

SEARCHING FOR A SAVIOR

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This collection of essays includes a preface that investigates the role and importance of setting and character in a nonfiction narrative. The preface assesses the writings of four great authors, examining how each author use setting and characterization to further the purpose of their story. This collection focuses on four different issues that the author has wrestled with for two decades. While “Desperado” is an investigation into the problems within her own family, “Being Black Me” highlights the authors struggle against the racial inequality her hometown. “Voices In The Dark”, the author analyze how the abuse she suffered as a child has influenced her life and contributed to a drinking problem that is explored in a later essay “Alors On Danse”.

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PART I
PREFACE

George Santayana wrote in his novel *Little Essays*, “The truth is cruel, but it can be loved, and it makes free those who have loved it” (107). I believe that writers are naturally inquisitive beings, and are drawn towards some form of truth. In fiction, we must attempt to build complex characters that are driven by their own system of beliefs. While nonfiction demands that the writer adhere to the truth of the moment. Regardless of the methods, the goal is always truth.

This collection is my endeavor to try and uncover my own truth in order to set myself free. To rediscover my self-worth, I first had to retrace my steps through my past and untangle all the hateful knots that kept me bound. Each essay tackles different issues that I have struggled with from abuse to identity and addiction. I wanted to make sense of my past so it would not hinder my future.

Time doesn't always dull the sting of all wounds, nor does it make some memories less murky; time can only give a writer distance and perspective. In the space between past action and present thoughts, adequate reflection is necessary in order to reveal the purpose for the essay, and a dual consciousness that is integral to the readers understanding of the discovered truth. In his essay “Reflection and Retrospection: A Pedagogic Mystery Story”, Philip Lopate states:

...In writing memoir, the trick, it seems to me, is to establish a double perspective, that will allow the reader to participate vicariously in the experience as it was lived (the confusions and misapprehensions of the child one was, say), while conveying the sophisticated wisdom of one's current self... (Lopate 143)

In order to bring the reflection to full maturity, one must identify on what that memory means to the present self. This undertaking is rife with pitfalls that could drag down the narrative.

Following the action too closely can lead to blind spots, and the writer runs the risk of becoming so entrenched in the memory that the immaturity of the child's voice bleeds through.

In her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, for example, Maya Angelou keeps perfect balance between the wide-eyed bewilderment of the child, and the adult 'writer at the desk' who looks upon the actions of the "Maya character". She does not condemn the thoughts and feelings of her past self; she lays out the facts of her life and allows the mature voice do the work of showing the distance between the Maya of then and the Maya of now. The compassion in her tone is unmistakable; and springs from an untroubled heart.

In order to achieve the freedom I felt in her words, and liberate myself from my own demons, I realized that I would need someone to guide me out of the dark. In preparation for this thesis, I studied different writing forms in order to give my essays a comprehensive feel. I chose to study the notable works of well-known memoirists Maya Angelou, Mary Karr and Jeanette Winterson and essayist James Baldwin.

These authors and their works span decades and continents apart, and yet their struggle for independence and self-conception are the same. I found myself identifying with the race-based rage Baldwin described in *Harlem* and the loneliness Karr found at the bottom of a bottle. Each perspective gave me a clearer view of myself and helped me to see the new heights my work could reach.

The beauty of this story is the author's absolute refusal to give into the melodrama of the moment. All the stories I read deal with some form of immeasurable tragedy. But what impressed me the most was how each author was able to make their story mean so much more than the pain they present on the page.

In this essay, I assess how these authors avoided the pitfalls of the nonfiction genre; as well as analyze how these authors use setting and characterization in order to find their truth and further their message. I also discuss the moments where their work influenced my own and areas where I used the framework of their stories to create my own.

Literary Device: Setting

Deciding where to place a story is an obstacle for any writer, regardless of the genre. It's crucial that the writer decides what role setting will play in the lives of the characters on the page. Does the character thrive in the small setting, or are they pushing against the boundaries—physical and figurative—of their town? This struggle between person and place can push the message an essay forward if the writer has established the identity of each entity. Yet, if the purpose of the place is forgotten, the writer runs the risk of becoming lost in the details, caught up in the telling instead of the revelation of their message.

During my research, I discovered that the environment of the story could act as an added character. Most of the writers I studied brought their setting to the forefront of their work. They described it in vivid detail and even interacted with it, sometimes violently as we saw in Baldwin's depiction of the violent riots that overtook Harlem in 1943. I learned that setting should inform the reader about: the people who live in this space, the social and cultural climate of the area, and how the two influence one another.

The setting for Angelou, Karr and Winterson change each time they complete another portion of their journey. From the cotton fields of Stamps, Arkansas to the northern English brick town of Accrington to the ever-changing world of Mary Karr, I scrutinized how these authors treated these places they once called home.

Winterson struggles to escape the restrictive confines of her Pentecostal household, while the transient nature of Karr's memoir reveals a restlessness born out of her insecurity and an attempt to outrun the demons that are imbedded in her younger self. Angelou—like Baldwin—uses the landscape of Stamps to speak to the larger problems of race relations and economic disparity of the South.

For the purposes of this essay, I would like to focus on how James Baldwin and Mary Karr use setting to fit the needs of their story. Baldwin was critical to my understanding of not only myself, but also the essay writing form. He taught me that setting is another device that should be used to move the story's theme forward.

While Karr showed me that a 'home' does not need to fit exclusively within the boundaries of a building. These ideas seem in opposition to one another, but combined, they showed me that the landscape of a story is not an idle creature, but one that is to be used to learn about the people who live in the place and also our view of our world. Together, they helped to guide me to a greater understanding of what the scenery can do.

In *Notes of a Native Son*, I studied how Baldwin furthers his analysis of race relations by examining the physical space of the oppressed. On this high-rise landscape Baldwin is able to transform his personal dealings with racial inequality into a powerful interrogation of American culture.

Under Baldwin's sharp eye Harlem is not just a city, but the embodiment of racial struggle, a place "pervaded by a sense of congestion, rather like the insistent, maddening, claustrophobic pounding in the skull that comes from trying to breathe in a very small room with all the windows shut" (Baldwin 59). His strong vivid language grounded this subjective concept

in a way I understood and identified with the emotion immediately. One can no more escape the confines of Harlem than the crushing limitations of racism.

Though six decades years separate us, Baldwin helped me to identify the indignation within me; as well as give me the language I needed to turn my emotions into cohesive thoughts. Baldwin warns the generations to follow, regardless of their skin color, that hate destroys all. “Being Black Me” is my attempt to reconcile my place in the world and the rage that comes with race.

Baldwin takes his time to unravel this thread, first describing the setting, then the people and their appalling living conditions as they toil beneath the oppressive cloud of discrimination. It is this struggle between place and people where we are able to see the connection between the physical limitations of Harlem and the systematic oppression of its inhabitants.

Baldwin pushes past the physical descriptions of Harlem to investigate the psyche of those who occupy the landscape. In the stand-alone essay *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin foreshadows the implosion of Harlem by describing its people. Through Baldwin’s eyes, we are allowed to see the anger that simmers just beneath the surface:

Nor had I ever been so aware of small knots of people. They were on stoops ad on corners and in doorways, and what was stinking about them, I think was that they did not seem to be talking...something heavy in their stance seemed to indicate that they had all, incredibly, seen a common vision, and on each face there seemed to be the same strange, bitter shadow. (Baldwin 100)

The city’s augmented police presence is and only adds to the heaviness we feel in the air. Through Baldwin’s descriptive language, the tension is palpable; one can feel it vibrating off of the pockets of people. Later we see Harlem on fire. We hear the glass crunch beneath our feet as Baldwin’s words walk us through the destructive power of the disenfranchised.

As I studied how Baldwin incorporates his message into the scenery, I felt that it was necessary to mimic this trait by including descriptions of my hometown in my essays. But before

I could do so, I had to take a step back and take a new look at my hometown to truly understand the undercurrents that were running beneath its surface.

In Karr's memoir *Lit*, I learned that one's definition of home does not need to be limited to a building. In the beginning of her story, Karr has run away from home out to California to lie on the beach and get high. Later, she finds temporary refuge in a Minnesota college before finding her way to Vermont to study for her masters. It was only upon rereading Karr's work that I realized how quickly the scene changes; the first time I digested her work I was enthralled with how her animated voice worked in conjunction with her wandering.

After a second and third read, I realized how Karr was able to keep such a rapid pace and yet remain grounded. I noticed that Karr took her home with her everywhere she went. Time and maturity helped Karr redefine what home meant to her. Her home was her family, she could curl up in the memories she shared with them and transform her current setting into any place she desired it to be. Karr taught me that a home lives on in the heart long after the building has been torn down.

From time to time, Karr quietly halts the forward motion of her narrative to take a look back. She slips back into her home in Leechfield by evoking the presence of lost family members (specifically her father); we see that in all her wandering, she is never truly far from home. We see her riding shotgun besides her whiskey drinking father or watching her mother create some new havoc of her life. She is conscious of this departure from the narrative and yet seems to fall under its spell every time:

In a mind shift, I'm a schoolgirl again in the summer, and my half-Indian daddy has just come in the back door at dawn with grime under his nails from a double shift...He sits down on the bed's edge, staring at his brown forearms. *Daddy*, I whisper, and that greedy call for him snaps the connection to the past. The voltage drops, and he's gone... (Karr 83-84)

Karr's memoir taught me that one could find refuge in the memory place and the people who lived there. Her father lives on in her heart and in her memory. Karr returns time and time again to moments she shared with her father, conjuring up his spirit and searching for solace in his memory. The strong ties she has with her family are what keep Karr grounded throughout the whole piece. These vibrant characters flit in and out of her narrative, seemingly at will, to remind Karr where she came from.

This lesson was particularly helpful when I decided to use my own hometown as the setting for my first essay, "Being Black Me". Through my research, I learned that setting could be a powerful tool used to add complexity and adult awareness to a story. Karr showed me that I could write about the place of my birth even after it ceased to exist.

During the time that I was writing this collection of essays, my hometown of Odessa, Texas went through another oil boom and bust cycle. The boom attracted an additional one hundred thousand people, more than the town could hold. Apartment complexes were hastily thrown together to accommodate all the workers who flooded into the town. Roads became clogged with semis and trucks with out of state license plates. The local Hooters stayed packed from the moment they opened till midnight when they pushed the last wobbly Halliburton Roughneck out the doors.

When the bust happened (Fall 2014- Spring 2015) it brought a scrambling, desperation that caused people against one another. Today my town is mired in crime, snatching the number one spot for most aggravated assaults in Texas. Slow traffic can cause a shootout between the short tempered and he who has the most ammo wins.

After seeing what Odessa had become, I turned my eyes towards the Odessa of my childhood. Karr's example of how to treat a place long past helped me to see how I could use my

town to my advantage. Now that the Odessa of my childhood has disappeared, I could look on that time fondly on my memories and focus on what these moments mean to me today.

With a mature voice and a clear head, this collection is my attempt to make sense of the place that helped to shape the person I am today. I look upon the town and its people with compassion. I want to show the conditions of those disenfranchised groups in my town as opposed to telling the reader about it. And give compassion to those who have wronged me in the past. This reflection helps to ground my essay, give new depth to the place and the people who live there.

I worked to ensure that the setting of the story reflected the mindset of the “Julia character”. The setting of the empty dark apartment in “Desperado” was meant to emulate the metaphorical distance between my father and I. While the drunken chaos of the French house party in “Alors On Danse” impersonates the loss of control over my addictions and the deterioration of my mental state.

Literary Device: Character

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?* helped my writing by giving me a clearer idea of how to create realistic characters out of the imperfect individuals who surround me. Both have a natural talent for saturating all their characters with electrified personalities. Some leap right out at the reader while others exist on the fringes of the narrative. I wanted to study how both authors were able to master such a technique and situate themselves in their narrative against the backdrop of such vibrant personalities.

This examination of character is particularly important. During my research, I discovered that both authors experienced some form of abuse as children. However the most impressive feat was that both not only resisted the urge to portray themselves as the victim, they did not make a monster out of those who had abused them. To do so would have made a mockery out of their experience they were trying to convey. Sharing the scene with an endless stream of monstrous characters would not inspire sympathy from the reader; it has an adverse effect of transforming the principal character into an unreliable narrator.

When the narrator is able to see beyond him or herself to the truth that lies in each of their characters, the reader is able to have a much richer reading experience. The characters are allowed to be more complex, layered with all the good and bad qualities life has to offer. I learned that characters should also challenge the author's perception of their world and their place in it.

The second essay in my collection, "Voices in The Dark" revolves around the sexual abuse I suffered as a child. With a subject this heavy, it took a few drafts to realize how easy it is to fall into the role of the victim. Righteous or not, the whiny often pitiable voice of the always victimized can be grating to the ears. In order to avoid this most obvious pitfall, I turned towards

Angelou and Winterson for stylistic direction, characterization and their obvious mastery of the double consciousness demanded by Lopate.

In the first line of her memoir, Winterson reveals to the reader that she was a mistake. She does not want the readers pity, on the contrary, she seems to intentionally rebuff such a sentiment by infusing a touch of humor to her tone. Winterson doesn't make this announcement herself, instead she pulls the words out of her mother's mouth, "When my mother was angry with me, which was often, she said 'The Devil led us to the wrong crib'" (Winterson 1).

This introductory sentence immediately establishes the dichotomy between mother and daughter. The relationship is an adversarial one, we are meant to see that from the beginning. The essence of their struggle is captured in the space of a few words. I felt the mother's repeated rejection, and yet at first I was puzzled by the candid manner Winterson tossed out the line.

It took several rereads till I realized what is missing from Winterson's tone. There seemed to be a complete lack of judgment and bitterness that is usually directed at someone so hateful. Winterson doesn't allow pain her mother's harsh words must have inspired in the past to dominate her present narrative. She acknowledges her pain, but doesn't let it take center stage.

After reading about the abuse that Winterson suffered at the hands of this miserable woman, I was surprised that she could have such a breezy rather humorous tone when she describes the woman who raised her:

She was a flamboyant depressive; a woman who kept a revolver in the duster drawer, and the bullets in a tin of Pledge. A woman who stayed up all night baking cakes to avoid sleeping in the same bed as my father. A woman with a prolapse, a thyroid condition, an enlarged heart, an ulcerated leg that never healed, and two sets of false teeth — matt for everyday, and a pearlised set for 'best'. " (Winterson 1)

There's so much life in Winterson's run-on sentences (insinuating that complaints about these ailments were constant) and detailed descriptions of her mother. By evaluating Winterson's work, I realized that she uses humor as a powerful tool to keep her story balanced. Despite the

anger and the meanness that is wrapped up in the Mrs. Winterson's character, the author keeps her mother's sadness at the core of her portrayal of her mother a sadness that permeates the piece. This ensures that the reader sees the humanity in Mrs. Winterson.

In her physical descriptions of her mother Winterson peels back every layer that would separate the reader from truly understanding who this woman she called Mrs. Winterson (mother) and what she meant to the author. This is the same mother who terrorized her child, locking Winterson out of the house overnight and other times becoming physically and verbally abusive, and yet, when we view this loathsome woman through the eyes of the writer at the desk, she's transformed into this awkward, hulking creature who doesn't know how to love:

Mrs. Winterson was too big for her world, but she crouched gloomy and awkward under its low shelf, now and again exploding to her full three hundred feet, and towering over us. Then, because it was useless, redundant, only destructive, or so it seemed, she shrank back again, defeated. (Winterson 35)

The author handles this woman's depiction with such care; one cannot help but detect some form of love, or at least admiration, in her words.

Through detailed depictions of her parents, Winterson allows the reader to see the hope and heartbreak wrapped inside both of them. This trait impressed me, I wanted to incorporate Winterson's form of forgiveness into my essays, but I didn't know how.

At the time that I was writing my collection, I was still rooted in the child's voice. I could only see black and white, good and bad, and refused to see the small nuances that each character brought to the page. Winterson and Angelou showed me that writers could use characterization as another tool to learn about themselves. When one brings maturity to the page, the voice of a character are able to shine through because they are not being reduced to a one-dimensional representation; they become more than just a single shrill sound.

Winterson does not make an ogre out of her mother. Instead, time and reflection worked together to give her memoir the mature voice that was needed to tell her story. It was only through intense reflection that Winterson was able to renovate the image she had of her mother. Gone is the bulky monster that towered over her, Winterson pushes past her mother's anger and sees the real woman who exists beneath all the pain:

She was out of scale, larger than life. She was like a fairy story where size is approximate and unstable. She loomed up. She expanded. Only later, much later, too late, did I understand how small she was to herself. The baby nobody picked up. The uncarried child still inside her. (Winterson 1)

Reflection has helped Winterson banish the specters of her childhood. Her characterization of Mrs. Winterson is inundated with compassion and love. She works hard to make sure that the reader sees the character's outsides as well as her insides. Winterson extends this compassion to her father as well, a character that seemed more ghost than man in this memoir. He lingered around the edges of the memoir, moving about quietly, never interfering with Mrs. Winterson's tyrannical rule over the household.

I found myself identifying with Winterson's search for goodness in her phantom father. In my third essay, "Desperado", I was struggling with how to have sympathy for my father. In the early stages of essay writing, I was stuck in the wounded child's perspective. I knew that my father was not a bad man, but I was still upset that he, like Winterson's father, failed to intervene and put an end to my mother's despotic rule over my life.

Winterson's treatment of her father showed me that if I wanted to be successful in conveying my story in a mature voice, I had to push past the pain I felt and see my father for who he really was. Years after she was kicked out of her home, Winterson was able to come to terms with the role her father had played in her life and was able to see him for who he truly was:

He was always a little boy, and I am upset that I didn't look after him, upset that there are so many kids who never get looked after, and so they can't grow up. They can get older,

but they can't grow up. That takes love. If you are lucky the love will come later. If you are lucky you won't hit love in the face. (Winterson 48)

This passage showed me that if I was to be successful in conveying my truth, I needed to see the characters on the page as fully formed, individuals. I had to extend compassion to the monster (my mother) and the observer (my father) if I wanted to have a well-rounded essay.

In order to achieve the freedom I craved, I wanted to use Angelou's work as a prototype of how one writes about molestation from a place of resilience. While Winterson showed me that one must have compassion in order to have a mature voice, it was Angelou who showed me how to use that voice without losing myself in the process. I studied Angelou's depiction of her rapist Mr. Freeman as a way to fashion my own characterization of my abuser.

Angelou doesn't make a monster out of Mr. Freeman, but I noticed a certain lack of forgiveness in her tone. Like Winterson's characterization of her too-big mother, Angelou works hard to remove the limiting role of 'abuser' that one can attribute to Mr. Freeman. It is evident she has no love for Mr. Freeman, but as a writer she is able to see past the child's perspective to reveal the man beneath the sin.

All throughout Angelou's narrative, her tone remains calm and beautifully understated. Even in the darkest moments of her memoir, as she is describing the abuse she suffered at the hands of her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, Angelou does so at an even pace using simple, descriptive language that conveys the horror she experienced:

There was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot. (Angelou 77)

While I would have rushed past the uncomfortable details to save myself the pain of reliving the moment, Angelou's tone remains unhurried. She embraces the agony of that memory and in doing so survives it, overcomes the dreadfulness she faced.

By reading about Angelou's traumatic experience, it brought my own story into sharp focus. I realized that if I wanted to overcome my own negative feelings about my own sexual abuse, I would have to relive it. I would have to feel every touch, every hurt if I wanted to truly capture the essence of the moment. I had to feel all the negativity attached to those memories if I was to rid myself of them.

In the hands of a lesser writer, Mr. Freeman would have remained a beast undeserving of any type of grace. But Angelou's mature perspective transforms this child molester into something tangible and rather pathetic. When she describes Mr. Freeman, we do not see an imposing figure with shifting eyes and evil written into his features. Instead we are shown a rather average if not paltry depiction:

He was a Southerner, too, and big. But a little flabby...I think he must have been a few years older than [Mother], but if not, he had the sluggish inferiority of old men married to young women. He watched her every move and when she left the room, his eyes allowed her reluctantly to go. (Angelou 68)

There is an undeniable helplessness in her characterization of Mr. Freeman. She infuses a there is a pathetic air of misery that clings to Mr. Freeman's character.

Angelou's ability to transform one of the foulest people she's ever known into a fat, middle aged, looser showed me how powerful and necessary reflection is to the narrative. I don't know what it took for her to finally make peace with the man who nearly destroyed her, but it inspired me and gave me the courage that I needed to try and tackle my own abuse.

I knew that if I made Charles the villain in any of my stories, I would slip into the role of the perpetually victimized and cheat myself—my essay—of the redemptive powers of reflection. I had to follow Winterson's example and find the human behind the monster my memory had created. Any instances where Charles was on the page, I scrutinized the scene for any signs of a malevolent character.

Like Angelou, I couldn't bring myself to completely forgive for this man who had a hand in wrecking my childhood. Writing this essay taught me that I didn't want to be a victim, in writing or in life. I had to learn to look at the world around me with compassionate eyes. But by writing this essay, by putting on paper what happened, I feel that I am taking a step forward into the light. I am taking back ownership of my life and the freedom to do what I want with my life, free from the baggage of my past.

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PART II

SEARCHING FOR A SAVIOR

Being Black Me

I was born and raised in a small west Texas town named Odessa. In my memories, it's a place of scorching summers and lightly frosted winters. The horizon was dotted with pump jacks and the land was saturated with the pride of the people who worked it. On Friday nights, beneath the lights of Ratliff Stadium, the hopes and dreams of the town rested on the shoulders of high school football heroes.

The town was filled with those who had survived the oil bust in the 1980's. The people who stayed were families who had lived in Texas for generations. Most of them came from towns so small that Odessa, with its population of about a hundred thousand, was the big city.

The bust didn't just rob the town of its livelihood; it robbed the city of its sense urgency. When I think back on my childhood, it felt as if the world turned on a slower rotation. The days seemed longer, like we had all the time in the world. Southern hospitality was bred into the people of west Texas, everyone had a smile for a stranger and any time was a good time to talk. It wasn't uncommon to see two good ol' boys hanging out the driver's side of their Ford F-150 in the middle of the road and shooting the breeze.

A set of train tracks runs through Odessa. This dark scar on the landscape ran a crooked line down the spine of the town. North to south. The tracks not only bisected the town, but also separated two different mentalities. On north side, gated communities with ranch-style mansions and sprawling lawns fed with oil money flourished. In a grotesque sense of poetic injustice, most of the minorities and lower income families lived on the south side of town. While my family was one of the only black families to live on the west side of Odessa, according to old district school zone lines, I still had to go to a junior high on the south side.

The Odessa school district had been living under a Supreme Court desegregation order that was filed in 1982. This was a fact that neither I, nor my parents were aware of when I started kindergarten in 1994. My early memories of Sam Houston Elementary are filled with nothing but happiness and curiosity.

One history lesson in third grade would alter the course of my life.

My magnet elementary school was a world where I came into contact with all sorts of people. Even before I knew I wanted to be a writer, I used each opportunity to study the people around me. I marveled at the way my best friend's pale skin turned lobster red when she was under the sun, and how her blond hair slipped through my fingers like water.

For years I didn't notice a difference between my classmates and myself. We all baked under the same west Texas sun, shared an affinity for fart noises and curse words.

My life knew no boundaries. Until I was about seven or eight, I lived a life that was coated with innocence. Now, I find it almost strange to think there was once a time in my life when I was just Julia. It was a simple, uncomplicated existence where my judgments of a person's character was based on who they were, not who they were supposed to be.

The history lesson forced me to see myself as others saw me. I ceased to be just another girl floating through life; I became the *other* in the eyes of everyone around me. But more importantly I became a creature of lesser value in my own mind.

It showed me where I came from by revealing a past I never truly understood before. The history lesson wasn't a revelation I completely understood at the time. I needed decades to grow and mature before I could understand the necessity of knowing and understanding your past

before you walk into the future. I've found that it is foolish to go through life without trying to reach out to the people who've walked the path before you.

I remember it was February 1997. The weather in Odessa couldn't decide if it wanted to be winter or spring. It would heat up one day only to produce icy sleet the next. My teacher third grade teacher, Mrs. Johnson was already hoping for summer. Bright yellow flowers dotted her chalkboard green summer dress, and matched the one pinned in her hair.

Mrs. Johnson was an older woman, a born and bred west Texan, with a thick southern drawl that made her vowel sounds last for days. She had to clap her hands and raise her voice to get anyone to pay attention. With only an hour separating me from the freedom of recess, excitement felt like a snake, wriggling around in my stomach.

"Today, boys and girls, in honor of Black History Month, we're going to learn a about the Civil Rights Movement." She held her hands up and waved them in the air like a cheerleader, as if we were meant to celebrate this moment.

I crossed my arms over my skinny chest, covering the picture of a pink pig in high heels on my shirt. I might have even "harrumph"ed for good measure. After Mrs. Johnson had skipped over the chapter covering the African continent in our geography book, I had lost all faith in her as a teacher. To this day, I am still appalled that one could dismiss the birthplace of humanity as "nothing real important".

At that age, I didn't have the ability to appropriately voice my dissent, but the 'know-it-all' attitude that I inherited as first-born refused to lie dormant. Rather than defying her authority outright, with a grandiose gesture, I had to find other ways to protest the way she played with the facts. I made it my mission to hold her accountable.

As Mrs. Johnson droned on, defining what civil rights were, my mind raced ahead of her, searching for any facts I remembered on the subject.

In order to teach about the Civil Rights Movement, Mrs. Johnson had to go back to the beginning and teach us all about history of American slavery. But she did so at a breakneck pace. As she began to gloss over various details that I deemed important, my tiny body was filled with all the indignation it could contain. I fumed and refused to sit through another lesson cheapened by her haste. So I took it upon myself to contribute.

“When you look into your textbook, it should say that the first slaves came to America in 1619—”

“Mrs. Johnson, isn’t it true that the slaves came from Africa?” I asked. I loaded all the mysticism I could into the word and was rewarded with a few wide-eyed stares from my classmates.

“Yes, that is right Julia, that is true. But, next time, please raise your hand and wait for me to call on you. Mrs. Johnson said. While a bright smile lifted up her round cheeks, my ears noticed that her tone had lost some of its warmth.

I frowned and sat on my hand. Instead of hearing the warning in her voice, I only saw a challenge. I wanted to make a fool out of her.

Mrs. Johnson couldn’t get halfway through a sentence before my hand shot up in the air, quivering with impatience. Near the end of her lesson, I had to start piling facts on top of one another in order to fit all of my facts.

“Mrs. Johnson, isn’t it true that slaves weren’t allowed to go to school or read or write or get married?”

Sometimes, I waited for her to get to the end of a sentence and then I would try to complete it for her, “—*And* that after the Civil War, weren’t slaves supposed to get forty acres and a mule?”

My parents had a whole VHS section dedicated to black actors and filmmakers. I had watched films like “Malcolm X” and “The Color Purple” so many times I could quote them. However, I was totally ignorant of the true plight of these characters and the brutal world that they inhabited.

The facts I used were things I’d heard my parents say whenever I asked them about the societal atrocities I saw in these films and others. I repeated their words with conviction, and tried to pass them off as my own thoughts. When in reality, I didn’t understand the dark reality that lurked behind the words I was spouting.

But in that moment, I just wanted to show off how much I knew about the subject. My smile grew with each fact I threw out till it spread all over my face. When I could sense her winding down, I would raise my hand. Later, when she tried to ignore my hand, I would wiggle impatiently in my seat, grunting and moaning until she rolled her eyes and said wearily, “What is it, Julia?”

“Isn’t it true that President Thomas Jefferson had a mistress named Sally Hemmings that was one of his slaves—”

“That was never proven, Jul—”

“And they had kids together?”

A frustrated sound escaped her mouth, “Julia, front of the class, now.” One manicured finger pointed to the spot beside her on the carpet.

My mouth went dry. While part of me knew what a show off I was being, none of me thought I'd get into trouble for it.

I shook my head furiously and tried to transmit my fear through wide, round eyes. It was much easier to challenge her from the comfort of my chair in the back of the classroom. But to march in front of everyone, and stand there like a piece of meat, the thought made my knees shake.

Her eyes narrowed. Her lips became so thin they were nothing but a red slash along her face, "*Now*. I ain't gonna ask you a'gin."

I swallowed.

The snickers and suppressed giggles from my classmates did not go unheard. I could feel my ears turning red as I trudged up to the front of the class.

When I made it there, I tried to stand as far as possible from Mrs. Johnson. But she snapped her fingers and motioned for me to stand next to her. "Okay, boys and girls, Julia's gonna help me teach today. Since she's been doin' such a good job already," she glared at me and I felt myself wither under her hard stare.

She turned her smile back to the crowd and put one arm over my shoulders. "Now I want y'all to take a good look at Julia, here. As you can see, she's not like the rest of us."

The words leapt from her tongue and laid rubble to what I knew of my life. Until that very moment, I had always felt like one of them.

"Julia is what you would call an African American." Mrs. Johnson said, her accent drew out the words, making them sound dramatic and foreign. It even prompted some students to "Oooo" and "Aaaah" as if she was presenting a python instead of a person.

I felt my face heat up. I wanted to run away, but there was no place to go. My feet shuffled restlessly as an uneasy feeling knotted my stomach.

“What that means, is that Julia’s ancestors came from Africa. More’n likely, they were taken from Africa and made into slaves—oh no, Julia. You just stay right besides me.”

Her hand snatched the back of my shirt and curtailed my escape back to my desk. Sweat pricked under my armpits as I felt everyone’s eyes on my skin.

“Then, during times of segregation, people that looked like Julia were kept separate from everyone else. What is it, Rusty?”

Rusty stood up. He was a pale, skinny boy, but tall for his age, and had hard blue eyes that made me nervous, “Why did they keep them apart? Did they all have some kinda’ disease or somethin’?”

Mrs. Johnson laughed good-naturedly at his foolishness and that prompted laughter from other students. He sat down back at his seat, his face reddening and glared at me, as if I were to blame.

“No Rusty, they weren’t carrying diseases. Although scientists believed that these people—these African—were a different species than whites. No, people like Julia here,” she pulled me closer to her side, “were kept apart because of how they looked, the color of their skin. They couldn’t sit next to a white person on a bus or go to school with other white kids. They were seen as a lower class...”

Mrs. Johnson continued her speech on racism and slavery. But all I heard was a rush in my ears. My palms felt hot and clammy. I kept opening and closing them, keeping count in my head to drown out Mrs. Johnson’s words.

A shame that I hadn't known before settled over my shoulders like a cloak. It was a heavy suffocating thing. It made my shoulders slump. I tried to make myself small. Tried to find a hiding spot inside my mind so that no one would be able to find me, no one could hurt me.

When I glanced up at the class, I felt the weight of twenty-six pairs of eyes on me. I saw a hint of apprehension, of judgment on their faces that hadn't been there minutes before. Their eyes poked and prodded my features, comparing my face to their own. Judging my lips as too thick, my nose too wide and flat. Finding me wanting.

Panic and shame warmed my face. When the blank stare of my classmates became too much, I dropped my eyes to the floor. I looked at my limbs in disgust. My arms and legs were the same as ever, but now, I took note of their packaging.

I finally saw myself the way the world saw me. I noticed the brown skin that clothed my bones. Brown skin covered my arms and the backs of my hands, while my white palms remained the only light thing about me. I rubbed my hands together, at first delicately. Then faster, rougher, needing to see if I could rub the color off of my hands.

Tears pricked my eyes when I realized how futile the situation was.

When I shot a cautious glance around the classroom. I realized that I was the darkest thing I could find. The only one of its kind.

In that moment, my world was irrevocably changed. I became aware of my status as the *other*. To some in my small Texas hometown, the color of my skin made me more than just an outcast. It made me an automatic criminal. Someone unfit to play with their daughter or date their son. Though that prejudice wasn't as prevalent as it was in the childhood of my parents, it still existed. And each look of thinly veiled disgust cut me deep.

That moment instilled in me a desire to be anyone but myself. I didn't want to look like me anymore. I became something ugly, something undesirable to myself.

After her speech, Mrs. Johnson dismissed me with a wave of her hand. I hung my head and watched my feet carry me back to my seat.

When I sat down, the plastic chair squeaked beneath me. Krista turned and glared at me. Her green eyes crawled all over my skin, her nose wrinkled as if I smelled. Then she snorted, flipped her long, blond hair over her shoulder and turned back to face Mrs. Johnson.

“Okay, now that y'all know a little about Black History, we're gonna watch a film. Now this type of film is called a docu-men-ta-ry,” Mrs. Johnson said, drawing out each syllable of the word, opening her mouth wide like a fish trying to breathe.

“A documentary means that what you're fixin' to see something that is one hundred percent true. It's about the Civil Rights Movement in America during the 1950's and 1960's.”

She held up a VHS tape. The cover showed a line of black people, men, women and children. All dressed in their Sunday best. Some locked arms, others held up signs in the background. Their eyes showed no fear; they all had the same proud look chiseled on their features.

“Now, I gotta warn ya' some of what you're 'bout to see is difficult to watch. If it gets to be too scary for you, just close your eyes for a while. But no sleepin'.”

She glared at Rusty, a notorious sleeper, and then popped the movie in the VHS player.

The documentary was from PBS. A friendly looking white man made the introduction of the video; he had on a blue tie and red sweater, like a young Mr. Rogers. His synopsis of the enslavement of blacks went no deeper than Mrs. Johnson's. I began to sulk, my lower lip drooping as I pouted, feeling rather cheated out of my history lesson.

Stock photos were used to try and briefly express the hardship of the slaves. Nothing too violent or in depth, they showed groups of slaves sitting outside their shabby living quarters. Others showed slaves in the fields, surrounded by a sea of cotton, their features drooped with fatigue, and children bent over bags of cotton twice their size. Large, matronly women held fat, white babies in their laps. Their skin was darker than anything I'd ever seen; the jarring contrast between light and dark made even more pronounced by the black and white photos.

In each picture, the slaves stared unflinchingly at the camera; as if their eyes were trying to telegraph some emotion only I could see. Centuries separated us, but something—some fragment of their spirit—lingered in the photos. They reached through space and time to grab ahold of me.

Most were masters of disguising their emotions behind deceptively passive ebony masks. While some dared to have defiance written on their faces. When I looked closely, I thought I spied a guarded pride of an unbroken people.

At the time, I didn't understand how dangerous it was to be ignorant of one's own history. Growing up, I learned about European and American history, the great conquerors of the world, but I had no knowledge about the land that birthed my people. To belong to a people without a past—or a past that is filtered through the mouths of others—is tantamount to having no existence at all. Like belonging to a clan of ghosts. As if history is telling you that your story wasn't worth writing down.

Finally, the scene shifted away from the photos. The camera showed a wide and close up shots of a crowd walking down the street. It was a sea of black faces. On a close up shot, I saw that the crowd had the same proud rigidity of the people on the VHS box.

“We will now watch the scene unfold during the 1963 Birmingham campaign in Birmingham, Alabama.”

When I looked closer at the images, I gasped. I realized that a lot of the protesters were kids, some not any older than me. The narrator confirmed this, telling us that the Civil Rights leaders had recruited students to help participate.

The children looked jovial. Some laughing, others arm in arm with their friends. While the adults could pass as stoic, the children looked like they were going to a picnic. They chanted:

“We’re going to walk, walk, walk to freedom...freedom...freedom...”

They shouted with such conviction and pride that I sat up a little straighter in my chair.

A quick glance of my fellow classmates revealed that they were all staring at the TV. The black and white images lit up their pale faces.

My skin matched the children marching on the screen. Their features mirrored my own. We shared the same roots in that ancient African soil. They weren’t marching for Krista or Rusty.

They were marching for me.

As the protesters neared a park, there was a line of police officers waiting for them. A knot tightened in my stomach. Just the image of the line of white men, their faces twisted with angry intent, was enough to make a shiver of goose bumps break out all over my skin. While most twirled clubs in their hands; some gripped chains that had fierce looking German Shepherds on the end. The dogs strained against the hold of their masters. Barking and lunging at the oncoming flood of protesters.

Mrs. Johnson stood and walked to the screen, she pointed out one man who flashed on the screen, “Now this here is Eugene ‘Bull’ Connor. He was a bad, bad man.” She said with an

exaggerated frown, her sing-songy voice was devoid of any actual horror; making him sound like villain at the end of a Scooby-Doo episode rather than an abject oppressor and racist.

As the line of protesters neared the police, Bull Connor turned around and shouted something to his men.

The video cut to a fire truck speeding down the street, its siren wailing sending people running to see what was going to happen. The video looked like it was being fast-forwarded, as men hooked fire hoses up to fire hydrants then ran over to meet the protesters.

Bull Connor said something else to his men. The audio popped in and out of the TV speakers as Bull Connor spoke. Most of his speech was lost due to bad recording. But as he swiveled around to face the marchers, he put his hands on his hips and the mike caught him roar to his men, “Let’s show these niggers what happens if they cross the line!”

The firemen cheered, a few of them shouted, “Let’s knock the niggers down!”

Nigger. Nigger. Nigger. The word, repeated over and over, felt like a grenade going off in my head. It left behind a corrosive metallic tang that coated the inside of my mouth. Even at a young age, my brain could sense the hate that was infused in the grooves of the word. I had no way of knowing how that taste would stay with me.

The firefighters struggled to turn the hoses on. Water burst out and when the blast struck the protesters they immediately began to scream.

“Bull Connor ordered fire hoses to be used on the protesters,” the narrator said. “The level of water pressure of the fire hoses was so severe that, in other circumstances, it could peel the bark off of a tree.”

The screams of the children rang in my ears. My chest tightened till I couldn’t catch my breath. Unwanted tears stung my eyes. I had to blink several times to keep them away.

The protesters scattered once the hoses were turned on. One black boy was hit so hard by the water that it ripped his shirt away from his body, exposing his black skin to the ruthless power of the hose. Another group of protesters tried to huddle together and protect each other, when a group of police ran over to where they were and aimed a hose at them. The blast knocked them off their feet. They fell onto the ground, and the force of the water moved their bodies like trash down the sidewalk.

I wiped my eyes furiously with the back of my hand. The cries of pain from the protesters hurt my heart. I couldn't believe anyone had endured this level of pain for a cause. For me. And other future generations of people who were going to come up behind them.

Slowly, I became aware of a reoccurring squeak. Every few seconds, the squeak got louder and more repetitive. I looked up and saw that, one by one, my classmates turned around in their chairs. They stared, unblinking. Some ping-ponged their eyes between the video and me.

I slid down further in my chair. I tucked my knees close to my chest and tried to make myself small. Insignificant.

What I saw in the eyes of my classmates, that slight hesitation and wariness, made me want to cry. The pride that I felt when I looked at the heroes fighting for justice on the screen, turned to dust in my mouth. I had always felt like one of them, until I found out that I wasn't. I would spend the rest of the year, and the better part of a decade, trying to fit in or blend into the background.

Mrs. Johnson snapped her fingers and motioned for the students to return their attention to the TV. While a few complied, most continued to stare.

I choked down the overwhelming urge to cry. Sobs sat on my vocal cords, hurting my throat and making awful hiccupping noises escape my mouth.

The black and white footage slowed down and froze on the face of a child. His mouth was opened wide in a silent howl, his eyes shut tight. His hands were raised in a vain attempt to protect himself from a jet stream of water exploding from a fire hose.

As the image faded away, it was replaced by a photo.

I gasped. My hands rushed to my face to cover the sound.

The picture showed one officer with a determined sneer. His eyes were hidden behind dark, round sunglasses. He held the leash of a German shepherd in one hand.

But my focus wasn't on the police officer, or even the dog. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the young black man in the photo. A German shepherd was attacking him. His white collar shirt and grey cardigan were clenched in between the jaws of the beast.

A grimace of pain was etched on the young man's features. The photo captured the him in mid stride, his body bowed as he tried to get away from the animal. The officer held the leash loosely in one hand, not attempting to curb the animal's attack. His other hand had a fistful of the teenager's shirt, preventing the young man from escaping.

The young man had one hand wrapped around the policeman's wrist, trying to break the officer's hold. The dark skin a stark contrast against the light.

Mrs. Johnson dismissed us early for playtime, but there was a potent cloud of melancholy seemed to hang over all of us. The images seemed to subdue even those students with a more wild nature. For the rest of the day, my classmates clumped together and spoke in hushed tones about what they'd just seen, while I sat on the swings alone.

I carried a heavy heart in my chest for weeks. The atrocities I had seen reverberated through me and changed the way I looked at my life. I saw the world anew; I realized that my

place in the world was a direct result of those who struggled before me. People who paved the way to a better life before I even took my first breath. I owed my thanks to a sea of faces in a slow marching crowd, whose names I would never know.

Eventually, the passage of time worked its magic and eased the pain out of my heart; and yet, an acrid taste lingered in my mouth. Now that my eyes were opened they could never be closed again.

A heightened awareness kept me on guard, even in the moments with my friends, I learned that some prejudices were too ingrained and couldn't be silenced. I began to notice things, racially motivated comments made by my classmates that were uttered as mere slips of the tongue, "She's so ghetto, but then again, she lives on the south side, so what can you expect..." I became conscious of the suspicious eyes of shop owners who picked me out of a group of my white friends; I felt them on my back as I wandered around the store. The bolder ones even followed me as I walked up and down the aisles. On the pretext of straightening up, they were ready to tell me not to touch the merchandise if my hands ever left my pockets.

I still carried a pride for my people like an anchor around my soul. But in order to fit in, I shifted it to the back of my mind, and at times I attempted to ignore it completely.

About a month after our class watched the documentary, I chased Cody Mitchell around the playground. It had been a vigorous game of tag till I finally caught him and pinned him on the cement wall behind the monkey bars.

Cody had sandy blond hair and a pouty bottom lip that drove me wild. His blue eyes looked like crushed glass and I loved to see my reflection floating in them. I had been in love with him since the first moment I saw him, in an excited, breathless way, where just the sound of his name filled my lungs to bursting. The sweet pain that comes with a first love.

His cheeks were still tinted pink and I couldn't stop smiling, "Will you be my boyfriend?" I asked. The question had slipped out of my mouth before my brain could stop the words.

A heavy silence fell between us. Cody turned his head to the side; his blond hair flopped onto his forehead.

With the cruel honesty, he said, "I cain't, Julia. You're just too...too dark." He spit out the last word like it tasted sour on the tongue.

His words hit me like a slap. I backed away, stunned. The cool, white stone of the building pressed into my back. My love was being rejected because I had a darker pigmentation to my skin.

I ran away from him, but I would never outrun his words. Nor the pain they caused. For years it felt like they were trapped inside my head. His disgust of my outsides poisoned my insides. I allowed his words to taint how I saw myself. I became ashamed of something I couldn't control.

From that day forward, it felt as if there was a war going on inside me. A fierce pride for my people had to compete with an embarrassment of self.

Instead of brushing off the rejections, I internalized them until they became wrapped around me. Born out of that moment, was a painful desire to be anything other than myself. I began to think that I was hopelessly ugly and blamed my skin for my unhappiness.

I became ashamed of me. I punished myself for being born this way. I cut myself to feel. Starved myself so I could be beautiful. Put chemicals in my hair to make it straight and resemble those I envied. But nothing ever mitigated the disgust I felt for me. All I saw in the mirror was a brown disappointment.

When I looked at the white faces that passed me in school or in church, envy curdled in my stomach. I saw them as the answer to all my problems. I thought that if only I looked like them, then my life would be easier.

I believed that their skin was my salvation. I convinced myself that if I were lighter than my world would fall into place. I would be beautiful, desirable. Finally, someone would find me worthy of their love.

As I got older, my envy grew till it was a stone stuck in throat. It prevented me from taking an easy breath, or say a kind word. Bitterness turned me mean. No one was safe from my gaze. Even my mother's skin became a target of my obsession.

Her skin was so light that most people didn't believe she was black. Decades of yard work beneath the West Texas sun had turned her skin the color of burnt honey. Her black hair fell straight down her back with only the hint of a curl at the end.

When we were in public together, hardly anyone thought I was her daughter. I shared my father's mud brown coloring. For years, I thought that if only my mother had chosen a different husband, than I would have been blessed with her beautiful features.

Ignoring the obvious flaws in that plan, I spent time imagining what my face would have looked like if my mother had decided on a different mate. A man whose nose wasn't wide and whose thick lips didn't betray his African ancestry.

I envisioned a different face in the place of my own. One that wasn't slathered with the features of my father. I told myself that if only I was a shade lighter, then I would be perfect.

I existed in haze of self-hate, my eyes played tricks on me; my mind whispered words of doubt. Telling me that I was never going to be good enough or pretty enough. I thought that my skin was black as ash and that I was the ugliest thing the earth had ever coughed up.

When the reality was quite the opposite.

While my skin wasn't the lily-white perfection that I craved, it wasn't the ebony color I imagined. Regardless of how light or dark I was, I am still black. The color of my skin brought along all kinds of unwanted prejudices and conjectures as to who I was before two words came out of my mouth. When I failed to fit into the neat stereotypical mold of the loud Black female, I disappointed people.

From 2001-2004, I attended Ector junior high. Nestled in the heart of the south side, Ector was the largest junior high in Odessa. Built in the 1960's, the building was the minority high school during the Jim Crow era. Desegregation didn't come to Odessa until later in the 20th century, and Ector High wasn't closed until 1982 after the school district was sued. I can only speculate what damage this lag of liberty has done to the people of my town, to the psyche of the disenfranchised peoples who toil on the south side.

Ector was twenty minutes from my house. After breakfast and the usual fights with my siblings, my mother would pile my siblings and I into our old Toyota Land Cruiser. Most mornings, I hunkered down in the backseat. With my headphones jammed into my ears and a scowl etched onto my face, I was the embodiment of teen angst.

The world passed my window as the Land Cruiser chugged down I-20 headed south. The solitary beauty of the west side faded away the closer we got to town. When my mother finally got off the highway and made a right on Crane Street, my eyes scanned the horizon until I saw them. The twisted black metal was not hard to find. Like a rotten keloid scar, the railroad tracks stitched together the north and south side of Odessa together. The moment our car bounced over the tracks, the landscape changed rapidly.

As a child, I was always fascinated by this drastic change. I couldn't understand how two halves of the town, sewn together by the tracks, could be so vastly different. It was almost as if they existed independently of one another.

After the oil bust, lots of businesses didn't survive. It was hard on everyone, but the south side was hit the hardest. As we moved along Crane Street, buildings popped up alongside the road like dirty daisies. Most were abandoned mom and pop stores, or broken down repair shops. We passed the barbershop where my father used to get his haircut, its faded candy cane barber's pole twirled listlessly. A sense of hopelessness clung to the buildings like Spanish moss. It was as if we were driving through a graveyard.

Ector sat at the end of the street. The big, white brick building was surrounded by restaurants. Taco Taco, part restaurant, part gas station, made the best horchatas in town, while Fiesta Burger was rumored to be a front for a Mexican cartel. Whether or not it was true, the legend caught on like wild fire in the dull, grey halls of Ector. And I learned in 8th grade that at the Sanchez Bakery, you could get weed for a steal of a deal if you went in with one of the Sanchez cousins.

Despite the desegregation order, minorities still made up most almost 85% of the school's population. The only way Ector was able to attract white students was to promise parents a state of the art Advance Placement program.

As our car approached the white brick building, just the sight of Ector was enough to fill me with unease. When I compared myself to my classmates, I found myself lacking. While all of us were forced to wear the same bland 'standard attire' of white polo's and khakis slacks, kids still found ways to establish a hierarchy. Gold plated saints adorned their necks and I soon found out that my grubby Converse were no match for their Air Jordan sneakers.

In junior high, I discovered that my lighter “high yellow” skin color set me apart in some ways from some African Americans that I would meet. Some saw the differences of our skin colors as a barrier. My diction, devoid of Ebonics and other black slang, earned me the hateful nickname of Oreo; black on the outside but white on the inside. The world saw me as trying to be something I was not designed to be.

Every morning for almost a month, I was cornered and interrogated by a group of black girls. When I think back on that time, I realize that their questions were rather benign, their curiosity genuine. They meant me no harm, but their clunky delivery frightened me.

While most of their faces have blurred with time, one girl has stood the test of time. Pashé’s features revealed our shared African heritage, except hers had been chiseled in alabaster. Her full lips had a pastel pink tint that I’d never seen; the bridge of her wide pale nose was dusted with cream-colored freckles.

Pashé was the first albino I’d ever seen. It confounded my young mind that one could be both albino and black. In my eyes, she was a beautiful anomaly, the perfection that I craved.

I was not alone, everywhere Pashé went the crowd seemed to part for her, whispers and jeers rippled in air behind her. Yet she sailed through as if untouched by their meanness, her hard hazel eyes almost dared someone to say something to her face.

The group of girls always caught me in the hallway as I was walking towards the Advanced Placement section of the school. The AP wing was kept the ‘smart’ kids separate from the rest. A pair of AP teachers stood guard at the entrance and checked the ID’s of everyone who wanted to pass through, and forcefully shooed away any students from the ‘regular’ classes tried to enter.

The girls knew this and they waited till I was just in sight of the AP wing to surround me. Breanne, the tallest girl, would hook her arm around my neck and pull me down a side hallway, with the other girls close behind. I squished myself into the corner of the hallway, believing that if I made myself small, they would lose interest and I could escape. But soon the twins, Malia and Jalissa, stood on either side of me and prevented any sort of escape. Then finally the shortest girl, Pashé, completed the semi-circle around me.

They tugged on my hair, pulled at my clothes and peppered me with questions.

“Why you talk like that?”

“Is you mixed?”

“She’s one of them high yellow girls—”

“Yeah! One of them house slaves kept out of the sun.”

“Your great-grandmother was a Jewish, what? Wait, hold up.”

Most times I was stunned into silence, unable to truly defend myself from the onslaught. At the time, the true meaning of their words were lost on me.

Mixed, high yellow, house slave—it was English, but a dialect I couldn’t comprehend. The complexities of the skin color had never been explained to me. I later learned that in the hierarchy of the African American color scheme, I was what some called “high yellow”.

However, that distinction wasn’t free of its own complications.

Explaining to the group that both of my parents were from up North, and raised me without an accent, Northern or Southern, or that my mom refused to let her children use any slang or delete any letters (‘dis’ instead of this) failed to assuage their curiosity. They grew impatient with my ramblings about proper sentence structure and family trees.

But more often, they looked me up and down, trying to find where the fault lie. When they couldn't find it in my exterior, they found fault in my interior. I looked like them, but I wasn't one of them.

Pashé was the first to discredit me. She glared at me through narrowed eyes and with a disapproving twist of the lips said, "Man, she ain't *real* black."

The words were tossed out with malice and had the sting of a lash. I had lived within the black and white confines of my culture for so long, that I had ceased to think of myself as anything other than black. My identity was wrapped up in my ethnicity, whether I wanted it to be or not. It hurt to have it dismissed by Pashé, but at the heart of her dismissal was a puzzle that I had never been able to solve.

What did it mean to be real black? How was blackness quantified? Is it in the way one walks or talks or dresses? Could the internal be separated from the physical? I would have never thought so. Our features mirrored one another, I was the shadow to her light, and yet she dismissed my color like it didn't exist. My mind demanded to know what gave her the authority to declare one unfit for their race? Yet my lips refused to form the words.

Pashé was so sure in her dismissal of my skin that the other girls took up her call. They jeered at me, called me an Oreo (black on the inside, white on the outside) and left me to wander. It felt as if I was being banished to the shadow lands of our ancestors, forgotten, inconsequential. If I wasn't black, then what was I?

These young women were all I wanted to be, and yet they frightened me. They were popular, part of the track team, they dated the football players, went to secret parties on the weekend. They were loud and brash, ready to fight anyone who gave them the side eye. More

importantly, they seemed so sure of themselves—at home in their skin—and their place in life, while I was floundering.

These interactions and others left me feeling abandoned by my own people, like even more of a freak than before. If I couldn't find shelter amongst those who shared my features, whose struggles with race would certainly match my own (my diction would not save me from all prejudices), then where was I to go?

History is written by conquerors. When my people were forced into chains, they were not only deprived of their freedom, but also stripped them of their past. In my own family's story, like so many others, is lost in the ashes of slavery. I can't trace my lineage back any farther than my great grandparents, and even their stories are shrouded in mystery.

For most of my life I was acutely aware of the fact that I knew nothing at all about my past. My people had their history ripped away from them, and it took me years to realize that what had been stolen from me as well. Without being able to rely on a map of past successes—or informative failures—there was nothing I could draw strength from. Nothing point to and prove that we existed.

Once Mrs. Johnson pointed out how different I was, I spent the better part of two decades trying to regain some sense of normalcy, only to discover that being on the edges of society fit me better. From this vantage point, I can see the problem from all sides. I am a part of that dark history that my country has tried to bury. I am a thread in the fabric that binds us all together. My voice can be dedicated to speaking up for the forgotten. I can give my people back their history. Their stories can live on through me.

* * *

Voices in the Dark

My parents told me at a young age that there was evil in the world. But they didn't raise me to believe that it was coming after me. They taught me to trust in the goodness of men's souls, but always be prepared for a fight.

Both of them grew up on the east coast. Neither of them understood the Southerner's fascination with a fire and brimstone God. Although my father attended a Pentecostal church, he told me that the Lord was never someone to fear. Memories of my early childhood, before my parents separated, are filled with the sensation of one endless summer. I remember at the end of each day, my mother would sit my sisters and I down at the end of our driveway to watch the sunset.

"God made this for you," she'd say quietly and there wasn't a bone in my body that doubted her words. We'd watch as the soft pinks and brilliant oranges gave way to the dark purple of nighttime. My faith wasn't a blind tag along of my parent's doctrine. I questioned them, challenged their ideas. But I found comfort in the knowledge that I had a friend who looked out for me.

As a child, I imagined God as my bearded friend in the sky. He was someone I frantically called on to help me during pop quizzes. God was also the one I secretly high-fived when I got a good grade. He was the one who heard my prayers at night.

When I turned ten, I learned the meaning of sin. It wasn't something I learned from the pews of a church, but in my own home. I felt it branded into my flesh by hot hands that held me too close. Late one night, I was roughly introduced to the reality of what hate could do to a shattered heart.

For years after that, pain and betrayal were an uncontrollable mixture that coagulated in my blood. They slowly poisoned me, until I couldn't stand the sight of myself. I used to believe that my attacker had tainted my skin with his sin. While his image used to haunt my memory, now I have learned to forgive, and say a prayer the times he passes through my mind.

On my tenth birthday my parents unknowingly let a monster into our home. I have never blamed my parents. There was no way any of us could have seen the broken man that lie behind the smile.

As a child, I reserved all the judgment for myself. As an adult, I learned that placing blame is a foolish man's game. There are never any winners; only people left feeling more fragmented than before.

Charles was a second cousin who lived in a small town nearby. He was a few years older than me with a tall, thin build and dark skin. His body seemed to be trapped in that transition phase between adult and adolescent. He had a low voice and he had the strength of a young man, but Charles was more like a child himself.

At my birthday party, he got along well with all the children. He was always ready to entertain the world with a joke or a magic trick. With a smile and a slide of the hand, he found a fortune behind my ear. After all the guests had gone, I begged my mother to let him sleep over.

Both of my parents came from large families. The adults in their lives never had the time or the energy to police the activities of their children. This lack of supervision meant their childhoods were filled with mischief. That recklessness led to adult lives filled with a wild streak that got out of control anytime they got a little alcohol in them. To counteract the wildness they

saw already in their children, my parents were always hyper vigilant about who they allowed around my sisters and I.

I don't know how long I had to throw a fit to finally get my mom to agree to let Charles stay the night. This young man enthralled me, and I imagined a night filled with laughter and more magic tricks.

That was the first night he came to my room.

Everyone in the house had already gone to bed. Torn wrapping paper overflowed the small Barbie themed trash can in the corner of my room. And toys, some still in their packaging, littered the floor.

With my old Curious George stuffed animal tucked safely beneath my arm, and my baby blue bed sheets underneath my chin, I was saying my prayers when my bedroom door opened. I recognized the familiar squeal of its hinges, and the crack sound it made when the door opened too wide.

I immediately recognized Charles's overgrown shadow. As my brain tried to think of a reason he'd be in my room and not the guest bedroom down the hall, he shut the door behind him.

Moonlight leaked through the slats in my bedroom window, casting half his body in darkness. A faded panther stretched across his white t-shirt, ripping at the words Permian High 1998. The animal's yellow eyes bore into mine as he padded over to me, the white carpet hushing his footsteps.

His hands clawed the air. Searching for me in the darkness. One hand wrapped around the corner of my canopy bed.

My mother had painted the beams white, then wrapped glittering blue and pink fabric around the top. Yards of fabric draped down the sides, creating beautiful shimmering curtains that I used to love to play with. It was a bed fit for a sleeping princess.

The bed sank when he sat down besides me. His large hand patted my head, smoothed down my hair. Though he spoke in a whisper, his quiet words seemed to echo in the darkness. He told me how beautiful I was. How special.

“It’s okay. It wont hurt. Promise.”

The light from the moon pierced through the blinds in my bedroom window. White lines slashed across his face. His features looked exaggerated in the half-light.

Charles leaned closer. Laid down on the bed beside me, pulling away the covers that separated us. My body unwillingly tumbled and bumped against his. I felt so brittle, my body so rigid I could break with the slightest touch.

He pressed his lips against the soft shell of my ear.

“You’re going to like it. Promise.”

He moved till we were so close. Rolled until his body was on top of mine. He let out a muffled groan, the sound got trapped in my ears. Then reached down and took my hands. Pulled them it away from my body. He told me not to worry; he was going to take care of me.

His hands grabbed the white drawstring of my new pink pajamas and tugged.

The pajamas were a gift. A matching set from a relative I didn’t know. They had dozens of fluffy, white sheep on them that wore red glasses and carried a small, black purse. Some winked, others smiled and some had a caption bubble saying: “You’re a baaaaaaaad girl!”

When the knot refused to untie, he grabbed handfuls of the soft cotton fabric and yanked. Shimmying the pajamas down.

My eyes latched onto the ceiling. I watched the dusty white ceiling fan turn in lazy circles. Round and round, swaying from side to side.

He shoved his hands down the front of my pajamas. While his other hand reached up and sat heavily on my shoulder, pinning me to the bed.

My limbs were full of sand. I couldn't move. My throat felt thick and scratchy, like I'd swallowed tumbleweed. A scream, trapped in the back of my mouth, struggled to get free.

I wasn't okay.

I didn't like this.

I wanted to scream. I wanted my mother to come and save me. But my mouth was sewn shut. Invisible thread zigzagged across my lips, holding my cries prisoner.

He took my hand. Rubbed it in furious circles around the front of his pajamas. He grunted when I tried to take my hand back. Instead of releasing me, he pulled harder, holding onto my palm till it hurt.

He spoke softly to me.

He told me how good it felt. How much he liked it. Sticky kisses dampened the side of my face. When he said my name, it sounded like a whispered prayer on his lips.

His words got lost in my hair.

I struggled to breathe. My skin prickled with sweat and fear. When I tried to push him off of me, he swatted my hands away with an angry grunt.

I pushed out the world till I was alone in my head. I heard nothing. Not his voice, frantically whispering in my ear, nor the squeak of the bedframe. Nothing. Except the pounding of my heart and my screaming thoughts.

As I lay there, I wished I were dead. My body grew slack, devoid of fight, of life. I willed my soul out of my body. I felt it lift up till it rested on the ceiling. It looked down on me, and waited for it to end.

Eventually it did.

Charles sighed. His body relaxed, melted on top of me, crushing the air out of my lungs. Then he moved off of me and patted me on the head, like one would a dog. When he got off the bed; his feet were slow, his shoulders stooped. Before he left the room, he turned back to look at me, and said goodnight.

When the door shut behind him, I waited. Listening for any sound that would tell me he was coming back, my ears straining, probing the darkness for his soft footfalls. When I was sure he wouldn't return, I turned onto my side, tucked my knees under my chin and held them close.

An icy numbness flooded my veins; the cold cut my brain away from the rest of my body. I couldn't catch my breath, it whizzed in and out of my lungs, heightening the growing panic in my brain. My thoughts spun around in my head, yelling at me to do something, while my body remained inert like I didn't really exist.

I wanted to cry.

I needed to cry. But no tears fell. It was like he had cracked open my chest and scooped my insides out. Leaving me feeling hollow and used.

The next morning I woke up and went along with my day as if nothing had happened. I brushed my teeth and stared at myself in the mirror. The girl in front of me wasn't someone I recognized. Fear clung to my eyes, making them look wide and owlsh.

I felt used. Damaged. But I couldn't afford to investigate those feelings.

At the breakfast table, I stared at my cereal, watched the golden Captain Crunch nuggets grow soggy. My two younger sisters fought, their words passed me by as my mother yelled at us to get ready for school. My breath fogged up the car window on the way to school, my eyes bumped along the familiar landscape. House. House. Car. Gas station. House. I tried to commit every detail to memory. Using every landmark, recording the jabber of my sisters, the cries of my baby brother, anything to fill my head and block out the night before.

Day after day, I got up and adhered to the same routine until life began to feel normal again. Time stretched out before me. There were moments when I could pretend that it didn't happen. When I could just be a kid. In those moments, my biggest worries were school, flirting with boys and gossiping with my friends.

But I was living on borrowed time. Just when I felt like my life was going to turn another happy corner, he was always at the other end, waiting for me with open arms.

There were months when I didn't see him. Months when my soul could breathe. I could pretend that he didn't exist. In those moments I felt free. But with each family event, each holiday, I knew he was going to come for me. Days before facing him, a queasiness would invade my body. I couldn't eat; I hardly slept. I waited for it to be over.

Each time was the same. Whispered promises. The secret groping, always a pinch too hard that made me want to cry out. And yet, fear kept me shackled to silence.

After he left, a feeling of worthlessness filled me up, like water in my lungs. Choking me until I could hardly breathe.

I existed as a half human, trying to survive by drifting through a cloud of forgetfulness. I learned to wrap my soul in a cloak of detachment, living life from a distance as to not be hurt by the present.

What I failed to realize then, was just how much the abuse had affected me. I thought that if I could push it to the back of my mind, if I could forget it, like it didn't exist. I forced myself into a deep state of denial in order to survive. His touch not only mangled my body, but also set fire to my peace of mind. He forced his sin upon my soul. But his influence wasn't just contained to the physical realm. Like gasoline, it leaked all over my life till I felt his presence was everywhere.

Soon after that first night, I began to have a reoccurring nightmare that I was chased by a faceless monster I called the Shadow Man. He had arms of smoke and silent footsteps. No matter how fast I ran, I could always feel him right behind me, his fingertips tickling the nape of my neck.

The truth sloshed around inside of me, threatening to spill out if I said too much. I knew that it could release me from my self-imposed prison, but it also terrified me. I didn't know what would happen if I told my parents. I found that the unknown was more frightening than the nightmare I was living.

I began to measure my words carefully. I paid close attention to every response, searching for any hidden truths trying to slip out. These silences began to weigh heavily on my tongue till I was transformed.

It all started with a slight hesitation. I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that at first I didn't notice the change. Then I found this new sensation rather exciting, like discovering an extra limb. But as the abuse continued, I couldn't stop and the stumbling and it turned into a full-blown st-st-stammer. My excitement turned to horror the more my tongue refused to obey me. My teeth became calcified jail bars that obstructed my tongue. The complete loss of control terrified me.

When a question was directed my way, my brain would race through all of the possible responses I could make. Sifting through a virtual minefield littered with sounds I knew I couldn't pronounce.

My stutter served to remind me that my body wasn't my own. Choice and free will were luxuries that had been taken from me. Ever since that first night, he ripped the voice out of my throat.

I used to think that I was this despicably soiled thing, unworthy of anyone's love and affection. I battled with thoughts that told me that I deserved to be treated that way. Negative thoughts that told me he must have chosen me because he saw something wicked in me.

When I went to church on Sundays, I raised my hands and sang along with the worship leaders. But no amount of prayers could wash away the feel of his desperate hands staining my skin.

A guilty heart is a heavy heart. Being in church reminded of how I must have fallen from God's grace. I knew that the decision had been taken out of my hands. But the blame had to go somewhere. I picked it up, my cross to bear.

I was in fifth grade when I discovered a way to make him stop. When my pleas and prayers failed to stop his wandering hands, I threatened to tell my mother. Fear had entered his eyes and anger hardened his face whenever he saw that I was serious. The taste of triumph was bitter and short lived when I realized how I'd condemned myself to silence. Unable to tell anyone over fear of his retaliation.

Charles moved away when I was in sixth grade. For the first time in years, I had hope. I thought that I would be able to live my life the way that I wanted now that the threat of his physical presence had been removed from my horizon. I thought that I would finally be free.

I forced myself to forget him. I tried to shove every memory of Charles every touch, every word, every moment into a locked box in my mind. I practiced forgetting him, removing his stench from my life.

Despite all my best attempts to eradicate Charles's existence, there were times when the thought of him would creep into my mind without warning. The memory of him would muddle in with the present and suddenly I would feel his hands everywhere. I heard his fervent whisper in my ear. Bile would rise into my throat as his face danced before my eyes.

If I ever had an attack, I'd force my mind blank until I could breathe again. Then push the ghosts back into the shadows where they belonged.

But I discovered that an evil forgotten lingers on in other forms.

Seeds of self-hate were planted that night, but did not find fertile ground until I was in junior high. I felt worthless. Unlovable.

A haze of self-hate clouded my judgment and threatened my sanity. Love was the only anchor that kept me on earth. For a time love kept me going. The love of my family, of my friends, surrounded me and reminded me that there were still good things worth living for.

I went to the biggest junior high school in our small town. It was a beehive, teeming with warm bodies full of insecurity and teen angst. In this place, my body grew tall and my limbs grew long and gangly. Hair sprouted from everywhere and hormones made me lose control over my emotions.

While I was in junior high I started to hear voices. I was fully aware that the voices were copies of my own; they were just a darker side to me that kept my shame alive. They whispered hateful things to me from the dark of my mind and at times made me want to die.

The voices in my head told me that I had done nothing to deserve anyone's love. Not the love of my family or that of anyone else. They said, If only they knew, like a broken tape, it replayed my past sins. Dredged up old memories that I thought were better kept in the dark. I was forced to look at the darkest parts of my past and remember. If only they knew how ugly you were, they wouldn't want you.

Whenever you're beaten badly enough the scars remain long after the bruises fade.

I began to agree with the voices in my head. Ice was cracking beneath my feet, and every step I took was the wrong one.

I didn't know where to go or who to turn to. I couldn't go to my mother with my secret; the pain in her eyes would have finished me. My father didn't even feel real anymore. He lived as a shadow. Lurking in the edges of our lives, existing without intervening.

I turned my gaze outward. I looked for love in the arms of anyone who would have me. My craving for someone else's love and affection was all consuming.

My eyes shone with a need that came from deep inside of me. Telegraphing my thoughts: This is the one; the one that's going to save me, I can feel it. I told myself that I needed someone to save me before I destroyed myself.

I thought that if someone else could find value in me, than I was still worth something. I prayed that they saw something I couldn't see in myself. If they could love me, than that must mean that Charles hadn't destroyed it all, that there was something worth saving.

In seventh grade I began to search for solace in the Pentecostal church my father attended. A banner above the pulpit declared that this was a place ‘Where hurting people feel loved’. Every time my eyes traced the faded letters, I wondered if they applied to me as well. During the evening services, as the sun tumbled down toward the horizon, the light would ripple through the stained glass windows behind the pulpit. I’d watch with fascination as the Savior’s life danced all along the walls and bathed the congregation in ruby gold hue.

At this time, the church was led by a man named Pastor J.T Pugh. He was an older man who was the epitome of the Christian lifestyle. His handshake was so firm, even in his 60’s one would think they were tangling with a bear. His aura was imbued with all sorts of power and yet I was never frightened in his presence. Quite the opposite, in fact, he had a smile and a kind word for anyone who crossed his path. And whenever he preached, the base in his voice alone seemed to make the whole building shake.

Under Pastor Pugh’s guidance, I found my way back to God one hot summer night at a youth rally in Amarillo.

We’d come from all over Texas to worship together at Crusader Kids Camp. Hundreds, touched by an apostolic fire, packed into the church. Everywhere I cast my eyes, I saw a sea of young people in the throws of feverish ecstasy. They raised their hands and cried out to God, or jumped up and down the aisles, keeping in time with the music and the roar of Pastor Pugh.

“God will cast you body and soul alive straight from the this dirt of this earth into the lake of fire and brimstone!” as Pastor Pugh stood at the podium, the base in his voice seemed to shake the whole building, “You will be left there to ache and writhe for eternity if you do not heed His word!”

I clapped my hands like all others, but I lacked their passion. Their cries were a twisted symphony that rang in my ears.

Pastor Pugh held the Bible like a shield against his chest; the gold letters glittered beneath the florescent lights. He paced the length of the stage, and then brought the microphone back to his mouth.

“Some of you young people tonight are not listening,” his was deceptively quiet, “you’ve hardened your hearts against God and because of that, I know I’m preaching to someone tonight who is going to hell. Look at your neighbor look all around you. Look!”

A heavy silence fell over the room as I glanced around the tabernacle. Doubt and fear played across everyone’s faces. A sick feeling pooled at the bottom of my stomach, I searched my soul for any signs of defiance.

The Pastor continued, describing the sinner’s descent into hell with such vivid detail, I could almost feel the flames licking my skin.

“But listen here children, I serve a mighty, and powerful God. He knew you when you were still in your mama’s belly. He loved you before you took your first breath.”

My heart was too scared to believe the Pastor’s words. How could such a love exist? My heart yearned to touch a love like that.

I felt a flutter in my chest, as if someone had reached inside and tugged at a loose thread. Fear shot through me as the feeling invaded my body.

“The Lord feels your every pain and hurt. He cries with you, never leaves your side,” the Pastor moaned into the microphone, “I am here tonight to tell you people that He longs to give your soul peace. All He asks is that you love Him in return. Repent and be baptized in His name, wash yourself clean.”

One by one the musicians picked up their instruments and began to play, soft and slow. They sang for God to save them, to move within them as Pastor Pugh commanded us to stand, “Let’s all come to the front, lift up our hands and give God the glory.”

We all moved as one, shuffling silently toward the stage. Some ran and flung themselves on the carpeted steps of the altar. Slowly, everyone squeezed together till we stood just below the stage.

Pastor Pugh waited till a hush fell over us, “Now I want everyone to close their eyes and pray with me,”

When I shut my eyes, the darkness intimidated me. My skin prickled, nerves hypersensitive to the every sensation. Mumbled prayers fell from my lips as my heart beat fast against my ribs like a caged bird.

I wanted to feel free. I wanted to be able to trust in a love that wouldn’t break promises or desert me.

I felt hands being placed all over my body; some were solid and strong, while others trembled like leaves. They supported me, raised my arms higher, or clapped and prayed from far away.

My eyes flew open. I saw that the girls from my youth group had formed a prayer circle around me. Led by the youth pastor’s wife, Sister Sandra, they laid their hands on me and shouted words of encouragement. Prayed for me, for my soul.

After I closed my eyes again, I asked for forgiveness with an open heart. When nothing happened, an embarrassed heat rushed across my face. I charged on determined to feel something. Slowly, I lifted my hands higher and began to murmur hallelujahs, the word was heavy and foreign on my tongue.

“Keep praising God, Julia, just keep calling out to Him—” someone said in my ear, before her voice broke off into wail as she prayed over me.

A cool, tingling sensation started at my scalp, then washed over me. Goosebumps erupted all over my skin. The change was immediate. My tongue felt heavy, like it was swollen and I couldn’t control it properly. My body felt like it was under warm water. The quiver in my stomach moved throughout my body till I was shaking all over.

“Open your mouth Julia, just let His spirit, His love flow through you,” I recognized the warbled voice of Sister Sandra, “He loves you Julia. He wants this for you.”

Several voices repeated her words; their voices swirled all around me. Pushing me forward into God’s arms. “That’s it, just keep going Julia, keep praising Him.”

Suddenly voices became hushed. Even with my eyes closed, I could *feel* Pastor Pugh’s presence. Behind my eyelids he stood ten feet tall. A pillar of peace looming over me.

“Open your eyes, my child.”

I did as he ordered. He wrapped his hands around my shoulders. Beneath his gaze, I could feel his blue eyes pulling me apart, seeing all my insides. I felt spiritually bare in front of him; yet, I found no judgment lurking in his face. Instead, I felt genuine warmth flowing from him.

“What’s your name, child?” he asked, his voice soft.

“Julia,” I said.

He nodded and smiled; the wrinkles on his face became laugh lines.

“There is beauty in your heart, Julia. A power that radiates from within you, I can sense it in the spirit.” Pastor Pugh’s voice rumbled out of his chest, strong and true, “the Lord has big

plans for your life! He will bless you with all the wonders of the world, my little sister, if you will take His hand.”

The Pastor’s words were fortified with an unshakable conviction, they wrapped around me, melting my insides. For a second, I saw myself as the Pastor saw me, as the Lord saw me. I glimpsed at a Julia that was not a gawky, self-loathing adolescent, but a child of God. I saw myself as someone worthy of love and respect, someone to be cherished.

For a second, I felt a peace so complete that I forgot to be afraid. I would spend the rest of my life trying to get back.

“Are you ready to accept Jesus Christ as your savior, the one true God and obey all His commandments, Julia?” the Pastor asked, his voice soft as the gentle inquiry passed through his thin lips, “Ready to follow His commandments in exchange for everlasting life by His side?”

I nodded my head, as my tongue danced behind my teeth. I clenched and unclenched my fists.

“Lift up your voice in the presence of the Lord tonight, Jesus is the answer—*tell* Him that.”

I repeated after the Pastor. He instructed me to let everything go, every fear, ever anxiety. He told me to release it all, “Give it to God, my child.”

I opened my mouth and strangled sounds forced themselves free. My tongue twisted and contorted itself to speak a langue completely foreign to my ears. I swayed back and forth a little faster. It felt like there was an electric current running through my body—like I’d tapped into a heartbeat that pulsed all around me.

Pastor Pugh placed his hands on my head, “Lord, you see this child before you. I ask that you bless her, Lord, anoint her life, take her into your arms and grant her soul peace.”

Heat simmered below my surface. Pastor Pugh released his hold on my shoulders and everyone's hands disappeared as well. I was completely on my own. Set free.

My soul had been cut loose, like the string on a kite. I jumped up and down as a warm euphoria lit up my insides. There was no space for self-doubt or embarrassment. I shouted in my new language, swung my arms around in circles and let myself go in any way I could.

The small crowd gathered around me. They clapped and shouted their praise to God. The spirit was catching, and soon we were all whirling around, at the mercy of the Spirit that moved within us.

When I returned home, I devoted myself to being a good Christian. The Pentecostal church adheres to a strict doctrine on how one should live life. All the rules made me nervous, but I vowed to do my part.

I wanted to belong to this new group so I ignored the doubt that raced through me. Prayer helped to silence the voices that had plagued me. To fill the void I felt inside of me I joined the choir, the youth group and became a member of the praise and worship team.

Pastor Pugh did not command my everlasting allegiance; he was a kind man who wanted people to come willingly to the Lord. But there were others in his flock that demanded my complete surrender in order to fit in. I did so, believing wholeheartedly that if I didn't I would stray from the path God had placed before me. If I didn't stay in the light, the darkness would swallow me back up. Little by little, I gave away pieces of myself until there was hardly anything left.

Now that my body was God's temple, I was expected to be modest in all things. I was told that I needed to be a good girl and emulate all the fine virtues of Christian womanhood. I stopped watching TV and going to the movies. I only listened to Christian music and spoke

softly to others. I chose my clothes carefully so that I wouldn't improperly expose my body to the world, or provoke stares from the opposite sex. I threw away my entire collection of make up, jewelry and pants—dressing only in skirts that went no higher than my knee and shirts with three quarter length sleeves.

In order for my heart to remain pure, my body needed to be unadorned with the things of this world.

I did all I could to remain in the good graces of the church, but it seemed the more I became involved, the farther I slipped from God. I couldn't hear His voice over the roar of the church choir. Slowly and quietly, I lost myself while I was chasing down someone else's dream of the perfect woman.

In between the weeklong youth retreats, summer and winter church camps, weekly prayer meetings, and old-fashioned tent revivals, I started to spend more time among the holy than with my own family. All of this new knowledge became jumbled up in my head. Every other day it felt like I was tripping over some new rule on how I was supposed to live my life.

As time went on, people in the church taught me that I'd loved my Lord the wrong way. I'd done so with ease, our relationship had been based on companionship, a long walk down a sandy beach.

I learned that God was not my friend; He was a being to be feared. I couldn't be satisfied with His silences. Instead I was to prostrate myself before Him and beg for His mercy in everything that did, because I was an ungrateful sinner who would be lost without Him. I learned that we were born into sin, it coated our souls the moment we entered this world.

I wanted to be accepted by this church so much that I was willing to follow any law they laid down at my feet. I longed to be a part of something bigger than myself. But as time went by,

I began to see the cracks in their foundation. I began to notice a disturbing trend in the rhetoric I was hearing from the pulpit. While Pastor Pugh welcomed saints and sinners alike in his church, there were other preachers who seemed obsessed with the concept of virtue, specifically the virtue of the young women in the congregation.

A virtuous woman was praised above all things. Some traveling preachers spent hours crafting the perfect woman and placed her on a pedestal so staggeringly high, her head could touch the clouds. They praised the young women in the congregation for turning our backs on the world and adhering to the commandments of the Lord.

Yet they were quick to remind us that we were only one step away from falling into ruin. They warned us to stay away from the sins of the flesh, because no true Christian man wants a ruined woman. “Your weakness is in your flesh,” they would say, “it’s inherited from the first fallen woman, the mother of all sinners, Eve herself.”

In moments like these, my past came back to haunt me. I averted my eyes when the traveling pastor turned my way. I thought they could see my sin, like a mark on my forehead. The voices in my head would say that I was that ruined woman they talked about, the harlot robed in the seven veils of Salome.

I had no compassion for the scared little girl I was, I blamed my body for the sin that had been perpetrated against it. If only I hadn’t asked him to stay over, if only I’d kicked him out, or screamed for my mother that first time, if only if only if only. The shifting sands of my faulty reasoning dragged me down to a new low. I piled blame and shame on my shoulders and I forgot how to give it all to God and bore my burden in silence. This new house I’d made my refuge gradually became my prison.

The voices in my head would rise up with vengeance, mocking my efforts to find redemption. Reminding me of how useless the endeavor was, how they knew I too stained for God's grace.

I left the church for good my sophomore year of high school. I returned to my old ways of coping with my pain, but I found that they didn't work like they used to, like I was trapped in a body two sizes too small. When I tried to retreat inside myself and hide from the voices that taunted me, I found temporary solace in my numbed soul. I stayed there as long as I could, wallowing in the nothing.

It worked for a bit, until it didn't. Eventually, it became harder and harder to come back from that place of icy tranquility.

High school was a difficult time for me; it felt like I was walking in a perpetual fog. My body was on autopilot, reacting to the world around me, nothing could pierce my interior.

One night, I decided to force myself to feel something.

After a particularly nasty fight with my parents, I walked into my room, my mind churning with noise. Too many nasty voices in my head shouted to be heard over the clamor.

A half finished Taj Mahal sat on top my desk surrounded by a sea of yellow golden fabric. I wanted to lash out, tear up the papier-mâché history project till I destroyed it. Then suddenly a sparkle caught my eye. A small, thin razor blade peaked out from beneath the fabric.

I fell into my desk chair and my breath became shallow. Slowly, my hand reached out. I pushed the material out of the way. The soft swish of the silk against my skin made my arm tingle.

The silver gleamed under the desk lamp. Winking at me, encouraging me. The voices in my head became a dull murmur in the background. I picked up the razor. Examined it in the light then let it fall in my palm.

It was such a small thing.

I closed my fist around the blade, felt it bite into the skin of my palm. I gasped. There. I felt it. It was pain, but at least it was something.

Nothing. I heard nothing, except the air rushing in and out of my lips. The voices had all disappeared. Making me believe that I was on the right path.

When I opened my hand, I saw a line of red appear, bright red drops of blood puckered through the flesh. I took the blade. Rubbed the blood onto my jeans. And studied it. Yes, I thought, this is the one.

I laid my left arm out on the table. Palm facing up. Nervous energy collected at the bottom of my stomach. I felt more alive in that moment than I had in weeks. A buzz rushed through my veins burning me up on the inside.

I tipped the edge of the razor onto my arm, just a few inches south of my hand. Sweat dampened my right hand, making my hold on the razor unwieldy. I tightened my grip. Pressed down too hard.

I inhaled sharply, my breath hissed through my mouth, breaking the quiet. The razor cut much deeper than I intended. The pain was immediate. It set my arm on fire. But at least this time, the pain was on the outside. It replaced the deep pang of my heart beat.

Slowly, I pulled the razor toward me, dragging it down my arm. A thin red line appeared, like a seam coming undone, revealing the flesh beneath the brown skin that covered me.

With a razor in my hand, I could control how I felt. I dictated who hurt me. I was in charge of how much pain I felt. I was finally in control.

Over time, light brown lines crisscrossed the insides of my arms. I wore long sleeves and oversized jackets to hide everything. I thought that if I could hide my body from the world, then I'd be safe from the pain it caused. My secret scars I were my own badges of honor. I earned them. I put them there. I thought that made me the master of my own destiny.

I tried to keep an iron grip on my life. But whenever I felt that hold slacken, whenever the voices got too loud or my head got too foggy, I would always return to the secret stash of razors I kept under a stack of books on top of my dresser.

The rush. The cut. The sting. The release. This became my life.

Until one night when I was changing clothes and my sister saw the cuts on my arm. I remember how her eyes widened. Her mouth fell slightly open. Before she could say a word, I felt her shock at seeing my pain so vividly displayed all over my body.

“Julia...?” her voice trembled, “what did you do?”

I knew I had disappointed her. Disappointed them all. I felt exposed. There was nowhere I could hide. All parts of me were beneath the magnifying glass of her gaze. Even my old numbness had been washed away, leaving me cowering in fear in front of a twelve year old.

I begged her to not tell our mother. But she did it anyway. She ran to our mother's room with quiet tears in her eyes. I put back on my sweatshirt and rushed to do the dishes, my chore for the night.

That's where she found me.

Wrapped in silence, my mother stood over me and I prayed she'd let it go. I frantically scrubbed harsh circles around the large pot she'd used to cook spaghetti.

“Let me see,” she said without a preamble.

I stopped scrubbing. My hands dropped into the hot soapy water that had collected at the bottom of the sink.

Slowly, I lifted up my left arm. I gently tugged at the sleeve, suppressing a groan as the cuff of the sleeve snagged on a new scab. It ripped off like a Band-Aid and caused the scab to bleed.

I heard her inhale, a sharp sound, before she covered it with her hand. Tears pooled in the corners of my eyes, stinging me until I squeezed them shut.

I’d worked so hard to forget what had happened. For years, I told myself that the truth could set me free or damn me in the eyes of those I loved. I never had the strength to confront the unknown, or the parts of myself that I’d rather keep in the dark.

“Why would you do this?” she asked, her voice soft and small.

Silence. That’s all I had for her.

I didn’t know how to look my mother in the eye and tell her why I was chasing my demise. I couldn’t bend my emotions into complete sentences. This is how I chose to flirt with death. If there had to be a period at the end of my life, I wanted to be the one who put it there.

I started to tug the sleeves of my sweatshirt down, no longer proud of the scars that marred my flesh. I wanted to hide them, hide my pain in a place where no one would ever see it again.

My mother’s hand shot out. She grabbed my left arm and held it under the kitchen light. Her thumb traced over a faded scar.

“Julia, please, just—tell me what’s going on.”

It was the small pause in her voice that broke me. That moment hung between us, stretched out till it seemed to last an eternity. As my ears became attuned to her quiet suffering, I saw that my misery had blinded me from seeing my world clearly.

I was so intent on punishing myself that I didn't see how my suffering had affected others. It broke my mother to see me in such pain. She was in the dark with me, I'd put her there pushed her into the shadows with my silence. Her baby was hurting and there was nothing she could do to help me if I didn't open my heart to her.

Suddenly, I wanted to tell her the truth. If I didn't, I was condemning us both to remain trapped in this cyclical tragedy I'd made of my life.

Finally the story trickled out of me. I hung my head, watched my toes curl up and disappear into my oversized sweatpants as I told my story in a low, dull voice. I didn't embellish, and shared my truth with as little emotion as possible, like I was talking about someone else. The numbness returned, but only a thin layer coated my brain. Easing out the fear, making the story easier to tell.

When I got to the actual abuse, panic quickened my heart, bringing with it my old stammer, "I di-di-didn't want him too, but..."

The bright kitchen lights cast shadows across her face she angled it away from me. Suddenly, like a flash in the dark, I saw it.

Her lips were pinched together, like she was holding them shut with her teeth. Red splotches seeped into her round cheeks. I saw that tears she refused to cry.

My mother stayed quiet as I told my story, bravely fighting off tears the entire time, while my words made her worst nightmare a reality. In the end she whispered, "To think that something like this was happening under my roof and I didn't know. I didn't stop it."

The words slipped out of her mouth so quietly I almost missed them. Then she covered her mouth, in a desperate attempt to muffle a watery sob. I could almost hear her heartbreaking, like the quiet rattle of shattered glass.

I tried to assure her that it was not her fault. My words fell on top of each other in a messy pile as I tried to take away the heartbreak that I heard in her voice. But my explanations and mangled apologies turned to mud in my mouth.

Her sadness left me shaken inside. All these years, I thought I was protecting her by keeping my secret locked away, that this was my problem to handle. I never imagined that someone else would want to share the burden.

But as I sat across the table and watched her struggle to keep her composure, my heart stuttered painfully in my chest. I began to wonder if I'd made the wrong decision.

Decades, of silence and betrayals sat between us, like a pulsing, tangled knot that I didn't know how to fix. I had always assumed that this revelation would elicit her revulsion. I had never imagined a world where unconditional love took the place of rejection always ended in my mother's.

Her pain forced my eyes open. I saw past my own sick self-centeredness to see that my silence had hurt her more than any truth could.

As I watched my mother's heart break right in front of me I realized that I was no longer alone, I had never been alone. All the time that I had suffered in silence, my mother had grieved alongside me, fraught with worry as to why I hated myself. I felt ashamed when I thought about how helpless my mother must have felt as she watched me through the years try to destroy myself.

Now that she shared in the knowledge of my abuse, she also shared my pain.

Her unshed tears made me see my story from her perspective. By keeping my secret, my actions said that I didn't trust her enough to protect me. She didn't see me as an awful sinner, nor did she think that I deserved it. If I had a daughter going through the same heartbreak, there was no way I would lay the blame at her feet. So why was I doing the same to myself?

I looked back on the event with my mother's eyes and saw that my sin wasn't a sin at all. I had no reason to be ashamed.

The epiphany was simple, and yet saturated with power.

"Can I just...have a hug please?" I said before she could continue. The words tiptoed out of my mouth. I was scared that she would say no. Fear clogged my throat and made it difficult to breathe. Her rejection would be the end of me.

My mother didn't hesitate. She pulled me into her arms and held me. Rocked me back and forth while I sobbed. "My baby, sweet baby," she said, her breath whispered against my forehead, "I'm so sorry, so sorry."

I burrowed my face in the crook of her neck and relaxed in her arms. Hot tears stained my cheeks.

She had nothing to apologize for and yet she was doing it anyway. I could see her pain reflected in her eyes, but also a fierce love that outshined anything else.

When the world didn't fall apart with the exposure of my secret the knot in the small of my back began to unravel.

I didn't trust the feeling at first; I couldn't really believe that the way to kill a phantom was to drag him into the light. It seemed too easy. But as each breath came a little easier as the tightness eased itself out of my chest.

By looking at my life through my mother's eyes I finally freed myself from shame. It took me years of therapy before I realized that Charles didn't break me steal anything from me. No one could take what I didn't want to give freely. Not my virtue, not my mind nor my soul. They are mine to keep, or share with whomever I wanted. They are mine.

Sometimes, I can still taste those fears, the bitter hopelessness of that scared girl I once was. I have to tell myself—sometimes daily—that not only I am loved, but utterly deserving of that love.

I remind myself that I did not inherit his shame that night. I do not owe Charles any part of my soul. And by keeping him a secret, I was allowing all these negative emotions fester till it felt like I was rotting on the inside.

By holding onto this final scrap of evidence, I could continue to punish myself. If I was the bad guy in all of this, then I could remove his presence from the equation. But to what end? His stench lingered in every memory of my childhood. But I am determined to live my adult life free of his shadow.

As she held onto me, my mother forced the jagged pieces of my heart back together. They didn't fit perfectly. But in her arms I realized that they didn't have to.

* * *

Desperado

My mother put her foot on the gas pedal and flew past the 55mph sign going 65. She hummed along to the radio and tapped the beat into the steering wheel, her silver bracelets jangled softly against one another.

I sighed and turned to stare at the buildings that rushed by, trying to stave off the unease that crawled across my skin.

At thirteen years old, I thought I was mature enough to deal with my parent's separation. But the nerves that fueled a fire in my stomach told me otherwise. My parents had promised my siblings and I that the situation was only temporary. But as time dragged on and four months became eight, then a year, I was losing hope. With each weekend shuffle, the distance between my mother's house and my father's apartment seemed to grow longer. I prayed I'd still be able to piece together the fractured parts of my family.

Weeks had passed since I'd last seen my father. Ever since he moved out, I got in the habit of writing down every joke and memorable moment that passed between my siblings and I. I had a special journal dedicated towards notating these moments that I would later report back to my father. Telling stories was my coping mechanism, I thought that if I made them exciting and fun, I could entice my father back into the house. I could make my family whole again.

This was a self-appointed quest, no one, not even my mother knew of my intentions. I captured their words on paper, detailed all the secret hopes my siblings and I whispered to each other. In this small corner of ourselves, we dream of a future where my father existed in our lives again.

“When Dad get’s back we can start Family Friday,” my sister Taylor was fond of saying, we’d pick our favorite games and strategized on how to finally unseat my mother as the reigning Monopoly champion.

“Yeah, yeah, and I’m going to make him take me up in his new plane,” my youngest sister Dakota would say, “and then we’ll go to the movies and get ice cream and a new puppy.”

Often I would join this game, adding my own fantasies, but I never asked if my sisters if they could feel how the earth beneath our feet was beginning to shift. With each week that went past, my father drifted out farther to sea, past the buoys and our screams calling him back to shore. To mention it would give a voice to the fear we all desperately wanted to ignore. It would mean we’d have to acknowledge the fractures in our family that we all danced around.

I shook my head, trying to clear out all the negativity. My eyes darted to the green backpack that was scrunched under my feet. A week’s worth of math homework floated around on the inside. I always needed my father’s help with that.

I loved her, but she was the world’s worst homework helper. She lacked the patience my father had. His soft voice would help me break down the complicated parts of any problem and walk me through the steps till I could see the solution. Whatever the issue was, I’d run to him.

I glanced at my mother and the thought shamed me. Since their separation, my mother had been very open about her opinions on my father. I learned about the inner workings of their marriage, their finances, and his faults. She created a Her vs. Him atmosphere in our house. In her eyes, to sympathize with my father was to condone his behavior. And yet, every time she shredded my father’s credibility, an overwhelming current of empathy ran through me. Even that small sympathy made me feel like I chose him over my mother and her justified fury. In all honesty, I didn’t want to believe that this man she described was the same man I knew.

“Did you remember to pack a bath towel and those throw away flip-flops I bought you?” my mother asked, I turned just in time to catch her shudder, “your father is Mr. Pigsty. I don’t even want to imagine what the inside of his apartment must look like.”

A sigh and a silent prayer passed through my lips, “He promised he cleaned it this time.”

This was the first time I was doing the house shuffle solo. Part of me that rejoiced at opportunity to be alone time with my father, excited that it was finally my time to shine in front of him. But that warmth was overshadowed by fear. I had never been truly emotionally honest and alone with my father.

Even in moments when my father and I were the only two people in the room, there was always some distraction that kept us from connecting. Sometimes the interruption came from something concrete like the little black work pager that sat on his hip. Anxiety plagued me when I was with my father, knowing that at any moment, whatever fun we were having could abruptly cut short if he was called into work at the hospital.

Other times, it felt like my father was made out of mist. He would be right in front of me, and yet trying to grab his attention was impossible. His mind was stuck in some other dimension that I had no access to.

As I went over how potentially futile my situation was, I realized that I didn’t know how I was going to survive a weekend with my father, especially without the distraction of my two younger sisters.

When I was with my sisters, my voice had a tendency to retreat to the back of my throat. Usually I was content to watch them try and compete for my father’s attention. But for once, I wanted to be special in my father’s eyes. Be someone important.

“In the years that we’ve been together I never once saw your father wash one dish,” my mother snorted, then tossed her black hair over her shoulder, “He has a lot of good qualities, but cleanliness is not one of them.”

I stared at my mother, since their separation she had been very vocal about her feelings towards my father. She was full of these peculiar anecdotes. They would fall from her without warning, praising some aspect of his character only to undercut him in the next sentence. She only added to the aura of mystery that cloaked my father.

After months of being told who my father was, I wanted to find out for myself. I bribed my sisters to stay home so I could do some digging. I needed this weekend alone to find out if he was the apathetic monstrosity my mother made him out to be.

My father’s apartment complex came into view a short time later. As my eyes traced the outline of the large white building, panic rippled through my chest. For as long as I could remember, I had tied myself to the notion of him being my savior. I had never thought to stop and imagine a world where he wasn’t. The need was so great, sometimes I couldn’t breathe around him.

What if I was wrong?

A small, naked bulb swayed above our heads. Our shadows danced across the kitchen floor, while the rest of my father’s apartment remained in the dark.

I studied the lumpy objects piled up in the living room. I didn’t need light to recognize the moving boxes my father still hadn’t unpacked. My eyes traced the loopy cursive of my mother’s handwriting the knot in my stomach tightened. Even in her anger against my father, she’d still taken the time to detail the contents in each box.

The kitchen chair was stiff and uncomfortable. The hard wood dug into my spine, and I could feel my butt bones moving against the seat. Each time I tried to find a more comfortable position, the chair squeaked. The sound echoed in the kitchen.

My eyes darted over to the corner of the kitchen where my father sat hunched over his laptop. Light bounced off his bald, brown head while his puffy brown fingers pecked away at the keyboard. Wide lips matching mine, mumbled in time with his thoughts.

He'd been out of the house for nearly a year, yet the only thing my father had managed to unpack was his computer equipment. Piles of papers and computer software were stacked around him on his makeshift desk.

The quiet tap...tap...tap...of his fingers on the keyboard came to a slow halt. He sighed then swiveled around in his desk chair.

"Is there something you want?" he said, his brown eyes stared at me, waiting.

I took a breath and held it.

A hundred questions came together in my head. Most swirled around my parent's separation, why did it have to happen? What went wrong? Was it somehow my fault? A pain flared up in my chest, the thought that I was somehow to blame was ever present in my mind. My throat became dry and when I tried to speak only air whizzed out of my mouth.

He sighed again, a hint of fatigue worked its way into his features, "Well, when you figure it out, let me know."

He started to turn around to face his computer. I could feel the moment slipping away. If I didn't ask now, I'd never be able to. I straightened my back, and searched for whatever courage I had.

“Did you ever cheat on my mom?” I said. My words tumbled out in a rush. I could feel my face growing hot.

My father made a strangled sound, his mouth hung open. I dug my fingernails into the skin and made small, crescent moon indentions in my thighs.

Embarrassment flared up inside of me. But while part of me wanted to run and hide, I knew I had to stay and see this through. I had to know. I had to know why.

“Does your Mother know you’re asking these kinds of questions?” he said, turning his body fully around, till he was facing me. His thick, grey skiing socks peaked out beneath his baby blue hospital scrubs. They whssshed across the floor as he scooted his computer chair closer toward me.

“Yeah, she does,” I said, confidence emboldening my tone, “we talk about stuff like this all the time.”

My father rubbed his hands over his face. His hand seemed to drag down all his wrinkles; even his cheeks seemed to droop. He suddenly looked one hundred and five instead of fifty-five. He muttered as he moved his hand and I couldn’t catch all of what he said. I guessed it wasn’t something nice.

I leaned forward, barely breathing, afraid if I moved too sudden he’d see how important this was to me. I needed to understand this man.

“Well did you?” I said then winced, my voice sounding whiney even to my ears.

“You know, she shouldn’t talk to you kids about something like this, at least not until you’re older—”

“I think I’m old enough to know why you and Mom aren’t working out,” I said, slumping down in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest. I tried to look tough, and prayed that he didn’t see my hands shaking.

I felt lost since he’d left the house. One day he was there. Then the next my mother was furiously packing his things in boxes and shouting for my sisters and I to help.

I looked for my father even when he wasn’t there. At times, I had to stop myself from wondering if he was going to walk back through the front door. I didn’t know who to put my faith into, my mother who spewed hatred at the mere mention of my father’s name. Or my father, the one who walked away from us.

I wanted to hear the story from his mouth and see if it matched the vindictive tirades of my mother. I needed to know his side. He made up half of me; did that mean that I was also doomed to repeat his mistakes. If I didn’t understand the source, how was I going to ever find myself? Without him, I was afraid I would be lost forever.

My father moved till he could rest his arms on the table between us. Squinting as he pointed at me, “Okay, I’ll answer a few of your questions, then we’re going to talk about how you’re doing in gymnastics.”

I sighed, as my confidence inside dissolved, “Dad, I don’t do gymnastics.”

“Yes you do, Taylor. I was just at your match—what was it—two weeks ago.” He said insistently, his voice got loud and excited.

I shook my head as my eyes dropped to my lap. My arms uncrossed themselves and I watched my hands form fists, “I’m Julia, Father, not Taylor.”

There was a pause, “Oh,” he said, “you’re the one who’s in theatre, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” I said.

The space between us seemed to expand. All children want to be special in their parent's eyes. I grew up bookended by my successful older sisters and adorable younger brother.

Sometimes it felt like there wasn't enough about me that set me apart in the eyes of my parents.

This moment confirmed doubts I had about the lack of place I held in my father's mind. My dreams of being his little girl evaporated. The disintegration of that pipedream hurt in a way I didn't expect it to.

"What was the question you asked?" he said finally.

"Did you ever cheat on her?" I said as I slid my feet out in front of me and slumped in my chair.

The silence seemed to fill up the room. I looked up from my lap in time to catch a casual shrug of his shoulders, "Yeah, I guess I might have once or twice."

I blinked. Once. Twice. His words slowly falling into place. They seared themselves into my brain.

All the tales that my mother had told over the years of my lying, cheating father became solid truth. The weight of his words thudded around in my head.

I needed my mother to be wrong. Because if she was telling the truth, that meant that no one was coming to save me. I was condemned to face this world without a hero to look up to.

My eyes ran over his face, searching for traces of any deceit that might be lurking in his face.

His wide mouth was twisted up into a frown, "Why?"

I needed him to be the hero. I was still waiting for him to come and save me. I needed her to be wrong. Any proof to the contrary, would jeopardize the champion I out imagined him to be.

A cool feeling pooled in the pit of my stomach. A question I wasn't ready to ask danced on the tip of my tongue, if he wasn't my savior, then who was?

"Because, well, Mom had said something about it." I said, fumbling for my words. This was not the way the conversation was supposed to go. He was supposed to say no. He was supposed to deny the accusation. I expected him to rant against the mad ravings of my mother. Instead, his truth threw me into a world of turmoil that I was not prepared for.

I glanced up at my father. Trying to reconcile this man in front of me with the father who tucked me in at night as a child with a kiss and a prayer.

"When she asked you what did you say?" I said.

He leaned back in his chair and scratched his head, "Well, when she asked me I probably lied."

I felt a deep burn in my chest, like a fist was forcing all the air out of my lungs. "Did she know you were lying?"

I held my breath as the weight of my mother's sadness settled over me. For years, I watched her nurse a grudge against my father. She wrapped her rage around herself, used it like a shield to push away the world. Over time, that anger spilled out and burned the rest of us.

After every fight they had, my father would storm out of the house. The sound of his truck's muffler roaring alive rang in my ears long after he'd gone. On a bad day, my mother looked around for someone to take her anger on in his absence, and found my sisters and I.

Part of me wondered if there was some way that he knew how she treated us, and did nothing about it. I shook my head. That couldn't be true. No father would abandon his children to the wrath of another.

“I don’t know, to be honest,” he looked up at the ceiling as he yawned, “my memory kind of fades on all that stuff. I don’t know if it’s on purpose, or just because. Its just best not to think about those things.”

I settled back into my chair. These were the responses I was used to getting. These foggy, evasive answers whenever asked a direct question. A lifetime of requests, pleas for his attention ran through my mind. I had a closetful of stuffed animals back at my mom’s house, all bought in the place of broken promises.

Reality settled in as I gazed at this unmotivated hero of my daydreams.

“How could you do that to her—do that to *us*?” my voice shook with hurt as the backs of my eyes prickled.

He checked his watch and finally turned my direction. His eyes stared at something behind my left ear.

“I’m an addict. It’s just this screwed up thing about me, that’s all.” his voice was soft, his eyes far away.

“That’s all?” I said. His words were crusted with a layer of nonchalance that made me want to scream. It was hardly an answer, let alone the apology that I was expecting.

He lifted his shoulder, “Years of therapy has taught me that some things are just out of your control. Some people can’t control themselves around alcohol, well I’m like that with sex.”

Anger simmered just beneath my skin, “It was just out of your control?”

“Yeah, its just one of those things—” he began, but I couldn’t hear it anymore.

I didn’t understand how he could be so blasé about his behavior.

“And leaving us behind? Was that also out of your control?” I said, cutting him off. I tried to take a breath, to calm the whirling sound that was rushing through my head. I couldn’t

see through the fog. While his words made sense in my head, I couldn't make my heart understand.

He stretched out and crossed his ankles, "Now, I don't expect you to understand this Julia, but your mother and I have had this fight going on between us for years."

I knew what fight he was talking about. My father fell quiet as decades of fights echoed in the silence between us.

All my life, my home had felt like a warzone. My parents sat on opposite ends of the chessboard, entangled in an endless struggle for control. I can't point to a moment where the fighting began. The ceaseless bickering between them was the soundtrack of my childhood. Now that my father was gone, I felt myself getting caught up in my mother's barbed words.

As my father told the story of his betrayal, his voice sounded unrepentant. His soft voice was often at odds with the heinous act he committed. He described how he'd met the other woman in church, 'a real godly woman' who he'd befriended in an effort to help her.

"One time, I was preaching in that little church off of 5th street, you know the one? Anyway, I could feel in the spirit that she was behind me one hundred percent."

My father gushed about their friendship, marveling at how strong their connection was. He told this part of his story with pent up energy as he described how they became friends, through prayer meetings and luncheons. He wanted to help her become the woman God had intended her to be.

My father's actions had caused a rupture in his marriage. The pain he'd caused my mother had influenced every aspect of my life. It was the bedrock of my mother's unhappiness. Yet, when the story got around to point where his friendship with this other woman became an actual relationship, my father's voice turned slow and robotic. He chose his words carefully,

distancing himself from the actions he was describing. Like he was more of an unwilling dance partner to his urges, as opposed to an active participant in the destruction of his family.

I brought air slowly into my lungs; it struggled past the knot in my chest. I didn't understand how he could turn a blind eye to his wife's pain, or his children's suffering.

"Do you know what she would do to us every time you'd leave us behind after a big fight?" I asked, my eyes rose to meet his. I needed to make him understand.

He shifted in his seat, "Now, I know that your mother can be a bit much sometimes, but lets not get dramatic. You know she loves you kids."

"A bit much?" I said, "She used to go on a rampage, looking for anyone to yell at." I shook my head as memories came flooding back.

The screaming. The way that little beads of spittle collected in the corners of her mouth. The sting of a palm whipping across my cheek. After a big fight with my father, my mother was a person to fear. He would leave the house, and she looked for someone to punish now that the object of her misery was gone.

"Did you know that she used to beat us?" I asked.

"That's just how your mother reacts to things. Her switch is permanently flipped to angry. I'm sure it wasn't that bad," he snorted, "I'd never let it get to that."

He knew.

Those two words made laps around my brain as the knowledge sank deep into my bones. He knew and he didn't do anything to stop it. To stop her.

It felt like a small sinkhole opened up in my chest. It sucked everything inside of it, but was never satisfied. I would spend the next decade and a half struggling to find something to fill that void.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen what real love looks like,” he said quietly.

I glanced up at him. I had heard my father talk about many things, but love was never a subject he breached. His head was tilted back, looking past me into the dark living room, but seeing something else.

“When I was young I had to live with my grandparents. My grandmother was named Delilah but everybody always called her Sweetie. Yeah, and it was true, she was the nicest woman you’d ever meet.” He smiled, wide and happy. When he caught me watching, he sat up and laughed self consciously, “Sweetie just happened to marry a drunk, Big Skip. A good man when sober, but a devil when he got a little whiskey in him.”

My mouth fell open, “How could your parents just leave you there?”

He looked at me and shook his head, “It’s not like they wanted to, but when you can’t feed all the mouths at your table, sometimes you look for others who can help. And besides, when I did get to live at home it wasn’t any better. Same fights on both sides of that street.”

I stared at my father. He hardly ever spoke about his childhood. The few stories I knew were all about adolescent pranks. I had never heard about the sadness that darkened his memories.

“I remember my dad got so mad he grabbed me up by my neck and...well,” my father blinked. His eyes darted around, looking for a place to land that wasn’t my face.

“Sometimes, it’s just best to focus on the good times. Doesn’t help to dwell on the bad stuff.”

“That doesn’t justify what you did,” I said, the words felt like shards of glass in my throat, “you left us. How could you abandon us?”

He adjusted himself in his seat. Crossed and uncrossed his arms. He glanced at me then away. The man was everything my mother said he’d be. He was a disappointment, a liar and a

cheater. He'd answered my questions like I'd asked, but I couldn't understand why the pain wasn't disappearing. Instead, it seemed the crack in my sternum only grew larger.

This defiant lump of a man in front of me had no intention of changing his ways. Something cool and sad took a hold of me when I realized that there would never be an ending to the chaos in our home.

For years I stood by him, defended his name against my mother's accusations. I tried to explain his actions to my younger sisters when I saw the sadness in their eyes after another broken promise. I'd spent years telling myself what a great man he was. I held onto that image with everything I had in me.

The knowledge that I wasn't enough to make him stay made my insides shake. I wanted to shout at him, make him feel my rage. The force of it frightened me. I wasn't going to allow myself to be manipulated like a child. I leaned towards my father; ready to throw everything I had at him.

And yet I hesitated. In that stillness, I saw my father in a way I never have before, or since. There was a slight hesitation, a fearful cringe of his features, like a child who knows they're about to be beaten but can't turn away. I saw my pain mirrored in his brown eyes. His body seemed resigned to bear the brunt of my fury. There was a helplessness in my father that broke me. In that unspoken sorrow I was able to see my father as he truly was.

I saw that this man who helped raise me was nothing more than a child himself. The knowledge sent an electric shock through me. Up until then, I thought that he had been blind to my pain. The reality was that he saw it, but had no way to stop it. He couldn't help me through my pain, because he was still in pain himself.

My father didn't know how to love. A boy pretending to be a man, he loved us in the only way he knew how. Trying to protect us by keeping his distance, or with the rough, clumsy hands that often broke things he wanted by holding them too tight.

However instead of admitting this, my father preferred to silently drag the weight of a lifetime of misery behind him. I wanted to help him—to save him.

I knew I could do it, in the moment that passed between us, I realized that I could be the hero. The one my father told his secrets to. He didn't to walk alone in this world.

I turned to my father, smiled up at his closed face. I was ready to understand him, on his terms. I wanted to tell him that I would start working on forgiving him, and that together we'd work through this. That hope me eased some of the tension from my body, now that I knew what he was not, I could focus on who he was. I could turn my attention on having some sort of a relationship based on whatever attention he was able to give. I had to accept the good with the bad.

Deep in my heart, I prayed that I'd be able to find a way to get him back into the house, save my parent's marriage. It was a fool's hope, but it was all that I had.

I was too young to give voice to my truth. I wanted a sincere moment with my father. I wanted to tell him how much I loved him. I needed him to see how important he was to me—so that he could realize the hole he left when he disappeared from my life. I thought that if I could do that, then he would take an interest in my life. Then I would be worth something in his eyes, I would be worth fighting for.

I reached across the table. My finger wrapped around his hand, I felt the veins roll beneath his skin as I prepared what I was going to say.

Before the words could leave my mouth, my father cleared his throat and moved his hand out from under mine. I watched his hand slide slowly away from me.

He coughed, rubbed his hands together then crossed them over his chest, “Julia, this has been a nice little chat, but there’s some stuff I have to do. So, if we’re done?”

The question hung in the air as I looked at my hand, lying abandoned on the table between us. My arm was still outstretched; fingertips still retained the warmth of his skin.

I tried to swallow around the painful lump in my throat. Then pulled my hand back into my lap. “Yeah, Dad, we’re done.”

I looked off into the shadows of the living room, listened to the scrape of his desk chair as he scooted back towards his computer.

“Now Julia, listen,” he said, “I believe that this little separation between your mother and I will be good for all of us. Soon enough, we’ll get back together in a few months and it’ll be like it never happened. Just think, now we have all the time to do...”

My father continued to speak, rattling on about all the things we’d be able to do now that he had his own place.

He spoke about his wishes and made promises for the future. I wanted to believe him. I needed him to be telling the truth. I couldn’t imagine a world where a father didn’t want to be with his children.

I knew he loved me. It just hurt to feel like he didn’t want me.

“I could have girls over for the weekend and we can...”

He wove castles in the sky filled with all the memories we would share now that he didn’t live with my mother. For a flash I saw the world as he did. It was full of possibilities

where he had time to make all his dreams come true. A place where he kept all the promises he made, and no one got hurt.

I took all those hopes and dreams of a future we would never have and packed them away. I locked them in a corner of my mind with the rest of my unwanted memories.

I turned to look at him. Watched the column of his spine curve as he leaned over his laptop. His eyes fastened onto the screen. He sighed, “Yeah, that’s what we’ll do.”

Soon the slow tapping of his fingers on the keyboard filled the empty space between us.

After that year, my continued to father drift in and out of our house and our lives; living with us for a time until he disappeared again, off to clutter up another apartment. Sometimes he lingered on the peripherals of my childhood, his presence hardly casting a shadow. Then other times he is front and center of my past, creating new havoc in our lives.

I wanted to close the gap between us, fix all his broken pieces so we could be a family again. I thought that if I unlocked the jigsaw puzzle of my father's affections, I would be rewarded with his attention. If I knew why he left us, then it would take the sting out of his rejection. I told myself that I had to understand his mistakes, so I wouldn’t repeat them.

I agonized over this moment with my father long after it passed. I replayed the memory, searched for some missed opportunity, some moment where I could have changed the outcome. I often wondered if I should have done something differently to illicit another response out him.

It took me years to realize that my father would never be the hero I dreamed he’d be. I blamed myself for not being able to bring him home, and even longer realize that that burden wasn’t mine to bear. Forgiveness is a blessing that continues to give back ten fold, as long as it’s

given with an open heart. My father will never be the savior I imagined him to be, but I can't be his either. It's impossible to help a drowning man who won't swim ashore.

I had to learn to love my father on his terms and realize that some questions will always go unanswered.

* * *

Alors On Danse (So We Dance)

Addiction has always played an important role in my life. Before I even took my first sip, my body was genetically manufactured to need it. Both sides of my family tree were poisoned at the roots.

I came from a patchwork of proud people who know how to work as well as how to play. These men and women are the reason I exist. All their miracles and mistakes are woven into my DNA.

They gave me my brown skin. My dimples. My curly hair. They are the reason my blood sings in my veins every time a vodka cranberry hits my tongue.

From the first time the alcohol settled down in my stomach, I felt something inside of me come alive. This living, breathing desire told me another drink wouldn't be enough. It was the answer to a question I didn't know I was asking.

I was fortunate to have a mother to know how to wrestle this particular demon. After decades of wild, my mother was finally able to find her peace. She's remained unshakeable in her sobriety since I was three. My mother found sanctuary in a building named the Suburban.

The Suburban was stucco building located on the south side of Odessa. People of all kinds, shapes, sizes and colors gathered there. Greasy, potbellied bikers talked with suit and tie lawyers, wondering if Troy Aikman could lead God's favorite football team to another Super Bowl victory.

Faded West Texas beauty queens mingled amongst the men, some chiming in while others waited patiently for doors to open. Layers of make-up hid wrinkles and old scars. No one

would ever guess that their yesterdays were littered with the darkest blackouts and a pain I would come to know.

Everyone towered over my sisters and I, but I was never afraid. These people were my blessings. They filled my life with their love and their chaos. They were the heroes of my childhood. The few times my mother let me sit in on a meeting with her in the main room, I listened to their stories with fascination. They shared their lives with the group, baring their triumphs and relapses, and some tragedies so heartbreaking I could taste it.

Inside those walls, I learned that addiction was a snake that coiled in the pit of my stomach, patient and unyielding. Its words were laced with honey and could bring even the mighty to their knees.

Growing up around alcoholics made me feel both privileged and powerless. I knew all the symptoms of the disease. I knew how the story ended and yet I watched the train head straight toward, incapable of pulling my body off the tracks.

Even before I started drinking, I knew that I was an alcoholic. The disease spared no one in my family. But after a decade of listening to the wisdom and warnings of my mother and her friends, I thought my knowledge would keep me safe; shield me from calamity. I thought I could beat it.

When I turned twenty-four, I decided my life needed a dramatic change. The monotony of school and work made me feel trapped; the suffocation only eased when I had a strong drink in my hand. I told myself that a geographical change would cure the restlessness that was building up beneath my skin. I expected my year abroad to transform me into the woman I wanted to be.

Before I left for my year abroad in France, I told everyone I was leaving home to find myself. The tired cliché grated on my own ears as I spoke the words, but I couldn't stop myself from uttering them. I thought that if I said it enough times it was bound to come true.

I had an ulterior motive in my move to France. After four years of living apart, I wanted to be closer to my French boyfriend, Clément. I was tired of dropped calls and blurry Skype dates. I wanted to feel like a real couple. For years, I dreamed of how our life would look like when we didn't have an ocean separating us. I imagined the romantic dates we'd enjoy, the feel of his hand in mine as we walked down the street, the smell of his sheets as we fell asleep in his bed. I wanted to be able to reach out and touch him anytime I felt the urge.

The intensity of these desires overwhelmed me to the point where I couldn't see anything but Clément, I loved him so much it hurt. I thought that being closer to him would help, but my anxiety only intensified with time. Now that I had him in my arms, I couldn't let him get away.

I whenever I felt anxiety ratchet up in my brain. Alcohol helped me manage my anxiety. It helped me to relax and told me everything was going to be all right. If one felt good, then three would feel better was my mantra. Soon, the solid clunk of liquor bottles bumping in my backpack accompanied me on my walk home every day.

Clément and I tried to cram a lifetime of memories in the months we had together. Over the course of the year, we visited every national landmark in Northern France and nearly every pub that the city of Caen had to offer. I made friends with all the bartenders, and received warm 'Bonjour's from all the burly bouncers of my favorite clubs. Alcohol brought out a different Julia. At first, she was a strong woman who wasn't afraid; she was the life of the party, someone I could be proud of.

Regardless of how cold the life was, I found temporary sanctuary in the warm embrace of a Tequila Sunrise. For a moment, the world was a place where all dreams were possible. I had all the time in the world to dance to every song, keep every promise. With the Sunrise on my side, I could do anything.

As the months slipped through my fingers, so did my hold on reality. Depression seeped back into my body the longer I stayed in France. The fun loving drunk I used to be eroded with each sip. Regrets piled up around me as my blackouts became more frequent.

I promised myself that each drink was my last. But my feet seemed to always find themselves back in the wine aisle of the supermarket. I'd watch in wonder as my arm reached out and selected something for me, almost without the consent of my body

But I didn't have a problem. I had everything under control. I was fine.

On the weekends, my boyfriend and I would drive out to a house party hosted by his friend Josette at her family's farmhouse. The nights usually started around seven o'clock. French aperitifs were paired with the correct cheeses. Classic French artists, like Serge Gainsbourg, sang through a haze of cigarette smoke.

Clément and I were the last to arrive at every party, flying in from the cold, always a half hour late. It became a running joke among his friends to save us two chairs at the corner of the table, so we had to climb over everyone to get to our seats.

The stench of a joint being passed around the dining room table was a permanent fixture at these events, like wine and good conversation. The smell tickled my nostrils and tempted me each time it passed by.

One particular night, the winter chill came in off the coast of Brittany and settled into my bones. I carried it inside the farmhouse with me; its icy tendrils pricked the tips of my fingers. I closed my eyes, repressed a shiver, and tried to guess what the temperature was back home.

After six months of living in France, I was beginning to forget what it felt like to be kissed by the west Texas sun. My chest became tight as loneliness wrapped itself around my ribcage. A dull longing for my family and friends tolled through my body.

I jumped when a branch snapped in the fireplace behind me, and then quickly settled back into my chair, hoping the movement looked natural. My eyes scanned the living room, looking to see if anyone noticed.

A handful of people sat around a wooden dining room table, while a separate group crowded around the rum-laced punchbowl in the kitchen. Everyone shouted to be heard above the music. The French had turned the art of conversation into a contest where only the loudest won. To my ears, it just sounded like fighting.

On any given day, I had a smile and a compliment ready for anyone I met, and with enough alcohol and I could dazzle the world. But every time I was around by Clément's friends, it felt like I didn't belong there. It wasn't because I was an American. There was something else, some unnamed insecurity that always hovered around the edges of my consciousness, and fueled a doubt that ballooned inside of me. It made my lips grew taut around the edges, doused my laugh in desperation. These were people he'd known since childhood, people I wanted to impress.

A familiar honking laugh echoed off the stonewalls of the farmhouse and caught my attention. I spun left towards Clément, only to find his back. I studied his profile; the slope of a

brow that frowned easily, his large nose had a bump in the bridge, a souvenir after a bar fight. Thin lips that hid his crooked teeth.

Clément's broad shoulders were hunched as he leaned towards a man named Gégé. Gégé was a loveable, soft-spoken man with a large Afro and eyes that would turn into half moons every time he smiled. Gégé's English was deplorable, but when emboldened with a little red wine, Gégé fancied himself a scholar of American culture and blond jokes he'd learned from the Internet.

As Gégé told a story, I watched Clément laugh, his face lit up with a smile I hadn't seen in weeks. His voice, loud and incredulous, shouted, "Non—non Gégé! C'est pas vrai!"

Gégé smiled and assured my boyfriend that every word was true. Twin dimples creased his cheeks as he joined Clément in laughing.

I leaned forward with a ready smile stretched my face, eager to be in on the joke. My hand latched onto Clément's red flannel shirt and I tugged until he finally looked at me. A small sigh escaped his lips; I saw the spark leave his hazel eyes as they locked onto mine.

A bored, "What?" crawled out of his mouth.

"What's going on?" I asked, ready to laugh.

His smile dimmed as he glanced at Gégé. A look passed between them and Gégé smirked and sat up, "I tell him a—uh, what you say," he turned towards Clément and asked how to say 'joke' in English.

Clément rolled his eyes towards me, "Gégé said to me a joke, its, uh, between friends and you don't comprehend. Ok?"

It hurt to be shut out of the conversation. I nodded up and down like a bobble head, blinking several times in an attempt to get rid of the unexpected sting behind my eyes.

Clément had watched me fall into this habit of over imbibing in moments of celebration and despair. The wild confidence that used to set me on fire had become a darker addiction that was skidding out of control. After a brief euphoria, I turned into a drunken nightmare that he had to put to bed.

He noticed the angst that crept into my face and patted my hand, “Not tonight please,” he said quietly, “you promised.”

Before we left his apartment I always made promises to behave myself, like I did every weekend. I could sense his annoyance with me in the small, tight smile that creased his lips. It was an unspoken warning that reminded me that my promises could only be broken so many times. Then he turned back towards Gégé and picked up where they left off.

I sank back into the chair and folded my hands in my lap, resisting the temptation to rub my hand down his back. I knew he’d shake off my touch then shoot me a glare. My eyes bobbed around the room, taking in the scene around me.

The living room was cluttered with family heirlooms, photos and trinkets. A marble bust of a forgotten woman sat on top of the fireplace, a straw hat askew on her head, her neck adorned with a string of colorful plastic beads from last Halloween party. A faded reproduction of Steinlen’s poster *Le Chat Noir* was tacked up on one wall.

I dropped my eyes to the table in front of me. Sturdy wooden table legs peaked out from beneath a long, yellow and burgundy tablecloth. It was littered with liquor and beer bottles, their labels in French and German. Half empty bottles were grouped together in the center of the table, making it easier for everyone to grab.

I surveyed my choices. Weighing the sweet against the bitter. Something stirred in the pit of my stomach.

My hand reached out and chose a dark bottle. I ran my thumb over the grey label; the name *Pastis* was proudly emblazoned at the top. I squinted at the fine print. A part of me sighed when I finally spied the 45° hiding in the corner.

I reached for my glass and filled it half full with the soft cream-colored liquid, shivering a little as the smell of licorice wafted toward me. This is what I wanted. Too lazy to get the required ice cube used to dull the bite of the hard liquor, I gulped the drink down without hesitation, loving the delicious sting as it burned its way down my throat.

Yes, this was what was missing.

My eyes crawled up from the table to meet the eyes of Josette.

The curvy blond on Gégé's left sat in a large white wicker chair. She wrapped her full, pink lips around the end of cigarette. Her cool, blue eyes squinted against the smoke and then looked me up and down.

When her eyes finally met mine, her face soured into a glare. Undeterred, I smiled, took a deep breath, and tried to ask her in French about her day.

She tapped her ear. "I do not comprehend you. The accent you have is..." she said, her nasally accent weighed down her words, "it's so bad."

Her brusque words shocked me. It took a while for me to remember that the French lacked the Southern hospitality and warmth I'd known all my life.

She shrugged. Then turned to her left to face Mimile, a petite brunette with an attitude twice the size of her body.

Halfway through her story, Mimile gestured wildly, pushing her bangs out of her eyes. Just as her tale reached its peak, her hand flung out and hit her boyfriend in the nose. François groaned and slumped forward.

“Mimile, attention!” François said, his long thin hands clutched his face.

Mimile placed a quick kiss on his head, and apologized. Her hand came to rest on top of his hair. She continued on with her story while her hands ran through his brown curls, rubbing his head.

I envied the love that flowed easily between them. My drinking had turned me into this hatefully twisted thing that I couldn't untangle. I demanded love and attention but regardless of how much Clément gave it never seemed to be enough. This pit inside of me demanded more than either of us could give.

My ears strained to catch the words floating in the air around me. I had studied French since I was fifteen, but even ten years later, some linguistic concepts still managed to slip past me.

I turned to François, gesturing towards his nose still covered by his hands. “Let me see,” I said in English.

As an English professor at the high school, François understood my words, but waved my hands away, “No, it is fine,” he pointed at Mimile and laughed, “Mimile is always like this, and I'm used to it.”

“How long have you and Mimile—?”

“François!” Josette shouted at him. Both of our heads whipped around to face her. She motioned for him to join her conversation with Mimile, “Je ne crois pas dans la parole de ta meuf!” I don't believe a word of your girlfriend's story!

François laughed, and told her he'd also learned to never believe his girlfriend's stories.

It felt like my voice was ripped from my throat. Sequestered to the corner of the table, I was being crushed by the quiet abandonment of everyone.

My hand reached for the *Pastis* again. My cup met the bottle. I poured a lot more than I intended, filling the glass way past the halfway mark. But I didn't care. I was determined to keep going until I felt good again.

Over the rim of my glass, I caught Josette's eyes. She smiled, a flick of her lips that did not reach her eyes, and tilted her glass in my direction.

I stood up, swaying a little, as her eyes slid over to rejoin her conversation with Mimile and François. Draining my glass, I made my escape to the bathroom before anyone could see how red my face was.

Ten minutes later, I stumbled out of the bathroom and down the hall towards the living room. I giggled at my lack of dexterity until I heard the familiar voices of The Temptations. The group sang about losing their one true love, heartbreak was evident in their voices. I listened, wrapping my arms around myself as pain poured out of the living room speakers.

"Ain't to proud to plead, baby, baby..." I sang along with the familiar tune. The rhythm of this and dozens of other Motown tunes were imprinted on my DNA.

I heard the strain in François Ruffin's voice as he sang his heart out. My own heart stuttered in my chest, imagining what it felt like to mean that much to someone.

I started to sway, moving my hips side to side in time with the music. I smiled, my voice rising along the scale with his, "Please don't leave me..."

Laughter echoed in the living room; so I moved further away from the door, back into the darkness of the hallway. When I closed my eyes, the scene changed.

I'm in my mother's kitchen back in Texas. My sisters and I laugh as we watch my mother move her hips with the bass of the song. It's a self-conscious laughter that is filled with wonder.

She dances with her eyes shut tight, her hands tangled in her dark, curly hair, and a small, coy smile tucked away in the corner of her lips. She is on another planet. Finally, she opens her eyes and holds her hands out, telling us to come and join her.

Five thousand miles and an ocean away, I carried this scene in my heart. It warmed me, pushed me out of my daydreams and into reality.

My feet moved along with the beat. I shuffled closer to the living room, ready to find a dance partner.

I rounded the corner, trying to remember how to say ‘dance partner’ in French. As the cloud of *Pastis* enveloped my brain, I kept mixing up tenses. I shook my head, trying to clear it. I resolve to go with English.

“Clément, do you want to dance?” I asked.

“Burk! C’est quoi ça?” Josette said, her voice shouted above the music. Ew, what is that?

Mimile picked up her iPod and said that it was a song by the Temptations, her mother’s favorite, and then asked Josette’s opinion.

“Yes, it is good if I want go to party for...” she turned her back on Mimile to face Clément. I saw that my boyfriend had switched seats with Gégé to be close to her. Josette smiled at him and asked something in rapid French.

“The old,” he said, as he returned her smile. Josette shrugged, and leaned into Clément. Her hand fell onto his forearm and said something that made him laugh.

The music ended abruptly. Soon, the low foggy sound of a saxophone from some 80’s French hit bounded out of the speakers.

Josette squealed and clapped her hands “Vanessa Paradis! Good, good Mimile!” she sang along with the singer’s high soprano voice with an off-key exuberance. Then grabbed Clément’s hand and together they swayed back and forth singing along.

I watched them move, hand in hand, for as long as I could. I studied the easy smiles that passed between them; saw how he wasn’t letting go of her. I spent what felt like a lifetime watching them look into one another’s eyes. I had ceased to exist. There was no ‘us’ in that moment. A dull ache crept along my chest as I realized that there might have never been.

I moved, slowly as to not draw attention, back to my seat and sat quietly. I glanced around to make sure no one noticed. The world around me turned, unchanged.

The *Pastis* sat in front of me, untouched. I took the half empty bottle, rolled it between my hands. I told myself that this was the answer. It would give me the confidence of a queen. Make me the funniest person in the room. Help me forget how much I hurt. I needed this to numb my pain.

I unscrewed the top with one hand while my other lunged for my glass. Something inside of me cheered as the liquor sloshed into the drink, nearly spilling over the rim.

While another part of me tried to rally against the need, it calmly reminded me that this was not the right way. I wanted to swat the voice away, but its quiet sincerity gave me pause. My hand stilled. When I listened hard enough, I heard the far away chants that called for patience and prayer. Fake it till you make it. It reminded me that God’s way was the best way.

I wanted to be back in the cigarette stained Big Room of the Suburban, surrounded by the people who loved me the most. My ears longed to hear the honeyed hallelujahs fall from the lips of Pastor Pugh, and feel his calm hand on my shoulder. More than anything, I wanted to be more than the drunk I was steadily becoming.

I stared into the liquid, like a fortuneteller reading tealeaves and I saw a world of possibilities. Then shot it back.

“No! This is how you do it, the real Texan way!” I shouted then I bent down and grabbed the tequila. “First, you lick the salt, take the shot, and then bite the lime.”

I squinted at the label on the bottle. I read the golden letters carefully, *fabriqué en Texas*. Made in Texas. I sat up a little straighter when the translation flittered through the fog surrounding my head.

I shook my head before waves of melancholy could pull me under and looked at the French faces staring at me. “François, you translate for Mimile and Josette,” I said, my head too cloudy for verb conjugations.

“Okay, first things first,” I said, my voice rang out a little loud even to my own ears. I uncorked the bottle and, with an unsteady hand, attempted to refill our shot glasses. I watched as my hand veered too far left, then spilled some of the clear liquid on the burgundy tablecloth.

Clément’s hand shot out to grab the bottle, “Oh! Attention!” he said. He forced the cork back in the bottle and put it on the table, out of my reach.

He pulled me away from the crowd by my elbow, “Are you ok to drink?”

I looked at his face. His dark blond eyebrows were drawn together, his hazel eyes expectant. His wide mouth had formed a disappointed line. I’d accepted a job in France so that we would have a chance. This was the man I’d devoted the last four years of my life to. He was the one who was supposed to save me from the darkness. I needed this relationship to work.

I reached up and pinched his large, crooked nose between my fingers. “Womp, womp,” I said in a nasally voice, then burst out laughing, “Relax, my love.”

He swatted my hand away and rubbed his nose. He didn't join in the laughter that quickly died on my tongue.

“Pay attention with your drink.”

I watched the fabric of Clément's shirt stretch across his retreating back. His hands curled into fists. He didn't turn back to look at me. He couldn't see my eyes, pleading for him to stay.

He skipped down the small steps that led into the kitchen. With his arms spread open wide, he stood in the doorway as the small crowd of guests in the kitchen cheered. Gégé separated from the group and threw his arms around Clément before handing him a drink.

I'd spent years watching him walk away from me. With his backpack slung over his shoulder and a determined look in his eye, I'd memorized every moment, until he'd disappear around the corner of the airport security checkpoint. My heart always gave a painful lurch in my chest when I realized he wasn't coming back, that one day he might not ever come back.

“Uh, Julia, what else?” François asked. I turned to find his kind brown eyes staring at me. Mimile smiled and held up her shot glass. Josette sighed.

In rapid succession, I demonstrated how to take the shot. I gagged a little when the clear liquid dripped down my throat, but didn't stop. Couldn't stop.

I slammed the shot glass down on the table, causing the other three to jump, “Again.”

Laughter bubbled out of me as I tripped down the stairs and into the kitchen. I didn't care enough to be embarrassed. When I stood up, my vision fizzled in and out like bad reception on a TV. I braced my hand along the kitchen wall, shut my eyes briefly and waited for the wave to pass.

I blinked until the black spots disappeared from my eyes, and listened to see if they were still playing the song I chose. It was the song that was playing the first time we met. Our song. This would help us remember who we use to be. Help us find our faded love.

I closed my eyes and felt the base of the song beat into my chest. It drummed up old memories, reminded me of our sweet beginning.

He first saw me beneath the lights of a bohemian bar in Northern France. With trashcan punch surging through my veins, I mistook him for my savior. He'd kissed me with tenderness and asked me to be his. For a moment the world was bright. As we danced to the sticky, over-synthesized voice of a pop singer, I'd never felt more beautiful in my entire life.

There was a time when he loved me. I knew it. All he had to do was take me in his arms and remember.

A laugh drew my eyes to a corner of the kitchen. Surrounded by a small crowd, Clément helped Gégé tell a story. They interrupted each other and traded off saying the lines like a comedy routine. Their words piled up on top of one another's, adding tension till they said the punch line.

As the group erupted into laughter Clément smiled and Gégé handed him a lighter. The two started their own conversation. Slowly, I crept up behind Clément.

When I was close enough, I wrapped my arms around his waist and clasped my hands together in the front, anchoring him to me.

"This is our song," I burrowed my face into his back, savoring the scent of his aftershave, "dance with me."

I smiled into his shoulder blades when his large hand came to rest on top of mine. I loved this man with a ferocity that scared me. I'd lived and breathed our love story. Told anyone who would listen, and prayed that my words would make my dreams a reality.

Clément pulled away, breaking my hold on him. As he slipped away my hand latched onto his, unwilling to let go. I threaded my fingers through his and took a step forward. This was my chance; I had to make him remember. Show him that he was my world.

His eyes held no laughter for me. A groan stuck in the back of his throat. Then his hand came up to my cheek and he roughly pushed my face away from his.

I gasped. My hand flew up to my cheek as I stumbled backward, "What was that for?"

He chuckled and wrapped his hands around his drink, the plastic lighter clinking against his beer can. "I don't like when you look at me like that."

"Like what?"

He opened his eyes wide; his lower lip drooped in an exaggerated pout. I studied his pitiful face and then gasped. He was mocking me.

"You have the face of a sad dog when you look like this," he said. "I can see your heart in your eyes. And its—ugh," he shook his head, "It's too much, too much."

His words settled into the grooves of my brain. They seared their way into my memory. My love was too much, something undesirable.

He looked at the ceiling and cursed in French, "You should not be *merde*, the word I search is—*évident*?"

"Obvious? I shouldn't be so obvious?" The words stung my throat.

"Oui—yes, obvious," he said, then started to pat his pockets in search of his cigarettes, "It is not good for you to show your love so obvious. Because with this you look desperate."

His accent stretched out the word des-per-rate between us. Showing me his truth. My hand slid out of his, and it hurt when he didn't move to stop me. It fell, lifeless at my side.

My life with Clément was laid out in front of me, brick by brick, leading towards the pine box that would be my final home. First marriage then a house with the picket fence filled with two kids and a dog. Panic flared up in my chest as I watched my fantasy unravel right before my eyes. His truth tore apart our love story. It made me see the wreck I'd made of my life. I saw the miserable girl that was beneath the cloud of *Pastis*.

"I go outside to smoke," he said, removing the pack from his back pocket, "Go dance with Gégé or Mimile."

He brushed past me as he left the kitchen, knocking me into a small, round table full of empty bottles. I flinched when I heard something roll off the table behind me and turned just in time to watch a vodka bottle shatter.

A small, "No," escaped my lips as I surveyed the damage, "Clément, I'm sorry it was an accident."

I turned around and found he was already gone. My breath hitched in my chest. As I stood in the kitchen, surrounded by the mess I made, I'd never felt more alone in my life.

I bent down and slowly gathered up the broken pieces. I did so mechanically, needing the physical work to keep me from tumbling into the abyss.

Over and over again, his words played on a tape deck in my head. Caught on a nonstop loop till they engrained themselves on my skull. They shamed me, and showed me a side of myself that I willingly ignored. I saw how my eager hands had strangled the life out of our love.

I had tried to blame Clément for the demise of our relationship. I played the victim in every story I told, was comfortable in the dysfunction of our seemingly endless fights. And found no joy in the tentative bouts of peace that followed.

I loved him like a zealot, and devoted all my energy into making our relationship work. But that obsession had blinded me to the role I played in our drama. I couldn't see, or refused to see, how my love had burdened him.

Tiny slivers of glass embedded themselves in my palm as I cleaned up. The sharp pain reawakened an old wound. I ignored the sensation. Instead, I focused on Clément's words.

My first reaction was to flee, to find the nearest bottle of anything and retreat into the quiet oblivion that alcohol had to offer. I didn't want to feel the hurt. But some part of me resisted.

I stepped gingerly around the kitchen, and peaked through the kitchen door into the living room.

Clément stood at the front door, adjusting the collar of his navy blue winter jacket, a lit cigarette dangled from his lips, threatening to fall. A patiently bored look smoothed the lines of his face.

Desperate. That's how he saw me.

For a moment, I saw myself as he did. I was a silly girl who was ready to give up everything, even erase who I was to be with him. I threw myself into our relationship, giving it my all. And prayed that my passion made up for my reckless attempt at love.

I thought he was the one. I told myself that Clément was the savior my father failed to be.

Clément bent down and picked up a dull brown hunting jacket. After slapping it a few times to get the dust off, he turned and handed it to Josette's waiting hand. He said something that made her shake her head and smile.

There was a time when I would have given anything for he looked at me like that. For years, I'd dined on crumbs he offered in the place of real affection and pretended that the heat between us was love. I told myself that I should just be content to have someone by my side.

In the end, I needed to see the world at a tilt so I could keep my fantasy straight. Alcohol helped to fuel my delusions; it dulled the pain of my past and helped me breathe. Only when my world was fuzzy around the edges could I convince myself that I was okay.

But as I studied the couple I realized that I wanted more than that. I couldn't wait around for someone to take care of me. If I was going to survive, I needed to learn to stand on my own. His words helped me see that I couldn't be that same desperate girl anymore, hunting down love. They showed me how to find some meaning in the chaos.

Alcohol wasn't the answer. The world didn't have what I wanted. Only I can provide myself with a love that will stand the test of time.

I vowed to never again settle for an incomplete love.

When he walked away, it didn't hurt as much as I thought it would.