier in the day, the thought of studying ancestry, any talk of personal history, might’ve backed me into a hopeless corner. Somewhere along the way, I had snapped back into the Turner life.

I felt mostly fine, and I hadn’t really noticed.

**

Classes had gone by quickly enough—math, psychology—then a couple of hours working in Dr. Lori’s office, transcribing oral history interviews. And then suddenly it was almost 3:30pm, and I had to go pick Benj up from school, because the Turners were busy with this and that.

“Yo, kid. Get in the car.” I rolled down my window and pulled alongside the curb at the high school where I thought my little brother, Benj, stood with his back to me.

“Benj,” I said louder, slightly honking my horn.

Then the kid turned around, and I could tell immediately it wasn’t him.

“Oh, I’m sorry. You’ve seen Benj Turner?” The whole group stopped murmuring or snickering or whatever groups of young high-schoolers do. They looked at me briefly, then the
Tyler kid said, “I haven’t seen him all day.”

The group went back to talking, and I wondered if maybe I had misheard Mom when she told me to pick him up after school today and keep an eye on him. But I clearly heard her say that she was busy and Dad was on a business meeting. But I could’ve been wrong, so I pulled out my cell phone to call Mom, but as soon as I was about to hit dial, I heard a bang on the passenger window and there stood Benj, also wearing a dark beanie, holding up his baggy pants with the hand and trying to pulling the car door handle with the other.

“Hey. Sorry I was late. Mr. Keith kept me after class to help me with some Algebra.” He threw his book bag in the back seat.

“Were you in trouble?” I hoped it was something minor, something like accidentally falling asleep and not something like, oh, say, threatening to burn to school down or anything like that. Something that he wouldn’t have picked up from a blocked memory of the “closet incident.”

“No, Mom. I wasn’t in trouble.” He messed with the dials on the radio.

“Then why’d he keep you?” I tried to not think the worst.

“Why didn’t he keep you?” He asked, sarcastically.

“Because I’m not his student?”

“Exactly.” He took his beanie off and ran his hand through his hair.

“Did he keep you after for avoiding the question?” I tried to play along with his little game, rationalizing with myself, that I would definitely know if he had pulled something Blanchette-style.

“Exactly.” He said again, never making eye contact with me.
We rode for what felt like a really long distance in silence, until suddenly he says, “I feel like I don’t belong, Liv.”

I tried to remain calm. “What do you mean? Like at school?”

“Yeah. At school.” He said, still not looking in my direction.

“I think that’s normal. Your age is tough. Are people messing with you?”

“No.” He turned the volume down on the radio. “It’s not just at school, though.”

“What do you mean?” I could tell he was balancing that fine line between not wanting to talk about something but needing to all at the same time.

“I mean… at home.”

“Oh. Is something happening?”

“No. Just the same as usual.”

“Oh. I thought you were happy?” I said, maybe not the best choice at the moment.

“I am sometimes. But I just feel… different.”

“Different than you were?” I felt the sweat build on my lip, and I tried my best to change the subject to one of growing and changing and maturing, not one of adoption and broken hearts.

“No. Different than everyone else. Different than the whole family. Except for you. Don’t you ever feel like we’re different? I mean… Do you ever feel different?” A bomb exploded.

The ball dropped.

All the everything hit the fan.

“No. Why would I?” In that very moment, that’s all I could think to say. A boldface lie.

“Oh.”

“Just give it time, buddy.”

“It’s been my whole life, Liv.” He pulled the beanie over his eyes.
And then we really did ride the rest of the way home in silence.

But when we finally got in the house, we changed from two, lonely Blanchettes to two of the six Turners in my eyes. I didn’t feel so lonely anymore, and I hoped that he wouldn’t, either.

“Hello. Hello. Hello.” Dad stood up from the couch and turned off the television. “You guys are later than we thought. Everything alright?”

Dad looked at me, and I could feel Benj’s gaze from the bottom of the stairs, wondering if I would rat him out, “Just hit traffic is all.”

And immediately the tension was gone.

“Well, we’re glad you’re both here. Go get ready for dinner, Benj. Make it quick. Mom’s almost done with dinner.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Benj sternly, with a smile, and a military hand gesture, and then he ran up the stairs with his soccer bag behind him.

“Tell me about this semester, Livy.”

“It’s school, I guess,” I replied and fell back on the couch.

“Which is one of your favorite things…” He said, setting back down next to me.

“You’re right. I love it. We’re working on an ancestry project right now.”

“That shouldn’t be difficult… we have an impressive lineage… well, maybe no more impressive than anyone else’s, but it’s at least documented.”

“But where?”

“That is a good question. I’ll check around about that if you want… you know, as long as you’re not wanting to start from scratch.”

“Of course not. I am wanting stories, too. You know, I want to learn about the Turner’s instead of just, you know, throw out some dates or whatever.”
“Well, your family has many stories.”

“I can’t wait to hear about them…” I felt a bit of a panic attack coming on, maybe the dream emotions hadn’t totally gone yet, “Mom needs help in the kitchen?”

“Maybe so.”

I found Mom in the kitchen, “I notice the dining room is empty? Need me to set the table?”

“No, need, my dear,” she said, leaning across the island to kiss my cheek. “We’re eating outside tonight.

“I see. I see.” I peered through the backdoor glass, “I also see you have the lights up.”

“I do. I thought your sister might like them. She picked them out a few years ago.”

“Caroline? She coming tonight?”

“That’s what she told your father earlier today. He ran into her down at Bailey’s Bakery this morning.” Mom moved a pot from the stove to the sink.

“DJ there?” For the most part, we all played DJ for Caroline’s seemingly sudden change in interests.

“Of course. Caroline wouldn’t dare go anywhere without her boyfriend, now would she?”

“Not that I can tell, anyway.” I arranged the apples in the fruit bowl.

“Let’s not be negative. I’ve set a place for Caroline and, of course, DJ. I cooked her favorite dish. We’re eating outside… I have a feeling everything is going to turn back for us and her.” I could hear Mom force her words.

“Probably just a rough patch.” I offered, even though this would appear to be much too long to be defined as “patch”—more like a black hole.

“Exactly right. Everybody has rough patches.”
“Where’s Mitch?”

“Across the street at Davey’s… he should be here soon.” Mom went out the back door with a platter of food.

“I hope so. I miss that kid.” I followed her.

“He misses you, too, Liv. We all do.”

“Mom… I come home every week.” I moved the plates on the table so the table had room for the platter.

“I know. I know. Can you get out the serving tray, please?”

“Sure thing.” I pulled out the tray from the pie safe and set it on the counter.

Mom put the roast on the tray and placed the top over it. “Let’s keep this warm. You always know that Caroline shows up late no matter what… but as long as she comes.”

“Just a rough patch.”

“Just a rough patch. Yes. Let’s join the rest of the family.

“Let’s.” I say and follow Mom into the living room.

Benj, wet-haired and sloppily dressed, and Dad sat on the couch, watching the news on mute and talking about soccer practice, school, normal things. Right as Mom and I sat down, Mitch flew in the front door and slammed the door behind him.

“Come take a seat next to me,” I say. I admire his almond shaped green eyes that always seem to have a sparkly and his dark, neatly parted hair, so much like Dad on any given day. “So what’s new?” I ask.

“Nothing,” A typical seventh-grader response.

“Nothing? Nothing at all?” I say, and attack him with tickles.
“Stop. Stop. Stop.” He says, laughing.

“He’s in wood shop.” Benj chimed in.

“Wood shop?”

“Yeah. But I already know more. Dad and Grandpa and Benj taught me.”

“He’s got the Turner touch.” Dad adds.

“We’ve all got the Turner touch,” said Alex. “There’s no two ways about it...we know how to craft a fine piece of furniture.”

“That you do,” said Sandra, winking from the recliner.

“We’re making a birdhouse. Mom said we could hang it out on the back porch.”

“I did. Speaking of back porch... Alex, you did tell her 7:15pm, right?”

“I did. I certainly did.”

But then the phone rings. And, of course, it’s Caroline. And can’t come to dinner.

Mom and Dad don’t say anything.

“Great! Let’s eat,” said Mitch.

Benj said little.

“I’ll clear the plates, then.” Dad says, and hops up from the recliner.

“Glad to see she’s working hard...” says Alex, following Sandra into the kitchen. “This can’t last forever, Sandra. You’ve got to trust me.”

“I know. I know,” we hear Sandra mumble, “but I...” and then her voice trails off, and we hear gentle sobbing.

We all know better than to bust into the kitchen right now.

We know to give them space.

Benj turns up the volume on the television.
“Are you ready for a tickle?” I said loudly to Mitch, and he let out a roar of laughter before my hand even touched his ribs.

**

My nightmare memory came back that night. Unfortunately.

At first Benj and I were in the kitchen with our old mom, our first mom.

She was cooking pancakes on the stove, and Benj and I were at the table, with glasses of juice and fruit. I had a banana.

But then, what appeared to be a pleasant memory, turned into the nightmare again.

And we were back in the closet, with the door closed.

The bedroom door opened. I hoped it was Mom. But in my dream, I didn’t really know.

But then my mind came awake, but my body wouldn’t budge.

I tried to summon any part of my body awake.

I knew I had to move, though. An impending sense of doom loomed in the room. I felt someone watching me.

I told my body to move. My thoughts told my feet to move, my legs, my arms, my eyes.

But not part of my body would budge.

I lied there in a coffin of my own body.

Still, I felt someone in the room with me.

I saw nothing but the inside of my eyelids—black.

My body seemed so heavy, my arms dead weight.

My breath became shallow, echoed in my ears.

But then, suddenly, my whole body jumped.

My mind was in control again.
The gap between my mind and my body bridged.

I felt mostly whole again.

I looked at the clock: 4:42am. I saw no one.

**

I stayed in my bed, and looked around my room. The streetlight filtered in through the slats of my window blinds. Black and white pictures of my family hung on the wall, uneven. I had given up trying to get them straight and level, so I tried making them look purposely catawampus. Jewelry and knickknacks junked up the top of the dresser. A pile of shoes and spare books junked up the corner. “There’s never a better time than now,” I told myself, knowing that I couldn’t go to sleep for fear of another episode like that.

So I stayed in my room, sifting through my stuff. Organizing the bits and pieces that I could. I turned on the lamp only—not wanting the ceiling light to concern Jess if she did wake up. Which didn’t happen for another two hours.

That’s a lot of cleaning I got done. I still wouldn’t consider the nightmares a blessing in disguise, though.

I ventured down the hall to the kitchen after I smelled the coffee pot and heard Jess banging around, opening and closing the refrigerator door, putting dishes in the dishwasher.

“Good morning.”

“Well, good morning, dear roommate. Lucky for you, I already have your coffee creamed and your bagel buttered,” Jess, already dressed, sat at the kitchen table eating breakfast, and I sat down to my pre-made meal.

“Thank you.”

“How’d you sleep?” She asked.
“Fine.” I sipped my coffee.

“The circles under your eyes tell me otherwise.”

“I just get that sometimes.” I offered. And, technically, I wasn’t lying.

“Yeah. Okay. Well, get ready, sleepyhead. This ancestry project isn’t going to complete itself.” She stretched out on the couch and turned on the television.

I did look bad I realized while I studied myself in the mirror while brushing my teeth. I tried to overcome my haunted appearance with my outside appearance: well-fitting jeans, a nicer shirt, casual nice to its finest.

“Welp, this is as good as it gets, I guess,” I announced, and showed myself to the living room.

“There’s the Liv I know and love,” she said hopping up from the couch. “But I loved you even when you looked like crap.”

Old Lorimier Cemetery, constructed before the Civil War, held graves for most of the well-known ancestors in town. It sits over the Mississippi River in a somewhat run-down part of town next to campus. It’s enclosed by an iron-wrought fence with two gates, one placed in the west and one in the south. The previous year, Dr. Franklin had taken us on a tour of the cemetery, and he had shown us the most interesting aspects of the cemetery.

“Over here,” he had said, motioning to the downward slope of the cemetery, “is a cylindrical marker, broken on the top. Any ideas what this stone marks?”

Nobody stirred.

“Dead people” was my best guess, but I knew better than to say something so stupid to one of the major professors in my own department. One student guessed Native Americans. “A good guess,” Dr. Lori said.
He stood in the middle of the group, wearing khaki pants and a plaid button-up shirt with his sleeves slightly rolled up right below his elbows. He stared at us all, from student to student, quizzically. “This stone marks a grave for Civil War soldiers.”

“Oh…” we all responded, almost simultaneously, then scribbled in our notebooks.

“During a war, there is not much time for personal services, so this is a mass grave, where multiple soldiers were placed. But out of respect, and for practical purposes, they did mark the burial grounds. Now, where’s our student who guessed Native Americans?”

“Sir,” he said, raising his hand.

“There are Native American Indians buried here. Why don’t all of you turn to the northeast corner of the cemetery,” he directed, pointing. “There, under the those poplar trees, a number of Native American Indians rest. You see,” he continued, “this spot was a Native American Indian grave site, and then the early founders of Cape Girardeau decided to bury their own here, burying on top of the Native American Indian graves.” He paused for a moment, letting that truth sink into our minds.

“That apartment building on the other side of the fence,” he continued, “also sits on top of Native American graves as well. I wouldn’t want to be a resident there at midnight,” he said, almost with a bit of laughter in his voice.

He directed our group to the West gate of Old Lorimier, and we dutifully followed him up the hill to the front gate of the cemetery. “On our left,” he said, pointing to an above-ground coffin, “sits the final resting place of Abraham Alexander Turner, one of the founding father’s of this city.”
I stood in the back of the group, only slightly paying attention, getting caught up in watching cars drive up and down Old Lorimier Street, slowing down to look at the group of college kids hoarding around tombstones. “I believe we have a direct descendant of Abraham Turner in this very class.”

He never pointed me out to the group, but it was interesting to know that he knew I was in the class, and he knew exactly what “Turner” I was—there were so many Turners that come to our school, who travel down from up in Saint Louis. He seemed to be a man with much knowledge, and I wondered if he knew that I was actually a gross, Blanchette scam.

I sometimes wonder if that’s why he hired me.

Often, people mentioned how much I looked like Mom. But people who had been around for a long time knew the actual truth. Maybe Dr. Lori knows the truth.

That was only last fall, and now Jess and I planned to go back and pull some ancestry information from the tombstones to later search in obituaries and census records through the library and city. Both of our families were founding families of Cape Girardeau, which is basically how we both ended up at the prep school down by the bridge all growing up.

Old Lorimier had been opened 24-hours a day a few years ago, but after some vandalism where some teenagers broke the tops off a few tombstones with baseball bats. Though I wish the vandalism wouldn’t have happened, I was glad about it that morning, because I know Jess would’ve had us get going at 6am if she could. I had even started to call her “Grandma J” in junior high, but she didn’t seem to mind much. Or, if she did, it sure didn’t stop her from going to bed early and getting up even earlier.

We pulled up to the cemetery, and there seemed to be an ominous sort of darkness over the cemetery. “Well, here it is…” Jess said.
“I’m not sure I want to get out…”

“Oh, come on, baby. It’s just fog. I also have water in the back in case we get thirsty.”

“I know… but doesn’t it seem creepy to you. And thanks.”

“A couple of acres of dead bodies? Of course not!” She hopped out of the car, letting the door slam heavily behind her. “Come on,” she said, peering at me through the windshield, waving her hands and almost laughing.

I reluctantly opened the door, “Can’t we just come back later?”

“Nope. The family tree part of the project is due next class. I think it’s gonna take more work than we think.”

“I know…”

She walked up to the gate and as she swung it open, put her hand up to her mouth and made typically noises like an American Indian. “If you’re lucky, Liv, maybe a nice masculine Indian will invite you to his tee pee. And the good thing is, you’ll be sure he has a lot of life experience. No! Afterlife experience,” she said loudly, practically laughing out loud.

“Very funny,” I responded, trying to hold back a laugh. “I just don’t know how we’d report that to 9-1-1?”

“Not sure why I’d want to? Not like we have any other action going on. Unless, of course, for your secret lovers.”

“Geez. I only ever text you and my family.”

“I know. Just like to see if I can get you going.”

“Well, I’m awake now. You go to the McDowell section… I’ll stick with Turner side. I wish they were by each other…”

“Hey, mine is by the creepy side, not yours,” she said.
Which was true, and I was glad for that.

So we separated in the graveyard, and she moved down toward the creepy side, making Indian sounds all the way, and I moved quickly from the entry gate near the drive to the front gate where my family was buried. I already knew about Abraham, Alex’s great grandfather, and I penned his information. His wife, Alex’s great grandmother was buried directly next to him in a plot not quite as decorative, but impressive nonetheless. I noticed that she lived almost 80 years—a very long lifespan for the time period, especially considering, she had 5 children with Abraham Turner. I did not know whether or not any of her family members were buried nearby, seeing as I did not know her maiden name, which reminded me that I didn’t now all that much about Sandra’s family background, either.

The plots were all neatly manicured with grass cut quite short, but not many of the stones had decorative hangers for flowers of any kind of small messages. I remembered all of the flowers and notes and my blood family’s graves—especially my father’s. I wondered what it might be like to be the last person carrying on someone else’s memory. I heard somewhere once that a person is remembered until the last person who knew that person dies. People remember historical figures, but not perhaps how that person actually existed.

When I finished transcribing everything from the Turner tombstones, I looked down to where Jess stood, hand on her hip, drinking a bottle of water. “Hey, you almost done?”

She looked up at me. And put her hands in the air to her sides, shrugging, like she didn’t know what I said.

I projected, “Are you almost done?”

She put the water bottle between her knees and held up “ten” with her hands. Then motioned for me to come down to the haunted side of the cemetery.
“Ten minutes.” I said, but I wasn’t about to go down there and join her. I shook my head “no” dramatically and wondered around the cemetery some, venturing down by the Civil War burial pile. I wondered how many skeletons were heaped together in the ground, covered with soil, completely forgotten except for the one, cylindrical marker with a broken off top.

“Come here.” I heard Jess yelling, and I looked over to her, still on the creepy section of the cemetery. “Come here.” She yelled over and over and waved her hands. I stared at there, not moving at all. But she kept waving her hands, and I knew that she would torture me about whatever it is she wanted me to see before I really did come over there and get it over with.

The temperature drop on that side of the cemetery seemed a bit bone chilling, but I knew it was only because of the thick tree cover. But still. “This better be good,” I criticized, as I got closer to her.

“Oh, it is. Trust me. Come here.”

“I’m coming.”

She stood in front of a regular looking tombstone.

“Wow, looks exciting,” I offered, sarcastically.

“It is exciting. Check it out.” I came over to her side of the tombstone and faced the front of it.

“It says ‘McDowell’… cool.” I examined the tombstone, trying to figure out what she wanted me to notice. “I mean, it’s a really nice stone.”

“You don’t see it?” She exclaimed.

“No.”

“Look at the middle names.”
“Okay…” I scanned up, and read the names, and then it was very clear to me, “Theodore Boris McDowell.” I thought the reason she called me over was so stupid, that I didn’t want to laugh and join in on her excitement, but I couldn’t help, “It’s destiny.”

“It is destiny. I told you. Who else would use the stupid name Boris?”

“I mean, probably a lot of people.” I offered, sure that the name had to of come from somewhere. “My bigger fear is that he’s related to you… some forgotten branch of the McDowells.”

“He is not related to me.” She seemed to be joking, but I knew I had hit a nerve.

“I mean… how do you know?”

“Well, it’s definitely not first cousins or anything.”

“I hope not. Stranger things have happened.” I tried to keep a straight face.

“Are you being serious?” She straightened out her notebooks and pens.

“No.” I knew I better quit before things got too serious.

“Good. Are you done?” Jess seemed ready to head to the car.

“Girl. I’ve been done forever. Let’s go.”

She double-checked that she had gotten all of the McDowell tombstones. And I helped. But then I saw a stone I had never seen before. And it would be just like the Blanchettes to have a stone down in the creepiest crevice of the cemetery. Because down below, even further down than the McDowell tombstones, I saw a few little stones around a bigger stone that read “Blanchette” in big letters. But I had never known they were around here for so long. I never knew the Blanchettes were a historic name at all—I had certainly never seen their names on any buildings around town.
A unsettling feeling started to well up in me—like there was something about them I should know, maybe something that unlock everything for me, set my mind free, stop the nightmares.

“Let’s go, peach.” Jess had already started heading for the car, but I stood there a few moments longer, gazing down at that place, almost hidden by low hanging branches, the grass a little higher there, but not completely unmanicured.

The letters signaled to me.

But I knew I better go.

I turned around to find Jess almost to the car, so I ran up the hill, as fast as I could, with that odd sensation, that I better hurry, or I would be grabbed. The same feeling like someone is under the bed, or there’s a monster in the closet, or the darkness or the basement holds a sinister creature.

“Geez.” Jess said, as I felled into the car and let the door slam behind me. “I didn’t actually think an Indian would hit on you. Leave it to you.”

“He wanted my number. And I figured… why not?” I couldn’t tell her about the stone without many questions to follow—many questions I wasn’t prepared to answer.

“Exactly. Why not?” She laughed. “I think I’m just going to drop you off at home then head to the coffee shop.”

“I see. I see. You might go ahead and ask him for his full genealogy.”

“I think that’s third-date talk,” she joked.

“Maybe you’re right. Wanna just drop me off at the library?”

“Watch out, world. We have an overachiever on our hands.” She turned toward the library.
“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with doing some extra research.

“There ain’t nothing wrong with that.” She added, and dutifully dumped me off at the library before heading to the coffee shop in hopes of running into Boris.

**

I entered the back doors of the library and tried not to make eye contact with any of the librarians or student workers posted at their stations. I needed to find the third floor stacks. I knew from previous research that if there was any information about the Blanchettes, it would be up in the third floor stacks with all the other regional history information.

I took the back stairs.

My soles of my shoes squeaked up every stair, and my book bag slammed down on my back with a loud thud with every step I took. My breathing seemed to echo up the stairwell. And it felt like the entire library could tell who had entered the building and where I was going. But when I opened the stairwell door into the third-floor stacks, I saw that no one else on the floor except for one librarian at a desk in the middle of the floor.

I put one foot into the library and turned around to quietly ease the door as it shut, but when I turned back around, I saw the librarian look at me from his desk, smiling wildly.

I knew him from before: David. He helped me sometimes with special projects for Dr. Lori. I hoped he would leave me alone.

I hoped I wouldn’t have to go to the computers in the middle of the library to search the catalogue, seeing as I hadn’t brought my laptop. Perhaps, I had fooled myself; I could walk up and down the regional history section, and some book from that time period I needed—between the 1700s and 1900s—would throw itself at me from the shelf. I see now that this plan wasn’t likely to fare well, but it’s the way my mind was working at the time.
So I gently stepped across to the stacks, not allowing myself to look up to see if David was watching me, and headed to the regional history section, where I was greeted with two aisles of library books, each book blending in with the others, each with a plain cover and little white typing on the binding. I tried to scan the books and isolate a title like I might need, and I saw one that might help, “Key Figures in Cape Girardeau History” and another “River Stories from a River Town”—but even finding those two titles took much more effort than I had anticipated. Much more effort than I had anticipated at the time. Looking back, I am not sure why I thought that I could easily rummage up information about a family who had, by all accounts, been forgotten by everybody but my dreaming self. But at the time, I was operating under a type of investigative optimism—a kind of hope that, perhaps, I could learn that my family wasn’t exactly who I thought they were.

“Can I help you?” David. The librarian.

“Oh. Hi.” I turned around, books in each hand.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.” He took a step back and shoved his hands in his pants’ pocket.

“Yeah. No. No problem.” The words stumbled out of my mouth.

“Working a project for Dr. Lori?”

Crap. “Yeah.”

“Oh. Cool. You’re lucky to get to be his student worker.”

And then I knew I had my cover, and I don’t know why I hadn’t thought of it before. I didn’t have to tell him I was enrolled in Dr. Lori’s class this semester, and he probably didn’t know I was an adopted Turner. “Definitely.”

“What are you researching?”
“Lesser known regional families.”

“Oh… cool. A book project?”

“Yeah.” Another lie. Unless I really did turn it into a book project one day? Maybe then I wasn’t lying, I told myself. Of course… David meant a book written by Dr. Lori. “Great. Well, any family names in particular? It’s a slow day. I can help do some research for you?”

“Yeah. Of course. Right now I’m looking into the Blanchettes… from the early 20th century and the late 1800s.”

“The Blanchettes. Let’s see…” David turned his back to me and scanned the stacks, trying to see what he might come up with.

“Well, hmmmm…. What books did you grab already?”

“Uh, these.” I showed my selections to him. “But I’m not really sure they’ll help at all.”

“You know, it’s probably the best to take this to the library catalogue.”

Like I didn’t know that. “Oh, sure, yeah. I was just in a hurry, I guess. I’ve got a class coming up.”

“Oh, okay. Cool. Well, how about I research the name for you and then send it via campus mail over to Dr. Lori’s?”

Dr. Lori wouldn’t have any idea why he was receiving the information. “Well, it’s almost the weekend… I’ll get it by Saturday if you send it to my apartment? That way I can work on it this weekend, get some ideas together for Dr. Lori for Monday…”

“Sure thing. Let me get your address.” I followed him to his desk. “Let’s see…” He took a pen from drawer, “… write down your address here, and I’ll see what I can come up with for you.”

I quickly penned my address and handed it back to him, “Here you go. Thanks.” “No. Problem. Oh, hey, can you go ahead and spell the name for me, just so I can get it
right.”

“Sure.” I took the pen again and wrote about B-L-A-N-C-H-E-T-T-E and felt like I was giving myself away, like I was penning a curse word.

“Blanchette?” The name spoken out loud stabbed the air.

“Yes.” I needed to get out of there, fast.

“I’ll work on my magic.”

“Thanks,” And I rushed off down the stairs, only to exit the library into the morning air with really no place to go on campus except Dr. Lori’s office to start working on some type of project. I considered the coffee shop, but I didn’t want to chance ruining any type of Jess and Boris love connection at the coffee shop, and I didn’t know how well Dr. Lori would take me showing up to work unannounced and then reporting unscheduled hours.

No possible option for escape except: the Mississippi River.

**

There’s a man in Cape who swims across the Mississippi every year on his birthday—one lap for each year of his life. Last year, he was up to 73 laps across. He hops in the river alongside a johnboat with a trolling motor and slowly swims across. The current of the river pushes him down stream by nearly a quarter of a mile, but he makes every single lap. I’ve seen film of it, and I still can’t imagine actually doing that. I can’t even imagine what kind of motivation he would need to even consider doing that every year. I can’t even decide what it would take to overcome the mighty Mississippi at all to resist the current at all seems almost impossible.

But there’s a man who tries it and adds a lap every single year.

Imagine the endurance.

I propped my feet up on the guardrails across the bench seat.
A giant log floated down the river, letting the currents and tows carry it along.

I could’ve sat there like that watching the river for hours, thinking absolutely nothing… or trying to think about absolutely nothing, but that’s not what happened. Instead, I ran into: my brother, Benj. He sat right down on the bench right next to me without saying a word.

But I looked over to say “hi,” to whoever had the nerve to sit right next to me when there were plenty of other benches around, and it was Benj.

“Hi?” I said to me, completely surprised that he would be down at the river when he was supposed to be at school.

“Hey.” He said, plainly.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him, trying not to sound too heated.

“Just wasting time.” He replied.

“You do know it’s Thursday?” I sat up and looked straight at him.

“Of course. I’m not an idiot.” He played with the buttons on his coat.

“I’m not going to lie to Dad again for you.” I needed him to know that I wasn’t about to be a part of this plan of his, whatever it was. He needed to know I wasn’t going to support behaviors like this.

“They’ll know I’m missing school, anyway. No need to lie.”

“They know you’re wasting time down by the river?”

“Not exactly. But Mr. Keith will tell them I’m missing a bunch of classes. Eventually.”

“And you’re okay with that?” My little brother had finally reverted.

“I don’t know. I just don’t want to go to school.”

“Why? Caroline?” I couldn’t believe another orphan-turned-Turner was doing this to Mom and Dad. I felt like I should’ve been able to stop this somehow.
“No. I just don’t feel like it.”

“That’s really not a good reason.” I knew that wasn’t going to stop him, but what was I supposed to say?

“What were they like?”

“What were who like?” I knew who he was talking about.

“Mom and Dad.”

“Oh.”

A few moments of silence passed. The tree had made it down to the turn of the river at this point—almost out of my field of vision.

“I don’t remember a lot.” I finally said.

“But you remember some stuff?”

“Yeah.” I wish he would stop asking questions.

“Just some stuff, you know. The usual. Dad playing with us. Mom cooking breakfast. Stuff like that.”

“You’re lucky.” He said, looking at me now.

“How?”

“You remember them—the people we’re like.”

“I guess.” That’s all the response I could muster up then. That’s all I could think to say. I had never told him—never told anyone, really—about the fire and everything else, about how Mom really was by the end, before she disappeared.

“Am I like Dad?” He put his feet up on the guardrails, too.

“I don’t really know.” I offered, “You look like him.”

“Yeah?”
“Yeah, at least according to what I remember. You look a lot like him.”

“Good.”

“It is a good thing. You know… it’s okay to feel different.”

“Yeah?” He asked.


“You’re okay, you know? Things will get better.”

“Will they?”

“Of course. Just wait until you’re older.”

“But don’t you ever want to meet our family… I mean our real family… or figure out where they are? Or what they were like? Or anything like that?”

“Not really,” I answered, racking up my total of lies for the week. “We have a family. We have siblings. We have a Mom and a Dad who love us. We have everything we could need, Benj. Everything.”

“I know.” He said. “I just don’t feel like that sometimes.”

“You’ve just got to make a decision and let your feelings catch up to you. That’s what I do. It works.”

“It does?”

“Of course.” The riverboat rounded the curve and the end of my field of vision. “Let’s get you back to school. I’ll give you a ride?”

“Nah. I’ll walk.”

“You promise you’ll go back to school?”

“Yes.” He emphasized the “s,” letting the word drag out.
“You promise me?” I needed to get enough reassurance that he was fine, that he wouldn’t do something stupid or permanently damaging.

“Yes. I promise. I’ll go right now.” He stood up from the bench.

“So if I call Mr. Keith next week, and I ask him if you’ve been in class, he’ll say yes?” “Yes. I promise.”

“You better be serious.” I stood up, too.

“I’m serious.”

“Okay, give me a hug.” He hugged me tight. My little brother clung to me.

Then we parted ways, and I wasn’t quite sure where he would spend the remainder of his day.

But I wanted to trust him.

I went to my classes, just as I had planned to do. I didn’t let my mind wander at all where Benj might’ve been or what kind of information David might’ve come up with. Instead, I zoned in on my classes. I took copious notes. I started my homework early. Then I took a run at the park. I dutifully created a to-do list, and then even more dutifully checked each item off of the list. I busied myself into a place where I almost forgot altogether about the Blanchettes and Benj.

But then I went to bed.

I shut out the lights, and then I went to bed, hoping for at least a few hours of sleep.

But that is not what I got.

In the calmness, in that stillness of my room, I let my mind wander from tasks to thoughts of Benj on that bench by the river. I saw his profile, the way his chin really did look exactly like I remembered Dad’s chin. His curly hair, exactly like I remember Mom’s hair. He looked nothing like a Turner but everything like a Blanchette.
He didn’t have to remember where he came from to feel it.

And that’s why the dreams came again.

**

I stayed in the room the next day, for hours. Until a knock came at my bedroom door,

“Can I come in?” It was Jess.

“Sure.” I replied, weakly. “I’m so tired,” I said to her, as she came into my room.

“You got a letter in the mail.” She held an envelope in her hand.

“Oh. Yeah.” I remembered, embarrassingly, the way I had frantically searched the library the day before, and how I lied to David.

“Here you go, lady.” Jess handed me the envelope while I stayed sprawled out on the bed.

“Looking forward to a big night out on the town, I see.” She joked.

“As usual.” I recognized the library logo on the envelope.

“What is it?” asked Jess.

“Oh, nothing. Just research, probably.” I pushed the envelope under a book on the nightstand. “Looks like you have big plans for tonight.”

“Why, yes, I do. Thanks for noticing.” Jess spun around, showing off her outfit, new jeans and a dressy top.

“Finally have a date with Boris?”

“Yes, finally. I would’ve told you last night, but you were already in bed.”

“Actually, I was out on my own date.” I offered, wishing it had been true.

“Very funny.” Jess sat on the foot of my bed.
“What are you guys going to do?” I asked, sitting up so I could see Jess better.

“We’re meeting at El Chico’s. Then who knows?”

“I bet I know.” I joked.

“Stop it. You know me better than that.” She ran her fingers through her hair, combing out the curls.

“I know.” I lay back down in my bed. “Well, I hope you have fun.”

“Oh, I will. I know it.”

“Good.” I really was happy for her.

“Are you okay?” She paused at my doorway.

“I think so.”

“You know you can always talk to me?”

“Yeah. I know.” I really did know that. She tried talking to me all day, everyday about whatever was wrong with me. But I didn’t know how I could tell her.

**

I fell back asleep when Jess left, for as long as I could.

Dream free.

And when I woke up, I finally felt better.

I finally felt like maybe the cloud had lifted.

“Maybe I was just tired,” I said to myself.

Because, really, the Blanchette tombstone thing was new to me, and it was very interesting, but it really shouldn’t have been enough to send me to the library like that, to get myself into a lie about my job over something that probably wasn’t even really any big deal at all.
I told myself that. It’s just like what I had been trying to tell Benj. We did have everything we needed. And it really didn’t matter what had happened in the past.

“It really doesn’t matter.” I even said it out loud to myself.

And then I sat up in bed, and I saw the mail from David on my nightstand and, against my better judgment, I opened it, assuming there would be nothing there of interest. Hoping, of course, that these Blanchettes wouldn’t even be related to my Blanchette line at all.

I ripped open the envelope and unfolded the papers.

There were two pages.

On the top, David had written a little message to me, “There’s actually quite a bit about the Blanchettes. Come by sometime, and I’ll show you where to look. This seemed like a pivotal story to me.”

I should’ve stopped reading right then. I should’ve put that paper down. I should’ve burned it or thrown it in the Mississippi, but instead I kept reading.

He had printed a story from the microfilm from the early twentieth century.

The headline read: “Local Woman Goes Insane.”

And there was a picture of a woman with crazy, wild hair. A woman with my eyes, staring right into mine, a woman named Helen Olivia Blanchette, a woman I would’ve known as my own without even knowing her name or her story. A woman I could feel was my own.

Then I thought of Benj and what his behavior might mean.

And I thought of me. And what my dreams might mean.

I sat in my room in silence, staring at that page, hoping that Jess wouldn’t come home soon, that she wouldn’t barge into my room.

And I knew I didn’t have to study where I came from to know it.
Benj and I carry all of who our family is in everything we are.

Whether we like it or not.

I knew we couldn’t escape it, no matter what feelings we tried to change or who we pretended to be.

I knew the Turners couldn’t make us someone we were not.

And I knew that we couldn’t stop our destiny.