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RESURRECTION FERN

by

Amanda Larkin Muir

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

May 2017

Acknowledgement

A previous version of the essay “Early Signs of Clouds” was published in *The Atticus Review*, Fall 2016.

Abstract

Muir, Amanda. MFA. The University of Memphis. December, 2016. *Resurrection Fern*.

Resurrection Fern is a collection of essays that explores the liminal space of becoming a woman; specifically, an independent woman with different ideas and values from what is considered the norm for the speaker's family. The speaker uses vignette-style essays to tell stories of her childhood, trauma, mental illness, and the threshold of adulthood. Themes of overcoming fear and mental illness to find a voice within the spectrum of feminism dominate the essays. The essays are broken into chapters to divulge the speaker's personal stories in relative chronological order.

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Introduction

Resurrection ferns are not simple plants, despite how they appear. They do not blossom or grow tall. They often sprout on branches, and fan out small green leaves that stretch for little more than a few inches. But there is more than meets the eye. Unlike other plants, a resurrection fern can lose most of its water content and survive during long periods of intense drought. During dehydration, the fern shrivels up and turns brown, but it is still alive inside. Once watered, it sprouts back to life, lush and green. The fern needs a host, like a tree branch, but it does not steal nutrients from that host. It produces its own nutrients, completely independent and thriving, even when ninety-seven percent of its water content is lost. I guess it's a kind of quiet plant. It does not spread like bacteria, it does not feed off of others. It is not large or looming. To the casual hiker, it would probably go unnoticed. It is quiet.

In my family, silence is necessary. Not the type of awkward silence where no one says anything around the dinner table, but the type of silence where no one says anything *deep* or *political* or *emotional*. I know the exact number of intimate conversations I have had with my father. It's three. One, when I was thirteen and promised to stay a virgin until I got married. The second was over oatmeal at 6 AM, when I was fifteen, and I told him that I wanted to kill myself sometimes. The third was when I was date-rape drugged and put in the hospital during college. This last conversation I barely remember, but I know that it was over the phone because I begged him not to drive the two hours to Auburn. I know that when I saw him the next weekend, he did not bring it up and wondered why I was refusing to eat the pound cake my mother had brought.

When my mother was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's in August of 2014, he told me over the phone in a static voice. I thought he was in a state of shock. I thought, *after this, we will have no choice— we will be forced to talk about the deep things.*

But we didn't.

My family likes to hide the deep things that are also, sometimes, "bad" things. Occasionally, the bigger problems go on the prayer list at their church, and that is where they stay. My family is quiet.

But I have always been different; I have a desire to speak out. For a long time, I did not have an outlet for this kind of conversation. I wanted boys, sex, fun. I wanted to be wild, to try new things, but I didn't know who to talk to, and I felt guilty. I told myself I was "weird" or "dramatic." I think that many young girls feel this way.

My family silenced me because they thought they were doing the right thing. Maybe they could sense my growing tendencies toward rebellion. Maybe they were scared I would turn out to be "bad," and they decided the best way to avoid it would be not talking about it. As if those bad things in the world simply were not options for me, so they were not real.

I only know that I felt repressed, like I was wilting and stunted. Craving hydration from any source.

As I grew older, I found different ways to feel alive. I tried drugs, drinking, and boys. Sometimes, experiences found me, and they were bad. Many things that happened were not quenching. At times I felt less than alive.

This collection explores those ups and downs, those silent times when I didn't have direction, as well as those times when I found something to latch on to, a place to grow. What has always remained consistent is my independence, my innate lust to feel and be alive and grow. I have learned to be a resurrection fern. I have learned that my periods of drought will end and begin again, and through each time I will keep thriving.

Being a Lady

The creek is our piece of the park. On summer days heavy with the Alabama humidity, we shed our clothes and slip into the brown water, the part of the creek where the water pools together. The hole is only four feet deep at most, but we're seven and we barely touch the bottom. We are comfortable in our nakedness; no one makes us think that we shouldn't be. We are all neighborhood children together in the mud. We eat ice cream and don't listen when our mothers warn us to look out for glass and metal trash in the creek. We pick up rocks with our toes and make waves with our bare arms. Then one day, we go our separate ways to public schools and private schools and church. We come back to humid summers again, but this time the boys chase rattlesnakes and us girls wear swimsuits and lounge around the creek on cotton towels, acting like we're too good to hunt around the woods with the boys, pretending we don't want to throw clumps of mud at each other's suntanned and freckled faces. No, our mothers sent us here dressed and expect us to come back clean. We are "ladies" now, and so we squeal at the snakes and mud and boys and worry about our skin.

Quitting the Water

I squat down on the edge of the boat, carefully leaning out to where my twenty-year-old cousin, Adam, sits on the big yellow inner tube.

“It’s OK, Amanda, Adam’s got ya,” my other cousin, Lynn, says. She smiles and motions for me to keep going.

Shaking, I grab Adam’s hands and stick a foot over water in between the boat and the tube. Adam pulls me up and over the rest of the way and helps me into the tube.

I’m eight, and I know how to swim, but the murky water of Lake Guntersville, Alabama terrifies me.

I sit in the center of the tube while Adam secures his legs on either side and hovers above me, creating a type of safety net.

“You scared, little cuz?” he asks, laughing.

I peek out over the wide rubber tube, eyeing the gleaming water. “I can’t see what’s under there,” I say, trying to steady my breathing and crossing my arms to slow the shaking.

“Only fishies,” he says. He grabs my hands and places them beneath his own around the rough handles of the tube. “Hold tight!”

Brian, Lynn’s husband, revs the engine and the boat starts to move. Adam and I drift farther away from them. I watch my grandmother, lounging on the bench in the back of the boat, big sunglasses shielding her eyes and a book in her hand.

As the boat speeds up, the tube starts to glide.

“You OK?” Adam asks.

I’m gripping the handles, but relaxing. “Yeah, I like this!”

We’re skimming the water behind the boat, gently moving up and down with the waves. I

look around the lake and notice that we're leaving the populated area, where the other boats were, with fishermen casting their lines on the calm water.

I look up at Adam. He's staring ahead, nodding at Brian. Suddenly, the boat speeds up, and we're flying, skimming the surface of the water. I stare straight ahead, at the white boat, fuzzy through the mist that's hitting my eyes. My chest is pounding, but it's not a nervous pounding. It feels good. The wind flows through my nostrils and into my lungs, and I see my grandmother's pale silhouette, one arm outstretched, waving.

When the boat slows down, I pant, laughing, a smile plastered on my face. My cheeks hurt from smiling and my eyes burn from the water.

Adam is laughing, too. "Again?" he asks.

"Again!" I shout.

*

When I'm nine years old, we join a pool close to our neighborhood. My mom takes me there for swim team on weekdays during the summer, and on the weekends, we go there to relax.

I love the water. I love swimming laps during early mornings, even though my coach, a large man named Raphael, shouts at me and the other swimmers continuously.

"Eight hundred! On your mark!" he shouts through our loud, exhausted moans, every time we think we're finished for the morning.

Raphael lets us choose our stroke for the final eight hundred meters, and I always choose backstroke. I can swim it faster than the other strokes, and I can relax my breathing. I swing my arms over my head one by one into the water while I flutter my legs: right, kick kick, left, kick kick, right. I stare at the sun through my goggles, letting my mind wander until I see the rainbow colored flags, which is how I know I'm a few strokes away from flipping over and doing my flip

turn against the wall. I can never swim in a straight line, so I'm used to running into the blue and white racing lane lines while Raphael yells at me to focus.

After I finish the eight hundred, I pull my arms up over the wall and lean my head on the cool concrete, letting my tired legs dangle in the water. After a few seconds, I pull myself up, my arms and legs quivering like noodles, and towel off. My mom waits for me to the side of the pool, chatting with other swim team moms. I limp over to her and stand awkwardly outside of the circle of moms. She glances at me and smiles.

“Go sit down until a lifeguard gets here, and then you can play in the pool. Kaitlin will be here by then, too,” she says.

I walk over to a plastic lounge chair, pull the rubber swim cap off of my head, and wait for Kaitlin.

*

Kaitlin and I play a game called “Star” in the deep end of the pool. The game centers on guessing the name of a movie. One person gets to sit on the diving board (if the lifeguard is the nice one) and think of a movie title. Once they have one in mind, they yell hints to the other players, who are sitting on the wall on the other side of the pool. When the other players think they know the answer, they swim across the pool to the diving board and give their guess. If they're right, they get to be the next “diving board person”; if they're wrong, they must swim back and keep playing.

It's not as much fun with two people, so usually we try to get our siblings to play. Kaitlin's younger brother, Jackson, is two years younger than us, but taller and bigger. I never like it when he plays, because we're equally as competitive, but not equally as fast. He always beats me. I, on the other hand, always beat my younger sister, Abby, who is six years younger

than me. But that doesn't matter; it bothers me that I can't beat Jackson.

Today, we're all there in the deep end. The lifeguard is painting her nails instead of paying attention to the pool, so we all climb onto the diving board and argue about who goes first.

"I'm going first because I'm eleven!" Kaitlin yells.

I'll be eleven in a month and a half, but I'm still ten, so I can't argue with this. Oldest wins. Jackson, Abby and I head to the other side of the deep end and get into the pool, holding on to the edge of the wall, ready to push off.

Kaitlin swings her legs back and forth as she sits on the diving board, thinking.

"It's one letter!" she shouts.

We all nod, waiting. I grip the concrete edge and twist my body towards the diving board, pulling my knees up to my chest, pressing my toes against the wall.

"P!" Kaitlin yells, smiling.

Pocahontas. I know this. It's Kaitlin's favorite movie. I know this. I'm going to win.

I push off of the wall at the same time as Jackson. We're swimming like we're in swim team practice, like Raphael is shouting behind us. I don't look to see if he's next to me or ahead of me. I know I need to stay focused.

Suddenly, Jackson lunges into me, grabbing my head with his hands. We're in the middle of the 8-foot deep end, and there's nothing for me to do. I thrash my arms around wildly, trying to come up for air. I can't see him. Everything is a blurry, bubbly white. I feel his fingers dig into my head and force me down. I'm screaming and he's kicking downward, pushing into my head with his whole body.

I'm going to die.

I need air. Instincts kick in, and I grab his wrists and dig my nails into his flesh. Above the surface, he screams. I keep clawing his arms until he releases me, and I come up for air, gasping.

I open my eyes to see him crying, holding his red wrists out in front of him as he swims back towards the shallow end. I cough and tread water to the side of the pool and look up at the lifeguard, who's focused on the red polish she's painting on her toenails. My mom is running towards me and Kaitlin is screaming.

"Pochahontas," I spit out in between coughs.

I let myself slip back into the water and float, trying to regain my breath.

"How dare you not do your job! Look at my daughter! Look! She could have died!" Mom is yelling at the lifeguard. Embarrassed, I avoid looking at her and swim towards the ladder and pull myself up, shaking.

Kaitlin and Jackson are being dragged out of the pool entrance by their mom. She yells something to my mom, and my mom yells back. Shocked, I try to listen. I've never seen Mrs. Allison this angry.

Mom marches back and towels me off with my blue and green striped towel.

"What happened?" I ask. "Why did Jackson do that to me?"

"He's a boy," she answers.

*

Weeks later, I'm on the boat with Adam again. He tries to get me to sit on the tube.

I shake my head. "No. I'm staying on the boat. Plus, I'm still eating."

He points to the corner of a ham-cheese-and-mustard sandwich that I'm holding in between my fingers. "You've been eating for a long time now. What's wrong?"

“I just want to stay on the boat,” I say, looking out at the dark water. The feeling of water filling my lungs is still fresh.

“Don’t you trust me?” Adam asks.

“You can’t promise me I won’t fall off the tube, can you?”

He looks perplexed by my question, shakes his head. “No.”

I’m not afraid of Adam. I’m afraid of the water.

*

I’m counting down the days until summer ends.

Jackson is on my swim team now, but he doesn’t race with me since I’m eleven and he’s eight and also because I’m a girl and he’s a boy.

But he does play with us at the pool, and so I ask the lifeguard to watch us. This makes Jackson mad, because he’s embarrassed, but that’s not how I see his reaction at eleven years old.

“I don’t understand why you are so mean!” I yell at him, in the middle of the shallow end, close to tears. I slide my blue goggles over my eyes so he doesn’t see any tears.

“Well, I don’t understand why you don’t want me around! I didn’t do anything!” he yells back, making a splash in my direction with his palm.

Kaitlin, always in the middle, always wanting everyone to be happy, chews her nails and mumbles, “Guys...”

I try to be okay. I try to forget what Jackson did. When we play Star, I distance myself from him, swimming slowly towards the diving board.

I don’t mention what happened again. I tell myself that I must have overreacted, like I did at school when a girl told me that my tooth was funny-shaped and my teacher told me I shouldn’t cry. So I try to be tougher and just stay away from the deep end most of the time.

Eventually, the summer ends, and I leave the pool and Star and swim team behind.

*

The next summer, I'm twelve and a pre-teen, so I "lay out" with Kaitlin on the lounge chairs at the pool. We share headphones and listen to music on my dad's new iPod. We take turns spinning the wheel with our thumbs, picking songs. Most of them are Lynyrd Skynyrd songs, but there's some Dixie Chicks that makes up for it.

Jackson and Abby sit on chairs near us, sweating in the heat until they can't take it, and then they beg us to play Star.

We wave them off like they're flies.

"We're laying out, Jackson!" Kaitlin says, a white t-shirt covering her eyes to shield them from the sun.

They slink off to the pool, and we hear them playing a sad two-player game of Star.

"I hope I get tan before school starts," Kaitlin says.

"You will. You have, like, olive skin," I say. I don't really know what this means, but it's what my mom tells me when I complain that Kaitlin gets tans and I only get sunburns.

We take breaks from our tanning to slip into the cold chlorine water for a few seconds, but we don't play in the water because we're too old and because, though I can't say it out loud yet, I'm too scared.

*

"But you used to love the ocean!" My mom stands on the beach, letting the tide reach her toes before it pulls away, back into the sea.

"I know, but I don't anymore. I can't explain it," I reply, looking out across the water.

It's my first spring break as a college student, and I had decided to go to Destin with my

mom and Abby. Less than a quarter of a mile down the beach, college students are funneling beers and blasting rap music. That will be me in a few years, but I don't know that yet. For now, I'm enjoying the peaceful part of the beach where we are.

"You were like a little fish! We couldn't get you out of the water!" Mom says, shaking her head.

I can't remember loving the ocean as much as she remembers that I do, but I know what she means.

"It's fine. I'll sit under the umbrella with you and read a book," I say, and this seems to make her happy.

We settle into the navy chairs under the umbrella, while Abby lies on a sandy towel in the sun, headphones in her ears.

The ocean glistens before us, stretching and blending into the bright sky.

I know I'm fine here, in the sand, but I think about what it would be like to play Star in the ocean— waves pushing us away, down under the surface, filling lungs with salty foam.

Black Sheep

The rocking chair by the window in my grandmother's room was uncomfortable, but it was in the farthest corner of the house, away from the extensive amount of family members that were in her living room. I sat there, rocking back and forth, reading my mother's old copy of *Little Women*. I was fourteen, and had begun carrying a book with me wherever I went. My mother's yellowed childhood books had intrigued me. I was only half-reading because I was so hungry, the growls coming from my stomach being a bit of a distraction. But, I reasoned that I been kicked out of the living room, where everyone was watching football, when my aunt and uncle decided to cuddle on the floor next to where I was laying. Disgusted, I had attempted to scoot over, but ended up pressed against the leg of the coffee table.

"I'm going to read awhile," I'd said. Everyone cheered at the TV and didn't seem to notice me leaving.

Now, curled up in the wooden rocking chair, I wondered if anyone was ever going to come check on me.

"Well let's all watch Lo cut the turkey!" My grandmother's high-pitched voice rang out from the kitchen on the other side of the wall.

They're cutting the turkey without me? I frowned and set my book down, straining to hear more conversation.

Soon I heard chairs scooting around and forks hitting plates.

Oh my God, they're eating Thanksgiving Dinner without me! I couldn't believe it. My heart pounding, I slammed my book shut and stormed out of the room.

"Well! Thanks for letting me know it was time for 'family' dinner!" I glared at them from the arched doorway into the dining room.

Everyone burst into laughter and my mother quickly stood up.

“Sweetie,” she said, laughing. “I was just about to come get you!” She pulled me in to hug me and then led me into the kitchen. “Let’s fix you a plate.”

Unfortunately for her, and the rest of the family, I took this incident more personally than I perhaps should have, and once we returned home I angrily wrote about it in my journal.

“*My family does not understand me,*” I wrote. After I pounded out more sentences composed of words like “miserable,” “alone,” and “hopeless,” I put in my headphones and curled up in the corner of my room, behind a chair and lamp.

“*She’s simple yet confusing...*” My favorite “punk” band, *From First to Last*, echoed through my head as I cried and imagined the lyrics to be written about me. I leaned my head against the blue wall, where penciled doodles and bits of my early attempts at poetry were scribbled (I’d discovered William Faulkner recently and tried to imitate his style, sans alcohol).

At moments like this, I couldn’t resist the thoughts of my family that came into my head. I convinced myself that they didn’t understand me because they were not my ‘real’ family. I had always known I was adopted, but I never viewed it negatively until my early teen years.

Somehow when I hit puberty, I saw myself as the sore thumb of the family, a jarring embodiment of rebellion in a picture-perfect Christian Conservative family. I wanted pink hair and combat boots. I wanted to write depressing stories about little girls that had corners to cry in. When my mother failed to understand my style or passion, I didn’t know where to turn.

For a long time, I tried not to let myself think about her. My biological mother. It felt like a sin to put her in my mother’s place. But when I was a pre-teen, I began hurling the words at her without thinking.

“You’re not my real mom!” I’d scream from the top of the stairs. Her face would fall,

and she would turn around and go into her room without a word. The next day was always hard. Wrinkled, purple skin had replaced her usual fair and smooth skin under her eyes. She hugged me and cried when I said I was sorry. I always cried, too.

*

In third grade, I asked my mom for book to write stories in. She gave me a Steno pad and a fat pencil, and I spent most of my summer in our unfinished basement, where I had created a clubhouse of my own. My sister, Abby, was just a toddler and I had little interest in her. I wanted to be a singer, and actress, and a writer. In the basement, I blared Amy Grant cassette tapes and wrote long stories. Most of these stories were, for a reason I can't remember, about the Great Depression. I wrote about little girls in gingham dresses working in factories or farming on dusty land in the West.

I proudly showed my mom once the Steno was full, and watched her face as she flipped through it. Slowly, her expression grew more concerned.

“Why are the stories so sad?” she asked me.

Later, I listened at the top of the stairs as she discussed the issue with my Dad.

“I don't know why her stories as so sad. Do you think she's sad about something?”

I felt weird. Like a black sheep.

*

I've always imagined meeting my biological mother. When I was little, I pictured the reunion occurring at a McDonald's. I guess I pictured it that way because when I was small, that was where my parents took me to tell me important things, like when I found out we were adopting my sister. They gave me chocolate and vanilla-swirled ice cream and I cried because I was so excited to be a big sister. When we got her, she was beautiful, dressed in pink and in her

own little crib at the adoption agency. I wondered if I looked that beautiful.

When I asked my mom if the day they got me was as happy as that one, she said: “You are the biggest blessing.” She always said that adoption was part of “God’s plan.”

Even if I didn’t know who or what I believed in, I still felt that she was right. I knew that somehow, we had been brought together. On purpose.

I don’t know when my mother gave me the box of things from my biological mother, but it’s always been there, behind my closet door. The little remnants of her, the only clues I have to her. When we moved, the box moved too, and came to rest behind a new closet door. Whenever I visit home, I can’t resist pulling it off of the shelf and gently lifting the baby bibs she cross-stitched for me. I run my fingers over the bumpy X’s that form bears and ducks, and try to imagine being a pregnant fifteen-year-old, cross-stitching to pass the time.

When I imagine her, she is young, with long blonde hair and eyes blue like mine. Her mouth is in a half-smile, and she’s looking at me as she cradles her pregnant belly with her arms. She wears a floral dress and chunky black boots. Only fifteen years old.

When I turned fifteen, even before I turned fifteen, all I could really think about was how my ‘real’ mom was pregnant at my age. I sat at the table of the Mexican restaurant during my surprise party and laughed with my friends, but I was alone in my thoughts. I didn’t even have a boyfriend. I couldn’t imagine having sex yet. I couldn’t imagine having a *baby*. I pushed the thoughts away as I caught my mother’s eyes. She was smiling at me proudly.

“Are you having fun?”

I nodded.

“Were you surprised?” she asked.

“Yes. Thank you, Mom. I love you.”

She hugged me tightly, squeezing me the way she always did. “I’m so grateful for you.”

That night, I realized that I could love my mother and who she was without having to be identical to her.

At times during college, it was hard to connect with my mother on a personal level. She didn’t know who my favorite authors were. She didn’t understand why I sometimes sent her handwritten letters. When I got three piercings my freshman year of college, she cried. I can’t even discuss my Gender and Literature class with her, because it’s too liberal. Once, I let her read a piece I wrote about my grandmother’s old house. She hated it.

“Well! That sure makes us look like some poor country hicks! You know, I grew up in that house. The floors did *not* ‘creak under raggedy carpet.’ Sounds like an orphanage.”

I pitched a bit of a fit, moped around and said, “I’ll reword it,” exhausted.

It’s funny, I still have those “you don’t understand me” moments with her, but it doesn’t matter. She’s my mother and I call her almost every day, despite our dramatic differences.

*

“Does it ever bother you that you’re. . .” Kaitlin stared at her feet. I waited. “. . . Well, adopted?”

It was third grade and we were on the playground, playing House as we did most days.

“No. I mean, I was a baby when they got me.”

“Yeah. It’s neat, really. Because your parents *chose* you. Mine just sort of had me. But yours went there, and picked you out,” Kaitlin said as she plucked at some leaves.

“I guess you’re right.” I pulled some leaves off of the bush and put them in a bowl made of bark, which was actually just a little hole in the ground. “Spinach for dinner!”

We continued playing house, and Kaitlin didn't say anything else. But her words stuck with me and haunted me throughout the years to come, and I'd eventually remember them when I sat in my corner, crying. I had never thought about it like that.

My parents picked me.

Thou Shalt Steal

“Who’s bra is this?” Mrs. Pickett, my eighth grade cheerleading coach, asked our squad one day after practice. The flimsy grey bra dangled from one of her fingers as she eyed the twelve of us. When no one spoke up, she sighed. “Now, I know you may be embarrassed to claim it, so I’m going to leave it in the bathroom. Feel free to go in there and grab it if it’s yours; no one will see you.”

The twelve of us looked around at each other. We knew the bra was small, probably a 32A at least, so we eyed each other’s chests. I hunched over and crossed my arms, hoping no one would look at me. It wasn’t mine.

“Is it yours?” I whispered to Sydney Lynn, a petite, freckled girl who I didn’t really like.

“Ew, no. It’s probably yours!” she yelled.

I rolled my eyes and gave a light laugh. “Sydney Lynn, come on. I don’t think it would fit me.” In reality, I knew it would, but at thirteen, I was still stuffing my bra, and I couldn’t let anyone know my true breast size.

After practice, I snuck into the bathroom. Sure enough, the grey bra was on the counter. I picked it up and looked at the tag. *Victoria’s Secret. 32A.* My mom never allowed me to shop at Victoria’s Secret. All of my bras were boring white Hanes-from-Wal-mart bras. Nervous that someone might see me take it, I set the bra back on the counter and swung open the bathroom door to check for other cheerleaders in the hall.

Clear.

I turned back around to the bra and thought about it. I *really* wanted to own a Victoria’s Secret bra. I picked it up again and quickly stuffed it into my cheerleading duffle bag.

Okay, just act like that didn’t just happen. That did not. just. happen.

I left the bathroom and walked to my mom, waiting outside in her minivan, the added weight of a stolen bra in my bag pulling on my arm.

*

My freshman year of college at Auburn University in Alabama, I decided that I was officially a “broke college girl.” I ate ramen noodles and Easy-Mac in my dorm room every night, except for the nights I used my dining dollars on campus to eat Chick-Fil-A or Papa John’s. The only thing I kept in our mini fridge was a tub of cookie dough. I would often borrow my roommate’s clothes, and sometimes I exchanged clothes with the other girls in my dorm, as well. I rarely went shopping for new clothes, except for the times my dad would call and say “I put some money in your bank account. One day, you can get a job, but it’s your freshman year, and you need to stay focused on school.”

He did this often, so by any other person’s definition, I was not “broke.” But eventually, the fifty dollars my dad gave me every week or so wasn’t enough to support my frivolous lifestyle. I went on shopping trips with my roommate and my friends, and since they were all in similar situations (no job, Dad giving them occasional money), we mostly tried things on and just walked around different stores. Sometimes, we looked at sale sections and splurged on twenty-dollar dresses to wear for the weekend. I had to constantly calculate whether or not it was worth it to buy a dress instead of saving money to eat a “fancier” dinner that weekend.

One day, I drove to the nearest Target by myself. My roommate, Ginny, frequently left town to visit her family in Birmingham, the city we both grew up in about two hours away. This must have been one of those weekends, or maybe I was just in the mood for some alone time.

In Target, I walked through the jewelry section and picked up necklaces, holding them to my neck in the mirror. I looked at a bronze-chained one with a yellow stone on it. I rubbed the

stone with my fingers, admiring the vintage appeal to it. A small gold tassel hung delicately over the stone like a curtain. The price tag said \$17.99, but I threw it in my shopping basket anyway. I knew I couldn't afford to buy it if I wanted to go out that weekend, but I didn't want to consider that.

As I walked through the lingerie section, I kept thinking about the necklace. I really wanted it, and my purse was enormous. *No one would even notice. Just take it! It's not like Target will suffer a huge economic loss from losing one little necklace.*

I looked around, clutching the necklace in my fist. I walked up and down the aisle a few times before thrusting it into my purse under my arm and marching back out into the open aisle of the store. Then, I walked straight back to the front of the store, tossed my basket onto the ground, and pushed open the door to the parking lot.

Once in my car, I peeked into my purse and felt the necklace. It was mine.

*

The bra didn't even fit right. I stood in front of my bathroom mirror, struggling to clasp it together behind my back. Then I stood up straight and looked at my chest. The grey cups gaped open around my lack of breasts, and the straps slid down my boney shoulders. I grabbed some toilet paper and stuffed the cups, but it still looked saggy. I pulled on a pink cable knit sweater and turned around in front of the mirror, looking at myself from different angles, pushing the toilet paper around my chest, molding it into two circular mounds. My fake boobs looked even worse with the sweater on—still saggy, and somehow more pointy.

Frustrated, I took it off, thinking I might take it back to the school's bathroom the next day. But I looked at it again, and this time it wasn't even about the Victoria's Secret label; it was just that I *had it*—something that wasn't mine before. I folded it neatly and placed it in my

underwear drawer.

*

“Look, most of these girls are bitches anyway. It’s hardly stealing if we just take a little bit from everyone,” I explained to my best friend, Mary Jo. We were sitting on the rough carpeted floor of her dorm room, two floors above my own, trying to figure out how to get some alcohol for the night. Our plan was to get drunk and eat cheese cubes and yell out of her window at people in the quad below us.

She looked nervous, but she was smiling. “You are insane.”

I laughed. “I know. But we can’t just *ask* people for it. That would be weird.”

Ten minutes later, Mary Jo was standing guard while I searched other girls’ rooms for their alcohol stashes. We knocked on random doors, and if no one was there, I just walked in. Most girls actually kept their rooms unlocked, which surprised me. Most of them simply left bottles of Aristocrat and Captain Morgan lying around their beds.

We had one empty water bottle with a little black star on the cap, and I filled that bottle with about a half-inch of alcohol—it didn’t matter what kind—from every stash we found. My hands shook as I twisted bottle caps and poured liquor and I thought, *I have no fucking idea why I’m doing this*. I ignored my conscience, who shouted back, “Um, greed! You’re greedy!”

By the end of the dorm search, we had a full water bottle of mixed liquors. The result was disgusting, but the alcohol was ours. And not one of the girls would ever notice.

*

At thirteen, I was a thief, but I was a religious, Bible-waving, Jesus-freak kind of thief. I labeled the bra as “found,” narrowly escaping God’s wrath aimed at my disobedience of his “Thou shalt not steal” rule. The bra would have probably ended up in lost and found anyway,

right?

*

My friend, Laura, and I used to drive to an antique store that was situated by the interstate, on the edge of a tiny town a few miles outside of Auburn. We met during our sophomore year at Auburn and bonded over our infatuation with our philosophy professor, a love for poetry and Bob Dylan, and our similar prescriptions for antidepressants. Laura could steal effortlessly. She walked into a store with her huge black leather purse, and though I would stay by her side the entire time and never notice it, she managed to steal tons of scarves and necklaces and rings. Sometimes she wouldn't tell me, but if I said something later such as, "I wish I had bought that pair of earrings I liked," her response would be, "Oh, I stole them," and she'd pull them out of her bag with a huge grin on her face.

At the antique store, we walked up and down aisles of junk. The store was called "Angel's Antiques," but it was really a flea market of sorts. The store was a large warehouse, with about two hundred booths in it. Each booth had an owner and each owner sold various things—tin cans, old war memorabilia, wooden yard signs, spoons, coffee mugs, and vintage pieces of jewelry. The sellers were rarely there, and it was easy to slip things into our bags.

Laura and I picked over rings, bracelets and little trinkets. Usually, I bought something random, like an old book or, once, a little jar of buttons, to make myself feel better about the clinking weight in my purse.

My favorite stolen treasure was a small silver ring that had the shape of a running bear on it. He was on all fours, with his mouth open wide. It fit on my forefinger, and it was an interesting conversation starter at parties.

I wore it almost every day until lost it a few summers ago when I was visiting an ex-

boyfriend in New Jersey. We drank too much and had sex in his backyard, and somewhere during that the ring must have slipped off. The next morning, I snuck out of his house to look for it, but when his mom found me and questioned my inspecting of her lawn, I had to stop my search. Eventually, I decided it was karma for stealing it from some poor flea market seller in the first place.

*

Every time I had to clean out my closet, I couldn't bring myself to give away the grey bra. For years I forgot about it, but it inevitably surfaced to the top of my clothes pile every now and then. I didn't know why I couldn't let go of it. Years after my bra size had graduated from the 32A category and I was no longer stuffing my bra, I still couldn't let that thing go.

*

There were times at Auburn when Laura and I got together to go out downtown. We liked to go to the bars in the heart of the town because they were walking distance from our apartments, though we didn't have much money between the two of us. Most of the time, we called our adventures downtown "scavenging adventures."

During any given night out, a typical conversation between us went like this:

"I found two red drinks in the bathroom."

"Cool. I got this guy over here to buy me shots, but we need to ditch him fast 'cause he's creepy as fuck."

Any unattended drink was ours.

We stood by the bar and listened to people order their drinks.

"Whiskey sour! And three Vegas bombs!" A guy sporting a visor shouted at the bartender.

“What’s the name on the tab?” The bartender shouted back.

“Johnson!” The dude shouted back, and then after he left, guess who stepped up to order a drink on Mr. Johnson’s tab?

We didn’t see any danger in it. If it was free, and it got us drunk, it was fine.

*

I don’t have the bra anymore. Losing stuff is probable when you move nine times in seven years. In it’s place, though, I have T-shirts and tank tops and a hideous golden dress with brown swirls on it—because if you left clothing at my apartment during my years at Auburn, then you probably wouldn’t see it in *your* closet again.

*

Off of the top of my head, I can count four bars in Alabama that are missing a significant number of beer and wine glasses. Throughout college, I smuggled these, once empty, through jackets, vests, and pockets.

Here’s a tip: if you wear a loose enough dress, you can fit a surprisingly large number of pint glasses under it, tucked into the waist lining of your panties.

One time, after a terrible fight in one of these bars with the New Jersey ex-boyfriend, he threw his glass full of beer on the ground right in front of the bartender. While the bartender was distracted with the task of cleaning up the mess and appropriately chewing him out, I tucked my own glass into the inside of my coat. No one noticed, and I left the bar with one more pint glass to add to my collection.

I still have these glasses, and if you ask my boyfriend, he will tell you that I am very particular about them. No one gets to use them except me—especially the blue-green Abita Andygator one.

*

On one of my first dates with my current boyfriend, Drummond, we stopped at a gas station for beer after a night out with friends. He went inside, and I stayed in the car. Five minutes later, he came running out with a funny smile and wide eyes.

“What?” I asked him.

He pulled his hand out of his pocket to show me two sticks of bubblegum cigars: one pink, one blue. “I didn’t pay for these,” he said, breathless, and I fucking loved him right then.

He laughed and started the car, but I put my hand on his to stop him.

“Wait,” I said. “I want to go in and steal something, too.”

“What? No. No, don’t do that. I got us gum!”

I rolled my eyes. “But I can steal us some beer or something!”

“Amanda. . .” He seemed uncomfortable. “Let’s just go and drink the beer that I already bought, OK?”

I sat back and told myself to calm down. It had been a long time since I’d stolen something, and I didn’t want to get carried away again.

A few weeks later, on another date with Drummond, we went back to the bar where we met. It was a karaoke bar named “Starz,” one of Birmingham’s many dark and grungy bars. People sat silhouetted at tables around a stage, where someone belted out John Legend, R. Kelly, or, quite often, Shania Twain. We took two shots of vodka out of tacky Starz-labeled shot glasses and then I pocketed them. Drummond looked at me disapprovingly.

“What?” I asked. “I want memorabilia! This is where we met!” I slurred. The stealing started out of a desire to be rebellious—but it became a habit and I couldn’t seem to shake the thrill.

*

I don't steal bras or rings or drinks anymore. But I still swipe the occasional glass from a table at any given bar, if I get drunk enough.

Two years ago, I bought a red dress and wore it on my second day of teaching freshman English in Memphis. I left the tag on it, and after teaching my class I drove home, changed, and returned it to the store that I bought it from. I felt the same satisfaction that I did that day in the dorm building, kneeling on the carpet, pouring stolen vodka into my water bottle.

I used to steal to be rebellious, to feel something different and exciting. Now that I'm older, it's just nice to get that sensation every now and then. I like to own things that aren't mine.

More specifically, I like to own things that aren't *supposed* to be mine.

Here is a confession: part of me will always be a thief.

How I Became a Freak-A-Leek

“I’m going to have sex with my husband as soon as we’re married. Like, in the limo. On the way to the reception,” I told my best friend, Kaitlin, as we ate lunch in our high school cafeteria.

“Me, too. I’m ripping his suit right off of him.” She giggled. “The limo driver will just have to deal with it.”

“Shh, here comes Jeff,” I said, not wanting her boyfriend to hear.

“No, he knows. We both want to have sex, but obviously we’re going to wait until we’re married. Right, Jeff?”

Jeff slid his lunch tray next to hers and sat down. “What are we talking about?” he asked.

But by then, our other friends were there, and we changed the subject. I thought about my boyfriend, Rob, and how badly I wanted to sleep with him. He was sixteen, so he had a car, and he was short and plump with glasses and lots of back acne. I was fifteen, so I estimated that I had about seven years before I could have sex, since I planned to be married right after college.

All of my friends felt this way. We were a group of kids straight out of one of those home videos they play at Bible camp: a few boys and girls in khaki skirts and Keds, laughing and talking about Jesus while they ate their bologna sandwiches their moms made for them. We didn’t know any other way to act. We were raised with religion, in a private Presbyterian school associated with a church of the same name in Birmingham, Alabama, and the most important thing we were taught was to never have sex—outside of marriage. The morals that we were taught directly related to our religion. Following the Bible’s rules meant going to Heaven when you died. There were kids in my grade who were “wild,” like Melanie, who I’d heard made out with the football team quarterback while drunk, and Carol, who was sent to the principal’s office

for letting a boy touch her boob in study hall. But they were the outcasts in my school. Melanie and Carol called my friends and I the “Holy Rollers,” and we took it as a complement. We were popular, because at Briarwood, it was “cool” to go to chapel and be in the front row during worship, jumping up and down while singing contemporary praise songs, and it was also cool to be a virgin.

At fifteen years old, I quickly realized that it was a lot easier to “guard my body” and stay true to my religion when I was fourteen and didn’t have a boyfriend or a sex drive. Now, sophomore year of high school, I was feeling all kinds of new and strange things. I had an “older” boyfriend, and I wanted to make out with him.

But we felt pressured to wait.

“Rob and I decided to kiss on our six-month anniversary,” I told Kaitlin.

“I don’t know when Jeff will kiss me, but I’ve been practicing,” she said. “Practicing on my hand, I mean.”

That was something I hadn’t thought about. But I wasn’t too worried, because it would be Rob’s first kiss, too.

When Rob finally kissed me, it was four months into our relationship, because we couldn’t wait six whole months. We were at a state park one afternoon in the woods, sitting on some rocks, staring at the view of Birmingham in front of us. In a matter of minutes, his lips were on mine, and soon we were rolling around in the dirt, grabbing at each other’s faces. There was a lot of saliva and groping. We kept our clothes on and rubbed our bodies against each other, exploring and feeling. Brown and gold leaves littered our hair and other hikers wandered through the woods in the distance.

After that, Rob and I met up to make out whenever we could. I made excuses to my mom

and dad, saying I had to study with Kaitlin at Starbucks, or I was meeting up with Rob so he could tutor me in Math. We also met in a church parking lot close to the high school every morning before school. I admitted this to Kaitlin, and she said, “Ew! You make out with your morning breath?”

The next time we met up in the morning, I could only think about Rob’s morning breath.

*

I started coming home at night with hickeys. They were all over my body. My mother was the first to notice.

“Are those—are those *passion marks*?” she said one evening, as I tried to skulk past her and up the stairs.

I pulled the hood of my sweatshirt closer around my neck. “What? What are you talking about?”

She marched over from the kitchen, her face scrunched up as she squinted at my neck, and yanked my sweatshirt down. “*Those*,” she said, jabbing an index finger into my neck. Then, she yanked the zipper down, exposing my chest, and gasped.

“Oh my *word*, he sucked at your *breasts!*”

I wasn’t grounded, remarkably, but I did promise her that I wouldn’t let Dad find out. Together, Mom and I made up a story about a make-up brush flying from the hand of another girl in theater and hitting me in the neck, several times. I remember his face as we told him the story, eyebrows raised, mouth ajar, and then his response when we finished: “I never understood women and their make-up.”

*

Rob’s parents were going out of town one weekend. We were celebrating eight months of

being together, eight months of slobbery make-outs in Starbucks parking lots. We excitedly planned to continue our favorite pastime, and make out in his bed after the spring school play that we were both working on, *Hello Dolly*. I was on the makeup crew for the cast, and Rob was building the set, which I found extremely sexy. The only roadblock was his older brother, Ben, who was supposed to be in town visiting from college. Ben was in school to be a pastor, had never had a girlfriend, and saw himself as a father figure to Rob. There was no way he would let me into Rob's room.

“Look. We can make this work,” he told me. “Ben is going to be with his friends while we're at the play. If we leave early, I can sneak you in.”

“Sounds great to me,” I said. I didn't care if I was caught, because I was growing sick of following rules every day and starting to feel like retaliating. But I knew Rob was nervous, since his parents were even more strict than mine (they didn't even own a TV).

We got to his house on the planned night. There was a storm outside, and the thunder shook the ground under us while we walked from the car to the front door. I wondered if we would have sex. My heart beat fast and hard in my chest and the sky lit up ominously with lightening. Rob unlocked the door, and I walked into his living room for the first time, looking around.

There was a clock ticking, like a mother's clicking tongue, as if to say, *Don't you do it!* while wagging a finger. Along the walls were lace doilies with Bible verses threaded onto them, like “As For Me And My House, We Shall Serve The Lord.” Family portraits dotted the walls in wooden frames: Rob, pimple-faced and wearing his glasses, and Ben, looking like Prince Charming in a polo, with a smirk on his face. I shuddered at his eyes and looked away.

“Can't we turn on a light?” I asked.

“Shh! Just come upstairs,” Rob whispered.

We tiptoed up the stairs and into his room. Rob slipped the straps of my dress off my shoulders and pulled me closer to him, closer to his bed. I was trying to take it all in. There were baseball sheets and baseball wallpaper, a recliner chair in the corner of the room, and thought I could still hear a clock ticking.

“You’re into baseball?” I asked.

“Shh! No, stop.” He kissed me and pushed me onto the bed, but then we heard something. A door slam. Boots on the hardwood. A voice.

“Rob? Why are all of the lights off?” Ben yelled.

“Oh, shit, oh shit oh shit oh shit,” Rob muttered. “Here—” he said, and he dragged me from the bed and pushed me into his closet.

I heard Ben crack the door open. I was trying to breathe lighter. I was trying to keep from vomiting.

“Rob?”

“Hey, Ben, heh heh, what’s up?” I heard Rob’s nervous voice crack.

“You OK? Why are you in the dark?” Ben asked.

“Oh, uh, I was just going to bed!” Rob squeaked the last word out and I cringed.

“Then why are you fully dressed?” Ben asked. I pictured Rob in his shirt and tie and held my breath, waiting for his answer.

“Ben, look, I—I just got here. I was going to get undressed, jeez,” Rob answered.

“Well...alright. ‘Night, I guess.” I could hear the skepticism in Ben’s voice.

I heard the door shut and Rob came to the closet and opened the door. He looked anxious. “Hurry, I’m going to sneak you out through the front door. Wait for me outside and I’ll drive you

home.”

So I was rushed down the stairs and out the front door and into the rain, where I waited, squinting at Rob’s blue house from the side of the road. Rob came outside a few minutes later.

“What took so long? I’m soaked!” I shouted through the rain.

Rob looked at me through streams of water. I couldn’t see his eyes, because his glasses were covered in raindrops. He shook his head.

“Come back inside! He knows!” he yelled back.

I followed him back up the sidewalk and into the house. Ben sat on the sofa, staring straight ahead, sitting upright with his hands resting on his knees. My red and white striped dress was soaked and see-through. I hid behind Rob.

“Amanda,” Ben said, and then he looked at me. “Nice to finally meet you.”

“You too!” I smiled.

Ben laughed. “No, no. It’s not *really* nice to meet you. I was being *sarcastic*.” He looked me up and down, and I noticed his eyebrows raise. I moved my arms so they were crossed over my breasts.

Rob puffed his chest up and moved closer to him, but Ben held up his hand.

“Sit down, Rob,” he said.

Rob immediately sat where he was standing.

“You, too, Amanda,” Ben said, and nodded to the space on the floor next to Rob.

I sank down onto the carpet, wishing I could sink through it and into some tunnel underground that would take me home.

“This is what’s going to happen,” Ben said. “I’m going to take you home, Amanda. And then I’m going to tell your parents what I’ve seen. I’m very, very disappointed in you two.” He

kept staring at me, like he was trying to burn into my soul.

I started crying. I felt like Jesus himself was telling me that he was disappointed in me. Ben drove me home in his truck, and the entire thirty minutes to my house, he just kept saying, “I am so disappointed. So, so disappointed.”

The first ten minutes, I cried. I was mortified.

After twenty minutes, I was angry. I slammed my fists into the seat cushion and screamed. “Stop it! Stop! It! Stop saying that!”

Ben looked over, his eyes widened, shocked. “Well, I *am* disappointed! I thought my brother would have a *godly woman!*”

I shook with anger, not knowing where it was coming from, and not caring. “Oh, no no no no no! You do *not* get to put the blame on me!”

“You know what, Amanda? You go ahead and yell. I’m just going to tell your parents everything.”

And then, I said the one phrase I’d never said out loud: “Fuck you.”

At my house, Ben knocked on the front door. My mom answered, confused.

“Where’s Rob? Who are you?” she asked.

“Hi, ma’am, I’m Rob’s brother. I caught them at my parent’s house ma’am, in the dark,”

Ben said, standing stiff, like a police officer.

My mom called my dad over. “Hon, get over here. Amanda and Rob were apparently...I’m sorry, sweetie, what did you say they were doing?”

Ben cleared his throat. “I don’t really know, ma’am. They were fooling around is my guess.”

My mom smiled. My dad didn’t. To my surprise, he said, “Well, that’s really none of

your business, is it, son? Thanks for bringing her home. Goodnight.” He pulled me in, shut the door, and I never heard another word about it.

Rob’s parents forced him to see a therapist for sex addiction, and he had to write numerous letters to my parents begging for their forgiveness, which only succeeded in weirding them out. On the other hand, I wasn’t in serious trouble with my parents. I only got a small lecture and then the whole event was promptly forgotten, a typical solution to issues within my family. But I was beginning to face a new demon of my own.

I analyzed the memory of my freak-out in Ben’s truck. I wondered where it came from. I’d never lashed out before. I’d cried plenty of times—I was an emotional child and adolescent. I knew I had emotional issues when I started writing poetry on my walls and wearing black and labeling most of my diary entries as “Reason # ____ that no one understands me.” I was familiar with sadness. Anger, on the other hand, was never my problem.

I didn’t understand why Ben blamed me, or why I wasn’t a “godly woman.” My entire life, I considered myself “godly,” because I went to church and prayed and read my Bible. But Ben made me question things.

Months later, Rob left to attend Covenant College, a private university in Lookout Mountain, Georgia. He was four hours away, but he came back to visit me on some weekends and for Briarwood’s school dances. We stayed together for awhile, much to his parents’ disappointment. While he was away, we talked on the phone every day. He told me about their chapel sermons, and how different they were from Briarwood’s sermons. He told me Covenant was a dry campus, and they couldn’t even have bourbon ice cream. He told me he was starting to hate Christianity and it scared him.

Stuck in my Briarwood bubble in Birmingham, I was having similar feelings. I was tired of feeling forced to believe in something. I was weary of sermons and lectures on my virginity, on being pure.

I heard my history teacher bash Catholics by saying they “would never get into Heaven” and saw my liberal English teacher be fired for saying that homosexuality wasn’t a sin. I listened to my preacher yell about the sins of masturbation and sex outside of marriage during school chapel. By my senior year of high school, I was seeing a sad and cruel side of my religion, and I didn’t like it. I was close to abandoning my religion and some of the strict, overpowering morals that came with it, but I had no one to talk to.

*

Spring semester of my senior year, I was driving home from school, imagining prom plans and thinking of the beautiful pink silk dress I had, hanging on my closet door, waiting to be worn. Two more weeks and Rob would be home, and we had a full night planned of dinner, dancing, and possibly finally losing our virginity in the back of my car in a parking lot. I predicted it would be a little like the scene from *The Titanic*, steamy handprints on the windows and everything, all while I looked like a princess in my dress.

Rob called me as I was picturing this happening.

“Rob! I was just thinking about prom,” I said as I answered the phone.

“Are you driving?” he asked me.

“Yeah, but I’m almost home!”

“Well let me know when you’re parked in your driveway,” he replied.

I kept driving down the curves of our neighborhood, not questioning his request. I rambled about prom, talking about the plans I had made with Kaitlin and Jeff for the four of us to

go to a fancy restaurant beforehand.

“. . .And I told you my dress is pink, right? So, just, you know, keep that in mind when you get my corsage. Okay, I'm here.” I pulled in the driveway and parked. “What is it?”

“I don't want to say it. You're going to break up with me when I tell you.” He sounded awful. His voice was cracking and I thought he was crying.

“Rob, what is it? Is this a trick or something?” I waited, but he was breathing too hard to talk.

“No.” He started sobbing. “I cheated.”

“You. . .what?”

“I told my friend Amy I loved her, and then I kissed her—a lot.”

“Do you love her?” I asked. Now my voice was cracking.

“I think so,” he said.

My chest hurt, and I didn't know what to say. I hit “End” and dropped the phone. I got up out of the driver's seat and lay down on the cold concrete of the driveway next to my car, curled into a ball, and cried.

*

For the last couple of months of the school year, I put my feelings about my break-up to the side. I didn't want the end of my senior year to be miserable. Rob wrote me a few letters—long apologies about ruining my life, notes about Amy and his unrequited love for her, then other letters begging for me to love him again. I read them, but I ultimately stuck them in a shoebox and didn't talk to him. I had fun with my friends and found another boy to take to prom. I kissed him on prom night, and I loved the feeling of kissing another boy—a *new* boy. I had all of this free time and free space in my mind, because Rob was gone from my thoughts and I wasn't

thinking about following the Bible's every rule anymore. In fact, I was excited to start college and meet other boys and go to parties.

"I'm going to dance on bars and let people pour whiskey shots on my *face!*," I said to Kaitlin one night, while I was spending the night at her house.

Her phone had been buzzing all night, because Jeff was texting her constantly, probably updating her on his every move. *Buzz*. "I'm walking to the bathroom." *Buzz*. "I'm pooping now." I rolled my eyes. *People in relationships are disgusting*, I thought.

Kaitlin laughed at my comment, but she was looking at her phone. She wasn't really listening.

"I'm going to get *naked* and let any guy *fuck me* that wants to!" I shouted.

She looked up at this. "OK, so you're going to go crazy in college. We all saw that coming."

"What?"

"Well, people have been calling you a freek-a-leak."

"A 'freek-a-leak'? Seriously?" I recognized the term from a popular Petey Pablo song by the same name, an explicit number that praised the girls who did "it" anywhere, any way that "daddy" likes it.

"Yeah, you've been making out with different guys and stuff," Kaitlin said as she texted Jeff.

I rolled my eyes and leaned back on her bed. "A 'freek-a-leak.' I like that." I smiled at the way it sounded. I wanted to be crazy.

*

That summer after senior year, Kaitlin and I, along with our other friends, took a trip to

the beach in Destin, Florida. Jeff and our guy friends were there as well. We rented two houses, and two sets of parents stayed with us to chaperone, splitting up between the houses. The two moms stayed in the girls' house, and the two dads stayed with the boys. It wasn't exactly fair, in my opinion, because the moms were much stricter than the dads. The dads brought beer and cigars for themselves, relaxed, and let the boys come and go when they pleased. The moms, on the other hand, gave us a curfew of midnight every night, and followed us around when we went to a restaurant or to the beach.

This really pissed me off, because I had secret plans to deploy my new "freak-a-leak" self. I knew one of the guys, Thomas, who had some alcohol, and he was flirting with me, hinting at meeting up on the beach to drink together.

One night, some of the girls went over to the guys' house to hang out. A few of us, Thomas included, went up onto the roof of the house and drank some vodka from a flask someone had hidden under their shirt. It was the first time I had ever tried alcohol, and I didn't know how I should act afterwards. I only had a few sips from the flask, but I stumbled around, laughing, holding onto Thomas and pretending to be intoxicated. I left to make it back to the "mom police" in time for curfew.

The next morning, I joined the boys on the beach.

"I'm so hungover," Thomas said, laughing. He rubbed his head and moaned. "My stomach is *killing!*"

"Yeah, me too," I said, pretending to grab my stomach.

"You were so drunk last night," he said, and then he reached for my hand. My heart thumped harder when he touched me. "Let's go in the ocean," he said, and I followed him into the water.

We waded out, until I couldn't touch, and he pulled me close to him. I treaded water for a minute, but he wrapped my legs around his waist.

He said, "I hear you're a freek-a-leak."

And then he kissed me, sliding his hand into my bikini bottoms under the water.

I forgot about Rob, forgot about the sermons, forgot about the moms back at the beach house who would never forgive me if they saw this happen.

My sunglasses slid off of the top of my head and into the water. Thomas said, "Shit!" and dove under the water to get them. Dazed, I treaded water until he came up for air.

"I can't find them!"

I swam up to him and grabbed his arms, pulling him back to me, and kissing him hard.

Owner's Manual

I. Shiny New Hand-me-down

When my Dad handed me the keys of his 2002 Ford Escape, it was still bright and shiny and perfect. There were no dents in the smooth black metal, and the tan leather interior looked untouched, with every knob and button pristine. Dad has always been this way with his things: he makes them last forever by taking care of them. He had only owned it for three years before it was mine. I worked summer camps and saved all of my money as soon as he hinted that it was a possibility that the car would be my sixteenth birthday present. He promised that I only had to pay half of the original price, and my grandmother offered to pay the other half as an early graduation present.

Before I got my driver's license, Dad didn't let me drive very much. I rode the bus to school and my mother drove me everywhere. I actually don't think he expected me to really start driving. But when I turned fifteen, I got my permit and insisted that he take me to a church parking lot that was a mile from our house and still within our small Birmingham neighborhood. That year, I was behind the wheel about five times, each time driving in circles around that parking lot. Most of the time, we sat in the car and talked about the different parts. I remember him letting me drive the mile home once; he was pushing an imaginary brake with his foot the whole time. I dreamed of the days when I would finally be alone in the car—just me and some hard rock and roll booming from the speakers.

When my sixteenth birthday rolled around that summer, Dad skipped work and took me to the Bessemer DMV, where we waited in line for hours so I could take my driving test. I had caked on makeup and lip gloss so I would look perfect for the picture, and I wore my favorite jean mini skirt with a sparkle belt that, as I was unaware of, would not be in the picture.

When I finally began the test, my instructor asked me to put the car in reverse and back up in a straight line. I had to repeat this action several times before we finally moved on, because I kept turning the wheel and couldn't figure out how to keep it straight. I rolled through a stop sign and turned right when she said to turn left. Out of the corner of my eye I saw her shake her head from side to side. Once we had returned to the DMV and parked, she turned to look at me, her bouffant a little more lopsided than when we started out. She was frazzled and nervous.

“Now look,” she said, “I don't want to pass you, but I also don't want you to come back here. So I'm going to pass you, and you're going to promise me that you will practice some more before you drive on your own.”

I could only nod because I was so happy. My legs were shaking and I stumbled out of the car.

“Dad, I passed!”

I didn't mention the other parts of our talk. I got my picture taken with mascara running down my face, a smile so big that my eyes were almost invisible, and my tank top lopsided. The car was mine.

II. Driver's Seat

The driver's seat was mine. My Dad gave me the keys and I didn't wait at all to jump in and start driving around. My first drive was to a gas station. I settled in, turned up the volume on a Green Day CD, and let the windows down. I stuck an arm out the window and screamed, “Woouooooooooo!” over and over. I didn't care about the stupid grin on my face. I loved being in control and feeling free.

*

After three months of driving, in August of my sophomore year in high school, I hit Mrs. Polinski's mailbox.

Mrs. Polinski was our "weird neighbor." She washed her driveway every Sunday with a water hose and soap, scrubbing it all the way down to the road. Her daughter, Ashley, babysat me one time when I was ten years old, and she microwaved a cup of butter for a snack. They had a blow-up pool in their backyard, which was hidden by hanging plants and various wrought iron garden gates. Their mailbox was imported from Thailand. It was large and extravagant, pewter with gold swirls decorating the sides. Flowers grew around the base and wrapped up to the top, a blooming monument for mail.

Her house was set on a downhill curve in the street, which I believe was problem number one. Problem number two was that I was focused on a group of teenage boys who were cutting the grass in Mrs. Polinski's across-the-street neighbor's yard. I had my windows down and when I saw them, I made sure my blonde hair was breezing in just the right way while I blasted some punk rock music. I flashed a smile, hoping my lip gloss was shiny enough, and suddenly heard a screeching sound move down my car on the passenger side. I hit the brakes and jumped out. The corner of the mailbox was still partially embedded in the side of my car. I glanced over at the neighbor's yard to see all of the boys laughing. Embarrassed, I kicked the mailbox down and jumped back in my car.

I got home and rushed to my room. I hid in the bathroom and stayed until the afternoon light had faded and I was sitting in the dark. I moved to the bathtub and crawled in, pulling my knees up to my chest.

I heard the phone ring in my parent's bedroom, which was right below my bathtub. I put my ear against the smooth, cold tile and listened.

“Are you sure. . .oh, she saw her?” I heard my mother’s shocked voice as I listened.

Oh, shit.

I panicked. I wanted to die. Crying, I strung the long cord of my phone charger around the hinge of my bathroom door. I put the other end around my neck, making a noose, and stood on the toilet. I stood there until I heard my mom coming up the stairs, and then I threw the cord down and sunk to the floor.

“Amanda?” She pushed the door open and stood over me. She waited a few seconds, silent, the ghosts of questions in the air. “Now,” she continued, “This is what you’re going to do. I’m going to give you this gift card for La Hacienda, and three hundred dollars, and you’re going to walk up to her door and give it to her, along with your apology.”

I wiped the snot away and stood up. I grabbed the money and the gift card and turned to go.

“And you’re grounded from driving. You’ll be taking the bus until Christmas.”

III. Doors

There are multiple cigarette burn marks on the top of the inside of the door on the driver’s side of my car. I used to put my cigarettes out on it before I tossed them out of the window. I started smoking when I was eighteen, the summer before I went to college, during my job as a lifeguard. I still lived at home, so I had to be careful not to smell like cigarettes when I came home to my family. I kept a little bottle of Bath & Body Works Fig and Brown Sugar body spray in the console, and I doused myself in it before I walked into the house.

On the outside of the right side door was a terrible long gash from the mailbox incident. My dad tried to cover it up, against my will. I liked the “rough around the edges” look. I liked the imperfection.

IV. Console

Things stashed in my console during my high school days:

- Mixed CDs: “Break Up/Wallow Mix,” “Guster,” and one titled “My Favorite Songs” from my ex-boyfriend, Rob.
- Lots of pens and notepads.
- A certificate that said “Most Likely to Scream Expletives at the Children: Amanda Muir” from the summer camp that I worked at. It was my counselor award, and I was proud of it.
- Napkins
- My trusty bottle of yellowed body spray, previously mentioned, that I continued to use as a mask for cigarette smell and, a couple of years later, to cover up the smell of weed and alcohol.

V. Backseats

I was seventeen years old the first time I fooled around in the backseat of my car. I was hurting from my breakup with Rob, so I turned to what would forever be my way of dealing with heartbreak: intimacy with other boys. The first was John. He was a year younger than I. We told our parents that we were going to youth group, but instead we met up in one of the church parking lots and made out, feeling each other’s bodies and learning how they work. There was a lot of shaking and nervous laughter. I liked it, and suddenly had feelings I’d never felt with Rob. I kissed other boys in my backseat when I wasn’t around John. It became a hobby. This continued until I graduated from high school.

I left for Auburn University after the year of John, and moved on to my next boyfriend, Corrai. I was nineteen when I had sex in the backseat of my car for the first and last time. In a school parking lot, under fluorescent lighting, Corrai and I had very awkward and uncomfortable

sex. First, we took off our clothes in the empty parking spaces, piece by piece. We giggled nervously—it was our first time being naked in public—and jumped back in the backseat. We made noises like we were enjoying it, but it was so far from what we’d come to expect. It wasn’t anything like the steamy car scene from *The Titanic*. The leather scratched my thighs and my head thumped against the glass window with every attempted thrust. Two awful minutes later, we gave up and stared at the stars through the skylight instead.

*

Throughout college, tons of people crammed in my backseat. For some reason, I was deemed “designated drunk driver.” We blasted Tupac songs and drove to the bars like we were the cool kids. When we were drunk enough and the bars were closed, I drove us to Taco Bell and we filled up on Fourth Meal.

*

I was twenty when I woke up one morning to find my backseat covered in beer. It seemed unexplainable until my friend, Grace, helped me put the pieces together. The night before, Grace and I left a party to go get more weed. We brought our solo cups brimming with beer. We picked up the drugs, and then I turned my car down the wrong way on a one-way street. When I realized it, I backed up and ran right into an electrical pole. Eight police cars showed up. We quickly tossed the beer into the backseats, Grace sat on the baggy of weed, and we lit cigarettes to cover the smell.

“I didn’t realize it was a one-way,” was my brilliant explanation.

“You have lived here for four years, two streets down, and you didn’t know this was a one-way?” was their rightful response.

The next morning, remembering this, we wondered how we weren’t in jail.

VI. Passenger Seat

I was twenty when I took acid for the first and last time. I had a new boyfriend then, Anthony. When I called him from a party and confessed to taking acid, along with abusing some other pills and smoking a lot of weed, he panicked and said he would be there soon. He showed up in my car, and I sat in the passenger seat on the way back to my apartment, wide-eyed and the tab of acid still on my tongue. I wanted to be the one driving. I had an overwhelming desire to own the road and choose direction. I didn't like Anthony taking charge, but I was too high to do anything about it.

*

A year later, just three months after my twenty-first birthday, I sat in the passenger seat while Anthony drove me to the doctor. After three home pregnancy tests, we decided to go to the medical clinic to be sure.

"We're sure," the nurse told me.

Anthony walked me back to the car, then got into the driver's seat. We sat there for a long time.

"What are we going to do?" I asked him, when the silence was too much.

"I don't think we have another choice. I can't be a father," he said.

I nodded. I knew. "And we don't love each other," I added. But what I was really saying was, *you've never told me that you love me, and if you did, I know I would freak out and leave.*

I hated being in the passenger seat that night. Anthony drove us home and we got in bed, facing away from each other. He fell asleep quickly, which left me alone, blinking in the dark and feeling lost. I got out of bed quietly and listened to his steady snores. I took my keys and went for a drive.

I needed silence and the calm purr of the engine. I told myself that it would all be fine, and that it was a good thing I had been pro-choice for a few years now. I dug my fingernails into the worn leather of the steering wheel. When my thoughts starting twisting and clouding my head again, I turned on my CD player and listened to Bon Iver's "Skinny Love" at least ten times, letting myself cry.

VII. Trunk

In the summer of 2012, after I had graduated with a degree in Creative Writing, I packed up the apartment I had in Auburn, Alabama and moved to Memphis, Tennessee with a full trunk. I've never been good at packing. Sweaters and hangers spilled over the sides of boxes, and shoes were wedged into any open spaces. I rented a U-Haul for the furniture and drove to Memphis to live with my parents and search for a job. Though I wasn't excited to live with my parents, I was ready to leave Auburn.

I should have kept everything in the trunk, because I got a job in Birmingham, Alabama a week after I moved home to Memphis, and soon moved there to start my short-lived career as a secretary and nanny. Most of my clothes stayed in the trunk for the year that I lived there.

VIII. Trunk, revisited

I moved back to Memphis, Tennessee for graduate school after a year of nannying. I will never consider that year a waste of my time, because I learned a little more about the world through a six-year-old and three-year-old. I also met my boyfriend, Drummond, who moved to Memphis with me. He helped me pack up the trunk and U-Haul once again, except thanks to him, it was more organized this time. I still have a box in the trunk, but it's only one, and I think I keep it there because it would feel strange to leave the trunk empty.

IX. Backseats, revisited

The year that I was a nanny, I had a permanent car seat strapped into my backseat, and almost every day I had a toddler, Hughes, to go in it. His brother, Henry, sat next to him. Henry liked that his mother, Kara, didn't make him sit in a car seat in my car. He felt older. Kara didn't give me any extra money to do activities, so most of the time we played with Legos or watched movies at their house. I also worked for their dad, Billy, as a secretary at his contracting company, and sometimes he had me run errands for him. If he called, it wasn't unusual for me to have to strap the kids into their seats and drive somewhere thirty or forty minutes away to pay a bill or order some construction materials. Hughes always fell asleep on these errands, and when he woke up, he cried. Every time. He hated to wake up somewhere different than his bed. I felt sorry for the kids, so if I ever had any extra money, I would buy them an Icee at the nearest gas station. Sometimes, they begged for one and I couldn't pay for it.

"Please can we get an Icee, Amanda? I promise we'll be good and we won't fight *ever* again!" Henry would say.

I looked at his face in the rear view mirror, then I looked at Hughes. Hughes' sad face was much harder to resist. Those fat, toddler cheeks puffing out and his bottom lip shaking.

"I'm sorry, guys, I just don't have enough money. Hey, tell your mom to pay me more!" I always said this, hoping they might repeat it.

"But you have moneys right there!" Hughes constantly pointed out the tray of change near my console. I couldn't explain to him that a handful of pennies wouldn't buy an Icee.

"Those are for you, though!" And then I would grab two, reach behind me, and put one in each of their palms. This made them a little happier.

Driving with them in my backseat was always entertaining. I liked to look up into my rear view mirror and see them there: Henry, blonde and with big brown eyes, and Hughes, who

was a miniature version of his dad with brown hair and big cheeks. They were usually quiet, and I knew it was because their little brains were piecing together questions about life.

“How do people get a Mommy and a Daddy?” Henry asked me once from the backseat. I didn’t understand the question at first, and I made eye contact with him in the rear view mirror.

“What?”

“How do we get a Mommy and a Daddy?” He stared at me, locked eyes, and then it clicked.

“Henry—”

“You know what I’m asking.” He was only six, but those big brown eyes were full of intensity.

“Henry, I really think you should ask your Mom about that.”

He finally moved his gaze and sighed, disappointed.

*

Once, when I was twenty-two, I was on my way to Memphis from Birmingham after visiting family and friends who lived there. I had to pull over at the Mississippi rest stop, because I was driving alone and was too tired to keep going. I’d barely slept that weekend, trying to fit in time with all of my old friends. I was falling asleep and hungover. I got out of the driver’s seat and slid into the backseat, falling asleep for thirty minutes.

I can’t handle all-nighters anymore, I thought. I can’t even handle fun anymore. When I woke up, I stayed there for awhile, staring at the back of the driver’s seat and thinking about how different everything was. Two years ago I was tripping on acid and going to class the next morning, still high and awake for two days.

X. Console, revisited

Things stashed in my console today:

- Earnest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* on audio CD
- A keychain with my monogram on it that someone gave me when I graduated college. I hate monogrammed things, partly because I worked a monogramming job at Auburn, so I never used it.
- An old GPS
- Various disposable cameras
- Old insurance cards
- Empty cigarette boxes
- The same bottle of Bath and Body Works Fig and Brown Sugar body spray, now yellowed, almost empty and never used.

XI. Doors, Revisited

The fake leather panels on the inside of the doors are peeling off. Drummond says my car is dying from the inside out, like a disease. Underneath the panels is a gross, moldy green gunk that rubs onto anyone who leans against the inside of the door. I tried to get it fixed this past summer, but I think the man who “fixed” them charged me two-hundred dollars for a quick super glue job. They peeled off again with the August heat, so I warn my passengers to sit upright and be wary of the flakes of gunk.

I don't put my cigarettes out on the inside of my doors anymore, but the burns are still there. Sometimes I rub at them and feel guilty, because it's true that my car can feel like my best friend at times, and I hate the damage I've done.

XII. Passenger's seat, revisited

This is my seat now. I rarely drive. I let Drummond drive me everywhere, and since my

CD player no longer works, we listen to the radio: NPR or classic rock. Most of the time, we turn it down to talk.

I like to put my feet on the dashboard and press my toes on the windshield. It's nice to watch the blurs of trees and buildings fly by, instead of watching the road and steering the car. I can settle back and relax. It's easier for me to have a conversation when I'm not the one focused on getting somewhere.

The passenger seat is new for me. I had to train my legs not to march up to the driver's side anymore, and I had to train myself not to yell out "Red light!" and stomp on an imaginary break.

"Will you relax?" Drummond frequently asks. "I've been driving for a long time. I think I know what to do at a red light."

XIII. Driver's seat, revisited

Drummond owns the driver's seat. The rare times that I am forced to drive, I have to adjust the seat and mirrors and it takes ten minutes because I never remember how I like them. I don't like driving in Memphis. Maybe it's because I'm still unfamiliar with the roads, or maybe it's just because I like having someone else in control. I didn't like it at first, but now when we leave the house he grabs my keys and gets into the driver's seat without questioning it, and I actually relax a little. I feel safe with him driving. He turns the knob of the radio dial until it hits his favorite station: "The Bridge." They play Paul Simon at least three times an hour, and we'll hear "Hotel California" by the Eagles a few times. Drummond knows all of the short cuts to our favorite places to eat and he knows how to parallel park. He drives with his window cracked and a cigarette in his left hand. I like to lean over and kiss his dimples, and he playfully swats me away.

“Will you stop that? I don’t want to miss a red light!” He says. He belts out the notes of “You Can Call Me Al,” smiling.

XIV. Not So New

My car is now eleven years old. The CD player is broken and moans whenever I turn the key, its dying attempts to breathe out whatever mixed CD I last left in there. It’s scratched and dented, but somehow still shiny. Actually, for all of the wrecks I’ve put it through, it’s not too scarred. A man rear-ended me the other day, and it didn’t leave a mark. The air and heat frequently quit working, and I’ve replaced the battery and transmission twice. Sometimes, when I’m sitting at a red light, the whole car will start shaking violently. It lurches back and forth, side to side, while I hold onto the wheel and pray that it doesn’t explode. It feels like it’s trying to work up the strength to handle more of my shenanigans, or maybe it’s trying to tell me that it can’t do this anymore. I refuse to let this car go. But when I talk to my dad, the realistic and logical one of the family, he mentions the car’s imminent death.

“Are you saving for a car yet? You need to start saving for a car,” he asks me over the phone.

“No, Dad, my car is fine,” I reply. “It’s going to last forever. It has to. We’ve been through too much.”

Monster

In high school I ate sandwiches with thinly spread peanut butter in between slices of wheat bread. During my free period, or after school, I ran a few miles around the campus. I never drank and rarely ate dessert or fast food. I was toned and thin, with a tan that lingered through the fall thanks to my summer lifeguarding job. I did not think I was unhealthy—in fact, I did not think about my health at all. Besides my thighs, which always seemed to stretch a little too wide underneath my shorts, I loved my body.

*

It isn't difficult to trace the beginning. I remember when the seed was planted, even though it took me years to see it.

It is eighth grade. I'm at the lunch table with my best friends. There are six of us. Mary Katherine is the leader: she tells us our weekend plans (tentative due to dependence on our mother's permissions). She is blonde and blue-eyed like me, but she's different from me because she has her period and her breasts are already double-D's. She is tall, and her mother lets her shop at Express so she has the cool collared shirts that zip-up in the front. I've been begging my mother for one of those shirts, but she only buys me clothes from the sale section of The Gap. Mary Katherine buys chicken fingers every Friday from the cafeteria because her mother doesn't pack her lunch.

"What are we doing this weekend?" I ask the lunch table of girls around me.

Everyone looks at Mary Katherine, who immediately throws a sharp glance their way, catching each girl's eye before saying: "I don't think we're doing anything."

"Really? No spend the night party?" I ask.

Mary Katherine smiles stiffly. "Well, we might, but I'm sorry, you're just not invited."

I push away from the table and run to the bathroom. In seconds I'm there, behind the stall, crying.

Being unwanted and excluded is unfamiliar to me. I try to be the best friend that I can be—I even got detention in seventh grade for being tardy because I was helping Mary Katherine get to class when she had crutches—but sometimes I try to be too funny or take over conversations with my own stories, and this is probably how I pissed her off. Or she might hate me because adults always say I look like a younger version of her.

Either way, the feeling of “not good enough” sinks in while I suppress tears and when I open my eyes, the toilet in front of me reminds me of the eating disorder movie we're watching in Health Class. We haven't gotten to the part where the girl dies yet, but we have seen the part where she throws up her food so that her friends will like her more and so she'll feel better inside. I'm already there, on the bathroom floor, and anyway, Libby, a girl in my class, told me it would make my boobs look bigger if I lost weight, so why not give it a try.

I lean forward, stick my finger down my throat, hate it, and decide that being anorexic would be easier.

But the seed of a monster was planted. It settled right in, I just didn't see it growing until it was too present.

*

Thirteen years later and I still find myself reaching for it, like an old friend, when I feel too sad or even too excited or too full. On the bathroom floor it finds me, reaches my deepest parts, whispers to me. Its voice is similar to my own, except it's what I imagine I would sound like if I were a villain in a movie. The monster helps me to my knees, it feels easy now, and gently pushes my head forward. I stare over the toilet.

Now comes the battle, but the monster has prepared for this, knows how to make me cave. I stand up and refuse, but the monster turns my head toward the mirror. And it's that easy—now, I face my body.

I look at my face. I touch my jaw and run my hand across the extra bit of fat that's given my chin a certain fullness. When I smile, my eyes squint more than before, my cheeks expanding to make my face even wider. In the corner of my eye, a pimple is developing. A nice reminder that I am often too drunk to wash my face and probably eating too much pizza.

Enough of the face. I look now at my arms, my stomach, my hips. Finally, my eyes rest on my thighs. The silver jagged marks on the inside indicate gain and loss, gain and loss, gain and, at last, in my mid-twenties: just gain. I squeeze my hands around them, watching the skin bulge between my fingers.

This is it. The monster knows he has won. In a second, I am back on the ground, sliding one finger to the back of my throat and watching my lunch, dinner, red wine, ice cream, come back.

The vomit no longer disgusts me. It hasn't in years. This is natural, this feels right, this gives me adrenaline and I keep going, flushing every three or four times, until I'm just gagging.

*

Will it ever go away? I ask every day, sometimes out loud to people who will listen or who have been through something similar, but mostly I just ask myself.

The answer is always “No.”

One time, a friend said, “I never had the strength to have what you have,” and I realized for the first time that there are people who don't realize that they have tiny monster seeds in their chests.

*

When I am eighteen, I go to college and join a sorority and get my first leg-dimple. Cellulite. I have to google it because I never really knew what it was, I just knew my mother and her friends complained about it all of the time. The pictures that come up on the screen of my laptop terrify me—rows of images of pale, lumpy craters. I could not let myself look like that.

So I eat granola with honey once a day. If I plan on drinking that night, I skip the granola. Anything else I “don’t keep.” I find friends, like Laura, who do the same thing and so when we go to Taco Bell, we also take turns in the bathroom back home because we know we “definitely can’t keep that.”

Nineteen years old and my best friend, who is also my roommate, begs me not to throw up after we eat at Cancun’s, our favorite Mexican restaurant.

“It won’t stay down!” I scream.

She does not understand.

How do you explain the desperate feeling of *needing* something out of you so badly you would shove a finger down your throat anywhere—even driving down the interstate while holding your head out of the window—to someone who remains ninety pounds no matter what she eats?

*

Laura quickly becomes my new best friend who understands the weight of food and an indulgence in the rush of controlling it. We are both in a similar vulnerable place: thin roommates, no boyfriend, and a love for alcohol and drugs and writing.

She says, “My therapist tells me that I’m filling a void in my life by throwing up my food.”

My therapist has told me the same thing, and soon we realize we have the same therapist. Instead of finding this weird, we see it as another reason, besides loving Sylvia Plath, to become best friends.

After class we hang out at her apartment, because she has the whole bottom floor to herself and her roommates are never home. Here we drink cheap beer and eat boxes of chips and turn up The Rachel Zoe Project while we take turns throwing up in the bathroom. Sometimes, we drink Slim Fast and swallow vitamins and we don't throw those up because we do still understand the importance of getting nutrients.

Together, we notice our hair falls out easily, and our throats are always scratched and sore. Our nails are flimsy and yellow. This is fine, because we don't like manicures anyway. We agree to tell our therapist that we only throw up a few times a week now. We agree to tell her we are keeping our salads and yogurt down and working on our diets and exercise.

*

Sometimes I miss having a friend with similar problems. It's good to have someone to relate to, but today I know I need a support system.

"No, I still have an eating disorder," I say into the mirror, practicing a conversation with a coworker. But I will never tell her this.

Over margaritas after work, we smoke cigarettes even though we have both recently quit. She tells me that her tattoo is the symbol for the National Eating Disorder Association.

"I was in therapy, but I made it out. This is a reminder that anyone can make it out," she tells me, proudly.

"I made it out, too," I say, flicking the long ash from a Camel Blue onto the ground. I look at my hands instead of making eye contact. When I glance her way, she is looking at her

hands, too.

I'm four years older than her— 25 to her 21. I feel a certain responsibility to be honest with her, and tell her that the monster never really leaves. I want to tell her that this conversation alone makes me want to push back my chair and run to the bathroom and rid myself of the quesadilla that is sitting in my belly. But she's moved on, telling me stories about our manager and the comments he makes about her breasts. We both work at a local restaurant, but she is a server and I'm just a food runner. It's my part-time job, since I'm in grad school and a teaching assistant. But somehow, at this job and with her, I feel younger than I am.

I try to give her advice about sexual harassment, I try to make her feel bold. But I can't shake the unsettling feeling I have about lying to her. *It's still there and it still fucking hurts and it will never go away*, I want to blurt out.

*

I remember a time in college when I was in Poetry Workshop and thought of the veggie burger in my stomach. I was twenty and trying to be a vegetarian with Laura. I would like to say that it was an attempt to be healthy again, but that's just a lie I told my therapist. Instead, I excused myself from class like I did every day in that class, walked down the long hallway of the English building, turned into the bathroom, and sunk to my knees in front of the toilet. There was a second that went by, and I started to reconsider. But it was only a second. The monster was too powerful. It was no longer my choice.

Back in my seat at my desk, I looked down and noticed half-digested crumbs on my shirt. I still remember the stains. I was embarrassed, and had to cross my arms against my chest for the remainder of class, for lack of a jacket or something to hide under.

That day, I went home and wrote "I am a professional bulimic" in my journal. I was

proud that I made it through class and no one noticed and I acted totally normal. I was proud of how quickly I could throw up an entire meal. I was proud of my thin fingers, my hip bones, my sharp jaw line. I was almost proud of my thighs.

*

The truth is, I will never feel complete sadness when I see pictures of me back then. There will always be a part of me that sort of misses that body. And that is normal. Because the monster never leaves.

I haven't forced myself to throw up in over eight months. I have been in an out of therapy my whole life, and I think I always will. But that will not be something I feel bad about. I am connected to my disease, I have learned to know and understand its intricate self, I have learned how to control it.

I told my coworker, "I still have bulimia. I don't act on it, but I want to sometimes because it's there, and it still fucking hurts and it will never go away."

She just nodded and pulled a drag from her cigarette. Then she looked at her hands and said, "Me too."

Purity Ring

My mother tells me to “behave.”

Like all children, like all little girls, I know what that means. I don’t need a definition.

I know she means for me to say “Yes Ma’am” to my teachers, to practice my piano lessons without complaining, to play nice on the monkey bars, to read and memorize Bible verses for Sunday School.

I know, as I grow older, that the word changes in meaning. It still means “be polite,” but now it also means “don’t say bad words.”

And then, it means “don’t do drugs.” And “don’t drink.” And “don’t party.”

“Behave” means, as I learn when my Dad takes me out for dinner and gives me a pair of tiny, silver cross earrings as a token of promise, to “protect my heart and body,” which is a Presbyterian way of saying “don’t have sex until you’re married.” I am not surprised when he hands me the gift wrapped box on an ordinary school night. All of the girls in my grade have been coming to school with beautiful new rings, necklaces, and earrings. Some have pearls, some diamonds, and some are silver and dainty. But they all hold the same meaning and purpose: to stay pure. This is a tradition that is very familiar to me, one that I’ve been looking forward to since the first time that I heard the phrase “purity ring.”

Dad takes me to J. Alexander’s, a steakhouse that we only dined at for a birthday or other special occasion. They have sweet rolls with sticky orange icing, and the good kind of fries—the skinny ones that are all crispy, never mushy. I’m fourteen, almost finished with eighth grade, and our Bible lessons in school and church have centered on the value of virginity. We’re almost to high school, where the strongest kinds of temptation nest.

I’m comfortable with the idea of keeping my virginity. Not only am I very religious and

focused on doing whatever makes me the best Christian, but the idea of sex is not appealing to me. I've had one boyfriend so far, Chris Meadows, who was a very small blonde-haired boy with a talent for fitting inside of a rolling backpack, which he did on a regular basis in the halls of our Junior High. We held hands a couple of times, he gave me a pink flower that he picked from outside of the lunchroom, and then after a few weeks I dumped him because I thought that I was in love with a senior named Max who didn't know that I existed. But even if Max stopped playing his bongo drums for the praise band for a second, looked me in the eye, and asked me to have sex with him, I wouldn't do it. I am set to wait until marriage, because those are the rules that I know. Virginitly equals good behavior.

So when Dad gives me the jewelry box during our dinner, and I unwrap it to reveal the two dangling crosses, I am overjoyed to promise him that I will wait until I'm married to have sex.

He reads some Bible verses aloud to remind me of the value of my heart and body, and to remind me that my body belongs to God until I marry. Then, I finish eating my chicken fingers and fries and tuck the earrings away into my purse.

This whole night is not devoid of awkwardness. There is something universally uncomfortable about a father/daughter dinner that consists of discussing virginitly. In my case, promising virginitly to my father was extremely awkward. But it was expected of me, as it was expected of many other girls in my grade at my school.

*

Throughout high school, I kept that promise. I hung Bible verses on my mirror, I wore the cross earrings almost every day, and I never entertained the thought of sex—not even when I started dating my first “real” boyfriend, Rob, in tenth grade. Occasionally we'd make out, and

start to explore each other's bodies, but we were too nervous to let anything happen.

My parents didn't seem to worry. They liked Rob and his family. He was the son of a doctor who went to church twice a week and had plans to attend a Christian college. They had confidence that when I said I was going to Starbucks so he could tutor me in math, he was actually tutoring me in math. (He wasn't. We were making out in my car).

I dated Rob for two years, and right when we started inching towards "the big night," he cheated on me with a girl at his college, and we broke up.

This led to a certain level of devastation I'd never felt before. The kind that can't be consoled by cookie dough and mixed CD's with bad country songs and Death Cab for Cutie. That summer after graduation, I tried vodka and making out with other boys for the first time, and I really liked it.

Down came the Bible verses that were taped on my mirror for so long the paper had yellowed. My purity earrings sat in my jewelry box, and I didn't think about them again until I started packing for college.

I gave each of my friends an acrylic jewelry box for graduation. This was mostly my mother's idea, because I didn't even wear jewelry, nor did I have any skills when it came to giving gifts. My own acrylic box held all of the jewelry I owned, and when I picked it up to pack it, I decided to open it and decide what I wanted to keep. Inside were bracelets my aunt had given me from all of her trips to islands in the Caribbean and beaches in Mexico—some bright pink beads woven through thick strands of twine, others had silver beads and pieces of white shell strung through fishing wire—and a silver Tiffany's bracelet with a giant heart charm she gave me as a graduation gift. I never wore any of these, but they had significance. In the bottom of the box were all of my earrings. Most were tiny studs of various gems from Claire's, a cheap

jewelry store in the mall, but there mixed with them were the two silver cross earrings. I tried not to notice them and shut the box.

The earrings stayed in the box and we moved them, along with all of my clothes and some of my books and a mini-fridge, to Auburn University, two hours south of Birmingham, where I unpacked them and left them on a shelf above my bed.

It's not that I forgot about the promise.

Every time I got dressed to go out to a fraternity party or a concert at one of the local bars, I opened that box. But I didn't want to wear them; in fact, I was too embarrassed to even let anyone see them.

*

My first college boyfriend was Corrai. He pronounced his name "Cory," but his dad was Irish and so his mom used the Irish spelling for his name when he was born (at least, that's what he told me). He had thick, curly brown hair that hid his eyes and drew attention to his lips, which were always pressed together in a tight, thoughtful way. It was hard not to kiss them.

On one of our first dates he took me to Hastings, a bookstore, and we drank free coffee and wandered up and down the aisles, commenting on books and pointing out our favorite authors. I was in my Ayn Rand phase, feeling philosophical and rebellious because my parents didn't understand her, but knew they disapproved. Corrai was reading Nietzsche, and my knowledge of the philosopher did not extend beyond his quote "God is dead."

That night in the bookstore, I asked Corrai if he believed God was dead, and he answered, "He's never been alive. God isn't real."

I shook my head, horrified, but tried to play it cool. "Why do you think that?"

What followed was a conversation on the floor by the philosophy books. We debated the

topic of religion and God and whether or not it's all made up until Hastings dimmed the lights and we knew we couldn't stay any longer.

This was the first time I ever considered my religion, my God, to be nonexistent to someone else. I never had anyone to talk to about my doubts on religion. My whole life had centered on a supreme being that was not even in the frame of someone's life—someone I was starting to really care about.

Corrai gave me books to borrow. I read Nietzsche (and hated it, but I didn't tell him), Sartre, and long novels like *House of Leaves*. Together, we started a blog and wrote a novella, each taking turns to write a chapter. For months, we conversed about religion and often debated on its significance and reality.

I was not ready to give up Christianity. I was taught Science, History, and English through the lens of the Bible. I went to church twice a week since I was a child. I dreamt of becoming a missionary. I helped build churches when I went on youth retreats to Guatemala and I taught Bible School during my summers.

Corrai didn't ask me to give up my religion. He admired my faith, or so he told me. But he did ask me to give up my virginity. He spent most nights in my dorm room twin-sized bed, both of us crammed against each other and staying quiet so we didn't wake my roommate. When she wasn't there, we fooled around, never going "too far." Above us, on the shelf, were the silver cross earrings. When I remembered them, I was overcome with guilt.

After a few months of Corrai staying over, and after we got closer and closer to having sex, I hid the earrings in a luggage bag at the top of my closet. They had a presence that I could no longer withstand.

Long after Corrai, long after I lost that virginity I was taught to hold in such high esteem,

I found the earrings, the silver turned orange and deep green from rust and time.

California Gardens

I.

Laura and I wanted to go to California. She put the idea in my head when we were twenty years old and had only known each other for a few months.

I remember her dreaming about it while we were sitting on the lawn outside of our dorms. “If I decide to run away, will you go to California with me?”

I would have gone anywhere with her. She was my soul-friend. She listened to Bob Dylan and had a betta fish named Lenin. I took Philosophy and so did she and that’s how we met. After class, we went to the student dining center and bought pizza from Papa John’s and fries from Chick-Fil-A. We talked about how much we loved our Danish Philosophy professor, and I laughed so hard when she whispered once, “I bet he’s a tender lover.”

I didn’t make friends easily because of my anxiety. But I wanted her to like me. She was shorter than I was, but we both complained about our curves. She had wiry brown hair and big red lips and never wore makeup. She wore thin round sunglasses to hide her wide, sad eyes. She smoked Pall Malls, which she regularly exchanged for my blue and white Prozac pills.

When you’re barely twenty years old, you don’t know that the world isn’t yours. You think it is; you think it’s right there in your hands. No one ever tells you that it isn’t. We planned big: we were going to pack up all of our things and leave Alabama. We wanted to drive until we found the right place. We wanted a big house surrounded by gardens. We wanted a huge red sofa that we could both sprawl out on. We wanted to fall in love with boys who loved books as much as we did and bring them to live in our big house with us.

II.

We were students at Auburn University, on a blazing path to be writers. When I met her

in Philosophy class, she was a regular English major. I had just switched to Creative Writing from Journalism, and I convinced her to do the same. The program was new and promised to be more bearable than reading dry books and writing research papers.

She signed up for poetry the following semester, and so did I.

We took all of our writing classes together from that semester on, until I graduated. This meant hours of getting together at one of our houses to “write” before and after class, which entailed lots of wine and loud music. I used to lay on her bed with my laptop, scrolling through pages of social media, while she lay on her floor staring at the ceiling with a pen in her mouth.

We drank and smoked weed all day until we were drunk enough to feel profound. We giggled at our words until the corners of our mouths hurt. My leather notebooks from those two years are full of our creations, such as:

A bee is flying through the forest and then realized "HEY, we need, need, to change. our circles don't mean anything"

Queen fucks day to night.

Queen fucks

Workers fuck

Bumble fuck, ALABAMA

Even Mississippi is part of Alabama.

Did you grow that corn?

Answer: no, there's only one ear per corn. That's the standard.

We're all going into the ground.

We never remembered writing that, but it was there in her notebook the day after a night we'd spent drinking bottles of rum and wine and getting high on the train tracks near her house.

I told Laura that I never really felt like a writer, that I thought everything I wrote was shit. She said we both needed to live more so we'd have more to write about. The problem was that we didn't have any money, and it's hard to do good living without money. We wanted drugs and alcohol and pretty things to wear to swanky bars. We wanted to be like the writers we read, like Kim Addonizio and Sylvia Plath. Sad, lost girls with a wild side.

III.

A lack of money thrust us into the "what if we just stole what we wanted" mentality, which quickly became a reality. We liked to rob a local antique store of their tackiest, chunkiest rings. We never took much because we were too scared. I stole long necklaces laced with stones from Target a few times. Laura took granola bars and Cokes from the student center grocery store. It was exhilarating once we got home and emptied our bags, remembering what we'd taken and trying on our new jewels. Afterwards, we'd dress up like Joan from *Mad Men*, or like Rachel Zoe if we were feeling thinner that day, and go to a bar and chain-smoke while we looked for nerdy boys like us.

IV.

I didn't tell Laura when I got pregnant. I didn't tell her when I cried about it in my boyfriend's car, and then got a quick abortion. By then, our dreams had dissolved into watery jokes:

"Remember when we wanted a garden in California or something?"

"Yeah, what a load of shit."

But when I found out I was pregnant, when I touched and rubbed at the blue stripes that formed a plus sign and they didn't disappear, all that I could think about was California and driving and going. I hung my head over the toilet and threw up the Taco Bell I'd eaten before I

had taken the tests. I wanted to be gone.

I don't know why I didn't call her to tell her. I waited until summer, nine months later, when the ghost of a due date was on my mind. I tried to explain it to her, and she tried not to care that I had kept it from her. Instead, she placed a Klonopin in my palm and asked me if I needed to cry.

V.

I went to California without her. It wasn't as if I had a choice, because my Dad took me, along with my mother and my sister, Abby. She even let me go through her closet and pick out my outfits for the trip. But I still felt guilty. When we rented bikes and rode along the Golden Gate Bridge, I stopped and leaned over the red railing. I looked out across the bay.

"It's beautiful," Dad said, as he pulled his bike up next to mine.

The air was clear and cold, unlike the thick and humid Alabama air that I was used to.

I pictured Laura, two years earlier, twirling her rings around her fingers and looking down at the grass as we sat in the lawn, telling me about her dream.

We stayed there a week, and I wore her chunky necklaces and flowery shirts and skinny jeans every day, like a piece of her was tagging along.

VI.

Laura found out she was pregnant a month after I returned from California, and a month after I told her about my abortion. She pounded her fists on the door of my apartment in Auburn and when I opened the door, she pushed past me and paced around my living room.

I knew when she finally slowed down enough to look at me. Her hands were pulling at her hair and her lips trembled. She started to cry. I walked her to my bed and she crumpled into a little ball on my sheets. I laid down next to her and curled my arm around her.

“You know, whatever you do, I support you and will always think you rock.”

She buried her face into my shoulder and I felt her nod. “I know.”

She had not told her boyfriend. She was scared, because they had only been dating for two months.

But soon, she was laughing about it. This was how Laura handled worry: humor.

“In a way, this is great, Amanda, because I’ve always wanted to be a grandma, and maybe now I can be a grandma even sooner!” She was beaming, her cheeks rosy beneath the wet streaks of tears. I knew she’d made her decision.

Today, she has a handsome, soft, smiling baby boy. I’ve held him; rocked him back and forth in my arms. I cried when I saw him. It was because I knew that I almost had a child. It was because he had her boyfriend’s brown eyes, and I wondered if my baby would have had my blue. It was because he was this glowing, beautiful thing in my shaking arms.

VII.

I knew that Laura would struggle with substance abuse during her pregnancy. Before the pregnancy, we made wine and drugs our priorities, and we rarely ate. Laura was cutting her wrists and thighs whenever she felt fat, something I did when I was younger that I soon started indulging in again after seeing her scars. We watched Rachel Zoe and dreamed of being skeletal. We stayed intoxicated and numb to avoid our depression and anxiety.

But her boyfriend, Trent, was strict. She needed more of him and less of me. We got drunk together one weekend, during her first trimester, while Trent was gone. She found a bottle of vodka that was in my car, because I regularly drove around with alcohol in my trunk.

“I need this. Please. I’m sad. Trent is so controlling.” I couldn’t stand to see her depressed.

So I said, “Okay, but don’t tell Trent,” and poured us shots into her red teacups.

I wanted to see the old version I’d known of her before the pregnancy, and I got selfish, and I encouraged it. I wanted to be favored over Trent. She drank and I did too. Trent stayed at his family’s farm all weekend, and so I stayed on Laura’s couch and kept us intoxicated. I drank and forgot what was happening. I crushed my Klonopins with her student ID card and let her snort the powder through a straw. I forced myself to throw up every time we shared a pizza on her bed, because at that time I was still bulimic. I tried to hide it, but she knew. I brought back all of the things that we used to wrestle with together and threw them in her face, and I knew it was wrong. I was afraid that I would do it again, and so after that weekend I pulled back.

VIII.

I left Laura that weekend, and then I made excuses until she stopped talking to me. It helped that she was already introverted and busy with pregnancy. She married her boyfriend and went to California with him. They stayed there for more than a week, because she said they needed to get away from Alabama for awhile. I understood this because I wanted to get out of Alabama, too.

I saw her at her baby shower. I felt awkward and distant from her, so I left early. After that, I left an occasional Facebook comment or sent her a few texts every now and then. I slid into the easy role of being a back-burner friend.

IX.

I think of Laura when I least expect to think of her. She lives six hours away from me now, in Auburn, Alabama. I think of her when someone near me smokes Pall Malls, or when “Black Betty” comes on the radio. I remember her when I smell Nag Champa incense or when I cook a can of Amy’s brand chili. It reminds me of the nights we spent on her floor, stuffing

ourselves with chili until we couldn't move. We'd lie like starfish on her hardwood floor, listening to Regina Spektor sing about perfect bodies. I think of her during certain instances when my heart is too full from the beauty of whatever is surrounding me.

X.

I am sitting at a bar in Memphis, alone, pulling vodka tonic through a straw and chain-smoking cigarettes. The bartender has a Joker card in the side fold of his top hat. There is nowhere else to stare, so I watch him as he watches me and cleans glasses. A girl comes up behind me. I don't notice until she is leaning in next to my ear.

"You're so beautiful, honey," she says.

She has big blue eyes and blonde hair. She is small in the way that Laura and I always wanted to be small. I think about how much Laura would have loved to hear a stranger say that to her and I start to cry. She puts her hand on my back before she turns to leave because her boyfriend is pulling her away.

XI.

Laura posts videos and pictures on Facebook. I watch her son grow. I watch a video of him rolling around on a blue blanket, smiling and scrunching his fingers together in little fists. The curve of his lips twitches and changes, he blinks and starts to cry. Laura hands him a pacifier off-camera. He settles down as he starts to suck. The video is four minutes long. By the third minute, I feel my eyes start to water. I close the video.

XII.

This is the truth: I think we will still go to California together one day. We don't talk much, but it's more than we used to. She says that she still writes when she's not busy. I tell her that I'm writing, or avoiding writing, and it feels so strange without her. I try to let her know that

I care about her. That she was a crucial knot in my life that I let come undone. Sometimes, we still mention the garden around the house in California that we wanted that neither of us have. We still joke about how silly it sounds, but deep down I'm clinging to it because I can't let go of beautiful ideas like that. I call it a possibility.

Trumpets

I.

My purse rattles with three pregnancy tests. They clink together as we walk into the doctor's office, and my face reddens. I grip the bag and pull it closer to my chest.

You don't reach out and hold my hand.

"Honey? Can I help you?" The nurse eyes me, waiting, clipboard in hand.

I look around. People, mostly students, sit slumped in their seats, half asleep. You are standing by the door, your face urgent, urging me. "I need to take a pregnancy test."

The nurse asks, "Blood or urine?" and I swear she shouted it.

I mumble, "Urine." She slips the clipboard into my hands, and I turn around to find a seat. I'm trying so hard to breathe, but all I can do is look around and wish that I had an illness that could be cured with prescriptions and pills.

II.

I know it's a bad sign when the nurse approaches me with a concerned look on her face.

No, no no no no no, no NO.

Her mouth moves but I only hear the words, "definitely clear," "Sweetheart," and "options."

I turn around and find you, my eyes constellations of water. You're gripping my red sweatshirt and pulling me in, I can feel your hard breath on neck under my hair.

The nurse speaks. "I can tell you already care, Sweetie."

What? "What?" I look up at her and see her gentle eyes and motherly haircut.

"I can tell that you—"

"Okay, that's enough, we're leaving." You grab me and pull me away, towards the car,

and I strain to look back, but I can't stand seeing her bite her lip that way as she clutches the piece of plastic that fated me.

III.

We drive and cry until the moon is fading. There are very few words.

"We obviously cannot do this." You look straight ahead, your jaw set.

Would our child have your green eyes, or my blue?

I look at you and breathe my response: "I know."

IV.

The sun hasn't been up for long when you pick me up from my apartment. Appointment number one.

There are people outside of the clinic, yelling at me, telling me I'll go to hell. You keep my waist close and we push the doorbell frantically. You don't say anything to the protestors, but I didn't expect you to act any way but meek—it's not in your blood. I start to cry when I think of your blood mixed with mine.

Inside, the women hand me a clipboard and say, "Fuck them, Sweetie."

We sit in an old wicker sofa surrounded by fake plants. The walls were once white, but time turned them a comfortable yellow. There are some small pictures of cherubs and many posters of birth control.

I slump into you and close my eyes.

V.

I choose not to look at the computer screen. I look at you instead, and you stare back at me with nervous green eyes. I try to read your mind, but I've grown accustomed to not being able to do that. You are always stoic and composed.

The nurse rolls the sensor over my flat belly and nods. "There's the little peanut all right." And then, catching herself, embarrassed, she adds, "There *it* is. Strong heartbeat."

I don't sob, but I want to.

Little peanut. Strong.

When I stand up, I pull my shirt down over my jeans and grasp your hand. We can't pay the full amount, so we pay what we can and schedule the surgery day.

"There will be trumpets when you come in. 'They'—the protestors— always play trumpets outside on surgery days," the nurse warns us as we leave.

You wrap your arms around me and I try not to hear the protestors, but I do.

"Don't do it! Jesus saves!"

I bury my head in your sweatshirt and steady my breathing.

VI.

We make the same drive a week later. Outside, there are trumpets. Inside, there are at least twenty other girls. Some are alone, some are with men. Most are with other women.

They take us, the patients, to another room. We wait while they pass out our gowns and pills, and soon we're all dressed in the same dotted pink fabric. My feet are cold on the tile and there is no back to my gown. My head grows cloudy and my fingertips tingle. There's a concert being advertised on television, and they keep playing the same song:

When she was just a girl, she expected the world

But it flew away from her reach, so she ran away in her sleep

And dreamed of paradise.

I look around at the other girls and wonder if they're sad, too. I wonder if any of them ever looked down and held their bellies, saying names inside their heads. I looked down at my

own and right then I knew her name would have been Rosie, after our favorite Bruce Springsteen song.

They call my name. I'm third.

I follow the nurse into a little room, where a doctor asks me if I'm sure. I nod. I can taste the nervousness in the back of my mouth.

"I need you to give me a 'yes' or 'no,'" the doctor asks impatiently.

"Yes." It's a blur of a response. I can't feel my tongue.

The machine at the base of the stirrups whirs and the doctor moves forward with a tube.

I am trying to pretend like this is like any other doctor's appointment. I grab the laughing gas mask and breathe in deeply.

VII.

It's hard to stand up from the chair, and when I do, there's a little pool of blood on the towel. I feel empty and weak. Two nurses hold my arms as I walk to the back of the clinic. The yellow walls and baby angels glare at me, but I don't linger because you're standing there with my clothes and coat, anxious. The nurses ask if I'm well and I don't answer. I collapse into you and you tell me it's okay now.

It's okay, it's okay. It's over. It's gone. We're going back home.

My fingers are still numb and I grab your arm for want of friction.

All I ever wanted was to be empty.

We're going home.

Sluts

Age 14

Boys do not go to dinner with their father with the intention of receiving a purity ring.

Boys do not have to worry about the length of their skirts fitting dress code. Our teachers don't send them to the principal's office while the principal, a deep wrinkle spreading across his large forehead, holds a ruler by their knees to ensure the fabric stops below the 1 inch mark.

Boys can wear those cargo pants that zip off in sections, and shirts that fit them well. Boys don't have to wear a tank top to cover up the skin beneath their collar bones.

They can change for P.E. in the locker room without girls laughing at their panties, and after P.E. they just change right back— no need to bring a makeup bag to “touch up.” And they don't wonder if their blush is too pink while they stand by the other girls in front of the mirror.

Boys can fight in the hallway and whistle at us girls while they talk about the lengths of our skirts.

Boys can eat pizza and fries at the same time during lunch, and no one cares. They're “growing boys.”

Boys can make out with girls outside during lunch, by the creek that runs in between the tennis courts and the football field. They can make out with as many as two or three girls a week, and they'll never be called a “bad girl,” or worse, a “slut.”

Age 18

Guys can sit in class and spread their legs wide open, under the tiny desktops that sit so low they bruise your knees if you try to cross your legs. Guys wear sweatpants to class and their unwashed, messy hair is “cute.” Their mothers don't tell them to wear makeup to class, because their future spouse may be sitting next to them in Modern Lit.

Guys can go to frat parties without feeling scared. While they drink the brownish-red punch swirling in the cooler as long as their body, they don't wonder if it might have drugs in it like it does in the stories their RA has told them. Guys can walk home alone and they don't have to power-walk, keeping their eyes on every side of them.

Guys can dance at band parties and be left alone. Most of the time, no one comes up to them and grabs their ass. Guys do not feel the bulge of a hard penis pressed into their backside during a cover of "Sweet Child O' Mine" and feel pressured to just go with it.

If they end up drinking too many vodka and tonics and making out with several people that night, they might get high-fived by their friends, or joke about it later, and they will probably not be called a "slut."

Guys can't get into Sky Bar for free on Wednesday nights because that's Ladies Night. But they show up anyway, and lean against walls with Coors in their hands, smirking at us while we dance with our friends.

It's rare that a girl drags a guy home from Sky Bar while he's too drunk to talk. Guys don't have to remember their mother's words in the back of their heads, saying *Watch your drink*. Most of them don't have to keep a rape whistle on their keychain next to a bottle of pepper spray.

Most of them won't forget to use the rape whistle when they're too drunk to notice someone on top of them, in an unfamiliar room, watching as their black and white striped thong is slipped off and thrown onto an unfamiliar floor.

Age 20

Men don't go to abortion clinics to have an operation. Sometimes, men go with their friends or girlfriends to be supportive. They sit in the waiting room and stare at the same TV as

every woman in the room, but they don't follow the nurse behind the door. They don't sit in the plastic chair and look at the doctor and feel the plastic tube inserted into their body.

When men leave an abortion clinic with their arm around a woman, the receptionist gives them an admiring look. *How supportive*, she is probably thinking. Outside, the protesters with the trumpets don't scream in their faces. They are not called "sluts." They are not scrutinized. They are not given a second glance.

Age 23

Do men feel anxious when they leave the house, too? Maybe there are men who run from the apartment entrance to their car and jump in so fast, they slam the door on their leg, causing a deep purple bruise that slightly resembles a galaxy.

Maybe there are men who drive around for hours, originally intending to find a coffee shop and get some writing done, but somehow they got stuck in a loop, biting their lower lip and alternating between feelings of empowerment and cowardice. Once parked, maybe they can't get out of their car. Maybe they just turn around and go back home, curl up on the sofa, and cry because they feel weak.

It's possible that some men are scared of other men who drive loud trucks, because they remind them of that time when they were a groggy 18-year-old in the unfamiliar bed of a guy who drove a loud truck. It's possible some men are scared to walk one block down the street, alone.

Age 26

Have men been told not to wear a ponytail, because it can be yanked easily? Have they been told to wear modest clothes, so it won't tempt anyone who happens to be in the same shopping center parking lot as them? Maybe. Maybe they have been told that if they did not

dress like a slut, they would not have been raped, and that way, they would not have such anxiety when they simply want a cup of coffee.

Token Feminist

Danny yells at me from the other end of the table at Olive Garden. “Do you think it’s OK for someone who is pro-life to eat eggs?” He’s grinning, like he always is, like he does when he’s telling a joke or making fun of someone.

Between us at the table, ten of our friends look up at me, smiling and waiting on my answer.

I lean over my salad to look at him. “That makes no sense,” I shout.

I can hear him mumbling something, but I can’t make out what it is. “What did he say?” I ask Kellyn, who is sitting across from me and has a better view of Danny.

She takes a bite of her pasta, and then looks at me. “Something about how you’re a typical feminist,” she says, chewing.

I look at Anthony, my boyfriend, who is sitting next to me. “Are you kidding me?” I ask him.

He doesn’t look back at me. “Just ignore him,” he says. And then he whispers, “Remember, he doesn’t know about the abortion.”

“It’s still rude as fuck, even if I didn’t have an abortion!” I shout, but when I look around, no one is paying attention to me, except for Kellyn, who already knew about my abortion because she’s my best friend. We’re juniors in college, and everyone is getting drunk off of wine samples. I lean over to look at Danny again. He’s big and blonde with a wide face that makes him look like Mr. Incredible.

“Will you shut up and let it go?” Anthony says through his teeth, staring at me this time.

“Fine.” I settle back in my chair. It’s true that I’m probably being overly sensitive, but around Danny I feel like I constantly need to have my guard up.

*

My mom didn't teach me to be a feminist. She raised my sister and I like most average mothers in the nineties: we played Barbies, rode bikes with pink sparkly streamers dangling from the handles, and played "school teacher," "kitchen," and "house." On old home videos, I am often found bossing my younger sister, Abby, around, telling her to clean her room, stand up straight, or to wash the dishes. These were the things we saw our own mother do. She handed down old clothes for us to use when we played dress-up: navy pumps, bright floral skirts, her old green and silver majorette costume, and long blonde wigs.

She also gave me a new baby doll every Christmas for years, until I turned twelve and asked her to stop.

"I thought you liked collecting them," she said.

"I did, but now I would rather have a cell phone," I told her.

*

I sign up for the Intro to Women's Studies class because I need an easy A. I'm a sophomore in college, and I don't realize how little I know about feminism. I also don't realize that signing up for this class will soon deem me the "feminist friend" of our friend group, thanks to Danny. This is the class that causes me to start thinking about myself differently.

Kellyn is a feminist too, but she doesn't take classes on it, so this seems to exclude her from Danny's jokes. At night, we drink vodka at her house and talk about our boyfriends.

"Fuck Bryan," she says. "He always wants me to suck his dick."

"You don't suck his dick?" I ask.

"Fuck no, not if he asks me too. I make him go down on me if he does that."

I think about what Anthony would say if I did something like that, and I decide that he

probably wouldn't care at all. I picture him rolling over and going to sleep.

*

My favorite doll was named Emily. When I was nine, I often put her into an old Graco stroller that my mom kept in the basement, a remnant of Abby's infant days. I placed a pink blanket over Emily and strolled her up and down the sidewalk of our neighborhood in Birmingham, stopping into neighbor's houses to say hello.

My best friend in the neighborhood, Allison, was two years older than me, but she still played with dolls. She strolled her doll next to me, but refused to walk down one street that a boy named Jesse lived on. He was in her grade and she had a crush on him. I had only seen him once, but I had a crush on him, too.

She looked cool when she strolled her doll—wearing bellbottom jeans and smiley face earrings, and sometimes she let me listen to the Backstreet Boys on her Disc-Man.

*

“I am going to ask every student one question. The same question. And then we're going to compare answers.” My Women's Studies professor is a short Indian woman, with a soft face surrounded by frizzy black hair. Her brown eyes always glisten, like she has just finished crying or cutting an onion before running to class.

We all take out a sheet of paper, ready to write.

“It's a yes or no question, but beneath your answer, you must provide a reason or explanation,” she says. “Are you ready? OK. Here's your question: Should women...” and here she pauses, narrowing her eyes and taking in our anticipation before she continues, “...be allowed to play on *football teams*?”

From the back of the room, several people laugh. I turn around to see three big men in

jerseys—football players.

“Yes, you’re laughing. OK, this should be interesting,” the professor says.

She gives us time to write, and then calls on students. One woman in the class says that she played football for her high school.

“It was a small school, and so they let me play,” she explains. “So of course I think it should be acceptable everywhere else.”

The professor looks at me. My turn.

“I think women should be allowed to play any sport they want,” I say. The girl next to me agrees, but adds, “There should be a separate women’s football team, though. Like there is with every other sport.”

Eventually, it is a football player’s turn to share.

“No. Absolutely not,” he says. “Look, I’m sorry, but a typical woman just isn’t physically able to tackle huge, grown men. Plus, you’re not supposed to be rough with women. And that’s sort of what we do—we hit other guys and we get hit.”

*

Allison strolled her doll next to mine and played “house” and “school” with me, until one day she went to her fifth grade class and came home completely different. I could tell, because she wasn’t jumping on the bed with me when I turned on her radio to 103.7 The Q, our favorite station that played Britney and O*Town.

“What is wrong with you today?” I asked her.

“Well, I don’t think I can tell you.” She played with the rubber bracelets on her arm.

“Yes, you can. You have to. We tell each other everything.”

Allison looked up at the ceiling, then she blurted: “Sex is when a man puts his penis in

our vaginas.”

I looked at her, my mouth hanging open. “What?!”

She was still staring at the ceiling. “We learned about it today in school. But I think our moms are supposed to tell us, so you have to pretend like you don’t know.”

“That is so gross! Like, it goes *in there*?” I pointed towards my crotch.

“Yeah. I know. I don’t have a crush on Jesse anymore.”

I shivered. “Neither do I.”

*

Danny calls me the token feminist friend. After the Olive Garden dinner, I tell him that I think he’s *trying* to be offensive, but I don’t see how being a feminist is a bad thing. I’m new to my feminism, but I’m starting to understand it and feel powerful.

When I try to talk about it, he laughs at me and yells, “Okay, Amanda, we know you’re a *woman* and deserve *everything!*”

One night, months after the Olive Garden dinner, we’re all drinking at Danny’s apartment. Anthony is there, but we’re not dating anymore. We decided to break up before graduation because we didn’t love each other. I’m trying not to care, so I’m drinking more, but the alcohol is having a reverse effect on me. When Danny starts making fun of me, I drink even more.

Eventually, Danny is a blonde-haired blur. Anthony is gone; everyone is gone. I’m on Danny’s couch when he climbs on top of me. My eyelids are too heavy to keep open. His pants are off and he’s on my face, prying open my mouth with his penis. I let it happen because I’m not strong enough to move him. He fucks me with his cowboy boots still on, thrusting and laughing.

*

My mom gave me a cell phone for Christmas when I was thirteen. I decorated it with pink and silver rhinestones and gave everyone a different ring tone. I also downloaded some games, including an online chess game. I didn't know how to play chess, but I liked chatting with people on there.

Something about the anonymity was exciting. Something about lying to people and telling them I was a 32-year-old woman in California when they asked "a/s/l?" was thrilling.

*

The next morning, I wake up with my jeans around my ankles. Danny is snoring on the floor. I pull up my jeans and stand up to get some water—my mouth feels like sand and my tongue is swollen. Danny stirs and rolls over, looks at me. He says: "Let's not tell anyone about last night. It would *kill* Anthony."

I nod. "Good idea."

I'm trying to play it cool. I run my fingers through my knotted, sticky hair. "Um, could you give me a ride home?"

"I guess. I need a Gatorade and a shower first, though." He stands up, naked from the waist down except for his leather boots. "Oh hell yeah," he says, looking down. "You let me fuck you with my boots on!"

*

I talked to horny old men through the chess game. I didn't even play the game. I just logged on and opened the chat box. I told them I had big boobs and was skinny. I gave them my phone number so that they could call me. Some of them did, but I rarely answered. When I did pick up, I stayed silent.

“Hey, baby,” a raspy voice huffed through the phone.

I hit the “End” button in a panic, my heart racing.

*

Danny doesn’t say anything else to me. He closes the door behind him when he leaves the bedroom to take a shower. I find my shirt from the night before, but I’m too weak to get up right now.

I feel shaken and powerless. I’m too scared to leave the room and face him. I stay under the sheets for a long time, until I convince myself that the only way to cleanse this moment is to start drinking again and have sex with someone else.

Taking a deep breath, I pull my shirt on over my head, grab my keys, and leave for my apartment, where I know there is rum and leftover pizza, my decided solution to end this nausea.

Touch

My boyfriend, Drummond, sits patiently while I poke at the dimples in his cheeks around his smile. Sometimes it's while he's stretched out on our bed, reading a book. Sometimes it's when we're in public and talking with friends. I do this so often, he rarely notices anymore. It's routine: I place my forefinger and thumb on the light creases in his face where I know they will appear, and then he smiles so that they show. Usually, he smiles absentmindedly. It's a habit.

*

I like the sense of touch. In the gym, I grab the weights without a coating on them. I like the hard, cold feeling of metal. I grip them and pump my arms up and down, wishing a bicep would immediately appear, but when I run my hand up my arm, it's still flabby. Loose skin with a pocket of fat that I can squeeze like an ironic stress ball.

Driving home, I run my fingers along the seams in the leather of my steering wheel. It's worn and peeling. I pick at the nicks in the leather and lean forward, almost resting my chin on the curve of the wheel. It's warm because it's next to the air vents, and the heat makes my cheeks glow with comfort.

I buy books because I like to hold them. I need to flip the pages and feel the printed words on my fingertips. I like to move my palm in waves across the spines of my books in their bookshelves, admiring them.

*

The phrase "Keep in touch—" is scrawled across a Christmas card on my mother's coffee table. I pick it up and read it:

Thanks for the picture. Your daughters look beautiful and happy. It's been years since we've

talked. Keep in touch—

Dolores

“Do you keep in touch with her?” I ask my mother.

“Hmm?” She’s washing the coffee pot in the sink.

“Do you keep in touch with this lady, Dolores?”

She cranes her neck to see the card. “Oh, no, we’re just on each other’s Christmas card list.” She turns back to the sink and lets the water run over the pot. I usually wash the dishes because I like the way my hands feel afterwards, wrinkly and warm.

I flip through the stack of cards in the iron basket she has them in. Some of them include long, typed updates from the families. Others are printed pictures with “Joy to the World!” scrawled on them. A lot of them say something like “Keep in touch.”

*

When I was younger, I obsessed over saving letters and cards I received. Anything that anyone wrote to me, I put into a special shoebox. The box was a gift from a friend in first grade. He (or probably his mother) decorated it with glitter and pink hearts made from construction paper. My mother wrote me notes that she put in my lunches, and I saved them in this shoebox. I put the shoebox in a locked trunk in my bedroom.

That shoebox became one of many.

I wrote letters to my best friend, Caitlin, who lived in Montgomery, Alabama. I grew up knowing Caitlin as a toddler, because our parents were old friends. I lived in Birmingham, a short hour and a half drive from Montgomery, but it felt like we were worlds apart. I was eight years old, and thought that friends should all live next door to each other. I begged my parents to bring Caitlin to Birmingham, but they deemed it impossible. So we wrote long, sticker-filled

letters to each other.

Caitlin's mother let her watch "Rugrats" and buy pop magazines. My mother didn't allow that. Instead, I was watching "Veggie Tales" and reading the Bible and really not enjoying it. Caitlin sent me little pieces of her freedom-filled life through the mail: a Backstreet Boys poster folded multiple times so it would fit in the envelope, tubes of face glitter, and puffy scrunchies to pull my hair up into a waterfall ponytail. She told me about getting a TV in her room and bean bag chairs and her own phone that was even lip-shaped. I lived for her letters. I felt like it was partially my life, too.

—Because we actually kept in touch. I mean, it literally felt like we were so close to each other that we were by each other's sides all of the time. When our families met up halfway between our houses in Clanton at Peach Park for ice cream, it was like we'd never been apart. We played on the playground in our own worlds, talking in British accents and pretending we were Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, even though our natural accents would have made more sense. When it was time to get in the car, we would hide from the parents, hoping we could stay together longer. We were very good at this. I was usually grounded in the end, my mother yelling at me with a red, puffy face.

"When I say it's time to go, it is *time to go!*" she would say, dragging me by the arm to the car.

I hated leaving Caitlin. I would start writing more letters to her in the car on the way back to Birmingham.

Now, it's ten years later, and Caitlin is in college at Troy and I'm in graduate school in Memphis—we're still hours away. We don't keep in touch nearly as much as we used to. I don't keep in touch with most of my old friends.

*

Touch is my favorite sense. I need it; thrive on it. When Drummond and I go shopping, I touch things along the aisles. I press a fingertip into a package of paper towel rolls on sale, I push a can of chickpeas on a shelf, I swing a Swiffer mop hanging up on a rack.

“Could you please stop touching things? You’re like a child,” he says over his shoulder, as he pushes the cart.

But isn’t it true? It’s childlike to want to touch. Our need to touch begins at an early age. Diane Ackerman writes about the connection between infancy and touch in her book *The Natural History of the Senses*:

“Babies don’t care about the gender of those who cosset and cuddle them. They soak it up like the manna it is in their wilderness of uncertainty.”

As babies grow, touch is the easiest way for them to connect. They build with blocks in preschool with other kids, touching and grabbing to learn. As a child, I loved to hug people. I walked down the halls of my school holding hands with my friends. It established comfort and closeness. When you’re a child, touching things and people helps you feel grounded and safe. I don’t think I ever lost that feeling.

*

A friend of mine from college passed away a week ago. His name was Bear. He died by jumping off of the sixth story of a parking deck in Auburn, Alabama. Bear was the type of person who remembered everyone he had ever met. He was always smiling; he was the definition of a joyful friend. When I remember him, I picture him doing yoga on the grass in the quad in front of our dorms in Auburn, stretching his arms to touch clouds, his legs in a split position. He had long, curly brown hair and a bright face. He liked to dance; he would grab a

stranger and twirl them around at a party without warning. He embodied the word *touch*. He touched people while they talked, while he talked, and he'd throw an arm around you if you just happened to be standing nearby.

I didn't keep up with Bear after I left Auburn. I never called him or sent him a message. I think that it gets harder to pick up the phone and call someone when you get older. It wouldn't have been hard to send him a message, but I didn't.

He probably wasn't thinking of me when he stood up on that cold concrete ledge in the parking deck. He was probably looking out at the stadium, the buildings where he had classes, the bars, the fraternity houses. I don't think he thought, "Whatever happened to that Amanda I knew?" But maybe he did think of me. Maybe he was thinking of everyone he had ever met, and if he was, I hope he was satisfied with how he treated all of us. I hope he knew that he was better at keeping in touch than most people. I hope he thought "I've done well," before he leaned forward.

*

I rarely write letters these days. A few years ago, when I was in college at Auburn, I wrote my family a letter. It said things like:

How are you?

and something to the extent of

I'm eating all of the spaghetti-O's in the world

and probably

I promise I'm going to class, but most of my time is spent searching for spare quarters for laundry.

When I asked my mother if she got the letter, she said she did.

“I was confused,” she told me. “Why didn’t you just call me?”

At this, I was embarrassed. “I don’t know. I like mail, don’t you?”

“Well we get a lot of junk mail here,” she said.

I never sent them a letter again. I know that I can just call them; I know that a letter from their daughter is considered strange, and that mail does not excite them.

I check the mailbox multiple times a day, even after I’ve already brought the mail inside. I order myself things online so that I get more mail and packages. I am the type of person who enjoys reaching into my mailbox and feeling the thick creases of an envelope. I feel loved, even if it is a package from myself.

*

When I lived in Auburn, I had a therapist named Ann-Marie. She had long dreadlocks and spoke in a soft voice. Her office was yellow with candlelight and lamps. I saw her for three years. At the end of one of our first sessions together, she walked to her desk and picked up a basket of earth-toned rocks. They were all different sizes, shiny and smooth shapes of tans and browns and sage greens. She told me to pick one out. I ran my fingers over the top layer, feeling the bumpy and cool stones.

“Pick them up, feel them. Decide which one is right for you. This will be your ‘grounding stone,’” she said.

I moved them around in the basket, turning them over in my fingers. One stood out to me. It was a light milky blue, different from the rest, about an inch long and wide. It had one faded brown streak on the side. I rubbed it in my palm. I put it in my pocket and twisted it around in between in my thumb and and forefinger. It felt like water.

I kept this rock for a long time. It disappeared when I moved out of Auburn, but for years

it kept me sane. If I felt a panic attack coming on, I could reach into my jacket pocket and feel the cold blue stone, easing my nerves. Touching it, feeling the ridges and edges and glossy surfaces, was rhythmic, grounding, slowed my breathing.

*

I go out a lot. I like to go to different bars with Drummond and my friends, drink too much, start smoking again, and talk about what's on my mind. When I talk, I bend my fingernails back and forth. They always break; this drives Drummond crazy. He grabs my hand and holds it on his thigh so that I'll quit. I put my hand around my beer glass, letting the coolness calm me. I like to go out, but I still have social anxiety.

While we're out, my friend Maggie talks about moving someday soon. She's decided it will be in March, and she's found an apartment. This is hard for me, because, like most people, I hate when people go away. It's hard for me to make friends, and I finally have one. I always tell her, "We have to keep in touch."

I mean it.

I don't want to let my new friends drift away, like most of my old ones have.

One of those old friends, Kellyn, texted me recently. She was my best friend at Auburn, always laughing and always telling crude jokes. I could say anything around her; she taught me to let go of the filter between my mouth and my brain. It was never wrong around her, she would laugh at anything. She moved to Atlanta to work for a tax company. When I felt my phone buzz, I never thought it would be her.

"What happened to Bear?"

I related what I knew.

". . . Are you OK?" she asked.

Our conversation continued all night. We talked about how different we are now: “grown up” in a sense, still drinking a lot, but not partying. She said she liked wine now. She said she was miserable at her new job. We talked about plans to visit each other when her busy season ends. I made a note to “Make it happen!” in my journal, because I really want to be a better friend.

The conversation with Kellyn made me happier that day. It felt good to re-connect to her. I know that I need human contact. I know that I need taction.

*

When I was younger, I believed that God touched people through other people, and also through angels. My Bible teachers and my pastors all told me that God could send us hugs spiritually. They told me that God wrapped his arms around me in “his own way.” I didn’t understand at first, because sometimes I was so sad and lonely and felt like the only person who would listen to me was God, and I wanted him to come down from the heavens and fucking hug me.

Later, during my strong religious phase, I swore that I felt God touch me. I was so connected to him from all of my reading and studying and praying, that I could feel him.

I want to be *that* close to real people.

*

There is something that makes the word *touch* mean more than just hand-to-object.

Touch is sometimes a physical connection, and it sometimes isn’t.

Every now and then, it’s verbal and it needs lips to push it into existence, to build a bridge between you and someone you know.

I miss you, I say into the phone. I will come visit you.

Early Signs of Clouds

I used to believe that you could sit on clouds. When I turned four, my parents took me on my first plane ride, and once we were in the air I begged to open the window. My Mom handed me a set of fat Crayola markers and a writing book—the kind with the dotted lines and ABC’s—and told me I couldn’t open the window. If I did, she explained, I would get sucked out of the plane, along with everyone else, and there would be no oxygen.

I stared through the thick glass window at the clouds, feeling horrified and small. I pictured my Mom, Dad, and I whirling around in the sky, circling the clouds up and up and into outer space.

“But in Heaven we sit on clouds, right?” I asked.

“Yes. In Heaven you can sit on clouds,” my Mom answered.

I imagined all of the people who were gone, like my Mimi: floating around our plane in white robes and holding brass harps, humming hallelujahs and playing leap-frog on the clouds.

*

Dad calls me to tell me about Mom. It’s my second year of graduate school in Memphis and it’s a humid August day. I am driving to buy myself flowers when I answer the phone.

Dad wastes no time getting to the point. “Mom is sick. She’s in the early stages of dementia.”

I don’t know what to say.

He tells me about it like it’s one of his business calls. I don’t blame him—it’s how he is handling it. After he hangs up, I pull over into the TJ Maxx parking lot and cry. The sky glares brightly with emptiness. I keep remembering being young and sitting in Mom’s lap and touching her cheek. I used to always ask her how her cheeks were so much softer than mine. I sob until I

notice a security guard watching me, so I drive home, open a beer, and sit on the kitchen floor.

*

Classes demand most of my time, until December, and I'm alone in the house I share with my boyfriend. Unless you count the dog—which I do, but he mostly sleeps and yawns and only gets up to look me in the eye, his stare saying “I need to pee” or “It’s time for food.” Drummond, my boyfriend, is at work, and he won’t be home for hours.

I’ve known about Mom for four months now.

“I’m fine, I’m doing word puzzles to strengthen my mind,” she tells me on the phone. I picture her on her couch, hunched over with a pen, running her fingers through her gray hair.

I leave the couch to walk around our little house—to stretch my legs, to stare out of the window for an unknown amount of time, to pour another glass of red wine, to move my body from one place of rest to another. I never know what day it is, what time it is, or what’s happening in the world. I only know the crevices of this red couch, the cover of the book I’m reading, the smooth stem of the wine glass. Drum will come home from work and I won’t be alone anymore, except in my head. I wonder if my Mom feels alone in her head, even when Dad is home.

*

I talk to my mom the next day. “Oh, I’m doing good,” she says in her usual energetic tone. “Are you watching *American Idol*?”

I have to fight back the frustration I feel when she asks me this, because she asks me this every week. I want to remind her of that, but instead I reply: “No, I’m not. I don’t have cable. How is it?”

“It’s pretty good, that Simon is just too funny,” she says.

I smile because she sounds happy. “I’ll have to come over and watch it sometime,” I say, and then my stomach turns because I know how many times I’ve said that and never actually done it. How many times I’ve said *I’ll have to come over and...*

“You will, you will!” She says back, and I hear her enthusiasm.

When I hang up, I pour a glass of wine and look at the calendar on our refrigerator: an empty December. *One day this week*, I think.

*

Two years after my first plane ride, I went for my second plane trip, and I sat by the window again. I don’t remember where we were going, but I know that I had my Crayola markers like the last time and the red one was my favorite. I stared out at the sky and remembered what Mom had told me on the last plane ride. The sky yanks you out and doesn’t let you breathe. I checked to be sure the window was sealed tightly. I held Mom’s hand.

If there was a crack in the window, or if another kid who didn’t know any better opened one, I assumed that my body would fly upwards, into space, and then out of our galaxy. I thought about how there must be so many bodies floating in space—people who were sucked out of planes or spaceships—their skeleton heads still inside of their spacesuit helmets, knocking into planets and stars.

*

I leave the house to go to our favorite local bar. Today, I’m the only customer who is a woman. I sit alone on a bar stool, reading a novel about a man obsessed with sex and money. I needed space from the couch, space from my head. Two of the men sitting near me talk about a woman who just left with her to-go order.

“She got a grilled cheese! That’s hot.”

“She didn’t order a beer though.”

“I mean, I can appreciate a woman who doesn’t drink. That’s kinda hot.”

I put my book down. “Hey, what do you guys know about outer space?” I ask.

One guy answers: “A lot.”

Another says: “That’s where I’m from.”

They laugh and start a new conversation, and I go back to my book.

*

In the lonely house, I swallow sleeping pills and force myself to stay awake. The poster of David Bowie as Jareth from *Labyrinth* is freaking me out.

“I know you see me,” I tell him. He really is looking at me with those bold eyes— one clear blue, one dark brown. He smirks from his place on the wall and extends his hand towards my face, his signature crystal globe in his palm. He’s about to start laughing at me—he can barely hold it in. I feel like I’m going to cry.

I need a cigarette. I quit months ago, but that was before David Bowie decided to stare me down and mock me. I dig through my underwear drawer in my dresser and find an old Camel Blue from an “emergency pack” I’d hidden from myself, pull on some sweatpants and a knit hat, and look over at Drummond. He is asleep, his steady breathing moving the blue comforter up and down. I step outside for some air.

Above, the stars are flashing on and off, on and off. They look like they may burst any second now.

I walk into the street in front of our house. Usually there is high traffic, but right now it’s after midnight and there are no cars. For a brief moment, I stop in the middle of the road. I can’t see over the hill. Part of me wants to stay there, maybe lie down, but I’m not that high and the

sober part of me says *keep on walking*. The cigarette tastes good and the icy air doesn't sting as much as it usually does. I find a bench to sit on for a minute before I get too scared of the darkness around me and have to go back home, back to the red couch.

*

Cliff sits down at the bar, on the stool next to mine. I put down my book and smile when I see him.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey, Cliff. You work today?"

"No, not today."

Our typical conversation continues, both of us pausing every now and then to take a swig of our beers, lean back, and stare at whatever is on the TV above the bar: Sportscenter or Jeopardy or a game show.

"How's your mom?" Cliff asks.

He always asks me this, because he cares about me, because although we are not exactly friends outside of this bar, there is still a relationship there.

"She's fine," I say, and then I add, "I think." Every time the question comes up, I feel a little guilty. Because the truth is, she doesn't talk to me about it. The truth is, I don't push her to talk to me about it.

Cliff always nods in an understanding way. "It's hard," he says.

*

Alone in the house again. It feels so much bigger than a duplex when I'm here all day. I spread out on the floor, trying to do yoga, but I'm not even sure what yoga is. I've never tried this before. I sit back and curl over into child's pose, staring at my knees. I breathe in and out. I

try to calm myself, but I can only think about Mom.

I imagine her, only thirty minutes away, in that big house, alone while my Dad works at the bank and my sister is in school or out with her friends. My Dad calls her every day, but he is often gone on business trips. My sister is getting ready to graduate and leave for college. She will be hundreds of miles away. Does my Mom think about this? Does she cry on the hardwood floor, too? When I start to feel selfish and sick, I get up, telling myself that I should be happy, because I am fine, because I am not the one who is sick, because I am the one too weak to get over my anxiety, get into my car and go see her.

I tell my Mom on the phone: “If you get lonely, just call me and I will come over there.”

“Okay,” she says. “I just never know what time it is. I wake up, then I go back to sleep, and then when I wake up again, your dad is home and it’s time to eat.”

*

My Dad takes me out for lunch, at a deli near his bank.

“So have you talked to Mom today?” He asks.

“No, I usually call her at night.”

“Oh.” He picks at his sandwich and sips his sweet tea. “It’s just that, you know, she’s alone most of the day.”

“I know, Dad, but I have to read. . .” I stumble over my words. The image of the empty calendar hangs heavy over me.

He looks up, his green eyes sunken in beneath tired skin. “I know. You’re busy with school. You know, it’s still so early. We have high hopes for finding a medicine that will work.”

“Are you scared?” I don’t look at him when I ask. Dad never talks about his emotions.

“No. We don’t have any reason to be scared.” He sounds confident, but I can’t tell if he’s

being honest.

I look at him to read his expression, but he's looking away.

"It's early," he says again.

*

I preoccupy myself with cooking. This long month, this December with nothing to do, is not good for me. When I get low on sleeping pills and start to worry about things, I buy vegetables and meat and look up recipes on Pinterest. I ask Drummond, "What do you want for dinner?" every day. Every day he replies, "I don't care—make me anything and I'll eat it."

I itch for the loneliness to subside. I start to think that cooking is something I can tell my mom about. I bake pork chops in brown sugar and garlic—"dessert meat," Drum calls it. I fry chicken in Panko and shredded pieces of parmesan. I chop brussels sprouts into halves, then broil them until their green sides are brown and crispy. Most of the time there are canned green beans, emptied into pots and stirred with spices to look fancy.

"I'm cooking dinner again!" I tell my Mom on the phone, happily. I tell her about Drum—how he eats everything I put in front of him.

"I'm glad you're cooking," she says. "You sound happy."

I know she hasn't eaten today, but she will say she did. I know she is lying because the last time that I visited her, I checked the cabinets and refrigerator for food. I found expired crackers, stale and soft, some peanut butter, some moldy cheese and tomato sauce.

I suddenly remember that she doesn't cook—when was the last time she made dinner? I can't remember. My childhood was spent at Mexican restaurants and pizza places where we knew the owners so well that we exchanged Christmas gifts with them.

"Mom, the last time I was over there, all of your food was expired."

“Hmm? Oh?” she says, uninterested.

*

Mom says, “I feel so out of it,” and I think of the lost astronauts in space, their bodies disintegrating in their space suits, their space suits floating onward. Bodies bumping around in darkness.

She says, “I get lost all of the time now. I stop at green lights. Your dad says it’s just a lack of confidence, though. Everything is fine.”

She drives to Birmingham to see her mother at the end of December, by herself. It’s four hours away. She is scared, but this is something she has to prove. She goes the wrong way on the interstate for two hours before realizing.

Does she feel lonely on the drive? Does she feel lost when it gets dark?

“Call me if you get lonely,” I said before she left.

I wait around for her call all day, and after eight hours I call her.

“Oh, I made it just fine!” She doesn’t mention the wrong direction on the interstate; I find that out from Dad. “I’m here with Grandmom watching *American Idol*. Are you watching it?”

I close my eyes and shrink down into the couch.

“No, I’m not; I don’t have cable. How is it?” I ask.

But I want to ask: *What is it like to have questions stuck in your head?*

Do they swirl around, bumping into others, confusing you even more?

I want to say: *It’s OK. I’ll be there. I’ll keep you safe from the clouds.*

Instead, I listen quietly as she talks to me, and then I tell her about my day, promising before I hang up to come over when she returns.

Return to Water

I haven't been to a beach in years.

There are several reasons for this:

A. I am in grad school. Not only is this time-consuming, but even if I had free time to take a trip to a coast, I wouldn't have the money. And even if I magically learned how to utilize the savings account I opened (currently it boasts \$0.56), I wouldn't have the energy to plan a vacation. It's easier to sit around in Memphis and pretend to get work done.

B. I don't own a bathing suit, and have no desire to buy one. They're expensive, sure, but the real obstacle is my ever-impending insecurity. Going to the beach means buying a bathing suit means trying on bathing suits means looking at your body in mirrors. Despite how far I've come in my body acceptance, I don't think I'm ready for this one.

C. I still hate water. I've tried imagining how sun could be nice for my skin, and I've tried picturing myself with a book by a sparkling ocean. But in the end it's pointless—sand in my butcrack to accompany a sunburn I get from hanging around shark-nests just does not sound appealing.

Yet my best friend has called me to tell me she's engaged, and now I'm driving to meet her for ice cream and champagne in Birmingham, Alabama, and I know she's going to ask me to be her Maid of Honor, and I also know this means planning her bachelorette trip, and I'm sure she will want it to take place at a beach.

She beams with excitement and I shed a few tears because I'm remembering playing with her Barbie Dreamhouse years ago and when she asks me the questions that lead to the inevitable

words “beach trip” spilling from her mouth, I choke down reasons A-C because

1. This is NOT my day, and
2. When I “played Barbie Dreamhouse” it was more like this scene: I bossed Kaitlin around and made her clean her room afterwards because I was a strange little neat-freak who was definitely a difficult friend to have, yet she was there for me for twenty years, so the least I can do is plan a fucking beach trip in honor of the happiest day of her life.

When I drive back to my parents’ house, which is across the street from her parents’ house (this happened after both of us had graduated from college—why they couldn’t make this move when we really needed to live closer to each other for make-up help and hair-braiding tips so we could catch the new boy’s attention in sixth grade, I didn’t understand), my mom asks how it went and for the dirty details and I can’t help but immediately gripe about the beach thing.

“You’ll suck it up for her,” my mom says, and I know she’s right and I should shut the hell up.

So at night I start planning how to deal with my anxiety over this for the next eleven months, and immediately regret the ice cream and champagne, and in my head I replay the weight-loss conversation Kaitlin had with her mom: her glow of excitement fading a little with talk of diet plans. Her anxious deep brown eyes. Her voiced wish to be anorexic. (Had she forgotten about the road trip we took, to visit Allie at Ole Miss sophomore year of college, where I made her pull into a gas station after driving through McDonald’s, and she gave me that same anxious look when I came out of the bathroom popping Tic-Tacs into my mouth and letting my hair back down?)

But I can’t let that bother me. It’s June. I have eleven months, I can lose weight

the right way, if I want to. And it's plenty of time to start saving money. And I'm in grad school, so I'll have a great excuse to possibly miss a day or stay inside the whole time—no, no. I won't do that. I'm going to the beach.

*

Kaitlin's Matron of Honor, Hannah, is the Type-A personality and so she takes control of planning the wedding. By January, she's booked the trip and made reservations at a beach house called "Crystal's Paradise" in Orange Beach, Alabama. In group chats, the bridesmaids discuss getting "bikini ready" and the struggles of giving up wine. I have not given up wine (I refuse to be that miserable) and "bikini ready" is certainly not what my body looks like right now. But this trip is only three days, during a weekend in May right after classes are over and grades are due, so I'm starting to see how it might be bearable.

*

April rolls around and I've paid the deposit for Kaitlin's bachelorette party and soon I'm counting down the days until the dreaded weekend in May. I start to wonder if it's possible to buy illnesses online—like strep throat in a can—that I could swallow and have briefly just to get out of going to things like this. My boyfriend, Drummond, says I'm overreacting and I know he's right, so I buy a tankini and some wedged heels and white jeans and pack my bags for an eight-hour road trip to Orange Beach, Alabama.

The drive is long, and once it's dark it's hard to see the twists of the gravelly road in front of me. Every time that a car's blinding headlights passes, I grip the steering wheel and try not to swerve into a ditch. I don't have cell phone service so I can't even call Drum to calm me down and keep me company. So I talk to myself when there's no radio service, telling myself that I'm strong and successful and happier inside than these perfect skinny girls who are all best friends

and don't know me. I reassure myself that I have an excuse to leave the party whenever I want—my final paper for my Women's Literature class is due at midnight on Sunday and it's tonight is Thursday. Even though it's almost ready to be submitted, I can play the cramming game in front of them. I'm a stressed-out grad student and teaching assistant with two part-time jobs. Own it.

When I get there, the room is full of pink and white streamers and gold balloons and the girls are hard at work on decorations at the dining room table. I'm told Kaitlin is upstairs, because they want to surprise her with the decorations.

I find her in one of the condo's four bedrooms, sprawled on her bed with her phone and a glass of champagne. She's wearing a glittery crown that says "BRIDE!" in big, white letters. She looks radiant.

We squeal and hug and get out our greetings. "It's been months!" I say.

"How is grad school? I can't believe you were able to make it even though you're so busy!" She says. Always selfless, always concerned with making sure others are happy, even during a weekend dedicated to her. I swallow my anxiety.

*

The next morning begins with bellinis— tall glasses of cheap champagne with a dash of peach juice. I try not to chug, but if I'm being honest I would funnel that champagne if I could.

The other girls sip their drinks and nibble small pieces of cantaloupe.

Kaitlin says, "Ya'll have to eat a cinnamon roll because I'm the bride and I want one, but I don't want to feel fat."

I've already got one in my hand and eyeing a second one. Most of the girls place one on their plate, but everyone, including Kaitlin, eats just a bite.

We pack some light beers and get ready for the beach. I change into my tankini and pull

on my cover-up, which I thought was scandalous because of the deep V, but it comes down to my knees and isn't sheer like the other girls'. I had not thought of getting a sexy cover-up, and now I'm regretting it because this was the one part of swimwear that I felt confident about. My head spins when I think of removing it on the beach.

We walk out of the condo and onto the sand. It's a short walk to the shore, where we set up chairs and towels. I spread my towel out next to Kaitlin and Alex, one of the girls who seems funny and easy-going. She also packed six beers like me, while the other girls opted to take two. I leave my black cover-up on until I can't take the heat anymore. It has to go.

I can feel the girls' eyes through their Chanel sunglasses. I squeeze mine shut and lie back down on my towel, stomach to the sand. I try to focus on Kaitlin talking about her wedding plans while I press my arm into my side to keep from reaching for my beer every two seconds.

*

I know I have to keep most of my focus on Kaitlin. As the maid of honor for a girl who has been talking about her wedding day since we were five, this is important to her, and thus it is important to me. At the same time, however, I have to think of myself, my mental health and my eating disorder. If I lose focus here, it could be a pitfall. I know how far I have come with my body—I know the exact point where my worries about my appearance turn from manageable insecurities to *I-am-breaking-down-oh-my-god-I-must-find-a-bathroom-my-stomach-is-so-heavy*.

So for the remainder of the trip, I stick with Alex when I'm not around Kaitlin. After all, she is the center of attention with 12 other girls around, so I determine she is happy and I don't necessarily need to babysit that happiness. Alex and I talk about books we've read and TV shows we like. Eventually, we talk about celebrities we like. And this leads us both to discover our mutual love for Hillary Clinton, which leads us to discuss our similar politics and feminism. I

find out that she left her last job as the librarian of a university because they were expressing verbal hatred for African American, Latino, and LGBTQ students. We are also the two curviest girls at the beach, and we also hate dieting.

We encourage each other to show off our bodies. She lets me borrow a black, flowy shirt and I let her borrow my black tankini bottoms.

*

On the third and last day of the trip, all of the girls get pretty tipsy and start sharing their most scandalous stories. I listen for a while, and then I decide to share my own. I tell them about the time I had sex with my ex-boyfriend on an air vent behind a Jimmy John's. I tell them about the time I woke up next to a guy with one tooth. I don't tell them about the eating disorder, or the drugs, or the rape. Because of this, my stories have a feeling of falsity, like I've always been this fun, carefree person. I still sort of regret holding back, but I tell myself it wasn't the right time, and Kaitlin would have been upset.

Somewhere during this story time, someone decides that we should play "Truth or Dare." It's my turn first, so I say "dare" because everyone knows that "truth" is the lame way out.

"I have a good one for Amanda," says Hannah, Kaitlin's Matron of Honor.

I pull my knees closer to my chest where I sit on my beach towel.

She says, "You have to run into the ocean!"

By now, everyone knows I'm scared of the water. I've been walking back to the beach condo whenever I need to use the restroom, while everyone else just goes in the ocean. Deep down, I knew it was coming.

I tell Hannah to come with me and then everyone volunteers to join. Maybe it's because they can tell that I'm crying through my sunglasses, but it's probably because they just like the

ocean and it seems like a good time to get in.

Either way, it feels surreal when I stick one foot into the water, holding onto Hannah's arm with one hand and Alex's arm with the other, and all of the girls run splashing into the water in front of me.

Hannah pushes me to go further, and I walk until the water hits my waist. It's cold, and I can't see my toes. My heart races and I feel my breath catch, like I'm about to slide down the top of a roller coaster.

I lock eyes with Alex. "You're doing it," she says, and it's not in a mocking way. She is looking at me like she really cares, like a mother watching her child walk for the first time.

But my head is spinning and I feel sick. I have to turn around. I push through the water and take long strides back to the beach, until I can run, and then I am running until I reach my towel.

I feel accomplished.

But mostly, I feel accomplished because I'm here, in a tankini with my thighs showing, and I'm not covering them up.

Redux

“There are no sharks in this water,” Dad says to me as we walk onto the beach and find a spot to put our towels.

I’m twenty-six. So I know this isn’t true, but I choose to believe it.

The water is clear and turquoise for miles. I haven’t been in an ocean for over ten years, but now, suddenly, I feel compelled to walk towards it. I walk to the edge, and let the water creep towards my toes. The tide pulls back, and I inch closer.

Abby runs up beside me and jokingly pushes me forward.

“Get in!”

“I will before we leave,” I say, and turn back to the beach chairs. When I say this, I actually mean it. We are on a tropical island in Turks and Caicos—probably the most beautiful beach I will ever stand on—and I plan to make the most of the trip.

I spend the rest of the day reading on the beach, glancing up at the soft waves, promising the water I’ll give it a chance tomorrow.

The next day, Abby and I ride bicycles that we borrowed from the resort into a nearby town. It’s been a long time since I’ve been on a bike— San Francisco, four years ago after college graduation— and I struggle with the breaks at a stop sign. I wore my swimsuit with a black dress over it, which was not the smartest idea, because it flaps in the wind and exposes too much of my thighs for me to be comfortable with. Dozens of large white vans—the local taxi service for the thousands of tourists— fly by, and honk at us as we wobble on the poorly paved sidewalk.

At the store, we find an overpriced package of steaks and shrimp, some frozen garlic

bread, and broccoli. I grab some Bambarra, the local dark rum, and a six pack of beer. *Liquid courage*, I decide, for the ocean.

“You’re paying for that yourself,” Abby says. “These groceries are already way too fucking expensive and I don’t want Dad getting mad at us for putting too much on his card.”

On the third day of our vacation, while Abby swims at the pool, I walk down to the beach and find a chair, drop my towel, and march to the ocean. At the water’s edge I take a deep breath and keep walking. When I reach knee level, I crouch down and kneel on the ocean floor, so that my shoulders are just above the edge. I turn in circles, constantly checking my perimeter. *No sharks. But what about stingrays?*

I hum a nonsense tune to keep myself distracted from the possibility of what’s around me and slowly continue forward, until I’m forced to tread water, and then I float, lying on my back, my ears submerged. The noise from the kids on white plastic floats around me is muffled, and now it’s just me and these clouds above me.

I’m weightless. For the first time in a long time, I don’t think about how I look or the stretch marks on my hips. Here, none of that matters.

I close my eyes and let the waves rock me back and forth.