THE THINGS THAT CREATE AND SUSTAIN

by

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I have never had a problem making up stories, in a pinch or to get out of a pinch. I am told that ever since I learned how to talk, and then how to write, I have told stories about everything from what I was going to be when I grew up and what happened at recess, to the fictionalized lives of my parents, grandparents, and friends, and even elaborate tales about fantastical worlds of shear make believe. And I have always loved using language, the beauty and the power of the written word to do so.

Yet, even though this childhood attribute of elaborating upon the truth has gotten me into trouble a time or two when I was younger, I feel it has benefited me immensely as a short fiction writer because I believe that is essentially what short fiction is— the blurring and interweaving of the lines between reality, memory, and fiction as well as the drawing upon and sometimes the manipulation of a specific version of reality to tell a meaningful story. In my mind, all stories begin with a memory and then a contemplation about what might have been or what might have happened if certain conditions had been different or if individuals chosen to undertake different actions. And these ruminations are frequently more interesting, evocative, and significant for me than what truly occurred or the actual state of things.

This tendency to ponder potential outcomes and conditions has consequently lead me to contemplate how much influence and what role different events, as well as different social situations, individual circumstances, and specific actions shape who we are, who our family is, and who those people we choose to surround ourselves with really are. I also wanted to explore what role our childhood— or perhaps more accurately, our childhood memories— has in defining our future self, essentially, what creates and sustains us as adults. This, in turn, has prompted me, as a short fiction writer, to consider the complexities of character and circumstance that define and distinguish all people. And I hope that I have effectively used these specific considerations and perspectives in my writing and that it is apparent in this collection.

Because short fiction has allowed me to use my affinity and genuine life long-interest in story telling as an artistically expressive means by which transmission of the shared human condition and experience is possible, my love of fantasy and imagination, along with my interest in the complexities of character, I believe it is the optimal medium for me to work in. However, putting fantasy, imagination, character, and the contemplation of the unknown aside for a just a moment, I realize that this introduction to my collection of my short stories has, thus far, neglected to address the very important methodological aspects and technical characteristics that are essential for quality short

fiction. The following compilation of stories, for me, was even more of an exploration into the mechanical and formulary components of short fiction as an art form than it was into the imaginary or artistically expressive aspects. I learned an incredible amount about the form, function, and various integral technical components of short fiction in the course of my research and reading in preparation for this thesis. I also learned that although story telling and an active imagination may come naturally, the art and authorship of quality short fiction, fiction that resonates with the reader and thereby possesses its own beauty and power, takes practice, patience, and a tremendous amount of hard work.

Despite the reality that short stories, in general, tend to be less complex than novels due to the fact that they frequently focus on only one incident, one plot, and a smaller number of characters over a shorter period of time, it seems to me that short fiction writing is particularly demanding because the prose needs to be so much more pointed and precise, even compared to novels and novellas. When creating a short story, essential components such as voice, theme, plot, and action need to be constructed very quickly and as seamlessly as possible.

Short fiction also differs from longer works because they very rarely contain specific, basic elements of the longer dramatic structure such as exposition, complication, rising action, crisis, climax, and resolution. In addition, the inception of many modern short stories is in the middle of the action, or *in medias res,* and the conclusion of many modern short fiction pieces is abrupt and is frequently open-ended, and these endings may or may not contain a moral or practical lesson. Because short stories frequently neglect to follow the universally recognized patterns of other works of fiction due to their relative brevity, I believe this respective freedom of form makes short fiction an especially challenging and exciting medium to work in.

I also believe that the medium of short fiction is interesting and sometimes challenging to work in because the format encompasses such a wide range of genres and styles. Subsequently, I have discovered that the creation of short fiction is an exceptionally exigent genre to work in due to the fact that the process involves a unique combination of creativity, personal expression, and artistic integrity, coupled with technical skill and precision. To master the short story one must not only master the creative and artistic aspects, the author must also have a command over the language, form, various literary devices and a plethora of other technical aspects.

In essence, it is my hope that this compilation of short stories is a study of and an endeavor to explore the form, function, and technical elements of modern short fiction, fused with my own individual artistic and imaginative modes of expression and my particular experiences and memories, done in a sincere endeavor to create a shared condition or experience that resounds with the reader. It has been an arduous and intense, yet extremely interesting and exciting learning process, one that I hope will not end with the completion of this thesis, but one that I aspire to continue throughout my life.

CHAPTER 1

DEATH AND MAGIC IN WALKER WOODS

Looking back from thickening and the falling and the wrinkling of middle age, it's easy for me to forget that I had *the* idyllic childhood. It was the kind of childhood that you see on old black and white TV programs and it makes you nauseous. You think, that never happened. But it was also the kind of childhood I had always wanted to give my boys, wanted to, but failed.

My father was the director of an environmentally oriented retreat center in northern Minnesota. In fact, he continued to keep the place running even after his terminal diagnosis at age seventy-six.

The Walker Retreat Center is a five-hundred and fifty acre expanse of pristine forest-covered wilderness surrounding the shores of Leech Lake. It was even more pristine and picturesque than the tacky Minnesota post cards you see wherever truckers buy gas, caffeine, and nicotine. And it was all ours. During the months when the skin-searing and breath-steeling winter wind battered us indoors, there were empty lodges, conference, and dining buildings to explore. And when the Minnesota winter finally retreated to wherever it came from to return another year and the land became sodden with the early spring thaw, there were miles and miles of trails and streams that cut through a dark, other-worldly woods of willow, pine, spruce, and birch that needed to be trodden, that needed to be witnessed.

Every weekend my father would help us pack a lunch of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a snack of fresh-baked oatmeal walnut cookies and Tang juice boxes, one neon green rain poncho that could be folded into its own pocket (we always hoped we'd experience the adventure of getting caught in a torrential downpour, or at least an spring shower because it'd make sure a great story), a Phillip's head screwdriver and a rusty set of pliers that we stole from dad's shop, then our neighbor Tammy, my little brother Bobby and me would set off for the depths of Walker Woods.

Even though my mom always worried about us and all the trouble we could get into with acre upon acre of wilderness to roam, I know that my dad loved hearing the tales we came back with. There was pride and something akin to contentment in his eyes as he listened to our thrilling adventure stories that were set in his woods.

We came back from our exploits with tales about everything from stumbling across a forest council meeting of foxes and wolves to following an old Indian trail for hours until it finally led us to an ancient whale skeleton. But the most fantastic and wonderful tale I ever came back with was the one about my discovery of Arbordonia. And to this day, I know it is the one story I take with me everywhere.

One late Saturday morning in May, Bobby, Tammy, and I followed the shore of Leech Lake north until we were tramping through the southwestern corner of Walker Woods, a particular corner we had never explored. We left the well-marked nature trail and headed into the thick, clinging undergrowth, making our way through towering blue spruce and white pine trees as they swayed and swished above us.

After we successfully explored to the edge of the forest, we were momentarily at a loss as to what our next adventure should be. So we sat down of the blanket of rust colored pine needles, ate our sandwiches, and began to scheme.

It was at that moment that I was struck by the sheer magnificence of the stream we had just crossed. It was flying over its smooth rock streambed, causing the bright green watercress leaves to dart with the clear current like the twitching appendages of a crouching sea monster. The sun also seemed alive as it coated the surface of the stream in a warm, moving glaze.

Then I noticed that even when the sun was completely covered by the slow-moving battleship-sized clouds, the water continued to sparkle and shine. I remember thinking how other-worldly it seemed to me.

All of his life my father had been a strong man. Slight of build, wiry, and very quiet, but strong. And he was also always so calm, no matter what he had to face. He was so unshakable that even when we coated every light bulb in the house that we could reach with peanut butter and left the lights on for hours, my mother screamed watered down obscenities and screeched that orphanages were very real places, but my dad just smiled slightly, scratched the squiggly vein in his forehead that stood out, and handed us rags to clean up the mess.

Then he was diagnosed with dementia.

My mother died almost fifteen years ago. She went fast. She was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor when she was fifty-four. The doctors gave her six months, but she only lasted three.

My baby brother Bobby— or the brilliant Dr. Robert McMullen, Jr., as he is known in the fast and flawless world of Windy City urologists— came back to Minnesota for my mother's funeral, but he left after lunch. He puffed himself up and informed the room full of our mother's closest relatives and life-long friends the he had Monday morning meetings, deadlines, and a dinner party that evening.

When I called to tell him about dad's diagnosis and prognosis, it was over a speakerphone in middle of a meeting with the hospital administration. That was the only time his receptionist could patch me through.

"Dad's sick, Bobby. And he's gonna get a lot sicker over the next couple of years. The doctors say he's in the first stages of dementia. He's really confused already and he's gonna need someone to stay with him before too long."

Silence in the board room.

"I'll see what I can do. I'll look over his insurance coverage, speak with some of my colleagues, and help with what I can from here. We'll be in touch. I'll call the house later. Goodbye and good luck, Rachel."

I could hear it in his voice. My little brother who had adored me when we were children now loathed me, and perhaps worse, he wanted nothing to do with me and he

had no need for me. We had barely spoken or made any contact with each other since he moved out when he was seventeen.

The only significant thing Bobby uncovered was that insurance didn't cover a home health aide. So when I caught dad's drooling, unshaved, and denture-less mouth trying to gum a bag of unpoped microwave popcorn, I moved in.

Bobby and Tammy seemed to be considerably less enthralled by the strange shimmering on the surface of the stream, but they were excited to embark on a new exploit, so we followed the winding stream for most of the afternoon, deeper into unknown territory and further away from Walker Woods. We tromped over thick mats of dried grass, over fallen oaks, and through dense, dark copses of pines like we were Juan Ponce De Leon looking for the fountain of youth, or something equally significant. We tromped on until we came to a place where an arrangement of large and smaller rocks made a kind of natural bridge over the water. We decided to cross, not because we had to get to the other side for any particular reason, but just because we thought we could.

"I'll cross first, then you throw the backpack over to me," Tammy ordered Bobby. I didn't argue and let her cross first because I wanted to make sure Bobby got across and because I wanted to brave the haphazard bridge last— I was still enthralled by the strange

glow of the stream and I wanted to examine it closer without Bobby and Tammy scrutinizing me. The sun was covered by slow-moving titanic clouds and the late afternoon sky was a vast morbid gray, the kind of gray you imagine ancient tomb rocks would be, but somehow the light continued to dance on the surface of the stream.

Tammy got across slowly but safely, with only one minor slip on a patch of slimy moss. She was safe and dry on the other side when she shouted, "Okay, toss it to me!"

"Okay, you ready?" Bobby cupped his hand around his mouth and shouted back, as if Tammy was fifty feet away on the opposite side of a roaring river, instead of fifteen feet away on the other side of a mild-mannered stream.

"Yeah! Throw the thing already!"

Bobby swung his arm back and heaved with all of his seven-year-old might. Then I watched as the battered red backpack with my father's faded initials and all of our survival essentials soared in a high arc above the running water and into the sky, straps flapping gloriously.

It was a magnificent throw to watch, but it was much too high for the backpack to clear the distance across the water. It perfect high arch , flapping and flying towards the sky, then it landed directly in the middle of the stream. Our sole key to survival in the encroaching wilderness floated on the surface of the brook for a moment, then it sank. All we could do was watch as the backpack stocked with everything we needed to endure the harsh reality of the wilderness and make it back to civilization was swallowed by the merciless black water.

"What'd you do that for?!!" Tammy screeched. "We're never going to make it back now! Our juice boxes and snacks were in there! My stomach's already growling and I don't even know where we are! My mom says that if I don't eat every two and a half hours my blood sugars will plummet! I don't know what that means but I know it can't be good! What kind of a throw was that, you girl?!"

Bobby was still staring at the space where our father's old college backpack had been swallowed by the stream. I could tell that he was going to cry, so I went up to him, rested my hand briefly on his shoulder, and said to Tammy, "You're not helping, you're just gonna make him cry. I guess it went down so fast because of the tools. Well, I'll go in after it. The water's not too deep here, I bet I can find it right away."

"Good idea! All of the cookies are in Ziploc baggies! We could still eat them!" was Tammy's contribution to my daring recovery plan. As long as I came back with the cookies, everything would be okay.

"You can have my cookie and my juice box, Tammy. I'm sorry I ruined our snack and got us lost in the woods forever. I won't try to come along again."

Tammi threw him a look of abject disgust. "Oh, shut up you baby."

Even then I knew how much he had just wanted to fit in with us and how hard he tried. We had always made it very difficult for him. "Just zip it, Bobby. It'll be okay. I'll go in and get it and we'll make it back before dark, like always", I tried to comfort Bobby while avoiding looking like a complete sissy in front of Tammi.

I began to make my way toward the middle of the stream, rock by rock, trying to grip the rounded surface of each moss-covered rock with the smooth rubber soles of my

worn out Keds. I had to carefully strategize and negotiate each maneuver so that I could come as close as possible to the middle of the stream, where the backpack had gone under and where the lights continued to play on the still slightly rippled surface of the stream. They seemed to be concentrated only in that area, and they were directly in front of me now. I had to get closer. I had to touch the surface of the water where the white glow flickered with each tiny ebb and ripple. While Bobby and Tammy held their breath and looked on from the stream bank, I slowly stuck one canvas-covered toe into the water.

To my astonishment, the water didn't feel cold or even wet when I stepped in. It felt warm, soothing, and incredibly alluring. The next thing I knew, I was under, then I was gone. Pulled into something strange, magnificent, and obliterating. It felt like sinking into the Aurora Borealis or wading into an ethereal cloud of brilliantly colored space dust. Then I landed on an enormous tuft of extremely soft, sun-dried marsh grass. Next to me was the green grass that carpeted the stream bank and beyond that, the stream.

It seemed to be the same stream from which I'd come, but yet, it wasn't. It was wider, clearer, faster, and more resplendent now— and all over the surface of this strange new stream were the dancing lights. I watched them play in bright little darting flashes until my eyes hurt and I had to look away.

I glanced up and saw a large structure of arching wood that stretched across one side of the wide rivulet to the other. I walked closer to the structure and saw that perfectly shaped steps had been hewn into it.

So, with the swiftness, assuredness, and shear sense of thrill that only a nine year old is blessed enough to possess, I decided to climb the bridge and explore the opposite bank. I walked across the smooth, evenly spaced steps and rose with the perfect arc of the bridge until I set foot on the lush loam of the other side. It was then that I noticed that the wood of the bridge didn't really end, it just sank beneath the rich, black soil. It seemed to be only a root of a much, much larger tree.

I tried to keep my intrepid expeditioner's excitement in check while I surveyed the area, but found it difficult to explore and to determine where I was because the undergrowth was an impossibly dense nest of brambles, leafed shrubs and bushes, vines, and wild weeds. I decided to plow through the wall of vegetation and work my way towards what I thought might be the source of the bridge.

The thick thorns and tentacle-like vines clawed at my skin, hair, and clothes for what seemed like miles, until I finally looked up and into an elongated prism of dust-sprinkled sunlight and saw a small patch of red, which immediately seemed strange and out of place amidst all the green of the forest undergrowth. So I began to maneuver my way to where the red thing was hanging high up in the trees, and it slowly began to take shape.

When I finally got to within a couple of yards of the enormous tree where the red object had been hung, I was certain. Hanging by its strap a house's height above me was my father's well-worn excursion backpack. I could just make out his initials. I knew there was no possible way I could reach the backpack, I wasn't particularly hungry for a soggy cookie or the remains of a smooshed peanut butter and jelly sandwich, nor did I

have any use at that moment for a rusty pair of pliers, so I decided to continue fighting my way through the thicket of thorns, still without any idea where I was.

After being struck by an especially hostile birch branch that left a lash mark directly below my right eye, I was just about to turn back towards the stream when I caught a glimpse of something through the tops of the trees.

The first thing I saw through the blades of white sunlight that sliced through the forest's canopy were the wisps of smoke that snaked their way skyward. The next thing I noticed was the parapets. Soaring wooden spires with light colored roofs and thin, slitted windows pricked the clouds.

Adrenaline surged in my chest, making my limbs work frantically to tear their way through the clutching foliage of the forest floor. I was desperate to find out what kind of magnificent wooden fortress the parapets were a zenith to.

I finally clawed my way to a small clearing that spilled out in front of an enormous wooden gate. The door of the gate seemed to be the only opening in a stockade made of ancient, magnificent oak trees. Not felled, dead oak trees, but living trees whose trunks grew so close together that they were impenetrable. Their thick-leafed branches grasped at the sky hundreds of feet above me and grew together in a formidable green mesh. Over the topmost leaves, I could just make out the tallest spires of what must have been the most remarkable and massive living, growing castle imaginable.

Suddenly, something I couldn't see darted through the woods directly to my right, something a little bigger than me with what could have been dark fur or skin was flying through the forest towards me. Then I blacked out. That's the last thing I remember.

I woke up back in Walker Woods sputtering dirty stream water and inhaling the straightforward smell of sodden soil. Bobby and Tammy were standing over me, frantic, red-faced, and crying.

"Rachel, Rachel! Oh, Rachel you're alive!" Bobbi hugged my shoulders tightly, but didn't stop crying.

"We thought you were dead! Do you think you're alright? I guess we can head back for some dry cookies now." Tammy looked thoroughly disappointed either that I wasn't more seriously injured or that I hadn't come up with her cookies.

Then I noticed that my father stood behind her with his battered plaid hat tightly balled up in his hands. He was breathing hard and he looked more scared than I ever had or ever would see him. We were so late that he had started looking for us, he heard Bobby screaming, and he had jumped in and pulled me out.

My father faded from the man I loved faster than even the most pessimistic doctors anticipated. Within a month of my moving back into my old childhood bedroom, I was living with a stranger. He bawled at the top of his lungs and cursed at me for not putting enough syrup on his waffles in the morning. He called me an "insufferable Nazi bitch" for refusing to let him eat an entire box of decade-old Fig Newtons. He could ramble off Ty Cobb's batting average and Bart Starr's completion percentage from over

fifty years ago, but he had forgotten my mother's name. And he couldn't remember the name of the retreat center he had devoted his life to.

At night and sometimes even during the day, I cried.

He died on a Tuesday morning. My ex-husband and his new wife Clara came up from Minneapolis and brought my sons to the funeral.

It's been two weeks since I buried my father in the small cemetery of St. John's Catholic Church three and a half miles from the Walker Retreat Center, and I still haven't left Walker. Dad wanted to be buried in a plain pine box in a clearing on the top of a hill on the north side of the lake, but I couldn't get it approved by the town board. I don't know what will happen to the place with my father gone. I've had several offers from corporations that want to buy the land and turn it into swanky condos and a monstrous hotel with a water park, but so far I've managed to stall them. I've done all I can think of including applying for all of the grants I can find and doing all of the groveling and fundraising I can stand, but I'm terrified that I might loose Walker.

When the cracks finally converge and what you thought was your life shatters and falls away in piercing little pieces like a puddle turned to ice in the Minnesota winter and you're not sure what you've accomplished or what you have left when your life's more than half over, you are drawn to any black pool of water that could be deep enough, dark enough, and cold enough to numb it all. Sometimes you think it would be so nice to just go under, into oblivion, to submerge yourself beneath the pain and failure.

I took a long walk in Walker Woods yesterday morning. The forest smelled of damp earth, drying pine needles and new breezes, the sun was shining over the tops of the tallest pines and the sky was a dome of unblemished blue, but the little bit of light that danced with the ripples of the brook looked completely ordinary to me. There was no longer any magic here.

I wandered around the woods until the position of the sun told me it was late in the afternoon, but I couldn't even find the corner of the woods where I had stepped into the stream so long ago. I can't find castles in the woods now even when I try.

The truth is, I couldn't save my father like he had saved me so long ago, I couldn't get back to the childhood my father had taken so much pride in giving me, the most wonderful gift I have ever been given and the magic that I had once believed could save me. Now the only thing that keeps me above water is the desperate need to save Walker Woods and the possibility that in my midlife ramblings through the woods I might stumble upon a stream that will take me back to the magic and the simple, beautiful, flawless happiness of my childhood.

CHAPTER 2

A MEETING IN THE FIRST GRADE BATHROOM

At the beginning of that sprawling, promising summer my best friend and I were convinced that there were at least a half dozen drowned baby boys at the bottom of the Legant's pond. That was the reason, two weeks after we completed the fourth grade, we found ourselves sitting in a rotting row boat on a starry summer night fishing through putrefied muck and tepid pond water for forlorn infant corpses.

The first event that made my best friend and I ritually pinky-swear to find the slain babies occurred when a strange man rang our doorbell at a little before midnight on a Tuesday. After I heard the bell, I crept to the door of my room and listened while the light from the kitchen made a pale trapezoid on the faded carpet, whose regular geometrical shape was occasionally broken by moving, free-formed shadows. A large, flame-haired, bristly-bearded man was swaying in our kitchen in the middle of the night speaking to my father in loud, fuzzy semi-sentences.

"I just need to make one call," the strange man was saying. "Won't take long, Tom." My father's name is John. "Seems that my phone don't work no more and it's very, very important that I uhhh… that I make this call, and then I'll be out of your way. I'd be ever so grateful."

My father— who had been brought up by a southern preacher's wife on healthy helpings of fried okra, hushpuppies, and southern manners— was well cultivated in the art of being boundlessly obliging, even in the most trying and unusual of situations. His answer to the drunken man in our kitchen was "Off course, Mr. Legant," and he helped him dial. But I noticed that Mr. Legant would get no further than our kitchen if he tried because my father intentionally blocked his way to the rest of the house.

Our neighbor stammered into the earpiece end of the phone, "Hello, hello? Operator? Ohh." He flipped the phone around so that he could speak into the mouthpiece. "Hello there. Yes, I need to call the Union of the Soviet Soc… I mean, I need to call Russia, please. I need to place a call to Stratsmonanov, Russia and I need an interpret.. an, an uhhh an interpreter. Someone who speaks Russian. I need to talk to my son. My uhhh, a boy. *My* boy. He'd be about five or six now. I think she gave him to a Russian, a doctor who lives in Stratsmonanov."

Twenty minutes later, when the operator was unable to get the name of an actual person from Mr. Legant or the correct spelling of Stratsmonanov, she hung up. My father got up from the kitchen table where he had been quietly reading Hemingway and offered his neighbor a glass of water. But he refused. The man was crushed. His awkwardly slumped shoulders reminded me of a freshly killed deer carcass on the side of a road— mangled, broken, and lifeless.

"My wife didn't want them to get sick, see? She didn't want them to get what I got. The defect I got..." He put both hands around his forehead, viciously tightened his grip for a moment, then, in a shear display of determination, he heaved his shoulders

erect, straightened his legs and stood up, only briefly bracing himself on the table. "Thank you for your help, John." Then he turned and left without another word.

As my father served us crepes and strawberries before school the next morning, I prodded him with questions about the Legants until he finally offered an appeasing amount of information about the midnight caller. I'd never seen him before that night, but my father finally told me that the man was our nearest neighbor, Mr. Gerald Legant. He lived about a half mile down the road from us in a single-story, shoddy-sided house with his five daughters and his six-foot-seven-inch-tall and freakishly obese wife. You could just barely glimpse the peeling brown paint of the house from the road. What I still remember about the Legant house was that it always seemed to be hiding— peering like an unconfessed accomplice from behind rusted bike and car frames, abandoned pieces of playground set, and rapacious thistle and dandelion weeds. The house was caged in by a copse of clawing black oak and maple trees, and all of the ancient trees seemed to be leaning in towards the center of the house, shielding it, hiding its menace.

The weeds and high grass had claimed the tiny riding lawnmower that Mrs. Legant tipped over in the ditch by the road the day it was purchased, after her one failed attempt to cut back the continually encroaching chaos that was her front yard. After the accident with the lawnmower, the feral weeds grew thick and strong, confident in their conquest. And even though we only caught occasional glimpses of the abandoned John Deere from the bus windows, the visual image of the massive Mrs. Legant— barefoot and draped in the homemade tent-like dresses that were the only thing that could cover

her giantess form— tipping over a ridiculously tiny lawnmower that she probably outweighed was a constant source of entertainment on long bus rides home from school.

The vanquished lawnmower, however, was not as riotous a diversion as the three nearly naked little girls who were too young to go to school came tearing from the house to the bus every afternoon, shrieking ecstatic greetings to their two older sisters. The three youngest sisters— Akya, Arianna, and Atolia— were still too young for school, but Arcite and Adrianna were in the fourth and second grade and rode the bus with us every day.

But we never spoke with either of the Legant girls who rode our bus, even though Arcite was in our class. One of the unwritten yet explicitly understood commandments that functioned as the most important keys to cool-dom and bus survival was: thou shalt not, under any circumstance sit near or have any kind of interaction with (with the singular exception of tormenting and/or ridiculing) the Legant sisters because such a monumental transgression would assuredly bring imminent, immediate, and irrevocable social ruin. We moved to Manitowosh, Wisconsin when I was in kindergarten, my family hadn't lived there for generations, and I always felt like something of an outsider because of that, so I had to work especially hard to fit in and be popular. I was always a quick learner, so I made certain that I was never seen associating with one of the Legants.

In fact, to be accepted, or at least to avoid getting picked on by the cool middle schoolers who staked out the back of the bus, you had to constantly concoct ingenious ways of terrorizing and humiliating the Legants. We walked by Arcite with our shirts over our noses and exclaimed things like, "You stink so bad you make me want to

puke!", "Don't they have a shower in your crappy old house?", and "You smell like a bag of dead rats! Disgusting!" Arcite always ignored her tormentors and stared straight ahead, keeping her eyes on the road in front of the bus, but she always sat as close as she could to the bus driver, so she was occasionally protected from the cruel taunts.

I never made fun of her myself; I could never have done that. I was grateful that no one seemed to notice that I always remained silent when they set in on her, but I always did my best to look like I was in on the persecution. In truth, I hated the kids who tormented Arcite Legant. And I knew that my parents would not only be horrified by the things my bus-mates said to her, they would also be crushed that I wouldn't even say one word to try and stop it.

My best friend throughout elementary school lived about a mile and a half down the road from me, on the other side of the Legant compound. Holly was a lanky lemur of a girl with incredibly bulbous eyes and thin, wispy blonde hair. Holly and Molly. By the time we were in the second grade we were so disgusted by the amused smugness of adults when they repeated the sound, that we invented fake names for each other and insisted that people call us by our different aliases, at least until we tired of them later that same day. We were virtually inseparable.

Molly's family and home were so different from my own that sleepovers there were like visiting an isolated tribal village in New Guinea without a guide who knew the language. They lived on a corner of her grandparent's farm in a small, straight trailer home. They ate white bread and Cheese Whiz and watched World Wrestling Federation matches every afternoon. And her dad said the word "underwear" out loud and he

frequently cracked open a can of Bud Light while sitting in his recliner in front of the TV. "Hold you're your underwear girls, this is going to be one hell of a match!" he'd exclaim as little tiny particles of foam shot out from the lip of his beer onto his dirty jeans. I thought he was great.

These were all things my own parents would never have dreamed of doing and would certainly not have allowed me to witness or participate in. *My* parents lived in a three story colonial that my dad designed, went to church every Sunday, listened to the classical music station on public radio, ate only organic food from farm co-ops, cooked seafood paella, had been loyal subscribers to *The New Republic* and *The New Yorker* for decades, only sipped fine merlot on very special occasions, and weren't even interesting enough to take the Lord's name in vain, ever. When we got a little older and I made other friends, spending time with Holly's family began to make me feel dirty and common, but while I was still in elementary school, I loved going up the road to the Schultz farmstead and I looked forward to going there every day.

One afternoon while Holly, me, and Holly's older sister Hattie sat on the greasy blue nylon-carpeted floor of the trailer, screaming at the professional wrestling match on TV while munching on a lunch of bologna and Kraft single sandwiches with the crust cut off and corn chips in mini bags, the second event occurred that would make it absolutely impossible for us *not* to explore the Legant's pond. That afternoon Holly's grandmother hobbled across the road and opened the trailer door, forgoing the formality of knocking. She was wearing the look that told us it was as serious as a sick calf or plummeting milk prices. It was good gossip.

After the obligatory brownies and coffee with milk fresh from the bulk tank was set out on the formica countertop and after Grandma had helped herself to generous portions of everything, she got right down to it.

"Judy Lofenburg was helping the Kindschus do their evening milking last Thursday, and she heard from Uncle Rob that old Bob Torkelson saw that crazy Legant man dump one in the pond again." She pushed their last name through the top of her head with her tongue, her nasally Midwestern way of speaking grating through her best attempt at a snooty French accent, as if the name was something the Legant family pulled out of a made-up book of ancestors to demean all of the decent families of German or Norwegian decent.

Grandma raised one eyebrow that was so sparse it was barely existent, and waited for a reaction from Holly's mom, she didn't want to have this conversation in front of us. Even as a child, I could tell how much Holly's mom loathed her mother-in-law and how much she resented having to live on the small, bare corner of their farm. I had, of course, told Holly all about the midnight visit from Mr. Legant and now we were desperate to discover what Grandma was talking about. However, we instinctually knew not to press the issue at that moment. Holly's older sister Hattie, however— the only middle schooler who sat alone on the bus because she was in "special" classes and because she had slapped a girl on the bus once, giving her a bloody nose that made a dark puddle on the camo-green covering of the bus seats as the poor fourth grader wept and tried to cover her face— had no such instinctual reservations.

"Dump one what?" No one spoke. "Tell me! Tell me! Dump one what?!"

Because she had that same crazed look in her eyes, I suddenly remembered the time Hattie had chased us around the house with a butcher knife— all the while spitting and screaming that she was going to kill us— because we had caught her making out with a life-size poster of her favorite wrestler, Brett the Hitman Heart.

Before Holly's mom could stifle her, between noisy gulps of coffee and mouthfuls of chalky brownie, Grandma explained, "A baby. He threw one of the baby boys in the pond." She ignored Holly's mom and turned directly to us and continued, "That's where they throw the boys because they're afraid they'll go crazy like their old man. Besides, who would ever know that woman's with child? She always delivers them at home. She had that brood of wild girls right there at home with only that lunatic of a husband to help her." Even in the midst of nothing but endless acres of corn, soybean, and alfalfa fields that covered the gently rolling countryside like the individual squares of a faded patchwork quilt, somehow everyone knew that schizophrenia was passed on only through male children.

Later, as we discussed the day's exciting events in the private seclusion of our fort in the woods, we would figure that, because the Legants already had five girls, all of them two years apart, they must have also had at least six and maybe even seven boys in between the births of the girls. And the pale, translucent fetuses were right down the road from us, their miniature ivory limbs preserved in silence and still, black water. We carefully imagined it— a sunken graveyard of murdered, miniscule little bodies and pristine souls only a hundred yards down the road.

We needed to see it for ourselves.

The next evening, just as the faded red ring around the horizon began to melt into the expansive dome of pale blue twilight like the layers of a bomb pop left on a picnic table in July, we commenced our secret maneuver. Our faces smudged in the most exposed places with my older brother's eye-black, outfitted from head to toe in pure black (except for Holly's slightly faded brown socks because she couldn't find black ones), and equipped with two of my father's fishing nets, we crept noiselessly out the front door while both of my parents were sitting on the back porch reading different sections of *The New York Times*.

Thrilled by our daring escape and at being out of doors when it was getting dark so fast, we tramped single file by the side of the county highway towards the Legant's, our way lit by an enormous July moon and the rubber soles of our sneakers scuffing the lip of the asphalt, sometimes sending pieces of gravel flying end-over-end across the blacktopped surface of the road. Our plan was to steal the old row boat that the Legants had stashed in the weeds on the opposite side of the pond, row to the shallow end nearest the house, get one good look at a dead baby, and be back before my father refilled his pipe. But now that we were actually in the process of carrying out our plot, I wasn't so sure that I actually wanted to see a decomposing infant. I felt the vegetable quiche that my mother had made for dinner slowly making its way upwards from my stomach.

After we fought our way through the scratching mess of thick weeds and low lying branches that stood between the road and the water, we finally reached the shallow end of the pond and, both of us shaking but neither one of us willing to admit that we

wanted to turn back, we launched the decaying rowboat. The splintering, painted prow of the boat cut through the film of moonlight floating on the still, black water.

Only moments after our launch, my oar accidentally grazed the soft sucking ooze at the bottom of the pond. Then the festering sense of nausea gripped me with renewed vengeance and I tasted the warm, cheesy quiche in the back of my throat. What if I had just crushed a baby's paper-thin skull?

Even though it had cooled down considerably since the sun had set, the air on the sunken surface of the pond wasn't moving, and I suddenly began to feel sweaty and overwhelmed by the stifling air. Nearly every inch of my skin was covered in black, but the mosquitoes still attacked my exposed ears and neck. I began to get unbearably hot, then sticky, then itchy, then panicky. The pulsing cadence of the crickets and cicadae that domed the pond in sound, a symphony I normally would have delighted in listening to, only added to my rapidly escalating sense of panic. I couldn't breath and, for fear that the rotting rowboat would capsize, I couldn't move. As I watched Holly jab her net into the dark, still water and come up with the metallic tip dripping black slime and bits of limp, water-logged sticks, I felt a hot wave of liquefied quiche force itself up and fill my mouth and I spit it into the pond. The greasy white chunks of partially digested quiche floated, like a puss-pimpled, festering infection on the surface of the smooth black water.

Just then Holly shrieked breathlessly, "Molly! Molly! Oh my God, I felt something. I really felt something! There! It's right there! Do you see it? Do you see that little white face?"

I leapt to the other side of the already unstable rowboat, almost dumping us into the hellish quagmire, but I was too late. I didn't see anything.

We were both terrified, so we chopped at the water with our warped oars until we made it to the nearest piece of shore. Suddenly we found ourselves on the opposite side of the pond from which we had started, just yards away from the jungle that was the Legant's front yard.

"Look!", Molly said. "You can see them through the window. What are they doing? Can you tell?"

I crept a little ways up the embankment that lead to up the lawn. "Yeah, they're sitting at the table and they're playing some kind of board game. Looks like Monopoly."

It was a nice table. Long and wooden, probably oak. The picturesque family scene was illuminated by a roaring fire in the stone fireplace behind them and also by a large driftwood light fixture that hung over the table. All five of the Legant girls and their mother were sharing a big pitcher of red Kool-aid and an enormous bowl of popcorn. They were all there except for Mr. Legant. The youngest girl, Atolia, was running around the table with fistfuls of multi-colored Monopoly money and the others were all smiling and laughing at her.

Suddenly all of the Legant females stopped what they were doing and the warmth and light seemed to be sucked out of the room as Mr. Legant walked in, picked up a picture from off the mantle place, looked at it for a long moment, took a deep swallow from the tumbler he was holding, draining it, and then, like the quick, painful kickback from a rifle shot, he fired the glass into the nearest corner of the room, shattering it. Then

he stalked back out of the scene. I wondered if it had been a picture of his son who had been sent away to Russia.

Then the rowboat banged loudly against a large rock that sat in the water only feet from the where we were standing. Just moments later, through the pine trees we could see the Legant's front porch light come on. We heard someone heavy crashing down the porch steps and then running through the hip-high lawn towards the pond. Horrified that the most fearsome monster we could possibly imagine was closing in on us at every step, Holly and I sprinted through the patch of woods to get to the road as fast as we could, scratching our exposed faces all along the way.

Hours later, just before dawn, when we had finally both calmed down enough to succumb to shear exhaustion, and in the security of my bedroom with my parents sleeping downstairs, Holly said, "My family plays Monopoly on Saturday nights, too."

"I know."

"My sister always has to be the race car."

"I know. My family plays Trivial Pursuit," I offered. We never set foot on the Legant's property again.

With our excitement filled summer vacation at an end, on the very first day of the fifth grade Arcite sat at the front of the bus, didn't talk to anyone, and kept her eyes directly above the bus driver's head. But even all of these precautions didn't save her.

After a summer spent on isolated family farms, with nothing to terrorize but farm cats, calves, and the occasional younger brother or sister, the meaner kids were ravenous for raw degradation. A particularly viscous seventh grade boy whose father was the janitor at our school and who was probably so malicious because he was aware of his own small eyes, large glasses, pointed nose, bucked teeth and general vole-ish appearance, came prepared for the Legants on the first day of school. His backpack was stuffed full of urinal cakes his dad had let him take from the janitor's closet because he had ordered a new case for the new school year. He began throwing them at Arcite and saying, "Here, wipe that under your stinking armpits and crotch!" The pungent odor of the urinal cakes filled the bus and the back of Arcite's purple, ragged, thrift store sweater was covered in the reeking chalky soap, but still she would not turn around and give him the satisfaction of uttering a single word in anger or to tell the bus driver. So the rapid fire continued. Then he hit her directly in the back of her head and little pieces of white urinal cake clung to the strands of her long, light brown hair. "There! Wash your dirty old disgusting clothes with that one 'cuz they smell like rat piss and the rest of us can't stand it!"

Finally realizing that he would not get the reaction out of Arcite that he wanted, the janitor's son—I think his name was Johnny, but I honestly couldn't tell you for sure—slowed, then ceased his barrage of messy missiles. At last we reached the Legant's house, and when Arcite grabbed her little sister Adrianna's hand to get off the bus, she was stoic as ever, but I noticed that Adrianna, who had been hiding behind the seat the entire torturous ride home, was silently crying.

The next day I had to go to the bathroom at the first recess of the day, which also happened to be the time that Arcite hid in the first grade bathrooms to avoid going outside for recess with the other kids, who would undoubtedly tease her about her clothing or her smell. But I never thought she smelt bad or dressed all that strangely.

It was a bathroom that was almost never used and I could tell that Arcite wasn't expecting anyone to find her there. I caught her looking in the mirror and trying to fix her incredibly long hair into a pony tail on the top of her head, like the popular fifth and sixth grade girls were doing. It had taken me some practice to get it right, but I had finally mastered the look. I started to wash my hands without saying anything and while trying to avoid eye contact, but her backpack was sitting on the sink stand between us and I couldn't help but notice that she had a key chain attached to it with the picture of a chubby faced, smiling little baby inside a plastic frame.

"That's my brother. He died a year ago in June. Mom says it was really hard on my dad because he'd always wanted a boy. Since little Gerri died, all my dad does is drink whiskey and get mad at everyone and everything. He never used to be like that."

I had no idea what to say. I had barely ever heard her speak before. There was a painful pause. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. I don't think anyone knew."

"It's okay. He was born sick and just never got better. There was nothing anyone could do." Another pause. What could I say to this girl my age, my classmate, my neighbor who had lost a brother?

But I didn't have to say anything because she started to speak again. "Hey, I know we can't be friends or you can't be seen talking to me in front of the other kids, but

I wanted you to know that any time you want to use our rowboat again, you can just go ahead and take it out. There's little baby painted turtles at the far end of the pond and there's a blue heron that shows up every once and awhile."

Shocked that she somehow knew we were on her pond and suddenly overcome by the fact not only that she was talking to me, but that she seemed normal, like the other girls I was friends with, I said, "Thanks. Maybe we could take it out and you could show me where those turtles are. I have some beta fish, but I'd really like a turtle."

But we never met at the pond. I wish I could say that I had befriended Arcite, that I talked to her again, or that I had stuck up for her just one time when she and her sisters were being tormented on the bus, that I had made her life easier in some small way. But I didn't. I can't say that now.

I got a little older and became prom queen and the belle of my small hometown, and by the time we started middle school I wasn't even friends with Holly because she wasn't pretty enough or good enough at sports. My parents never knew that was the real reason I had stopped going over to the Schultz's farm, and when I graduated high school, they were very proud of me. I left the Midwest after high school to go to college out East, then I stayed on the East coast to make more money, and now it's as if my childhood in that small Wisconsin town is someone else's dream. It's usually a pleasant dream, one I enjoy remembering from a distance like those elusive and long ago, fabled nights by a warm fire, but the part of the dream that haunts me, the part that I can never leave behind or forget wherever I go or whatever I do, is Arcite Legant, her family, her

pond, and the fact that I will never see them again because they exist in a past that I can never return to and never change, a past beyond my intervention.

CHAPTER 3

THE RAIN DANCE

God spent the night my best friend's mother died shooting through the summer twilight with lightening, flashing deified pictures of us in our outlandish bowling get-ups. I think She got a kick out of seeing us stupefied by cheap alcohol and tragedy in our obnoxious teal and yellow team shirts and ridiculous multi-colored shoes.

On Thursdays, Joey, my best friend since the first grade, dragged me and four of our other college friends to bowl in a league at King Pin Lanes, the only bowling alley in our home town. But that Thursday was different. That Thursday night the sky pulsed with silent explosions of brilliant white lightening, like an enormous, omniscient camera that was determined to capture us in the most uncomfortable situation imaginable. It might have been at least partly a result of the five gin and tonics I had sipped throughout the course of the evening— the dose I required to tolerate the greasy, grain and sausage plumped patrons of the bowling alley bar— but that night my fingers danced with the primeval power of the storm and I felt an intense desire to dance in the rain.

As Joey and I stood, silent and tearless, in the parking lot waiting for her uncle to take us to her dead mother's duplex, I studied my blue, red, and gray patterned bowling shoes and mused about how they looked like strange, wingless insects with a half-dozen pairs of unblinking, white rimmed eyes. It was all I could think of to do. We waited

while the fading purple summer night strobbed blinding white surges. We waited and waited, but it never rained.

I didn't know quite how to leave, so I sat there in Uncle Rick's olive green doused, shag carpeted living room with Joey's family for the rest of the night and into the early morning. No one spoke. And even though Joey's grandmother had set out turkey, mustard, mayonnaise, homemade bread, and fresh milk, none of us touched the spread. No one seemed to know what to say when a healthy forty-two year old woman has a massive heart attack and drops dead on her bathroom floor.

Suddenly sober and still tearless, I was a stranger amidst a family who had lost their only daughter, sister, and mother.

By three in the morning God stopped shooting pictures of the family's awkward shock and grief, by four Joey's grandmother and aunt had somewhat subdued their sobbing, at five Joey's grandfather and two uncles left to do the milking, and by six some forgotten sense told me I was ravenously hungry. I had skipped supper the night before in favor of the gin and tonics and I was almost beginning to regret turning my nose up at the unnaturally yellow tortilla chips and caulk-consistency nacho cheese that they sold at the bowling alley.

And I was tired. Tired of being uncomfortable, tired of being still, tired of being pent up, tired of thinking, and tired of being awake. The first year of a counseling

internship leaves too little time for friends, boyfriends, and family, and virtually *no* time for luxuries such as sleep. It got to the point where all I think about that early Friday morning was all of the work I had to do, the appointments I had missed without explanation, and closing the door to my bedroom, hiding under the comforter, and letting the wonderful unconsciousness of dead-end exhaustion wash me into oblivion. But Uncle Rick had appeared during the third frame of our second game and told my best friend that her mother was dead.

"Can you go with me?" Joey turned to me and pleaded. So deadlines, appointments and sleep were forgotten because a woman was dead. I had no choice but to follow Joey and climb into her pot-bellied uncle's tank sized conversion van.

Later that day, as I was just sitting down at my tiny kitchen table with my *Introduction to Child Psychology* textbook and the spinach and feta salad I had ordered from an overpriced Italian restaurant on the other side of town, my mother called. The ringer I assigned her was a grating snare drum roll that made my phone jump and wiggle across the kitchen counter. I didn't answer.

She called back thirty seconds later and when I didn't answer she shrilled on my voice mail, "Savannah, you should really think about changing your message; you sound like you're twelve. Anyway, I wanted you to know that your stepfather and I are spending a couple of weeks in New Mexico. We're staying with his daughter Jessica. She's a very nice girl. She has the most beautiful long hair and she's going to school to be a dental hygienist. Actually, we're about to board the plane in a minute, so if you need anything right away, don't bother calling, not that you ever do. Oh, and your aunt

mentioned that you've highlighted your hair again and I just wanted to make sure that it didn't turn out too coppery. You remember what happened the last time you tried to dyed your own hair. But if it did, call *my* stylist, not that hack you went to high school with. And when we get back from New Mexico, I think you and we should grab a nice steak dinner or something, so just…" Mercifully, my phone finally cut her off.

Even though she lived only about a half-hour away from me, I hadn't heard from my mother in six months. And I hadn't needed anything from her in at least a decade.

But I had forgotten how much I still cared what she thought. It made me disgusted with myself.

Hearing my mother talk about my appearance in her usual disdain-saturated tone after so many months made me remember the time she had playfully snapped my picture with a Polaroid camera when I was eight. After she stared at the image of me in profile for several minutes, she began to seethe. She smoked four Virginia Slims, drank three dry gin martinis— leaving the olives in the elegant martini glass because they had too many calories—, shattered the framed picture of herself in her homecoming queen crown, and then slapped me for not finishing my beef enchilada TV dinner. But even then, I had refused to cry. That was the first time I felt ugly.

I didn't call her back.

Three quarters of the guys and girls soccer teams and most of our other college friends came to the wake. The line to view Joey's mother and hug the family stretched out of the funeral home doors and out into the deserted Main Street of Bankroft, Wisconsin. When Joey spotted the group of mostly mal-adjusted and thickening ex-

athletes, most of whom we had lost contact with years ago and who were now scattered across the Midwest, she let herself cry for the first time since she received the news.

While Joey was busy with her relatives and after I waited my turn in line for over two hours and had attempted to say something appropriately sincere and adequately grief stricken to each of the family members, I went with Colin— the former star football player I dated my Junior and Senior year of college— to the nearest Citgo to buy cigarettes, even though neither of us have ever really smoked. He had spotted me at the wake and asked me if I needed to get out of there, and at that moment I would have kissed Osama Bin Laden himself to get out of there and to breathe some fresh air.

As Colin shifted into reverse, he turned and said to me, "You still wear the same perfume. It's the stuff I bought you. I always liked that." I only smiled slightly, sadly. "Did you know I'm a firefighter now?" As if that explained everything.

"Yeah, I heard that from my aunt. That's great. You like it?"

"Yeah, I do. I love it. I really do. It's great work. Lots of action." And then I knew he'd rehearsed this very conversation, just like I had. It was so inadequate in reality.

Did you know that I could never have gotten on that plane to Vegas with you? It's not my fault. You shouldn't have asked me. But I'm still so sorry that I wasn't ready then and that I hurt you so much. I panicked, and he was just there. Did you really move on or are you just pretending with a sometimes tolerable replacement like I am? Even if I had managed to get that out, it still wouldn't have been enough.

"That's great, Colin."

As I climbed out of the cab of Colin's truck, the air felt cool, weighty, wet. I exposed the tan skin of my entire arm, but I didn't feel a drop. When we entered the nearly empty funeral parlor, I noticed that Joey's full cheeks and round little nose were red, raw from crying. For the first time in my life, I began to wish I could cry.

The next day we sat through a weepy service at St. James the Son of Zebedee Catholic Church, and then we crowded into the dank, low-ceiling church basement to eat a funerary feast of ham and cheese sandwiches, seven layer salad, crunchy peanut butter bars, and hot coffee. During the burial at a flat, sprawling cemetery three miles out of town, the indecisive July wind teased us with hot and then cool air as the sky around the horizon sickened to a mixed shade of green. You could feel it in the air. Tornado weather.

Even during the priest's eulogy, amidst the grief slackened faces and the shining metallic blue coffin, I felt my arms' need to rise above my head and my fingers' desire to dance in anticipation, to dance with the charge of the brewing, surging atmosphere. I pushed the need down somewhere.

The strange sensation and the possibility of an impending tempest made me remember that when I was in the second grade, in a drunken fit my mother called me a "goddam worthless little shit" for dancing in a storm and stomping in the dirty puddles that collected in our driveway. Then— after I picked up the largest earthworm I could find and proudly presented it to her, dark pink and fleshy, coated with bits of wet gravel, and dangling limply between my pinched little fingers— she made me stand outside through the rest of the downpour.

But standing on the exposed hill of the cemetery, one in a throng of weathered farmers and factory workers and their weary wives, I was still waiting for the rain. Like famished predators, high, flat, looming clouds patiently stalked from one end of the horizon to the other. I was scanning the higher purple parts of the sky for the thrilling, spinning funnel clouds, when I felt someone watching me. But I had missed him gazing at me. When I looked up, Colin was already playing with the manicured cemetery grass with the toe of his polished black shoe, making all of the blades stand up in one direction and then lie down in another.

When the service ended, still somehow feeling like a stranger, I hugged Joey, her grandmother and her aunt, lowering myself to each of their heights while awkwardly embracing their bulk. But I couldn't find the words. Their bloated faces and red eyes made me clammy and graceless, agonizingly silent and still dry-eyed.

The next day my mother called again. I hit the silent button, cutting off the jarring snare drum, and went back to my chapter about counseling abused children. I knew she would leave a message.

"Hey, Vanna listen. George and I found some little dolls they call Kachinas here. They're everywhere, actually. And there's this other little figure they got on everything down here they call Kokopelli. He's a funny looking Indian guy who's always dancing and playing a flute. Since you used to be so into all that Indian stuff, we were wondering if maybe you wanted one of those instead of a t-shirt. Well, let me know. Oh, I almost forgot, your brother says that you've lost some weight. Now I want you to watch it; you

were skinny enough already, Vanna. So I think we should grab that nice big, steak dinner when I get back and then do some shopping…" Click. That was enough.

I had an entire shelf in my closet stacked with never unfolded, screen-printed souvenir t-shirts from various hokey tourist destinations across the continental U.S., a mock shrine devoted to George and my mother's travels. I told my boyfriend that the fear that my mother or George will ask me to about one of the t-shirts they bought me has compelled me to keep them, but I really didn't know why I saved them and stashed them away. Perhaps its out of guilt that I actually detest me own mother, the only family I have. Some day I'm going to get mad enough or work up enough courage to hurl the whole mess into the dumpster.

I am a vegetarian. Have been for five years. And I can't remember ever eating a steak. And after discovering in the third grade that my grandfather was really only a quarter Cherokee, I stopped collecting Native American books and artifacts. To my mom's tremendous frustration and disappointment, I loathed all dolls even as a child. I pressed five to delete the message.

My mother completed the AA program six years ago, she still attends meetings, and she hasn't stopped trying to reach me since the step about forgiveness, but I still can't forgive her for my childhood.

The next night, a Tuesday, Joey decided that what she needed was to go out. I knew that I had four more chapters to read and a veritable glossary of terms to memorize before the morning, but I also knew that I had to be there for her.

For both of us, having a drink at our favorite bar— the place where we had always been so carefree, crazy and happier— after the tragedy and the funerary ordeal, felt wrong at first, but then, after the wash of a third round of Bombay Sapphire, it became warm and right, a fitting tribute. All of our college friends who were still in the area and whose devotion to Joey superceded their Wednesday morning employment obligations, showed up at Sully's, the dive bar that had been our home away from home through four years of collegiate athletics.

I told Bryan, my current boyfriend, that I needed to spend the night studying. Somehow I forgot, but I guess we had planned on making dinner together. He cursed at me and hung up the phone.

"I already bought the goddamn groceries, Savannah! Fine. That's great. I'll make fuckin' paella for myself!" He was actually an incredible cook who loved making dinner for me. But I didn't tell him that. I guessed it would be at least a day or two before we spoke again.

Mike, our favorite bartender, the one who always made sure one of us was okay to drive and who let us drink for free whenever we won a conference game, set a bottle of Captain Morgan on the counter and told Joey that the Coke gun was the second one over.

"You're mixing your own tonight, hun. On me." Ever since our sophomore year in high school, it was the only thing Joey drank. Each of us had our particular poisons.

At around 10:30, when the line of sweet brown liquid was just below Mr. Morgan's brilliant yellow waist sash, Colin showed up. He stood between us as he put his right arm around Joey and kissed her forehead lightly, said his hellos, ordered a bottle

of New Glarus, then seated himself on Joey's other side. I'd never met a single person who didn't adore Colin. It was maddening.

Until Colin started to tell stories about how funny and kind Joey's mother had been, I'd forgotten that he grew up in the next small town over and that Joey's mother had babysat him since they were three. How did he know just the right thing to say to her? After Colin had finished his own tribute, I told the story about how, right after Joey and I had decided to rent a little house together our Junior year, Joey's mom woke us up before seven in the morning on a Sunday to start raking leaves. She came with three rakes, a bottle of Ibuprofen, three thermoses full of hot chocolate, a plate of homemade chocolate chip and walnut cookies, and with so much unapologetic exuberance for cleaning up the yard that it made us even more painfully aware of how much we had drank the night before and of what time we had finally gotten to bed.

"Gotta get those leaves up, girls, before the first snowfall or you'll have one hell of a mess in the spring! Mice and voles burrowing in the snow, nosing their way into the house. And we'll have to clean those gutters out. Alright girls, pick up those rakes!" We had no idea that gutters needed to be cleaned or that it was so imperative a task to accomplish before noon on a Sunday.

We raked, hauled, bagged leaves, chatted, and laughed until the sun set but Joey's mom never tired, or complained, or even made it seem like work. She worked eighty hours a week as a waitress at a 24-7 truck stop diner. Sundays were her only day off.

Like me, Joey never knew her father. Hers left right after she was born. I've been told that my biological father stuck around until after my third birthday, then, when

my mother started drinking again, he took off for Alaska. Maybe growing up fatherless was the reason Joey and I bonded so quickly and fiercely.

By the time Mike was locking up the front door and wiping down each ray in the brilliant rainbow of liquor bottles, the level of Joey's rum was even with the Captain's gold buckle bedazzled shoes. She suddenly spun her barstool around to face me.

"I know you feel really bad and I know you think you're terrible at these things, that you're so damaged and dark, and there's so many things wrong with you— and you might be right about some things— but you're here. You were here through the whole thing and I know you're gonna be here tomorrow and even after that, so thanks. Thank you." She raised her glass. "And bon voyage, Mom, happy sailing." I watched her and smiled sadly. We clinked drinks, making the dark rum and the clear gin glint and dance in the faceted glasses. Then I scanned the bar. There were only five of us left in the place, including Mike.

"He left." Joey said, as she filtered the ice with her lips for another slow sip.

"Who?"

"Colin. Don't act stupid because I know you're not, so it's not going to work on me. He left about a half hour ago. He said goodbye and squeezed your shoulder. You don't remember?" Her words were only slightly slurred.

Perhaps I had also polished off more of the medicating tonic water than I had realized. Or maybe it was just easier to let him leave. I set my drink down.

Then I got a text message from Colin asking me if there's anything he could do or if I needed a ride home. I texted him back "No. Cab's on its way."

By the time Joey and I poked and weaved our way out the back door, through the alley and towards the other side of Main Street, the first layer of our clothes was spattered and our faces were glistening with the enormous raindrops that forced meaty night crawlers from their underground sanctuaries. We stepped over their exposed pink flesh as adroitly as we could, as if they were part of us and the same sort of flesh.

The sky had finally broken and unleashed the rain. I felt the sudden warm July deluge unbind something inside me and I was no longer able to push the need to dance down to that place where it had been pushed for too long. I threw my arms in the air and danced for all I was worth. I leaped and I twirled, I pirouetted, and I splashed out the puddles. Joey watched in amazement, but then she did her own little jig in a particularly deep puddle, and suddenly everything in our worlds didn't feel quite so messed up, quite so wrong. We laughed until we had to stop to breathe and because we had finally both spent everything we had left. Then the wound was split wide open and there was nothing between me and all of the guilt, all of the hate, all of the regret, and all of the love that had always been there. I allowed myself to finally feel them all. I allowed myself to forgive and to be forgiven. So, at last, I cried. I turned the face that I finally believed was beautiful up to the sky and into the warm July rain, and I let it wash everything away.

I would make calls to the two people I knew had been waiting to hear from me for a long time, to the two people who had been waiting for me to cry and to dance in the rain once again.

CHAPTER 4

OUR FINAL STORY

People reveal the most amazing things when they know they are about to die. I spent my life with people caught between two worlds— their small, sterile, white-tiled hospital room that was reality, and all of the other places they lived their lives, their memories of the things they had done, and the people they had known and loved.

I was a traveling hospice nurse who held licenses in eleven states. I know that the dying sometimes spend their final months in entirely different places, the places they were the most happy, or sometimes the most miserable. My very first hospice patient for example, Mr. Daniel, never came back to Toledo, Ohio from the lover he had in the Philippines before World War II. But some of the dying are more lucid than they ever were in life, more lucid than any of us ever could be without that certain knowledge that we are about to die. They are temporarily blessed with the gift of seeing what was truly important.

I spent too much time with the dying and the things they remembered, so now everyone I ever loved is dead and I have no one to visit me here. I don't even have a story of my own to share with you, *my* hospice nurse. So I will tell you Mrs. Stinzworth's tale, because it's what I remember, what I keep coming back to.

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What Mrs. Stinzworth remembers most about that night was the enormity of the stars. They seemed to hang in the ebony expanse of the night sky just above the pointed tops of the tallest pines, ancient and eternal. The surreal stars made the freshly fallen snow glint across the subdued swells of Mrs. Stinzworth's backyard, and the January cold froze the night into a dead stillness and heightened Mrs. Stinzworth's senses until she could feel nothing but the immensity of the stars, the snow, the trees, and the winter night.

Mrs. Stinzworth and her husband were enjoying a quiet cup of hot chocolate infused with the tiniest thimbleful of crème de menthe and nibbling on some homemade cookies and fudge while listening to their favorite radio program when they heard a knock at the front door. Mrs. Stinzworth was always after her husband to fix the doorbell that chimed a lovely melody because whenever someone banged on the front door she jumped so much that she spilled whatever she was drinking or made a mess of whatever she had been making in the kitchen. There used to be people dropping by the house all the time, the doorbell was always ringing, but it had been so long now since anyone had stopped by that both Mr. and Mrs. Stinzworth both jumped when they heard the knocking.

And they both went to the door. Will and Josh were immediately ushered in from the cold, gushed over, and offered anything and everything the Stinzworth's had to offer, before they were finally settled into recliners with their own steaming mugs of hot chocolate. At first, Mrs. Stinzworth never even thought to ask her son's best friends what

they were there for. She was just so happy to see them and it was so good to have boys in the house again. Before their visit, she only vaguely realized how mush she ached for the noise, the smell, the sound, the feel, and the general boisterousness and life that boys bring to a home.

The recently retired Mr. Stinzworth was always so quiet, subdued, and reverent that even when he did speak, sometimes Mrs. Stinzworth wanted to scream or burst into laughter or tears or bounce a basketball against the walls in the dining room, the way Samuel and his friends had done only a couple of years ago, but what seemed like only a couple of days ago. Even with her husband at home all of the time now, Mrs. Stinzworth more and more frequently found herself talking only to herself, or to Samuel.

She wanted Will and Josh to stay for a long enough time so she could make them warm and fill them full of good things to eat, all of the delicious cakes, and cookies and casseroles that her and Mr. Stinzworth couldn't put a dent in, let alone come close to finishing. She always seemed to be making entirely too much food now.

As she brought out a platter of oatmeal raisin cookies she baked that morning for a bake sale at church, Mrs. Stinzworth chimed, "Aren't you hungry after running about in the cold, boys? Could I bring you a nice ham sandwich on homemade bread? Or would you like something hot? I made a huge pot of chicken and dumpling soup yesterday and now that it's just the two of us…" Mrs. Stinzworth caught herself. She wanted to be happy to see her son's friends; she didn't want to think of the memories they brought with them. "Well, I'm sure I could get some heated up for you in just a minute here."

She was on her way to the kitchen before they had time to answer, but Will gently caught her hand.

"We're fine Mrs. Stinzworth. Thank you all the same. You know I always thought you made the best homemade soups out of all the ladies in town, but we're not hungry now. Really. The hot chocolate's wonderful. Thank you."

By far the more outgoing of the two, Will, a robustly handsome, self-assured, well-mannered and scrapping farm boy with tan skin and sandy blonde hair who excelled in every high school sport without ever putting forth a genuine effort, was the first to speak. "Mr. and Mrs. Stinzworth, I want you to know that Josh and I have talked long and hard about it and we think it's best to tell you straight out. That is, there's something we need to tell you that we think you oughta hear. We think it might be good for you to hear… uhh to hear what we've seen."

How strange. It wasn't that long ago that Mrs. Stinzworth was telling this boy what was good for *him*.

Joshua, the small, quiet, black-haired, intense and studious boy who had decided to go away to college, saw his friend floundering and attempted to come to his aid. "Mr. and Mrs. Stinzworth, you know that Samuel was our best friend in the world and we, well, we uhh… well, we loved him like a brother (Mrs. Stinzworth had, in fact, known that for a very long time, ever since the night she caught them taking a vow of eternal brotherhood by lantern light while they were camping out in Mr. Stinzworth's old Army tent in her backyard the very first summer that Josh moved to Pine Ridge, the summer before they started the fourth grade) and we'd never do anything to upset you, but we

think you should know that both of us saw something amazing, unbelievable really, incredible, but wonderful." He lost himself and trailed off.

Will sat just as mute, troubled, and lost, and eventually Mrs. Stinzworth— who found it extremely painful to see anyone else in discomfort— found it necessary to help him on, "Well Josh, dear, please tell us. Just go ahead and tell us what you've seen." Mrs. Stinzworth patted his knee.

And then, like breaking through the ice on Pine Ridge Lake in February, fast, painful, and shocking, it came. "We saw Samuel."

Seeing that Mrs. Stinzworth was in awe and was not about to say a thing, Mr. Stinzworth was the first to get his bearings and respond. "What do you mean you 'saw' him? Josh, that doesn't make and sense."

"I know, Mr. Stinzworth, I know. But it's the truth. And we debated whether or not we should tell you, whether it would do you good or harm, but we decided that it's such a good, amazing thing that he did for both of us that we thought you should know."

Ever since that horrific, fatal jerk of the wheel that night a year and a half ago, Mrs. Stinzworth had wanted nothing more than to see her son. She would have given her own life to see him, to feel him, to hug him one last time. She would have given everything she had, her own life and her husband's, just to have the chance to say goodbye. There were times she thought she couldn't go on, times she thought she would and *should* die, because all that was impossible now.

She would have done so many things differently that unseasonably warm and sunny day, if she had only known that Samuel would never come back to her alive. What

really made her want to die now was the reality that not only was Samuel's life such a maddening, hope-crushing waste of everything great in this world, but his death meant her life was also a waste. Samuel was Mrs. Stinzworth's only child, and she lived for him. He was her masterpiece, the best thing she had ever or would ever create, the best thing anyone could ever create.

But why did *they* get to see her boy? She suddenly thought she hated them just as much as she hated the driver of the car, Sam's girlfriend at the time of his death, Katie. But the feeling was fleeting; Mrs. Stinzworth didn't have the capacity for it. She loved these boys, even if it was unfair that their parents got to see and hold and talk to them every single day while her son was gone, dead.

Sometimes Mrs. Stinzworth lay awake at night and she saw Katie's lovely heart-shaped face framed by her beautiful strawberry blonde hair and her chest burned loathing and her heart beat hate. And then she was so ashamed that she spent the rest of the night and the next day weeping.

Now it was Will's turn to jump in and help his friend. "I saw him just last week, Mr. Stinzworth. It's the truth." He seemed to have composed himself considerably and now he was determined to get out what he had come to say. "You see, I had to haul some wood up to our barn in the far north field to patch up a hole in the barn where the wind was getting in and freezin' the silage when my truck started skidding around out on Highway 49 because of all the weight I loaded in the back of her. Well, I hit a bad patch of black ice and I started sliding in to the opposite lane just as an eighteen wheeler was coming down the hill, and that's when I saw him. That's when I saw Samuel."

No one said anything, so Will continued. "I tell you, he was sitting there just as sure as I'm sitting here in your living room now. He put his hand on my shoulder just before I thought I was going to feel the impact and he smiled just a little, like he always used to do, you all know the way, and before I knew it, I was on the other side of that eighteen wheeler. Got past it God only knows how, or maybe Samuel only knows how. But I'm telling you I should have been killed. And I know Samuel has something to do with why I'm here today."

There was only silence when Will finished. This was one of the only instances in Mrs. Stinzworth's life that she was completely silent and stunned. She didn't have the words because her mind couldn't work its way around what these boys were telling her.

Feeling the gravity, the incredible weight of the awed silence brought about but what he had just said, Will finished quickly because he knew he was going to cry, "He was a real good boy, Mr. and Mrs. Stinzworth. The best there was. I just wanted you to know that he was my brother and I love him and he saved my life."

Mrs. Stinzworth didn't know how she found the strength to emerge from her shocked stupor, but somehow she put her soft, ivory, slightly age-spotted hand on Will's knee and patted it gently. She felt the heavy, rough denim of the working man's jeans, and she saw that a tear was forming in the sun-tanned creases in the corner of Will's eye.

They all sat there for a moment in complete stillness. Then Will put his cracked and calloused hand over Mrs. Stinzworth's smooth, ivory one and they both cried together, silently. The fire had died down to lustrous orange embers and everyone's face was cast in alternating forms of glow and shadow.

Finally, after they were all silent for as long as it takes to catch a breath, there was a mutual agreement that they could go on.

"Josh, tell them your story now. Come on, just like you told me. It's time."

Slowly, reluctantly, Josh finally looked up from the floor. He turned slightly so that he faced the older couple and the fire squarely. Mrs. Stinzworth felt even before she saw Josh's whole body flood with pain as his face glowed with the warm fire light.

"Well, Mr. and Mrs. Stinzworth, you remember when I first came here, the summer before we were all going to enter the fifth grade, well, I had a really tough time with everything. A *really* tough time. My parents had just divorced and I just couldn't get used to living with my dad and his new girlfriend and this small town. Chicago was so different and I missed my mom so much… and I just couldn't understand why it all happened."

"Well, anyway, the truth is, I was so lonely and scared and sad all the time, and I think Samuel knew it. He wasn't even in the fifth grade, but he was so smart and he knew what people needed, even as a boy. He made friends with me, Mrs. Stinzworth. He didn't have to do that. He made friends with me when no one else would and when I was so shy and awkward and he was always so good at everything and so popular already."

"There were even a couple of times in high school when the bigger guys wanted to pick on me. They wanted to start something just because they knew I wouldn't say or do anything and because they could beat me up if they wanted. But Samuel never let them. He was right there to back them down every time and I never got trouble from

them again. Well, I'll never forget that. He was a brother to me, Mrs. Stinzworth. And I, well, I loved him like a brother. I always will." Mrs. Stinzworth shook ever so slightly with silent sobs, but she never took her eyes from Josh's face.

With a deep and painful intake of air for courage, and after an evident effort to compose himself, Josh began again, "I've had a really tough time since Josh's death, as well. Everything just seemed so unfair, so pointless, and so unbearable again. I couldn't see why anything mattered, and I couldn't find one single thing to look forward to, and there was such a pain that sat right on my chest and all over in my head that I just wanted to get away from it. I just wanted it all to end and all I wanted to do was sleep for a long, long time… not die, just sleep." Mrs. Stinzworth squeezed Will's hand and held it tighter, but she couldn't take her eyes from Josh's face, from his pain.

"Go on, Josh", Will whispered almost imperceptibly.

"I was sitting there on my bed in my dorm room with a whole lot of pills that I knew would do it, that I knew would make me sleep for a very long time. I was sitting there all alone with my door locked and with the pain and the hurt and the worry crushing me, crushing me until I couldn't think, until I couldn't breathe, until all I could feel was the terrible pain. And then all I could think about was how wonderful the release of real sleep would be, about how nice it would be to just dive under, to sleep for a very long time, to go under all of the things that were crushing me."

The other people in the room had ceased to exist for Josh as he spoke, but then he returned to them. "And that's when I saw him. That's when I saw Samuel. Before I even realized it, he was sitting there right beside me. But he didn't say one thing to me,

Mrs. Stinzworth. He just smiled real faintly, the way he did, and then he reached over and put his hand on my shoulder. When he touched me, everything seemed to come loose all at once in a great, big, wonderful rush. And then I wasn't being crushed anymore. I could breathe again. I started to realize, and I'm still realizing that somewhere, someone has a plan, and that there are some things that just don't matter like we think they do. I think that's what Samuel wanted me to know."

The room was silent except for the crackling of the fire. Josh stared at the flames for a long moment. "I flushed the pills down the toilet."

Josh watched the fire slowly, relentlessly do its work, burning the neatly cut birch logs down to glowing orange and grey embers, and he was mesmerized by it. Still staring into the fire, he began again, very softly. "Mr. and Mrs. Stinzworth, Katie saw Samuel too. We've both spoken to her. Please, Mrs. Stinzworth, I know she's in the same place I was. It's horrible. I know she just wants the pain and the guilt to stop. I can only imagine how terrible it must be for the two of you and I know it will take time, but she's in so much trouble now, Mrs. Stinzworth. Please." He reached over and put his thin, but strong hand on top of Mrs. Stinzworth's and Will's.

Through their enormous picture window that was the house's sprawling eye onto the frozen wild world of pine woods, Mrs. Stinzworth saw the stars burning bigger, brighter, growing closer, seeing and knowing all, still eternal.

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I broke the code of the hospice nurse that I'd followed for twenty-seven years when I went to Mrs. Stinzworth's funeral. I've spent my life helping people die. I've devoted myself to easing their failing, battered bodies into the unknown. I've done my best to live amongst the dying, but now I've lost everyone I've ever cared about, and it was the only funeral I've ever been to.

There were two middle-aged men at the funeral who stood at the grave site after almost everyone else had left. One of them was tall, tanned from working outdoors, straw-blonde, muscle-bound and broad-chested. The other was smaller, thin with slightly graying dark hair and black, deep set eyes that held a pain he still couldn't completely understand or share. They clasped each other on the shoulders and cried.

But the very last person to leave Mrs. Stinzworth's gravesite that warm and sunny September afternoon was a middle aged woman with a beautiful heart-shaped face and long, strawberry blonde hair, both wet with tears. I knew it was Katie. Mrs. Stinzworth said it was the most difficult thing she had ever done, but she eventually forgave Katie. In the years after Samuel's death, Katie became as close to the Stinzworths as the child they had lost. It took some time after she realized Josh was right about her, but Mrs. Stinzworth finally forgave Katie, loved her, and saved her. And now that I am dying, I think that's what I remember most about Mrs. Stinzworth and her final story.

CHAPTER 5

AFTERNOON IN THE CEMETERY

It's the most beautiful October day on record in Wisconsin and my mother and I are strolling, as slow as we can, through the Polish-Catholic section of St. Benedict's cemetery, over the perfectly green, perfectly manicured swells in the cemetery lawn, and looking for a place to bury my grandfather. We feel first-class, privileged here because this is one of the oldest sections of the cemetery and the *only* section where there is still a nine by five foot section of lawn to be buried in.

The elderly, well-dressed priest with spiky white hair and coffee-stained teeth, the man who sold my mother and father their expensive vaults in the mausoleum, is strolling through the plots with us and speaking to my mother in reverent tones, with just the right amount of subdued salesmanship, but I'm not listening. I can't hear him because all I can hear are the stories I've been told about the people buried in our section and the lives they lived. My family, my progenitors.

My great-grandmother Chuska kept her exquisite mink coat locked in a plain pine chest next to her bed until she had to sell it for money to feed the family she left behind in

Poland in the time after the Second World War. The coat was the only thing she brought with her when she fled across the ocean; and it was her most treasured, most valuable possession, even after she married the good-natured Latvian-American man who bought her many other nice things. Alexandra's first husband bought her the mink coat as a wedding present, but they were only married for two months before he died.

Her first husband was a pilot. He was a devilish, dark-haired, heartbreakingly handsome hero, and heir to a small farmer's fortune. He bought her the mink coat a week after they met, and Alexandra married him when she was only seventeen. But he caught pneumonia while in training for the looming war and died two weeks later. They hadn't even been on the honeymoon to Rome that they had planned.

My great-grandfather, her second husband, a weathered, honest-faced Latvian leather tanner, never asked her about the fine mink coat or her life in Poland before the invasion. And she probably wouldn't have understood him even if he had asked. They were both outcasts in their own way. Alexandra Chuska spoke only a smattering of broken English that she learned on the voyage to the United States and my great-grandfather could never bath enough to get the smell of scorched cow hide off of him, nor was he ever entirely successful in scrubbing away the livestock blood from underneath his broken fingernails. But she had the most beautiful red hair Joseph Panzer had ever seen and he could play the fiddle like a madman and he had a little Milwaukee-bungalow on the south side with a garden and a small plum orchard in the backyard. They married when she was nineteen and he was thirty-eight.

When her family was destitute and in danger of starving to death on the streets of Warsaw after the Nazi's invaded, Alexandra sold the only thing she thought she could sell. Unable or unwilling to ask her husband to help her family, she cut and sold her remarkable red hair. It fetched a very low price because the well-to-do women who shopped downtown and lived in the upscale neighborhoods on the upper north side thought the six fashionable, shortly cropped wigs that were made from my great-grandmother's long, beautiful hair were too brilliantly colored to be natural. She was only able to feed her family for two months.

But no one can say how long they would have survived on the sale of the magnificent mink coat her dashing pilot-boy-husband had given her back before the war, back when she was young and in love. The only person who knew she had the coat was my great-grandfather because she never took it out of its pine box by her bedside. After she hung herself in the basement of his happy bungalow, my grandfather buried her in her mink coat.

She is buried directly in the center of our family's section of the cemetery.

My great-grandmother had one first cousin who was just daring, rash, and smart enough to get out of Poland and to make it to the United States before the full-blown onset of the war. He arrived at Ellis Island, and after three weeks and too much money

spent experiencing everything New York had to offer, he pawned the only thing he came with, his mother's silverware, and left to seek out my grandmother in the diminutive, isolated quiet of the Midwest.

Leo was the youngest child and the only boy born to a couple that had three girls before they were finally granted a boy. He enlisted for the war under a fictitious name because he desperately wanted to be a fighter pilot, but the waiting list was too long, so Leo decided he'd much rather move to the top of the list and start his training right away, as a tail gunner.

Leo was barely eighteen when he was sent to the other-worldly dessert of Tonopah, Nevada, but he had already been married for three months. His young wife, Christine Peterson-Chuska knew when Leo proposed to her that he was going to enlist. She knew all about his obsession with becoming a hero by gunning down Germans on the European front. But she also knew that she loved her sleek, olive-skinned, black-eyed Leo. But perhaps more importantly, she knew that she was already pregnant when he proposed.

Being in love with a dark-haired Polish immigrant and being pregnant by him and unmarried were treacherous conditions for the young, sweet-faced, blue-eyed, blonde-haired daughter of a second generation Swedish immigrant. But underneath her sweet face and quiet demeanor, Christine was strong-willed, stubborn, and just as rash as the man she loved, so after the hasty exchange of a miniscule and slightly tarnished diamond ring carefully selected from amongst the wares of the local pawn shop, and without her

family's blessing or knowledge, the couple was quietly married at St. Helen's on Tenth Street in Milwaukee.

Also despite her family's wishes, Christine had ventured to Milwaukee from a small and extremely isolated but determinedly prosperous farm outside of Moose Lake, Minnesota to find work. And she did, as a caretaker of a wealthy elderly couple who lived downtown. Her clandestine flight from Minnesota was inevitably followed by alienation from her monstrously-traditional father, who could cope with anything a hard, immigrant's life threw at him, except independence and disobedience from his children. But for awhile she was happy in Milwaukee, satisfied, and proud of herself.

Then she met Leo. And, like the child she was, Christine truly believed she was in love and that it would last forever. Next, pregnancy and marriage rolled over her like the distant clouds that you always think will remain on the far horizon, like the quiet, stalking clouds you never see coming overtake the sun.

Christine was a little over three months pregnant when she had to move to Tonopah with her new husband. Nevada was a barren, lonesome, and alien world for Christine. It was all flat, dry, sprawling, penny-colored earth, not at all like the rich, green hills of Minnesota. But Leo was her husband now, and he was the father, part owner, of the baby swelling inside of her. She was ashamed of it, but she felt her need for and dependency upon Leo ballooning, growing like a well-fed parasite, encompassing something inside her and eating away at a part of Christine that she thought she had once been proud of, that she thought had once been her own.

She was almost eight months along on the day that changed everything for her and the baby. Every July the base had a picnic for the men and their families. The men fried greasy hamburgers on huge, cast iron grills and sipped cold beer from cans, the children ran around the dirt lots playing tag and red-rover while coating their carefully chosen regalia of bold stripes or soft gingham in a thin layer of red dust, and the soldier's wives proudly set out their side dishes while pressing down their meticulously styled hair and precisely ironed dress pleats. Serene conversations swirled in their own separate spheres, sometimes overlapping, then spinning back to the circle they came from.

This soft, slack pattern continued undisturbed until two voices cresendoed and a challenge was made. Two of the rookie pilots were suddenly warring about which one of their planes could climb to a firing altitude faster. Sides were chosen and old allegiances were called in. Before Christine had her prized potato salad and pistachio pudding displayed precisely how she wanted them, two planes were being pulled from the hanger, and it just so happened that one of the pilots was Polish.

When Leo winked at her from across the picnic table festooned with every kind of salad and dessert imaginable, Christine knew he had volunteered to go up with the quiet, but vain young pilot from Krakow. Back in Poland, Warsaw and Krakow were rival cities, but here, in the United States, Leo and the man from Krakow were as good as brothers. Before she realized what she was doing, Christine was rubbing her protruding stomach with her left hand and nervously rolling the speck of a diamond on her ring finger with her thumb nail as she watched her husband prepare for combat with his Polish comrade.

The men had to run from a chosen starting line near the grills at the perimeter of the picnic to their planes, leap into the cockpit and start their planes while their chosen second kicked away the starter block, then jumped into the rear door, all within seconds. Christine watched her strong, handsome husband do this flawlessly, and faster than the other tail gunner. The Polish pilot and his Polish tail gunner were ahead of the other team— a tall, tenacious pair of Texans— by the time the wheels of the plane had skipped off the ground.

But as Leo's pregnant bride watched her husband's plane climb skyward, the engine screamed under the strain of driving the bits of beaten metal higher and higher into the exspanseless sky, farther and farther away from the cheering crowd of picnickers. Then, for the first time, Christine's mound of a belly felt like a too heavy, meaningless weight and her wedding ring felt like a cold, biting constriction on her trembling left hand. There was nothing she could do but watch, along with the rest of Leo's base and the rest of his company, all dressed for a Sunday picnic, as her husband's plane suddenly erupted into angry orange flames, foundered, stalled, then sank. Even as the stray bits of metal, debris, and bodies fell to the hard, red, Nevada earth, all Christine could think of was how pregnant she was and now how alone she was in the world.

Leonard Roman Chuska is buried directly to the left of his sister, my great-grandmother Alexandra Chuska.

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When my grandmother Wellborne died, there was not enough of her to go around. In life and in death, she was a swift, soft, unshakable whisper. After her death, her ashes and her few possessions were let loose into the wind to settle where they would.

Under my Aunt Hope's assiduous direction, every one of us nine granddaughters received something of Grandmother Wellborne's after the brain tumor claimed her. Although I didn't realize it at the time, being the oldest granddaughter, I received the most valuable of my grandmother's few belongings.

After the funeral at Saint Helen's on Tenth Street, my Aunt grabbed me from amongst the throngs of church members crowding the sanctuary and spilling over the large, ornate entryway and told me, "This is yours now. I don't know why for sure, but I know that it meant a great deal to her. So please take care of it and keep it somewhere safe, Alexandra. And please, honey, don't let your grandfather see this."

She pressed a neatly folded piece of black lace into my hand. As an eleven year old child, my first thought was that it looked terribly tacky. Tacky and gaudy, but somehow still dull and plain. It was a disappointment. This had meant a lot to her? To *my* grandmother? To the incredible woman who, with sweet-bubbly charm and steely strength had entranced and cared for her proud, preacher husband, her six children, and an enormous congregation of needy, wanting, watching parishioners for forty-six years? I loved my grandmother, but what a poor choice of a most treasured possession. Well, true saints didn't get to choose the relics they left behind.

Later that day, after the funeral, I carefully unfolded the piece of delicate black lace and realized that it was only about a yard long by a ruler length wide. I began to think that maybe my aunt had told all of the grandchildren that she was giving them Grandmother Wellborne's most valued treasure, but then I noticed the astonishingly intricate pattern that seemed to give the lace life. Grasping, spinning swirls reeled across the lace like an eddying ocean surf and the tiniest sequined stars danced on the surface, playing like moonlight on the foaming, black, constantly swirling surf. I couldn't take my eyes off of the weightless piece of fabric in my hand. It was exquisite and mesmerizing.

My grandmother's husband, my grandfather, the Reverend Robert James Wellborne, D.D.V., was one of those rare men who somehow eclipse everyone around them. Certainly not physically because he was a short, scrawny, sinewy man, but in general scope he was larger and more significant than everything and everyone around him. One could walk with him beside the wonders of the world and realize that he was larger, more magnetic, more powerful than the pyramids, than the ancient walls of Jerusalem, than the Coliseum. When he spoke, which was what he did best, whether it was a thunder or a significant whisper, people listened. And my grandmother always seemed content to listen, to be eclipsed. And all of us mistakenly believed that she never had a life before him or a world without him.

But years later, after he had stopped calling me his "little hummingbird", after he had given up his ministry and moved to a condo in his hometown of Greensborough,

North Carolina and only ventured back to the Midwest for a week in June, and after my grandmother died, my grandfather told me the story of how he had won his wife.

Finding nothing she liked in the men there and feeling the need to strike out on her own, my grandmother picked up and moved to Greensborough from Milwaukee when she was seventeen for a job as a secretary, leaving her kind, honest-faced, leather tanner father alone and lonely. Once she settled in the South, she became immediate best friends with "Sis" Wellborne, R.J.'s older sister. But R.J. was a gangly-looking, loudmouthed kid who constantly spewed fire and brimstone about what he was studying at the local bible college and she was quickly established as the most popular, most beautiful girl on the west side of Greensborough. They only truly noticed one another for the first time when he was fourteen and she was a week shy of nineteen.

Seven days before her nineteenth birthday party, which also happened to be the night that she and her handsome boyfriend, the young baseball star and the pride of Greensborough, Ken Sherman, had decided to announce their engagement, my puny, still squeaky-voiced grandfather announced to Glorietta Regina Chuska that he was going to marry her.

"You're the girl I'm going to marry, Glorietta. God's let me see it."

She laughed as good naturedly and politely as she could, and then she went back to her fiancé and her birthday party. But even in all his pre-pubescent, unattractive awkwardness, my grandfather had a presence, a magnetism about him. And she was shaken by what he had told her.

A month and a half later, the man that she thought she was going to marry was sent off to Korea on an early peacekeeping mission. Even though she expected it, Glorietta was outwardly devastated at Ken's being sent to Korea, but the best she could do inwardly was to miss the idea of him.

Not a week later the young Mr. R.J. Wellborne appeared on Glorietta's front porch with two dozen pink peonies and a poem.

"But I'm engaged. You have to leave, R.J."

He looked into her shining green eyes, took her hand and smiled, sweetly, self-assuredly, then said without a hint of doubt or worry about what the final outcome of his declaration might be, "Well, that's your problem."

She was stupefied, stunned into silence. Was this silver-tongued would-be preacher really that crazy? But she had no idea why she didn't force the impertinent little imp out of her house. She didn't know why she was drawn to him, why she was still letting him hold her hand, or why she wanted him to stay.

"He's gone to you even now, Glorietta. You have to start letting him go," he said as he continued to gaze at her more intently, more honestly, and more deeply than she had ever been looked at before. No one, especially Glorietta, would ever understand why he knew what he knew or why she believed him.

Exactly nine days to the hour, my grandmother's fiancé, the pride of Greensborough, was shot down in the red glow of a Korean sunset. Early that morning he had bought and carefully wrapped a particularly exquisite piece of black Korean lace and mailed it to his fiancé, the girl with the funny northern accent and the most beautiful

girl on the west side of Greensborough. It remained untouched, immaculately folded, in the bottom compartment of her hope chest for forty-seven years, until her death.

Glorietta Regina Wellborne is buried directly to the right of her mother, Alexandra Chuska.

As we stroll through the cemetery, the high noon sun touches my face and tans my bare arms, and I feel warm, growing, alive. My mother and the priest have gone on ahead into the mausoleum and I am alone with my silent, buried family. Somewhere above me a robin sings to its mate, but the only thing that speaks for the Chuskas are their names and the years they were born and died, etched into the granite and marble tombstones. I know that I should be thinking about my grandfather and his funeral arrangements, but I can't. All I can think about is how long it will be before I am back here when my own mother and father die. Will my son or daughter be here, at this very same spot, making arrangements for my funeral? Will the pain, happiness, longing, striving, elation, triumphs, disappointments, and the long, horrible depressions of my own life be just another story that is told in snippets to my progeny after I am gone? What chapters will they tell?

As the grass, dirt, weeds, wind, water, and rain erode all that we once were and the generations grow over the lives we lived and everything that was so real, so vital to us

until they will not even be able to tell we were here or what contributions we made, I guess all we can leave behind is one thing that was true for us, one story about who we were, what we did and what happened to us here, and hope that somebody finds it interesting or important enough to tell, to remember after we are a tombstone with a name and a date, warmed by the sun on an Indian Summer day in October.

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