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WOLF DRESSED AS THE MOON

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of a collection of fictional short stories and nonfiction essays. The fictional short stories mainly focus on children characters and deal with innocence, the loss of innocence, innocence that was never there, resistance to growing up, growing up too fast, and the struggles and obstacles that accompany the transition from childhood into adulthood. The collection pays close attention to detail, takes bizarre, abnormal circumstances and casts them in a realistic, relatable light, and implements experimental narrative voices that engage the reader. Writing the fictional collection has enabled me to develop and explore my creativity and has improved my skill with constructing plots and storytelling. The thesis also includes nonfiction essays which focus on personal life events that I felt the need to write about. My past has contributed to who I am today as much as my passion for fiction writing, and so I feel the nonfiction essay belongs in my thesis along with the collection of short stories.

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## Your First

Make sure your arm stays locked with Trish's as she races you toward the lingerie store, otherwise you won't go in. Repeat her name over and over in your mind and wonder why your parents didn't give you a sexy name like Trish. Then remember you're thankful they didn't. Trust that you will see the boys heading for the food court later, Jeremy like Trish and Dylan like you; Jeremy for Trish and Dylan for you. Feel lucky for her dragging you by your arm and not your hand because both your hands are sweaty, obvious-sweaty, and Trish wouldn't find that sexy. She's here insisting she help "sex you up." In your mind, for Dylan. The bright pink interior of the store bleeds out onto the surrounding kiosks of the mall as though claiming territory. One is selling seasonal sweaters and leashes for dogs, and another bibs, mugs and visors screen-printed with personal photos. None of these things goes well with a lingerie store just like you feel you don't go well with a lingerie store, but you're going in anyway, to get "sexed up."

Swerve your best friend toward the left of the entrance to avoid the aggressive sales girl planted on the right; she'll only stall you from your mission of buying your first thong. You bet she's wearing a thong. Her forced compliments and promotion pitching are not what you're here for today. Trish breaks her hold as soon as you're inside, off to scope out your size in actual lingerie. That's right, your size. You're now cased in by the solid wall of sugary perfume sealing off the entrance. It's so strong and sickly-sweet it feels solid to you. Keep your head down and head straight for the panty bar. No distractions. Breathe. You know exactly where it is. Too many days you have come to the mall, made it inside this pink fortress, reached the panty bar and wussed out. Today is not one of those days.

Stay aware of where Trish has wandered at all times. You don't want to lose her and get left alone in the lingerie store, to be an island stranded in a sea of all things you are not, a sea of all the deliciously provocative things your best friend is and more. She's feeling the padding of different push-ups with pinched fingers, comparing them to herself like she compares everything else, even you, her best friend. This gives you plenty of time you won't use.

"How about this one?" she asks you excitedly, holding up a light pink outfit of lace.

You can't see how the bottom half is supposed to cover your bottom half. Ignore her and let her put it back. Ignore the folded rows of rainbow-assorted panties around the top of the bar too; they will only overwhelm you with their racy captions again and make you make a run for it. Zero in on the label that reads "Thongs" and open the top drawer, a frontier you've never dared explore before. XS—perfect—breathe a sigh of relief. You just so happen to be an extra small. Pull out the very first thong you see lying on top, a pink and white striped v-string. Wonder if Dylan likes pink and decide it's a sexy color; it will do. Call out to Trish that you're ready to go and find her testing different lotions. Watch her gaze drop to the thong dangling between your two fingers at your side.

"V-string...very sexy! Are you sure you don't want real lingerie though?"

Shake your head no quickly to find Trish still approves. As the two of you walk toward the registers, spot the three green and white varsity jackets standing together in line. Your colors...your high school. Breathe. Hide behind one of the makeup stations as Trish is distracted texting Jeremy for your ride. You're that much closer to Dylan. Wait for the green and white varsity jackets to make their purchases and leave, because other girls from your high school, older girls, can't see you buying a thong and label you a slut.

As you wait on line, ball the thong up into your hand so other shoppers can't see what you're buying. When you're finally called up to the register, reach your fist over the counter as far as you can and drop your first thong in front of the cashier so other customers still can't see. Unzip your wristlet and stare down at the birthday money your grandma gave you last month. Be relieved you can only smell the solid wall of perfume still closing in and not your grandma. Don't think of grandma. When the cashier tells you of the deal on the panties, "Buy more, save more!" don't even consider going back. Refuse to care that you would save money, and pay. Just one is enough to make you nervous-sweat for now; your very first one that's supposed to "sex you up."

Take the tiny bag cushioned with tissue paper extending from the smiling cashier and find Trish beaming. "They're parked outside!" Share in her excitement of leaving this place to see Dylan again. Turn to bolt, but wait for Trish to primp herself in one of the dozen full length mirrors throughout the store. Contemplate yourself in the mirror behind her and stare at your own hand. Decide this hand attached to your wrist, holding this new little bag is foreign and not your own. Then feel the ribbon handles slipping through your sweaty grip and admit that this hand does, in fact, belong to you. Rub your open palms on your jeans so that Dylan doesn't reach for a sweaty hand to hold later. Grant yourself this wishful thinking.

Arm-in-arm again, head out for the parking lot. Ignore all the shoppers around you having x-ray vision and knowing you're hiding a v-string thong in that bag. Instead, notice Trish's thumb hook the lacy thong she's wearing higher than the band of her jeans, for the boys to see. Remember they are high school juniors and you are freshmen, and junior boys like seeing girls, freshmen girls, in thongs. Hope they won't get the wrong impression of you being a slut from your lingerie bag and what's inside it. Hope they magically pick up on that you've only

ever had one kiss before, ever, and they go easy on you. Everyone should know it was only Caleb Fallon at the public swimming pool in the summer between sixth and seventh grade, and you're not sure if it even counted because it happened underwater.

Spot their car immediately as you approach the pull-up outside. It is the only one here to pick up two freshmen girls, the only one here to bring you home. Realize the car only has two doors and that you will have to fumble with the handle on the passenger seat in front of junior boys, one your crush, to climb in back. Breathe. Decide it will be worth it. Then find Jeremy smiling from behind the wheel patting the passenger seat intended for Trish. Don't be surprised at her letting you look foolish trying to fold down the seat and squeeze into the back where Dylan is already sitting, waiting for you to join him. Keep your cool; he'll find it sexier. Sense that with the slam of the passenger door, you're off with two junior boys, evenly matched to you and your best friend.

Remember that Dylan had had his arm extended over your side of the seat before you even got in the car. Wonder if he intentionally placed it there to slide his arm around you, and hope he did. Hear, "What's in the bag, Cassie?" come from the driver's seat and catch Jeremy grinning at Dylan, then you in the rearview mirror. Feel your heart skip a beat in the bad way. Pick up on Trish getting a little jealous of the attention you're receiving, but feel obliged to answer anyway. "My...my first—" Take Trish's lead as she turns around and plucks the bag from your grasp, cutting you off. She knows what she's doing.

"Her first v-string thong" she finishes. "To add to her collection."

Relax as Jeremy whistles in approval from the front seat, followed with a smooth "Sexy" in the direction of the bag now in Trish's lap. Glimpse Trish shooting you a satisfied look that reads Bingo, and try not to blush at her rescue. Quickly tear your eyes off Dylan peering over the

seat to see the thong, or he'll notice you staring at him. Instead, buy into Trish's dramatics as she crinkles the excess tissue paper and lets the tiny thong emerge looped around her index finger. After Jeremy questions your best friend, "Where's yours?" take note of Trish flirtatiously curving her hip out, revealing the lace band. Then follow Dylan's trance on the new thong so that you see it too. At his question, "Uh, what's that thing hanging off it?" spot it with everyone else—the sensor. Hear, "Shit!" come from the passenger seat in your best friend's familiar, cool, pissed off tone. "They forgot to take the sensor off. We'll have to go back."

"After we pull over for a bit." Realize when Jeremy flashes Trish a look she knows something that you don't know. Hope it's a good thing; a good thing involving Dylan. Her smile makes you think it's not dangerous. Dylan's smile makes you think it might be fun. You like his dark curls and think his earrings make his teeth shine whiter. Let your mind wander to playing with his hat and then wearing it like you're his girl.

Pretend not to look around when the car comes to a stop, but do look around and identify the small lot intended for hikers and dog walkers tucked along the curve of the road. You're in the park reservation you've only ever driven through and not parked in, especially not with junior boys. Breathe. Don't jump at the sudden blast of the radio when Jeremy turns it on; keep your cool. Watch his hand turn down the volume and then drift over to Trish's thigh. Find that his other hand has been running through her hair all along, to be sexy.

Think about your own hair and wish Dylan's hand was running through it. Look for his hands and find them clutching his knees as he's watching his own best friend. Then see Jeremy catch Trish flashing you her signature I'm up to no good look and hear him say, "Don't worry about her, babe. She's got Dylan." Decide you like the way that sounds without waiting for Trish's approval. With his hand now on the back of her head, feel the sexual tension as Jeremy

pulls Trish's face to him and she leans forward and they kiss—hard—and keep kissing. Notice that in no time his hands are exploring all over your best friend, but her hands only stay on his face and neck.

Turn for Dylan's reaction for him to catch you off guard and kiss you, too. Feel your heart skip a beat in the good way and love the way his lips feel pressed against yours. Kiss him back and don't dare stop. Lose track of what's going on in the front seat and don't care. Your best friend has her provocativeness and Jeremy, and she wanted this; know she's not worried about you. Discover kissing with tongue and think he must think you're a great kisser. Wish that Dylan's hands roaming shyly would explore just a little bit more of the new, sexy you. Hear sucking and laughter from up front and think they must be having a good time too.

End up half on Dylan's lap and half underneath him as you continue kissing. Allow your mind to be completely blank of all but how Dylan feels and tastes and smells until you hear Trish in distress. Try your hardest to make your concern for her overpower your disappointment for stopping with Dylan, and then give up. Tell yourself you really did try. Then detect the lack of control in the way she screams, "Get off of me! Get off me! You're going too far!" and the agitation in Jeremy's voice when he snaps back, "You said you were down for this! If you ain't going any farther, you've got a far walk back." Decide this shouldn't involve you when Trish flings open the passenger door and swiftly hops out in protest. For once, don't follow her when she whirls around and expects you to. Let her look foolish as she demands, "Cassie?" and waits.

Don't move from under Dylan as your best friend storms off into the woods. Jeremy has already gone after her calling, "Babe, stop! Come back, I was kidding! Kid-ding!" He can worry about her. Look back to Dylan when you hear him lock all of the car doors. Let him boldly continue kissing up your neck and for a moment, close your eyes. Allow him to move fully on

top of you in the backseat and listen when he tells you to stay. Don't even try to get out and go after your best friend, to make sure she's all right. Think you have never seen Dylan be the aggressive one and he has never seen you be the aggressive one. Feel that you are sexy and the time to be sexy is now. With Dylan. Hear a voice echo in your head and think, *Don't worry about her, babe. She's got Jeremy.*

## Feed Big Bertha

You always lie about having to go to the bathroom. You just want an excuse to go into the arcade. You make sure the babysitter isn't looking and then you swerve passed the men's and women's to go deeper onto the floor. You think the babysitter is stupid because, *has she seen you drink anything all day?* but you appreciate her stupidity because it allows you to escape. You've gotten used to the entire arcade smelling like chlorine and quarters and sweat. You've also gotten used to no employees being around. All of the machines are taller than you but they don't stand in your way. Around the rocket ship and the laser guns, in between skee ball and air hockey, you always find Feed Big Bertha. Every day you come, and every day Big Bertha is there waiting for you.

Big Bertha looks as though she is older than the arcade. She's a massive puppet in a faded floral dress behind glass. Players shoot plastic balls into her mouth when she opens it to accumulate points. It is clear that Big Bertha is eating the balls because she is so fat. And that makes her a bad person. Fat people can't possibly be good people, because they choose to eat. They don't know it means everything to be skinny. They're supposed to strive to be skinny, like you, but they don't and they eat and it makes them weak. You understand what everyone's supposed to want in life. You're a good person even though you lie to your babysitter and your parents and everyone else, because you're starving yourself to be skinny.

You notice everything about Big Bertha. Her hair is made of fraying, orange yarn and her freckles are uneven. The collar on her dress is ancient and her cheeks are too dark and rosy. The glass is so scuffed and smudged the average player would miss the wire poking out of her left hand. The paint has worn off on the sides of her machine so you can see patches of the sheet metal underneath. But you never play Feed Big Bertha, no. You just come to stare at her. To

study her. The carpet of the arcade is a red and purple, gum-stained confetti pattern, and you always stand three spirals away. You watch other kids play Feed Big Bertha and when the occasional one asks if you're waiting for a turn you say no. You impatiently wait for them to finish playing and walk away because you prefer observing her alone. She's obscenely obese to you and it disgusts you. It entrances you. It keeps you coming back.

You are obsessed with Big Bertha. You imagine her machine weighs a ton. You don't understand how she fits behind the glass, but you do understand how she eats so many balls all day long. Because she's so fat. You hate her. You hate the way she comes to life, how her game lights up and her jaw bounces to open and close her mouth. You hate how she talks and encourages kids to feed her all those balls. Feed me another one! I'm so hungry! More, more! replays over and over again in your mind in her heavy voice while you lie awake at night. Hungry. That's her fault. Her voice almost haunts you on deeper levels than the hunger does. You just hate her. And when you arrive at this realization again every day you leave. Not because you're worried the stupid babysitter will come looking for you, or because you remember where you are and remember you're freezing under the strong air conditioner. But because you need to.

When you leave the arcade you have nowhere else to go but to the pool, and you tell yourself you should go back there because even though the babysitter's stupid, she'd come looking for you eventually. You know that it's alright for her to be stupid and it's acceptable because the babysitter is skinny. Being skinny makes up for her stupidity and ultimately makes her a good person. She is still useful for other things. Before you go into the pool, you have a checklist: 1.) You must spend most of your time in the pool swimming to burn calories, 2.) It must be a slow day at the pool because too many people aren't allowed to see how fat you look

in your bathing suit, 2½.) No one swimming in the pool is allowed to be skinnier than you or its no dice that day. It is agreed that if you are swimming in the pool and someone skinner than you gets in you must immediately get out, 3.) Your towel must be near the pool at all times in case you need to immediately get out and cover your fat, 4.), Unless there is an air-tube free to conceal your fat, only your head may be above the water, 5.) No using the diving board, ever, because it's secretly a runway for displaying how fat you are, 6.), The babysitter must agree to get in the pool with you because she carries you in the water and that is the greatest feeling in the entire world—feeling weightless in her arms. She's the only one you let carry you in the water, but she's too stupid to know how special that is. Besides being a part of your checklist, the babysitter is also good for her magazines. She lets you keep the ones she's done with, and you take them home and flip through them for hours, only cutting out the skinniest and most beautiful models to glue into your Diet Diary. The one you hide from your parents even though you're a good person.

The more you leave the pool and come back the next day and leave the pool and come back the next day the more Big Bertha stays with you. The babysitter asks if you want to do something else with your summer since you hardly ever swim in the pool, but you insist you still love going there and she buys more magazines. You lie awake at night, the hunger keeping you awake, the hunger not allowing you to fall asleep, and you think about Big Bertha. You think about how much you hate her and how much you hate her and how much you hate her until one night startling thoughts come to you. You wonder if Big Bertha ever feels anything when people watch her eat, like you do. You wonder if she ever feels full. You wonder if she ever feels trapped in the glass like a caged animal. You wonder if she wishes people would stop feeding her all those balls so she can work on being skinny. You wonder if she hates her lines but she can't

help saying them because she's said them for forever and they're all she knows. You wonder if she can say anything else. You wonder if she ever feels heavy, like you do. You wonder if she ever feels ashamed about how she looks, like you do. And tears well in your eyes because you feel sorry for Big Bertha. You feel guilty for judging and misunderstanding her. She could feel what you feel—she could feel your pain—and she could need your help. And as you press your sheets to your eyes to wipe them dry, determined to help Big Bertha become no-longer-big-Bertha from your epiphany, even more startling thoughts occur to you. What if this whole time you have been noticing soon-to-be-small-Bertha, she has been noticing you? What if she's noticed how unacceptably fat you are? What if she's noticed how you're too heavy to wear a bathing suit without a cover-up? What if she's noticed the gap between your thighs isn't big enough, and you can't see enough of your bones to be skinny? And you're back to hating Big Bertha. Gigantic Bertha. Enormous Bertha. You loathe her. You want to make her feel your pain. You want her destroyed, no—you want to be the one to destroy her.

You remember the feeling always being there. You remember feeling fat in your stroller, like your butt hung too low to the ground sitting in that flap of fabric. Because you were too heavy for a three year old. You remember being the only kid to reject birthday cake at classmates' birthday parties, and how powerful that made you feel. You remember reading the nutrition labels of every piece of candy after trick-or-treating with the neighbor's kids. You don't ever remember eating lunch in school, in front of other people. You remember giving the different parts of your lunch away to other kids so when you got home, your mom thought you ate it all. You remember the waiting lists for your Rice Krispie Treats and Oreo snack packs circling around fifth grade. You remember teachers asking why you weren't eating lunch and lying about having a big breakfast or not being hungry, knowing you were lying but lying

anyway. You remember preferring clothes that were too big because they made you look skinner. You remember feeling overly exhausted from not eating and not being able to sleep because the hunger was merciless. You remember all of these things so well because most of them still happen. You don't ever remember feeling good enough. You don't ever remember being happy.

At the pool, you want to tell the babysitter everything. You want to ask her why you feel so fat after starving yourself to be skinny. You want to ask her how it's possible to feel so hollow and solid at the same time. You want to ask her what's wrong with you. But when you say, "Can I ask you something?" And she puts down her magazine and shifts towards you in her lawn chair with her hip bones jutting out of her bikini bottoms and her thin ankles perfectly crossed and says, "What's up?" Instead you ask, "Can I have a quarter?" And she leans over to reach into her beach bag, exposing the perfect notches of her spine, and reemerges smiling. She presses a quarter into the flesh of your palm and says, "Plenty more where that came from." And you head for the arcade without asking your real question. It wasn't a lie, it was just a decoy question. You'd decided you weren't ready to ask her yet, and you'd decided you're going to play Feed Big Bertha.

Around the rocket ship and the laser guns, in between skee ball and air hockey, there is no line for Feed Big Bertha. You were hoping there would be so that you'd have a legitimate excuse to stall. But now there is nothing stopping you, and you need to play; you need to understand her. You feel weird stepping closer than the third spiral, as if this same puppet you've been observing all summer has suddenly become brand new. Keeping her at a distance always meant she couldn't possibly be that similar, but now getting this close is necessary. And you are still in control. You pick a small confetti triangle to stand on and Big Bertha looks frightening up close when her machine is turned off and dim. Her puppet is slightly hunched over cast in

shadow, and her arms are limp at her sides. Her stitched eyes remain wide open, on you, on your quarter, wondering why you have one, because you never have one. You pinch the quarter between your fingers and let the rigid edge roll back and forth. Then you push it into the coin slot and listen to it clink all the way down. Big Bertha begins to rise as her arms span out into the air and her lights flash in sync. The buzzer sounds to count down your 30 seconds. 30, Big Bertha opens her mouth. 29, you don't launch a ball. 26, Big Bertha opens her mouth. 24, you can't launch a ball. 23, you purposely launch a ball while her mouth is closed. 19, you aim for the wire poking out of her hand. 17, you can't feed her a ball; you can't make her a bad person. 15, Feed me another one! I'm so hungry! More, more! 12, she is a bad person. 10, she opens her mouth. You tighten your grip on the launcher. 9, you try shooting for her stupid eyes so she'd stop staring at you. 5, you aim for her fat dress. 4, you aim for her fat bouncing chin. 3, you hit her throat. 2, good enough. 1, you're gone. You don't wait for the score to flash zero. You don't wait to hear the automated Try again! You need air. You need to put as much distance between you and Big Bertha as possible. You need a plan.

You've had the whole weekend to think it through, to have space, and today you have a hammer wrapped in the beach towel in your bag. Your dad won't miss it for a day. You haven't figured out if the plan is to hurt Big Bertha or set her free, but you still have a plan. You'll be hitting her with the hammer regardless. The less-stupid babysitter falls for another lie, that you need your bag in the bathroom to change into your bathing suit because you forgot at home. And your plan is set in motion. Around the rocket ship and the laser guns, in between skee ball and air hockey, Big Bertha is... gone. Her machine is missing. There is a gaping hole where her game used to be. And you don't know what to do, but all of a sudden an employee is there. An employee is never there. Did you scream? "Where's Big Bertha?" tumbles out of your mouth as

your beach bag slumps off your shoulder. And the employee tugs at the lanyard around his neck and says, “Oh yea that game broke down for good over the weekend. Finally bit the dust.” This wasn’t part of the plan. She was yours to finish off; you needed to be the one. You stand in the outlined square of her game and trace the imprint in the carpet with your toe. She really is gone. And suddenly the sirens and blasts and music of the other games grow louder and louder. They are cramming into your head, competing to butt out Big Bertha. And you’re not ready. You can’t take it, and so you burst out from in between skee ball and air hockey, fly right passed the rocket ship and the laser guns, and you head straight for the pool; straight for the deep end. You hit water and pull your knees in, and as you slowly sink to the bottom, you are grateful for once, just this once, for feeling heavy.

## Change

Gavin loves putting coins in his mouth. He loves the metallic sting on his tongue. He loves slicking them around and feeling the dips and grooves of each surface. He loves flipping them over and over and gently scraping the roof of his mouth. He prefers quarters because they're bigger but he'll take anything. If it's a quarter he'll only use one but if it's something smaller like a dime he'll pop in two or three, to add flavor. With multiple coins he can stack them under his tongue or swirl them around with his spit and stay amused. His love for coins is shameless. He'll spit parking meter quarters back into the cup holder. He'll mix saliva-glazed change back in with his lunch money. Gavin doesn't care. But if he sees a coin laying on the sidewalk or in the street he's not just going to pick it up and put it in his mouth. He has standards. Most other coins though—new coins, mystery coins—he can give the benefit of the doubt.

He carries a supply of coins with him like people carry gum. The weight of them in his pocket brings him comfort. He knows he can count on them, and sometimes he'll make unnecessary movements just to hear them jingle. When Gavin walks home from school he loves cutting through the park to stop by the fountain. People toss tons of coins into the fountain when they make wishes. It's a literal jackpot. He loves circling around and around until he's spotted the perfect glistening coin to pluck out and pop in. He makes sure not to mix up the fountain coins with his pocket coins, though. He always stays in the park until he's finished and puts the coins back, because he doesn't like tampering with peoples' wishes. One time Gavin's mind wandered and he left the park with two dimes from the fountain in his mouth. That night he dropped his favorite snow globe and the cat got out when his dad was taking out the trash. He was sure the incidents were related.

Sometimes, when it's nice out and he has sandals on and there aren't too many people in the park Gavin will sit on the edge of the fountain and dip his bare feet in. He loves gliding his feet over the layers of coins coating the bottom. The feeling sends chills up his spine. They feel so slippery and different, and yet so familiar. He could sit there for close to an hour mesmerized with parting the coins with his feet and tracing shapes and symbols into the bottom of the fountain. But Gavin tries not to do it too often. He doesn't purposely wear sandals or spend the whole school day hoping the park will be empty. He knows the feeling is more special if it only happens rarely, and when the timing is right he savors it. But Gavin also knows that he can't be too late getting home from school, because it only makes his parents more upset with him.

Gavin's parents don't understand why he puts coins in his mouth. His mother says that she breastfed him instead of giving him formula; that she only ever let him watch educational children's shows; that she denies him sugary cereals and takes him to church every Sunday. His father says that he takes Gavin to football and baseball games, and even coached his little league team; that he read Gavin a story every night before going to bed; that he always hung all of Gavin's artwork on the fridge. They don't know where they went wrong as parents. They have read parenting book after parenting book and watched every parenting special on talk-show TV. They have grilled him over and over on why he does it and what he's feeling and what they can do to help him break his "habit." But Gavin doesn't see anything wrong. He's not hurting anybody. It's not illegal. And so he keeps putting coins in his mouth because it makes him happy. All of his parents' attempts have failed—gum has failed, candy has failed, sunflower seeds have failed, lecturing him has failed, grounding him has failed, therapy has failed. Failed, failed, failed. And Gavin's parents can't keep him from getting his hands on change. They can take away his piggy bank, start giving him packed lunches instead of lunch money, hide the

swear jar and leave all of the cup holders in the car empty, but that will never be enough. Money is everywhere. And although every effort has failed to stop Gavin from putting coins in his mouth, they have succeeded in starting something else.

Spending night after night alone in his room, grounded for what he's done, Gavin starts getting these thoughts. He's not the strange one. He's not the disappointment. Something has to be wrong with them because they won't allow him to feel normal. He still gets good grades in school. He still plays on two seasonal sports teams with his friends. He's still well-mannered and well-meaning and normal. He's your average kid who just happens to enjoy putting coins in his mouth. But his parents just can't understand that. They can't accept him for who he is. And as Gavin sucks and swirls around coins in his mouth from secret, hidden stashes throughout his room he thinks all of these things over.

Gavin's parents arrange a playdate hoping it will do him some good. They invite over the nice boy named Tristin from the nice family living in the nice house two houses down. The nice boy who has had a nice lifelong friendship growing up with Gavin. He brings over his trading card collection, which seems like a nice way to distract their son. As soon as he reaches Gavin's room, their two collections are spread out across the floor, a calculated distance between them, covering the carpet in a laminated sea of royal blue. Both boys are on their knees unbothered by the carpet making imprints in their kneecaps. But Tristin has not come to play with Gavin. He has come to buy Gavin's cards. Gavin prepped him on the terms of their playdate after school, and Tristin has come armed with a concealed bright pink, heart-shaped coin purse borrowed from his little sister, stuffed to the brim with coins so that they could not chime or clatter together. These are the type of specific instructions only a true best friend would follow, as they

risk embarrassment and lunch-table exile if Tristin were ever to be exposed for carrying a girl's coin purse. Their bond is unspoken, like all young boys' are.

Tristin doesn't need an explanation for the coins; every kid wants to make money, and he has been eyeing some of Gavin's best cards for a while. Gavin insists this has to be secretive because his parents are Froot Loops. Tristin says Froot Loops are bomb and Gavin has to agree. The two boys then gently unzip the packed coin purse and slowly pour the coins onto the floor, the soft carpet muffling their sound. They divide the quarters, nickels, dimes and pennies like little territories, and then the selling begins. Both boys are very happy with their exchanges, but they make the mistake of cleaning up the cards before the coins. Gavin's mother comes in to nicely check on them and ask if they'd like a snack, and then she not-so-nicely asks where all the coins came from. Tristin swiftly leaves, new cards and empty coin purse in tow, and he is not to be invited back for another playdate.

Over time Gavin's parents make him give up playing sports and having friends over until he'll agree to give up his coins. They consider homeschooling and stop letting him go out after school altogether and start making him spend more time alone in his room. But the more Gavin is punished with isolation the more it becomes a comforting constant in his life, just like his coins. He doesn't miss the fresh air. He doesn't miss the fountain or his friends. And now when Gavin catches himself in the mirror next to his closet, he thinks his hair looks more copper than brown. His skin tastes like metal and he can pull coins from behind his ears, blow them out of his nose, and even shake them out of his hair. Gavin and the coins have become one, and now he will never run out of quarters and nickels and dimes and pennies to pop into his mouth. But when his parents catch on it is already too late. Gavin's door is locked and never unlocks. And the night they come for him, the night they break down his door, Gavin starts swallowing all of his

coins—the ones coming out of him and the ones from his stashes—because they can't take them away from him.

## Flinch

His car was in his driveway. His car was in his driveway. His car was in his driveway because he was home. That made sense. But he still wasn't answering his phone. We sat parked in the street and could hear each ring echo from inside his still house. After two more phone calls my mom finally decided he wasn't going to answer and broke her gaze trained on the windows of the house. She began fumbling around for a key; the key I knew we had somewhere but I had never seen. I hadn't realized she'd brought it with us. She took more time than necessary gathering herself and then looked over to me and said, "Brace yourself."

We cautiously made our way up the three concrete steps and froze at the front door. With a deep, desperate breath my mom pushed the doorbell. The light chimes pierced the silence behind the door, and after hearing no footsteps or movement my mom finally moved, turning the key to open it. She stepped inside the house first, making sure to keep me behind her. With her voice shaking, she called out, "Joe, it's us. Carol Lee and Laura. Joe, we're here. It's okay. Where are you?" With no response she looked back at me, and without words I knew where she wanted to go. As slowly as we could, we made our way across the front room and turned the corner to see his open bedroom, and there he was.

\* \* \*

Were you there? Did you watch? Did you stand across the room? Did you silently look on as we found you? Did you try to answer the phone? Did you try to stop us at all? Could you?

\* \* \*

We both saw him at the same time. Through his bedroom doorway from the hall. He had collapsed at the end of his bed with his head turned away from us on the mattress, facing the opposite wall. His left arm slumped over the near side of the mattress until his hand curled under

his wrist on the hardwood floor. His right arm was folded underneath him, with his hand over his heart. The lower half of his body was perfectly slanted right down to his feet, like he had stiffly tipped over. A thick stream of dried blood trailed from his open mouth onto the mess of sheets in front of him, and his skin was blue. All blue. That's how I knew he was already dead. You've stopped breathing a long time ago when you're that blue. And as my mom screamed and sprang towards him I stood perfectly still. Because I couldn't do anything else.

\* \* \*

Is there a politically correct way to say you found a dead body? Discovered? Detected? Happened upon? Am I supposed to use cadaver or corpse or deceased instead of body? I need help, I'm not good at this.

\* \* \*

You always said if God was good he'd let you go quick and easy. In your sleep or in an instant. But did you know when God gave you what you wanted, He'd make us find you? Would you still have asked to go quick and easy?

\* \* \*

When you find a dead body, you accidentally look into the face. You don't mean to do it. You wish you could take it back. But you can't, you never can. Your brain doesn't know what to do and your eyes don't know what to do and in searing panic they land on the face. The dead face. And your eyes hold there because you can't help it. You see the painful expression frozen in it. You see the dried blood streamed out of it. You see proof of the agony he felt before he died. And it is the most horrific, traumatizing, damaging thing you will ever see. You will never be able to look back on a happy memory again without that same agony slowly carving into his face.

\* \* \*

The day we found him I was fourteen. Fourteen.

\* \* \*

What's so tragic about a 65-year-old having a heart attack? Absolutely nothing. I know that. There was nothing tragic about the way he died, but his death was traumatic. The blood. Blue skin. The ringing. My mom screaming. Looking into his face. Calling 9-1-1. Calling my dad. None of that will ever leave me. Ask me what the name of the responding police officer was. Office Elias. Ask me what Joe was wearing. Blue jeans, black sneakers, a solid purple shirt (for Lent), and a light blue sweater full of holes. Ask me what I was wearing. Jeans, black converse, a black Hard Rock Café shirt and a black and red Hard Rock Café sweatshirt. Ask me what food of Joe's the coroner ate when he came to claim the body. M&Ms from a saran-wrapped bowl next to the couch. I remember it all. I can tell you it all. I did not live through his death just once; I've lived through it every day since. It has become a part of me.

\* \* \*

There was no one to blame. No ruthless murderer. No slow 9-1-1 operator. He just had a massive heart attack. A blood clot blocked the blood flow in his coronary artery, and the artery ruptured. And that was it. There was no closure. The last thing he did was grab his heart and then he was gone before he hit the mattress. A room full of doctor's couldn't have saved him. No matter what time we got there, we couldn't have saved him. He was gone and we were left to find his body. With no closure. No goodbye. Just each other. And we would never be able to talk about it, not once, so we would lose each other too.

\* \* \*

When you find a dead body with your mother, she starts calling family. She calls your uncle and tells him he needs to get down here right away. And that uncle listens, not knowing what he's in for, and comes right away. And when that uncle pulls up to the house your mom runs to him. She sprints out of the house and into the front yard to fall apart in his arms. And this leaves you all alone in the house, alone with the dead body. And this doesn't occur to your mother at the time. And you never blame her for running. But you're still all alone in the house with him. And blood pulses through your ears as your heart pounds through your whole being. And you want to stand up and go to him but you stop, because the body in the next room with the blue skin and bloodied face will decimate the heart you feel pounding inside of you if you go to it. Because this body was him but isn't him anymore. He is gone. Really gone. Gone forever. And instead you stay in the room you're in and look up to the ceiling. And you scream, why did we have to find you? Why did we have to see this? Where are you now? And tears stream down your face. And you feel more alone than you ever have in your entire life.

\* \* \*

*Laura, call 9-1-1! Call 9-1-1! Joe! Joe! Laura! Laura call 9-1-1! Joe!*

\* \* \*

What do you want? You wish you didn't have to find him. You're relieved your mom didn't have to find him alone. You don't even know what you want.

\* \* \*

When you find a dead body, everything you ever learned in Catholic school goes to shit. You don't understand what you did to deserve this. You don't understand why you had to be the one to find him and not a paramedic or cop or stranger who didn't know and love him. You don't understand why this would ever be in "God's plan." You don't understand why prayer isn't

comforting you at all. You feel that after all you've learned about souls and the afterlife, you deserve to see his soul. You feel that after all you've been through you deserve to get to talk to him. That you've earned this by having to find his body. And it won't happen. You'll beg and plead with God for one last chance to see him because you don't remember your last words to him, and you don't understand why any of this happened, and you need to see him as a soft glowing Angel to make you forget about seeing him with blue skin and blood coming out of his mouth. And God will deny this from you. God won't grant you the one thing you need to be okay after the trauma he made you endure. The last decade you've spent praying to God and worshipping him will count for nothing. And you'll be devastated. And your Catholic faith will shatter almost too easily. Until you stop going to Church and no one questions it because they heard what happened. Until you stop praying to God and believing altogether. Until the only thing you believe in is his soul will come to you one day, whether God likes it or not, when he feels you need it most.

\* \* \*

My grandparents live right across the street from his house. Directly across from it. And that didn't change when he died. It's now painted a different color with a different car in the driveway and a new family living in it. Every time I visit them I see my fourteen year old self walking across his front lawn to ring his doorbell, wondering why he's not answering his phone. It's hard to forget with his house always there, across the street. Seven years later, it triggers everything coming back too easily.

\* \* \*

*Dad-we-picked-Olivia-up-from-chorus-and-found-Stephen-and-Melissa-there-because-Joe-never-came-so-we-brought-them-home-and-he-wasn't-answering-his-phone-so-we-came-to-*

*his-house-and-we-found-him-in-his-bedroom-and-he-wasn't-moving!-Dad-he's-blue!-Dad-he's-dead!-They-told-us-he's-dead!*

\* \* \*

When you find a dead body you feel like the tainted child. Your parents still have four innocent, protected kids at home, but you are the one they can no longer shelter from reality. A traumatic reality they could have never seen coming. A sudden reality that all your years in Catholic school could have never prepared you for. They can't help you un-see what you've seen. The damage has been done. And so you are the one, the only one, they can no longer protect. There is nothing your parents can ever do to take it back. You are the no longer innocent, unlike the other four.

\* \* \*

I imagine you lying in your room unable to answer the phone. And the phone ringing loudly throughout your still house, reaching your dead body. And you still unable to answer it because you're dead. And the ringing haunts me.

\* \* \*

There was nothing they could do about his fingernails. The heavy makeup could hide how blue he was but they couldn't take the blue out of his fingernails. In his casket he was coated with powder; you could see the layers of it caked onto his skin. He looked flushed and pale and still unlike himself. But his fingernails were still blue. He would always be blue.

\* \* \*

When you find a dead body you aren't able to remember him without seeing him as a dead body. "Dead-Joe" is born, and he lurks in your dreams years after it's all over. You are not be able to recall any happy memories without the image of his dead body tainting them. You

aren't able to look back on him teaching you how to tie your shoes or zipper your raincoat without seeing stiff, blue skin. You aren't able to reminisce about how he knew your favorite snack was pickles and always had a jar "with your name on it" in his refrigerator when you came over without seeing the coroner's tag on his wrist. You are not able to remember how he always loved your poetry and kept every childhood drawing of yours taped to his refrigerator without seeing his still, black sneakers perfectly angled towards the bed. All of this makes everything more painful, because you are not be able to separate the infinite good memories you have of him from this one, mother-board bad memory. You aren't able to rescue all of positive from the negative until enough time has passed to do it for you. And even still, Dead-Joe continues slowly turning into a dead body in random dreams.

\* \* \*

"Dead-Joe" is his dead body come to life, animated and functioning and real. Among many things he makes you feel extremely frustrated, as you desperately want to dream of him but not in that way. You wish and wish and wish to dream of him and then feel cheated, like your wish came true but didn't. When you begged God to see him, this wasn't what you meant. This doesn't count. You will finally admit that he only comes to you in nightmares, not dreams. You put up dream catchers all around your bed, but you realize the only way you get to see him at all is if he's "Dead-Joe" causing nightmares. In these nightmares he look grotesque and evil and heartbreaking. He lunges for you across different surfaces right before you wake up. He tries to hunt you down from across a room but doesn't get anywhere near you because you open your eyes. His skin changes from healthy to blue right in front of you until the last thing you see before jolting awake is a haunting smile slip across his face. You always wake up whimpering with your heart hammering against your chest.

Dead-Joe haunts your dreams on and off for five and a half years. He never speaks to you and you never speak to him, until one dream he is sitting on the steps in your Grandma's basement, silently watching you. And you turn and you scream at him. You blow up and yell WHAT DO YOU WANT? And the dream is over. And then Dead-Joe doesn't visit any of your dreams for a very long time and you feel even more confused and frustrated because you start to miss him. Because even though he was Dead-Joe at least you got to see some form of him in your dreams. The one you love and miss and want to see again with all your heart. You think Dead-Joe was better than nothing, and then you remember how terrifying he was and think what the hell am I thinking?, and then you swiftly change your mind and think you miss Dead-Joe again.

Then after a year goes by with no Dead-Joe dreams you wake up one morning over a year later and linger into the bathroom to brush your teeth. And as you're leaning against the sink brushing your teeth half asleep, your mind wanders and you suddenly remember that he was in your dream. And he was normal. He wasn't bloody and he wasn't blue; he was himself. And you choke on the toothpaste foaming in your mouth and start crying. Your heart feels more warm and full than you ever recall it feeling. And nothing becomes more important than clinging to that dream.

You start sifting through your dreams for him like panning for gold. For the normal, true him. You wake up every morning and make yourself lay there actively analyzing your dreams for everything you remember. At some point you question why Dead-Joe shifted and transitioned into Normal-Joe, and why there was such a big lapse and long absence. You buy the biggest dream catcher you've ever bought and put it over up your bed to keep Dead-Joe away for good, hoping Normal-Joe will stay.

\* \* \*

I've never been able to remember the last conversation we ever had. As hard as I've tried. I only remember sitting on the couch in the living room playing with my dog and not paying attention as he was talking to me. But I do know that before he and my mom walked out to the driveway, he looked back and said, "See you later, alligator." Every goodbye to me was always "See you later, alligator" since I was little. My goodbye was, "After 'while, crocodile." I'll never be sure if I said it back in my final chance to say goodbye. I like to tell myself I did.

\* \* \*

His wallet was so heavy in my lap. I held it the whole car ride home. It felt like it was sinking through me, bursting with too many credit cards and photos. It was the first time ever holding it in my hands, and it felt so wrong. He always kept it guarded in the back right pocket of his jeans. Every pair he owned had a permanent imprint of his wallet in that pocket. But it was with me now. I kept my hands securely cupped underneath it the entire car ride home, my thumbs straining to stretch over the top because it was so thick. I never looked up. I could only look down and rub my thumbs over the leather that was so cracked and worn, so creased and faded. I never opened it, either. I couldn't. Whatever curiosity I once had to would never come back. I wanted it back in the back right pocket of his jeans, out of my lap. I wanted so much more than that. But all I could do was fixate on how heavy and worn his wallet was, until the car came to a stop and I never had to see it again.

\* \* \*

When you find a dead body with your mother, your relationship can't be repaired. You don't talk about it at his house because it's all still happening. His body is still lying there and you're waiting on the coroner; waiting on family. But then you drive home together with his

wallet in your lap, in silence. And when you get home everyone eats dinner and goes to bed because it's been a long, rough day. And from the moment you wake up the next morning you wait and you wait and you wait for your mom to come talk to you about it. To ask you how you're feeling. To ask you how you're handling the trauma you endured together. But the wake goes by. And the funeral goes by. And cleaning out and selling his house goes by. And a year goes by. And your mom doesn't come to talk to you about it. She doesn't even try. And you understand this as it's too painful to talk about, ever. That it would be selfish of you to bring it up. That the time or day isn't coming at all. And you understand this means you can never have a deep conversation about anything with your mom again. Not about your triggered eating disorder. Not about birth control. Nothing. Because you understand anything deep would lead to talking about his death, which your mom didn't want. And so his death slowly drives a wedge between you and your mother, until it's hardened like cement that can't be cracked. And she never tries to talk to you about his death or anything meaningful, and in turn you never go to her, because you understand it's too painful, and everyone deals with death differently.

\* \* \*

You only ever feel close to him when you play roulette. In the casino is the only time you're sure he's there. Because 35 was his number and you play 35 and it comes up often. In Niagara Falls you played 35 and it came up four times in seven spins. No one could deny those odds. But it's not about the money. It's about knowing he's there. It's about being certain he is with you. Because you've never seen him, and God's never let you talk to him, and you're not really sure if it's him or your imagination in your dreams. But in roulette 35 comes up every time. And you can feel close to him.

\* \* \*

When you find a dead body you won't touch him. Your mom will rub his back as she talks to him before the coroner takes him away, but you won't touch him. You're afraid he will still be warm. You don't want his death to be tangible. You know he won't flinch like he's supposed to because he's supposed to still be alive. And so you can't bring yourself to touch him because he won't respond. He lies there until the coroner has no problem taking him away. And you wince as the body bag bumps into ends and corners because you can't help but feel they're hurting him. You watch as his body is heaved into the back of the car like luggage, and you think so much you wish you'd said to him as the coroner drives him away.

\* \* \*

If I could talk to him, and I mean really talk to him, not to his grave or his picture or through prayer, I would tell him finding his body didn't completely fuck up my life. I would admit it fucked up my life for a while. I would thank him for all the good he saw in me when he was still alive. I'd thank him for making me feel exceptional and like I have so much potential. I'd tell him all the things I wish we could have done and would be doing if he had more time left on earth. I would thank him for looking over me because I know that there are outcomes in this life he has protected me from, even though I can never physically feel him with me. I would tell him I wish I could physically feel him with me more often and ask him why I can't. I'd ask him why this was the first time I could talk to him. I would ask him if it was really him visiting my dreams or if they were just figments of my imagination. I would ask him what he thought of me writing about him. I would tell him the last thing I needed to make peace with his death was talking to my mom, and ask if he could help.

\* \* \*

For the funeral your granny asks you to write a poem in his honor and read it aloud before they close the casket. She grants you this chance because she knows you are traumatized and heartbroken and need something to kick-start your growth from this loss. She believes in you. And so you get up in front of the whole room and read your poem about how much you love him and how he is one of the greatest men you have ever known and how he will always be one of the strongest influences of your life. And when you look up the entire room is crying with you. And your granny stands to meet you in a hug. And then your granny gives you the most treasured moment of your entire life. With the poem folded back up in your hand she guides you over to the casket with her hand over yours, and she helps you slide the poem inside the breast of his jacket, right over his heart.

### Whose Baby is This

“Whose baby is this!?”

She had stormed in through the “Pharmacy Entrance” and seized hold of aisle eight.

Seger wondered why she passed up aisle ten, and then nine.

“Well, whose baby is this!?”

Her demands carried throughout the entire grocery store, with her left hand curled around the bendy intercom mic swung outward to face her. She had a silent baby wrapped tight in the grasp of her right arm.

“Um, lady, that’s not your baby?”

The cashier’s voice rose higher with each word. On “baby” he let his face freeze in an unflattering scrunched-eyed, open-mouthed expression. Seger thought the pencil tucked behind his gauged ear was there for no reason, and he was wearing too many bright rubber bracelets for his age. His line had already retreated in disbelief and fear.

“No he isn’t mine!” She rang out in growing frustration.

Her long linen skirt swayed with her anger, hitting right above her bony ankles. The matching camisole blouse exposed every strained vein in both arms and the peaked shoulder blades of her back.

“Yes he’s a he, does that help!?”

Her eyes grew sharper and her breathing, deeper, all now focused on the lone cashier. The strands of hair tangled back by that first gust of air conditioning now dangled by her face again. Cell phones started poking out over heads and cardboard checkout displays to capture this on video. Seger’s wasn’t one of them. He decided he should look away at something else, and chose the discounted protein bars, gum, and rye bread in his hands.

No one came forward.

“Lady, how did you—” the cashier tried but she interrupted him, still over the intercom.

“I found him locked in the back seat of a hot car in the parking lot!” She yelled.

The baby started trying to wriggle free and her grip loosened. He was no longer entranced by the shifting Happy Birthday and Get Well balloons. She let his little hands bat at the sunglasses dangling from her neck by a rope necklace.

“You broke into some—”

“I saved someone’s baby!” She snapped impatiently.

A manager approached the aisle to mediate and stretched out his arms toward her. Seger noticed he was balding and that his uniform polo looked too tight; he looked like he could do little.

“No!” she screamed. “I want to confront his irresponsible parents!” She released the mic to have two hands on the child, who started scream-crying to match her screaming. When she backed away too close to the doors the sensors dinged and they swished open. The plastic bags rustled in the air conditioning as if calling her back to the store.

As patrol cars pulled up to the shopping carts outside, a man made his way to the front desperately shouting, “My son! You have my son!”

The crowd parted to let him through until he burst into the bagging lane where it was only he, the manager, and the woman holding the infant, out in the open. The tall, clean-shaven man held a purple package of diapers against his t-shirt streaked with sweat. He was still very good looking, in Seger’s opinion. Before the man could say anything else, police officers had the three of them surrounded. Cell phones still hung in the air like spotlights.

“Where have you been?” she screamed at him.

The baby boy, now a red little radish in her arms, cried louder. The manager stayed planted silently between them with nods from the policemen, purposely keeping his back to the crowd.

“I—I needed diapers. It was only supposed to be a minute, but I couldn’t remember the size. I had to call my wife at home. I wanted to g—give her a break from the baby. Gregory.”

“Well you both took a break alright.” She replied aggressively.

“Please—” the father began to plead, but an officer cut in.

“Ma’am, how did you come to acquire this baby?” He questioned sternly.

She swung the child onto her hip, the weight of him appearing to grow heavy. The father clenched the diapers tighter.

“He was trapped in a hot car in the parking lot. The windows were barely cracked.”

“Are you armed, Ma’am?” The officer kept his hands up and out where she could see them while clearly flashing his gun.

“No, I’m not armed! What kind of question is that?”

“What is your intent with that baby today, Ma’am?”

“It’s Ms. Connerdy and I want to criminalize his parents for almost letting him die!” she said while glaring down the father.

“Ms. Connerdy, are you willing to turn him over?”

“He doesn’t deserve him. He can’t care for him!” She forced out, now tearing up, and the policemen took that as a no.

Two surrounding officers immediately came up from behind her, and forced the little boy out of her frail arms. A third held the father back as he gasped at the struggle.

“Don’t give him back,” she cried. “It doesn’t feel right.”

She collapsed to her knees and the officer not holding the baby knelt down with her. He allowed her a moment and then helped her to her feet. He guided her to the manager's office where the other policemen waited, locking the manager out. Two remained on the floor with the father, the questioning officer and the one now holding the infant boy, who had quieted in awe of the uniformed men. The crowd had dispersed to either continue shopping or linger outside the manager's office. Seger kept his eyes on the father.

"Is this your son?" the free officer questioned gently.

"Yes, Gregory." He said reaching out again for the child. "He's only ten months."

The policeman holding him still did not hand him over.

"That's my car right up front in the parking lot, with the cracked windows and car seat in the back. I can show you pictures. You can speak to my wife on the—"

"Nah, that won't be necessary, Sir. You've been through enough today. Just make sure you never leave your son alone in the car again. Ever."

"No, never," he assured, and the silent officer handed him his son. The color and calm came back to his face and he seemed to have a firmer grasp on Gregory than Ms. Connerdy.

"Now, do I need to do anything else? I don't want to press charges. I understand she was only looking out for Gregory, and my wife's waiting for me. She'll be worried..."

Seger picked up on the influence of this man's charm. Surely this wasn't standard procedure.

"You can just pay for the diapers and go home," the questioning officer assured him.

"Like we said, you've been through enough today. We'll talk to her, calm her down; make sure she knows to never pull a stunt like this again."

"Thank you," the father said, relieved, and he shook each of their hands.

The policemen left him to pay and headed for the manager's office. Seger realized he couldn't pay for anything, because now he was late for work.

\*\*\*

The ambulance had stopped moving. And Seger didn't know why. Riding in the back he had no view through the front windshield, but he knew they needed to reach the hospital now. His patient had been shot through the heart and was bleeding out through the ruptured chamber. All Seger could do was stabilize and control the bleeding and monitor his heart until they reached the trauma unit for emergency surgery and blood transfusions.

The ambulance was still at a full stop, and this meant the patient's heart was going to stop. Seger shifted to keep all of the pressure on the chest cavity with one hand, using the other to reach for his radio. He tried to guess what street they were on.

"What the fuck is going on up there!? We need to move now." He tried to emphasize the life or death of the situation and not the panic in his voice.

The sirens suddenly shut off.

"There's a Dodge parked sideways in front of the ambulance," came through the radio. Seger looked up at the silent roof and then at the radio in his left hand. That wasn't his EMT partner, Rodger's, voice. With that thought the back doors of the ambulance flew open, and a man started climbing inside. Seger immediately noticed he was carrying a gun.

"Who the fuck are you?" Seger questioned boldly. He returned his left hand to the patient's chest cavity for more pressure without looking toward the heart monitor. He watched both doors slam.

"I'm the owner of that truck." His voice was calm and instructive, and Seger didn't like it.

He had dark hair sweeping out in every direction from underneath a solid blue ball cap, the bill casting a shadow over his square jaw. He sat down on the bench seat that doubled as an extra patient transport bed and seat belted himself in

“I bet that was your next question,” he said smoothly with a smirk. Then he pressed the release button.

The aroma of burnt metal began to fill the back of the ambulance. The gun had recently been fired. From his kneeling position over the stretcher, Seger looked from the bleeding wound to the gun propped in the man’s lap.

“That’s right.” He laughed approvingly and patted the top of Seger’s head. “Someone’s a fast learner.”

“Where’s Rodger?” Seger demanded.

“I duct taped his mouth closed and hands to the steering wheel. Told him if this vehicle moves an inch I’m gonna shoot you.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to show me what I did wrong.”

Seger knew what he meant, and knew where this was going.

“How did you track us down in a moving ambulance?”

“Police monitor and using the fastest route to the hospital from where I shot him. I gotta say though, those sirens are also a dead giveaway.”

Seger didn’t laugh.

“I promise not to hurt you if you just help me fix my mistake.”

“I’m not going to help you kill this man,” Seger warned.

“You are if you value your own life.”

“Why do you want him dead?” He was stalling.

“Don’t you know who this is?” The man sounded curious now.

Seger didn’t get a good look at the patient’s face at the scene. The pierced heart and traumatic blood loss had to come first. He didn’t want the face to make a difference, but peering over the oxygen mask, careful to maintain the pressure over the patient’s heart, he took a closer look. He was clean shaven, and handsome, and...the father from the grocery store.

“Yesss” the man responded maniacally to Seger’s realization.

He remembered seeing it all over the news. The man in the grocery store wasn’t the real father. He had kidnapped the baby from the southern part of that state earlier that day, and even though cops had the baby in their hands before it got reported he still got away. Police handed the abducted child right back to him, and then they disappeared without a trace. Everyone interviewed on television said he didn’t look like a killer, but rather charming and convincing. He didn’t have ugly scars or birthmarks or definitive features, and neither did this man.

“His real name was Ronan. The baby’s,” the man shared.

“I’m really sorry about your son,” Seger said sincerely.

“Oh, he wasn’t my son,” he corrected.

“Oh...well...you know, someone’s going to come along and find this blocked ambulance in the middle of the road in broad daylight” Seger tried.

“Then you better hurry up” he prodded.

The heart monitor was showing the beats occurring slower and slower. There was nothing Seger could do but keep the constant pressure over the cavity and appease the man with the gun.

“Can you put that down please, um...Dodge?”

“That’s right, call me Dodge. And I’m keeping it right next to me. You’re nowhere out of the woods yet,” he cautioned. He placed it beside him on the seat and began rubbing the palms of his hands against the flat surface of his jeans.

“Thank you,” Seger said, taking his eyes off the gun. “Now, uhh…” He tried to map out his explanation with his free fingers. “You shot him on the left side of his heart here, which was good I guess because that causes more bleeding than shooting someone on the right side of their heart. The right side has lower blood pressure. Now the reason why he lived is because you only ruptured one chamber with the bullet and not two or three or four. And because the bullet didn’t pierce the septum, which separates the left and right sides of the heart.”

He looked up to see Dodge nodding his head in understanding.

“Now what’s keeping him alive?” Dodge leaned closer.

“Well, I’ve been doing my best to control and decrease the bleeding with dressing and pressure. I’m also monitoring his heart on that screen.” Seger used his chin to indicate to the defibrillator and heart monitor across from the bench seat below the I.V. bags.

“So if you let go he’ll bleed to death and his heart will stop.”

“Yes, but that already might—”

“So what I’m telling you to do is let go right now.”

When Seger didn’t move his hand Dodge moved his hand to the gun.

“Okay, okay.” Seger released, and following all of Dodge’s hand gestures, removed the dressings and the gauze.

All that remained was playing the waiting game and watching the heart monitor. When it flat-lined, the false-father would be dead.

“You know you could just shoo—”

“He’s going to suffer now.” Dodge insisted, pushing the gun further away from him on the seat. “So what makes you the guy back here saving lives and him the guy up there just driving you around?”

“I’m the paramedic and he’s the EMT. I handle all the advanced life support and deadly injury and illnesses while he provides primary care and gets us to and from safely,” Seger explained.

“Well lucky you,” Dodge laughed.

The heart monitor was close to flat-lining.

“So do you like synchronized swimming? America’s up in the Olympics tomorrow and we’re looking good this year.”

“Oh yeah, that’s good for America,” Seger offered. He had just accepted the false-father was going to die; he came to terms with being a part of it. Now he just wanted Dodge to leave.

“Have you ever tried Greek yogurt?”

“No I haven’t.” Seger was thinking and this guy likes shooting guns?

“My mom just turned me onto the stuff. It’s a lot healthier than all those other yogurts out there. Great way to get your protein in.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

Just when Seger thought it was game over another beep came through. He thought maybe Dodge would buy a lie.

“Okay, he’s dead. Dead-dead. You can go now, Dodge. Mission accomplished.”

“No, it just beeped. We have to wait for the flat-line like you said.”

“Oh, well you don’t have to stick around. I’ll make sure he dies. You want to make a getaway don’t you?”

“No that’s okay, I can wait with you.”

None of them would just die for Seger already. The three men, two sitting side by side on the bench seat and the other lying unconscious in the stretcher waited for death on that little black screen.

“So what’s your take on man-scaping?”

## I Am Barrow, Alaska

I am Barrow, Alaska. Northernmost city of Alaska. Northernmost city of the United States. I can only be reached by plane, when the flight isn't canceled by my brutal polar climate. People come by plane from either Fairbanks or Anchorage and they go by plane; there is no other way. The hunters who go out on boats always come back to me with nowhere else to go, whether empty-handed or successful. Returning home safe is considered a blessing in itself. The snow can fall on any day of the year, and out of every 365 days, only about 120 give me a high temperature of above freezing. I sit 320 miles north of the Arctic Circle and 1,300 miles south of the North Pole. The Arctic Ocean blankets me on three sides while expanses of flat tundra span out the fourth, providing no barriers from merciless winds. I'm not much to look at from your plane window, and I don't mind.

Tourists' first impressions of me are always curious. They de-board the plane and enter the only building they see in front of them. Once inside, they look back behind them wondering if this is the whole airport. Yes, it is. Tourists see they are in one condensed room squeezing in an Alaska Airlines service desk, one security line, one conveyor belt for luggage, a corner of bucket seats, and an overpriced vending machine that flickers and hums too loudly. Through clouded glass, they see crumpled potato chip bags and sagging candy bars and hope they'll be more successful in finding lunch. When they discover they will be riding to the only hotel in a personal mini-van with most of their luggage on their laps, knee-to-knee with other tourists, they decide they are already disappointed.

Stepping out of the van, tourists notice the road is unpaved, forcing them to walk through silt and dust. They think back on my airport just 700 yards away and realize the road was not paved there either. Some secretly think the new place they've just traveled all this way to is dirty

and not well taken care of. They turn to the driver of the mini-van for help to discover he has parked it and is now walking away. When they ask a little too desperately where he is going, he shrugs his shoulders with a confused expressions and simply replies, “home.” Receiving blank stares, he adds, “The village tour begins here in an hour,” then points toward the Top of the World Hotel and Pepe’s North of the Border restaurant connected to it and turns to head home. They wonder which flat, featureless box seen from the plane window is the one he calls home.

Now facing Top of the World, the tourists think to take pictures, but a few end up lowering their cameras. They decide the peeling sheet metal sign is ugly, and the building itself is even uglier. My only hotel is longer than it is tall, painted a mute gray framed in an even darker gray, with a long wooden ramp way weathered down to splinters. Burdened by their baggage overstuffed with luxuries and souvenirs from other travels, the tourists have the front desk lock it away and think, what a nice thing for such an ugly hotel to do. Starving, they head over to Pepe’s, feeling limited by their options. They are overwhelmed with the abundance of vibrant Mexican décor of painted masks, skulls, and dolls, and surprised to see so many people already seated and eating. Where did all these people come from? The delight quickly wears off with the theory that these locals are only here because they are limited too.

While the tourists are waiting for their food, the owner of Pepe’s comes around to each table and greets them with her guest book. They don’t care to catch her name. They race through their signatures and dig into what’s left of the complimentary chips and salsa to avoid conversation and get her to move on to the next table. She looks about ninety-years-old with wisps of thin, platinum-blond hair fraying out from all directions on her head. She is wearing all hot pink—a tank top, knee-length skirt and slippers—and has lipstick on her teeth. She is beautiful. She is not crazy; she is not crazy. She kindly hands out certificates to keep that say “I

Crossed the Arctic Circle,” but most will purposely leave them behind on the tables, stamped with rings of water after being used as placemats.

After lunch, the tourists will drag their feet back to the lobby of the Top of the World Hotel to wait for the tour to begin. While it will only be a few minutes, they decide it is too chilly to wait outside and looking through the bay window will do. They sarcastically think, lucky I have to stand at this window and watch for the tour because there are not enough places to sit. They think the stuffed polar bear leering paws-first over the only two couches is too close for comfort, the wooden interior is too outdated, and the walls are too white for a place that always gets snow; the architects who built this place intended the gift shop to be a janitor’s closet and the lone TV is too small for entertaining a lobby full of people.

An empty school bus parks out front and their first reaction, “Why doesn’t the school need its school bus?” is quickly replaced by a much more important question: “Is it worth seeing the rest of Barrow?” Looking back at the Top of the World Hotel, they reluctantly climb on board, just glad to leave that boring lobby. The tour guide is a young man no older than twenty-three, who scratches himself often and hums like a refrigerator as he drives. He begins the answer to every question with uhhh and always points into the distance, even when the answer isn’t in the physical landscape.

The first stop on the tour is my Inupiat Heritage Center, where tourists are ushered into a row of seats facing costumed children on the opposite side of the gymnasium-like room. They are all Inupiat Eskimos; my future. The tourists think, now is the time to take pictures. The children are wearing brightly colorful, layered costumes accented in nature prints like suns and pine trees. Some have their hair braided back while others wear their hair loosely with feathers. Their shoes are piled off to the side. They take turns dancing and playing instruments made of

seal skin and animal hair and bone. The tourists pick up on the different chants during each song and give up on trying to understand them. Adults that weren't there before are now in the doorways of the gymnasium, nodding in approval of the children's performances. Also Inupiat Eskimos, also mine. After ten or so dances, the children invite the audience up to participate in a dance. The tourists' laughter as they join in is not lighthearted, but mockery. The children know this, but pretend it is at their own embarrassment of not being able to dance. How else could they keep dancing for these tourists?

After the final "thank you" dance, the children pluck up their shoes and scamper out of the room. The tour guide then reappears and leads the tourists through my whaling museum on the other side of the Inupiat Heritage Center. Whaling is the most significant and definitive aspect of the Inupiat Eskimo culture and it has supported and sustained their way of life since the dawn of their existence, but as the guide narrates each portrait and exhibit, the tourists zone out and wander. They do not care to learn of our fascinating heritage and traditions and history, and they hope that by skipping ahead exhibits in the museum their guide will catch on and speed the tour along. The next part of the tour is to cross the street and explore my central Inupiat flea market, but after poking their heads around, most tourists decide it is too tight and crowded and dirty, so they go into my superstore next door instead to size up the shopping situation. This is literally the one-stop shop for everything, lining up groceries next to furniture followed by hunting gear, modern clothing, and etc. The tourists sigh in amazement and feel grateful for how many malls and places to shop they have back home. Once the tour guide lures them back to the bus, they learn they are driving to the high school football field.

As the tour guide explains about the permafrost and how it prevents all the roads from being paved, the tourists are not paying attention; they are scrolling through their cameras and

searching for wireless internet signals on their smartphones. Getting off the bus, at least one of them will complain, “Great, more dust.” The Barrow Whalers’ football field looks like any other, except it’s not. In August 2006, my high school played their first football game against Delta Junction, who had to fly in to play. After picking up the first win in the third game, the entire team rejoiced by jumping into the Arctic Ocean. In 2007, the Whalers got their very own artificial turf field. Every home game of the season is played in the freezing, snowing cold, and thousands from the village attend to show support, taking great pride in having a team to cheer for. Cheerleaders and fans drape themselves in animal skins to keep warm as they root for their beloved Whalers with painted faces and team jerseys in the high school’s colors, royal blue and yellow. Stepping onto the field for pictures, the tourists will grunt at the sticky black balls their shoes pick up from the turf, and scrape them against the bleachers before heading back toward the bus. Stepping onto the field for practice, willing to give it their all just as it’s beginning to flurry in twilight, the Whalers always win.

The last stop of the tour is the Arctic Ocean. They stand under my Whale Bone Arch to say they’ve officially crossed the Arctic Circle (sans certificate) and dip their fingers in the Arctic Ocean just long enough for a picture. Then they slip their gloves back on, zip their heavy coats up higher, and pull their scarves tighter as my locals hover around the nearest ice cream stand, in shorts while eating ice cream. As the tour guide points out where the famous whales Putu, Siku, and Kanik were discovered, the tourists hide their wide, shocked eyes and open mouths at the ice cream behind flashing cameras as my locals hide their laughter behind tall cones, licking away happily, satisfied with their impact.

Did you know I’m a movie star? That’s how most people (who know of me) know of me. In 1988, I captivated the media attention of the world when three California grey whales, two

parents and a baby, were discovered trapped in my ice offshore. There was only a small break in the ice where the three whales could breathe and native volunteers began working to prevent this patch of ice from reforming overnight, which would have meant death. The whales were given the native Inupiat names Putu, Siku, and Kanik to keep the support and attention building. With the help of media exposure, putting me in the spotlight and on the map for the world, Operation Breakthrough was established under the collaboration of multiple governments and organizations to help save these three whales. One week before Putu and Siku were saved, their baby Kanik died, sinking down to the bottom of the Arctic, never to be seen again. To honor Kanik, the rescue efforts continued until his parents were freed. The film *Big Miracle* about this glorious rescue was released in February 2012.

When Hollywood originally came to stake me out, as no more than tourists, they quickly decided that I would never work, that I'm not movie star material. I am too isolated, too boring, too small. Actors fill in for my Inupiat Eskimos, and a boy in the script gets excited over new batteries; the boy thinking a big deal of such a normally common household item is supposed to be cute, and the supplier is portrayed as warmhearted, charitable. Vague streets and featureless expanses of frozen ice fill in for me. One of the only authentic scenes was shot in Pepe's, and when they came to film they told the beautiful elderly owner to step aside for a new owner to step in on screen, one preferable to their cameras.

\* \* \*

The last thing the tourists cannot understand is the native family in my airport; they are too focused on leaving me and going home, willing to call any hotel "home" that isn't my Top of the World. Parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, a new infant nephew—all conquering the bucket seats in my airport waiting to welcome their beloved teenager home from college. They

have all come out to fill the airport to greet her, to celebrate the blessing of her safe return home. She has been away for months and has not yet met her newborn nephew, being it was too expensive to fly home just for the birth. She comes bustling through the only terminal door and drops her luggage in her path to jump into all of the outstretched arms ready to catch her. Once the hold is broken, she takes her baby nephew into her arms without a word and begins to cry—this is the moment she’s been waiting for, when their two lives finally get to meet. She gently presses her pinky into the palm of his curious hand, smooths and smells his soft baby hair, sways him in her arms to grow familiar with the weight, the feel. She begins to serenade him with the rhythm of her favorite tribal dance, one he will grow to learn.

He will grow up taking his first steps in the snow, becoming accustomed to the crunch under his boots and not the brush of grass at his ankles. He will watch his mother artfully cook whale blubber and seal meat, and his father maneuver heavy polar bear skins. He will grow to love the texture and smell and warmth of the animal skins and furs he is wrapped in, and run between them and hide behind them in playful games when they are hung on the clotheslines outside to be beaten against the strong wind. His grandfather will teach him to hunt and identify the different tracks and trails of the animals; he will compare his boot print to the smaller imprints in the snow and then remove one of his gloves and try his hand. He will come across the shed antlers of wild caribou and believe he was destined to find them there. In the summer, his older aunts and uncles will take him to the Arctic Ocean, and as they easily wade in he will stop on the shore where the water barely brushes his toes, like a puppy that cannot follow an older family dog up the stairs yet.

Along with the other children his age, he will sit cross-legged on the floor of my Heritage Center and watch the older kids perform the traditional Inupiat dances. He will catch on slowly

but love the fast music. As he makes his way dancing freely across the room, each older girl will coo and give him a piece of their costume—a bracelet, a shawl, a feather—and he will love the attention, feel he belongs. When he is old enough, after these practices, he will ride his bike with friends to pick up ice cream and watch the sun set over my Arctic Ocean. The blending streams of greys and pinks and oranges will look like a watercolor painting, and he will think there is nothing more beautiful. He will learn that, to travel farther than his bike can take him, he will need to ride a plane, and from that plane, already thinking of returning home, he will love my view.

### The Eight Deaths of Grandma Prescott

Kayla's grandmother has died seven times since Kayla's tenth birthday. Maybe if it wasn't a collaborative effort, someone out there besides me would notice, but she's brought back to life without question every time to await her next kill. Grandma isn't even aware of how many times this family has killed her. They don't tell her, and agree she's better off. These things are on a need-to-know basis, after all. The Prescotts would rotate the family grandparents every time a new death was needed, but then it would be too difficult for everyone to keep track of who died for which reason, so Grandma Prescott is always left the standard, go-to choice. Perhaps it would have been better to choose a grandparent that was already dead from that start, like Grandpa Owen, but the family reasoned not to mess with spirits. At the time, it made as much sense as planning to kill off a living relative five times, now seven; besides, Grandma Prescott would never learn of their scheme while safely nestled away in Five Oaks Retirement Home. If there was ever any suspicion, Plan B was to say, "No, you're thinking of my other Grandma, God rest her soul," careful not to leave out the "God rest her soul" and to wear a fragile, broken-hearted expression.

When this all started, each Prescott was granted only one get-out-of-jail-free card, a one-time excuse out of an event they were absolutely dreading, but some people got greedy. Now while these Prescotts shall remain nameless, (Mr. Prescott, Darren!), this is how the death count jumped from the originally risky, predetermined five, to the even less safe, harder to pull off seven.

First came Mr. Prescott's charity golf tournament at the office. He's super competitive but can't play golf for his life. He'd die before letting Harold Kappen, up for the same promotion in a month, cream him out on the green, and so Grandma Prescott died instead, kicking the

bucket and bailing him out. He never did get that promotion, but cared more about Harold not getting it either. Then Darren didn't make varsity his junior year of high school, and so her wake happened to fall on the same night as the boys soccer benefit dinner where the varsity athletes were presented their jackets. Wonder where he gets that bitter competitive edge. He didn't make it because the coaches didn't think he was a team player, and he didn't help his case by not showing up to support junior varsity, even though Grandma's on "Team Prescott" and he was supposedly supporting her.

When Derek discovered The Red Hot Chili Peppers were touring the same weekend as his ceremonial Boy Scout camping trip, he skipped out to attend her funeral and "not" the concert. He was only still in Boy Scouts to please Mr. Prescott, anyway. He ended up receiving his badges and pins for the year in the mail. He's big on music—playing guitar—but doesn't think it'd go over well with his parents, especially his Dad, if he quit the Scouts for more free time to start or join a band. Mr. Prescott should get a load of Derek rocking out to Guitar Hero at my house, but he never wanders down my end of the street.

That same summer, Mrs. Prescott received an invitation to the second wedding of a friend she's not too fond of in Maine. Frankly, I don't think she's too fond of anybody. She always threatens to give my folks a ring when my baseballs land in her "landscaping," (at least they miss the windows). You'd think a lady with kids the same age would understand and offer me some lemonade or something. What I don't tell her is her own sons hit half of them, because I know they'd be worse off than me. But for days, all the family heard from her after receiving the invitation was, "Who gets married in Maine, really?" when it finally occurred to her that Grandma Prescott could help her "save the date."

As finals approached during Kayla's second year of high school, my sweet, oh so darling Kayla, she couldn't believe that one, she actually took AP psychology as a sophomore and two, how thick the review packet was. I would have offered to help her study but I didn't know the first thing about psychology, let alone what "AP" stood for. She knew it was early on in her high school career, but Grandma Prescott conveniently died a day and a half before the exam, granting Kayla an extra weekend to study and score a 91. This happened to inspire Darren in college. (This kid again...). He didn't have a final exam, but a final art history research paper due that he hadn't even started. Technically, these consecutive deaths of Grandma Prescott still count as two. He had to "rush home" to share her final hours on earth and was generously given a week's extension by his swindled professor. A few trips to the library and the phone number of the cute girl behind the counter later, he earned a 78, which was worth more to him than a failing grade and a living grandmother.

The next kill came from Mr. Prescott's gun; the first one to start it and the most recent to end it. A teammate on his Thursday night bowling team, (why couldn't the charity event at work have been bowling?), asked if he and the Mrs. would double-date them for a weekend on a couple's retreat. Now, as Mr. Prescott loves bowling and spends every Thursday night catching up and spending time with the guys, this friend had previous knowledge of all the Prescott kids' ages and activities. Meaning, Mr. Prescott couldn't throw a fake graduation or sports tournament at him, and he knew Mrs. Prescott would throw a fit, complaining in his ear all weekend if she was forced to go. Couple's retreats weren't really Mr. Prescott's scene anyway, (I have to side with the Mrs. on this one), so there in the bowling alley out on lane sixteen Grandma Prescott's health suddenly declined again. Mr. Prescott confided poor Grandma's "Alzheimer's" in his companion and sorrowfully expressed the family was expecting her to pass on any day now,

wanting as few people to know as possible to help cope with their mourning. Being the good friend that he is, the teammate kept the news to himself and sent a fruit basket over when he and his wife returned from the retreat. I saw it delivered to their front door; all those vibrant, shiny fruits looked out of place in pockets and twirls of black ribbon. The Alley Cats on Thursday nights are the closest Dad has to second family, and so he won't be killing off Grandma Prescott anymore. That's one less murderer on the loose she has to worry about.

Mrs. Prescott attempted death number eight this past summer, but never would have gotten away with it. I don't know what she was thinking. She wanted to skip the Fourth of July family reunion for a getaway weekend with her girls, emphasis on the family. Grandma Prescott is family. How would the rest of the family be convinced she passed away without any knowledge of it, especially with Grandma at the reunion eating potato salad in the shade watching the badminton game between the cousins in the backyard. Exactly. Mrs. Prescott was also at the reunion, miserable, watching the game in the shade as her friends were off having the time of their lives in New Orleans. What I would give to go to one of those family reunions. Kayla ups last year's outfit every summer, always taking it to the next level with red bows or star-spangled shorts; God, she looked good in those shorts. I don't think there's a piece of clothing that girl, my future girl, could put on and not look gorgeous in.

Kayla did pull off death number eight, but without telling the family. She figured one of them could be her little secret, harmlessly. Little does she know I've known all along. There are a lot of things about me Kayla doesn't know, probably the most important being I'm madly in love with her. I was on my way over to toss the old ball around with Derek in the backyard, (looking for any excuse to be closer her, not even knowing if she was home), when I noticed no one had brought in the mail. In that fat stack of catalogues and bills was a birthday card for

Darren addressed from Grandma Prescott, the correct Grandma whom supposedly croaked to get Darren out of that soccer benefit dinner. I asked Derek about it, handing over the disheveled block of mail, and he gave me the low down over our long game of catch, counting off every death with ease explaining who the killer was and why. It felt like I was caught in a marathon of Clue. I now knew all about Grandma Prescott and her amazing seven deaths, so I was prepared for when Kayla finally decided to kill her off on my account.

In the fall of our junior year of high school, I asked Kayla to homecoming and she explained she unfortunately couldn't make it because she'd be spending the night helping pick out prayer cards and flower arrangements for Grandma Prescott's passing. I guess she figured it was the easiest way to let me down, and she had already been to two Homecomings with one more to look forward to, the big one—senior year. I love her too much to have called her out on it, so I told her I understood but wouldn't be able to bring myself to go without her. I got a maybe for senior year.

In trade for telling me all about Grandma Prescott, I had to tell Derek all about how I'm in love with Kayla. He said it was obvious; that he'd known for years. I figured. So as Kayla skipped out on the dance and left home after loading the backseat of her car with movies and Boy Scout popcorn, (yes, I saw), I invited Derek over for some pizza and Guitar Hero. I knew he'd be cool about it and wouldn't tip Kayla off. He's cool about a lot of things. Soon there was nothing left in the boxes but grease stains and puddles of cheese and it was his turn to get up and rock out in the moment like no one was watching. With the music blasting way too loud to hear anything, I told him I hope Grandma Prescott makes it to our wedding.

### Blessed are Cows from Swimming

“You said we were going to the park.” Maggie stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of the high school, right before a crack in the sidewalk. That crack between Maggie and the student parking lot gained gym-class-capture-the-flag-don’t-cross-it-status as she thought now would be the perfect time to jerk her hand away from Tana, if Tana was holding her hand. “This isn’t the park.” Maggie now folded her arms tight across her chest, crinkling the white button-down of her Catholic school uniform, so that Tana couldn’t take her hand. “We are going to the park,” Tana reassured, “right after this little pit stop.” “You didn’t mention anything about a pit stop before.” Maggie’s arms went limp as she dragged out before and turned her head as sideways as it looked it could go, tilting up to look at Tana. Tana focused on her small pierced ear but couldn’t see anything inside it. “Yeah, and I didn’t mention ice cream either, but now I’ll buy it for you if you come.” Maggie stuck out her pinky at the magic words ice cream and Tana took it knowing she had to swear. This was enough to persuade Maggie to participate in today’s activity.

She shuffled her saddle shoes as they walk through the parking lot because she liked how they sounded against the gravel. When they finally came to a stop was the first time Maggie heard keys. Keys she traced to Tana’s loose sweatshirt pocket. Her eyes went wide. “What are you doing?” “Shhh!” “Why do you have keys? You don’t own keys you have one house key.” “They’re my friend’s, okay,” Tana said to pacify her. “This is my friend’s car.” Maggie looked the outdated burgundy two-door up and down and read “Hail Mary” on the lone, off-white bumper sticker. She didn’t know why the bumper sticker also had a pointy green plant on it. “Hey! Hail Mary! Is your friend a priest?” Tana looked around at the bumper sticker and laughed. “That’s not what that means, Maggs.”

She stared harder at the sticker harder and decided to let it go. “So what are we doing here if you’re not trying to introduce me to a priest?” Tana was lousy at playing the “stick to the same story” game and decided to give up two lines in. “Okay, so remember how this is my friend’s car? He’s actually not just a friend, he’s a boy I like. I just want to peek inside his car to learn more about him.” “Don’t they have Facebook for—wait, you lied? That’s a sin! You sinned!” Tana enjoyed getting Maggie worked up and smirked her way. “Okay lying isn’t as bad as breaking into someone’s gym locker to lift their keys while they’re at track practice.” “Oh my God my sister’s a sinner!” Maggie threw her hands up dramatically, her voice rising with each word, attracting stares. “Shut up, kid!” Maggie hated being called kid and knew Tana knew, so with this she always started acting like a kid. “Oh Tana, why do you have the hots for this boy on the track team?” “Maggie!” “And why does your one house key have bunnies on it?” “Stop.” “Does this boy know about your weird obsession with bunnies at 17?” “Now!”

Maggie pouted. “I’m telling mom you told me to shut up.” “I don’t care, just let me focus. And you used God’s name in vain, sinner. She looked down at the gravel that wasn’t fun anymore and pulled at the cuffs of her sleeves with her palms, wishing they could just go to the park already. Tana pulled her eyes away to look down too, finally realizing why it was so difficult to unlock the damn car. “Shit these are Matt’s keys! I forgot they share the same locker!” Maggie looked over with an “Oooo” meant to imply Tana should be in trouble for saying “shit.” Tana gripped the keys tight and squeezed her eyes shut as she kicked the car hard. A blaring car alarm suddenly sliced through the crisp air and they heard the hurried, collective footsteps of a sports team interrupting practice to investigate, in Tana’s mind, the track teams’. Maggie cupped her hands over her ears as she screamed, “What do we do?” Tana pulled up her hood and dropped the keys as she scooped up Maggie. She started running, running as fast as she

could with a five-year-old in her arms out of the parking lot. She was no track star. Maggie couldn't look away from over her shoulder, and to Tana's heavy footsteps began saying, "Hail Mary, full of grace. Our Lord is with me. Blessed are cows from swimming, and blessed is the root of my moon, Jesus..."

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Hey I just heard someone tried to break into your car that's really weird! As Tana sent her text message from the shaded park bench she looked up to keep track of Maggie. There was a long line and a crowd of kids around the water fountain across the park but none of them were her. And then a loud, "Alright, who's next?" That was Maggie. As she got closer she could see Maggs' high brown ponytail poking out of the center of the crowd forming. Tana climbed the swirling stairs of the jungle gym and perched herself at the top of the slide to watch. Maggie was cupping her hands together to catch the water streaming out of the fountain as another child held down the handle for her. "Thank you, my disciple" she said graciously. Then an anxious, freckled boy stepped forward. "Name?" "Anthony." He obeyed, "Now close your eyes and bow your head," and was splashed in the face with the water. Tana let out a gasp as the boy looked up, smiling with his soaked head and stood there in silence. Maggie gave him a look and he lowered his head back down. Then, completely focused, she traced the sign of the Cross over him with her slick, flat palm and chanted, "I bless you Anthony in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Anthony bowed and descended to the back of the crowd. Over the applause Tana couldn't believe what Maggie was doing, and couldn't let her keep doing it. She called, "Maggs—ice cream!" and threw herself down the too-small slide to cut in front of the next kid in line.

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Tana felt her phone vibrate in response but let it sit in her pocket. “So you’re really into this religious thing, huh?” Maggie chased her dripping chocolate soft-serve with her tongue around the cone. “It’s not just a thing, it’s my life” she explained between licks. “So you’ve learned about it a lot in school?” “Oh yeah! Sister Margarita has taught us all about Mary and Joseph and Jesus...” The ice cream was winning, smearing her lips and cheeks in sticky chocolate. “Did you know Margarita is a form of Margaret and Maggie is short for Margaret?” “Well I know my own name,” she forced through a mouthful of ice cream soup. “I also know my name sounds a lot like Mary.” Tana sensed that this was going somewhere. Somewhere bad. With the cone finally finished, she reached for the napkins stashed in her back pocket wanting to clean up Maggie’s face first. But with one turn Maggs was off, bolting for a homeless man Tana overlooked, slumped along the sidewalk with a frayed cup and a flimsy cardboard sign that read, “God Bless You.”

The ragged homeless man looked up from his filth as Tana shouted, “Stop!” and Maggie, “Do you know Jesus?” at the same time. He then quit slouching and directed “Why yes I do!” toward Maggie with an exaggerated smile, ignoring Tana. Tana forcefully pulled at her warning, “Get away from him Maggie, he’s a stranger,” but Maggie smiled softly at him, as if in a trance and replied, “But all strangers are still God’s children.” With the man’s smile growing wider and looking ready to get on his feet, Tana hoisted her up and marched away. He hollered and waved after them, “God loves you, Maggie! God loves you!”

Back on the playground surrounded by other mothers and their children, Tana inspected a lone, wide tunnel set apart from the rest of the jungle gym for kids to spy out of. She crawled inside and motioned for Maggs to follow. Facing each other and sitting like Indians, Tana let the chocolate stay on Maggie’s face. “Maggs, you can’t just go running up to strangers, they could

hurt you and take you away.” “Are we hiding from him?” “No...maybe...we really crawled in here because I want to know what’s up with this.” Maggie thought hard and nothing. “What do you mean?” “Why are you so obsessed with Jesus and Mary and religion?” “Why are you so obsessed with that boy?” “Oh, come on I thought all girls your age have like three pretend boyfriends by now,” she attempted to joke. “Not me...I’m saving myself.” Tana was completely thrown off. She stopped laughing. “Do you even know what that means?” “It means I have a destiny.” “A destiny?” Her little sister looked at her too seriously for a five-year-old. “I want to be the next virgin birth.”

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“She’s fucked up I’m telling ya.” “Tana watch your language! And lower your voice Maggie’s right upstairs.” “Dad, that Catholic school’s got her fucked up!” “Tana, you calm down right now!” “Mom, I’m serious!” Tana reached into Maggie’s unzipped backpack slung over the chair next to her and dropped a thick Bible on the kitchen table, satisfied with its heavy thud. The ridges of the pages were stamped, “St. Thomas the Apostle School Library.” “You see this? She borrowed it from that school’s library. A Bible.” “Well whaddaya know, a Bible from a Catholic school,” their father said sarcastically. “So she’s learning to read, good for her” their mother chipped in for a positive spin. Their lack of concern amplified Tana’s frustration. “She wants to be the next virgin birth! At the park...blessing kids with the water fountain...talking Jesus with a homeless man. She actually ran to a homeless man because he was holding a sign about Jesus!” “Honey she’s five-years-old, her imagination’s going to run wild.” Their father nodded in agreement. “Yeah, run her right into the arms of a homeless stranger. He stopped nodding. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Are you hearing me? She wants to be the next virgin birth! Maggie. Your daughter. Our Maggie wants to be pregnant with the next ‘savior of the world!’”

Her aggressive air quotes almost took out a gallon of orange juice. Their mother sipped her tea slowly, only moved by Tana into sliding the orange juice away. “Tana, I’m sure you just misunderstood her asking about where babies come from. Kids get curious about that stuff at her age now.” Their father had had enough of this. No more out of line language or babies. “Tana she’s staying right where she is in that school. She loves everything about it, her teacher, her homework. The girl loves her homework there. If she’s happy, we’re happy and we’re just not putting her through public school, it’s not good enough.”

As if on cue, Maggie skipped down the stairs to join them for breakfast. “Well good morning sunshine,” their mother greeted her brightly. “You’re wearing your hair down today.” “Yep, I’m wearing it down from now on because that’s how Mary wears it.” “Mary, pumpkin?” Their father jumped in. “Yeah, Mother Mary.” “Why are you wearing your school uniform? It’s Saturday morning Maggs.” “Because it makes me feel closer to God.” “Oh how very sweet,” their mother soothed. “Have some breakfast dear.” “I’d love some Mom, could you please pass Jesus’ bread?” Both mom and dad began humoring her with, “Sure honey would you also like some of Jesus’ butter?” and “How many of Jesus’ ice cubes would you like in your orange juice?” “You’re really playing along with this, really?” Tana was infuriated. “Fine. Fine! Let this bazar behavior continue and see how she turns out! See if I care!” Huffing in another breath, Maggie interrupted her. “She’s right.”

Everyone fell silent and looked at Maggie, who stared into Tana’s distressed face for a long moment before turning back toward their parents. Waiting for the big moment, for this to end and... “Did you guys pray before eating?” “Oh my God!” Tana had lost. “Unbelievable!” “Why yes we did,” said their father, completely smitten. “Why don’t you go outside and look for Tabby so she can eat now.” “Okay,” Maggie beamed as she accepted a kiss on her forehead. She

spanned her hands out and twirled in circles out the back door singing, “The miracle of life! The miracle of life! The miracle of life!” Defeated at the table, Tana’s gaze helplessly followed Maggie to the backyard. “This is really happening.” “Yep” their mother laughed over the dishes in the sink. Tana watched through the bay window as Maggie made a crown of thorns from the rosebushes and put it on the cat.

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Writing Tutor, Penn State Behrend Learning Resource Center September 2011 – September 2014

- Revise and edit students' writing for correct grammar, content, organization, format and citations.
- Enhance writing skills, aid creativity and build confidence in writing abilities.
- Serve as writing tutor for Composition Support Program paired with freshmen English classes to give presentations and join peer review days in order to address students' questions and concerns with essays.

Head Fiction Editor, Penn State Behrend *Lake Effect* September 2013 – Present

- Review and oversee fiction submissions selected for publication in forthcoming editions of Penn State Behrend's undergraduate-run Journal of the Literary Arts.

Assistant Staff Editor, Penn State Behrend *Lake Effect* September 2010 – September 2013

- Read and provide feedback for short stories submitted for publication to Penn State Behrend's undergraduate-run Journal of the Literary Arts.

Staff Member, Penn State Behrend *Roundtable Society* September 2010 – Present

- Participate in workshops, field trips, and social events designed to share and improve student writing.

Fiction editorial intern at Bowling Green State University May 2014 – Present

- Read and provide feedback for online fiction entries submitted for contest and/or publication to Bowling Green State University's international literary journal *Mid-American Review*.

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Communications/Development intern at Erie's Public Schools (EPS) Fall 2014

- Write education-related news stories on EPS accomplishments within schools and divisions for online publication at [www.eriesd.org/news](http://www.eriesd.org/news) and for news releases and media advisories.
- Support proactive and reactive media relations efforts by gathering facts and information for local news media and developing multimedia content for district website and printed publications.
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- Help organize, coordinate, execute, and market all of LEAF's summer programs and events.

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