FROM POETRY TO MEMOIR: A FIGURATIVE SEARCH FOR FAMILY

by

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For my grandmother, Adeline Lena Van Ess, who was always a constant in our lives and who wished she “could’ve tooken” us. For my siblings, especially my sister Lori, who has always been supportive. For my foster parents, Sharon and Steve, who have accepted and loved so many children. And for Sara, Dick, and Aidan, who are my home.

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POEMS, SHORT STORIES, AND MEMOIR: ALL IN THE FAMILY

Family as Theme

The vision of one's family as a source of security, sustenance and love is a basic, universal archetype, and dysfunction in this paradigm often impedes the healthy growth of children, presenting challenges to their sense of self and their sense of place in the world. Consequently, the search for the meaning of family is often the subject of creative writing. From the epic poem *The Odyssey* to the confessional poems of Sylvia Plath, writers have explored the meaning of family in individual, cultural, and communal contexts in an attempt to elucidate and signify the relationships they establish with their parents, spouses, and children.

The creative process has taken me through the genres of poetry, fiction, and memoir, consecutively, as developmental stages in my writing craft and as a journey in search of the meaning of family. Countless writers have shared their vision of what family comes to mean to them when they have been deprived of traditional, meaningful family connections in early life. I grew up in a variety of foster homes from ages four through eighteen, at which point I aged out of the foster care system. It was a challenging journey, filled with many obstacles to my making meaningful connections and finding a sense of belonging. Through writing, I discovered a way to express the emotional truth of my experience so that I could acknowledge it, deal with it, and resolve it; then move forward with an identity and a purpose. A number of fellow poets and memoirists have encouraged me in their own examinations of abandonment, neglect, or abuse and the

desire to understand and connect with their families. They have also inspired me to discover my own voice along the way.

When I first encountered it twenty years ago, Sharon Olds' poetry struck my sensibilities immediately; as a budding poet, I identified with Olds' style and speaker, especially in her seminal work, *The Gold Cell,* much of which deals with the dysfunction of her relationships with her father and mother. Olds' speaker's experience of abuse in an alcoholic, broken home mirrored my speaker's themes of abandonment and emotional abuse and the search for understanding and identity as an individual, a mother, and a woman. In particular, Olds' poems about her alcoholic father and abusive mother convey the feelings I associated with my own father and an abusive foster mother. In the poem "Looking at My Father," she observes:

> I do not think I am deceived about him.
> I know about the drinking, I know he's a tease,
> obsessive, rigid, selfish, sentimental,
> but I could look at my father all day
> and not get enough. (31)

Olds goes on to describe her father's physical characteristics and her longing to be a part of him:

> What I know I know, what my
> body knows it knows, it likes to
> slip the leash of my mind and go and
> look at him, like an animal

looking at water, then going to it and
drinking until it has had its fill and can
lie down and sleep. (32)

This is the way I understand my own late father—in full view of his alcoholism and its effects, I wanted to connect with him and understand who I was in relation to him. I had often observed his physicality, as he stood about six foot-four, with dark hair and blue eyes, handsome despite his worn and sallow face. I knew him to be a sentimental man who often stated he had not wanted to give my siblings and me over to the county, that he loved us, that he wanted us back. Several of my pieces address the subject of my father and my longing to form a close relationship with him.

An Olds poem that served as a vehicle through which I could express my own feelings about an abusive foster mother is "What if God?" In it, the speaker questions whether God would have saved her if He could have seen what was happening to her:

And what if God had been watching when my mother
came into my bed? What would He have done when her
long adult body rolled on me like a
tongue of lava from the top of a mountain . . . (15).

The theme of unwanted sexual advance in this poem reminded me of the physical and emotional abuse I endured. "What if God?", because of its frightening images and

portrayal of a little girl's desperate need to be saved, inspired me to write "What If They?", injecting my own feelings of helplessness and my anger towards my foster mother and an ignorant or unresponsive social services system I likened to Olds' God, the all-powerful, the arbiter, the judge:

> And what if They had been watching when the foster mother
> set me on the toilet? What would They have done
> when her bone-wrinkled hand spanked me—a sound
> like the whipping of downed wires from a storm . . .

One reviewer notes that Olds' collected works, *Strike Sparks* (2002) "is in many ways a poetic memoir in which we keep circling around the subjects of sex, motherhood, and Olds's troubled childhood and parents in a Catch-22 kind of spiraling chronology" (Garner). To call her work "a poetic memoir" is to accurately perceive her purpose in writing—to recollect, express, and understand her family experience and to speak of it truthfully. Olds' poetry validated in many ways my desire to express the truth of my life honestly, and her work represents the family dysfunction I wished to explore, despite the risk of revealing my struggles and, hence, those of my family.

While Olds for thirty years did not admit that her writing was autobiographical, she recently confessed in public that indeed her work did represent her real-life experience. Her reasons for not earlier admitting that the "I" in her poetry was herself: the fear that someone might sue her, or even kill her, and her desire to protect her "autobiographical family" ("Sharon Olds on Persona"). While she has made her

admission, Olds still insists that poetry, autobiographical or not, is an artistic effort and that what is generated on the page is "different from (the experience of) the living being" ("Sharons Olds on Persona") who creates that art.

Taking such a personal risk for art's sake is evident in the poetry and memoir of Paula McLain, another key model for me as a writer, especially since she also grew up in the foster care system. McLain's writing depicts her experiences in several foster families—the struggles to trust her relationships with foster parents and the mix of longing and uncertainty that occur with the possibility of reconciliation with the biological parents who abandoned her. McLain's work as a poet and memoirist embodies, for me, the actual foster care experience as I know it. In her poem "Enough with the Angels" from *Stumble, Gorgeous*, McLain credibly renders the experience of moving from place to place with her sisters, expressing the resignation and distrust that a child develops about others and even herself:

> One night my sister came into my room and kissed me
> Quietly on the forehead. *I'm so glad you're here*, she said. This was after
> We'd stuttered our way through the wrecked nests and cul-de-sacs.
> After seven-eighths of the damage and commandeering of our several
> selves
> To Ball jars in a fly-snagged hutch. After the sour facts but before I knew
> I would ransom even her to save myself. That I would count my money
> running.
> This is the way it goes for you and me. We have covered some ground…

We are too tired, now, to talk back. To sass
Our stupid beginnings. Too tired to do anything but shove for space
Enough in the aisles to lie down. (10)

This same sense of fatigue and resignation is evident in one of my own poems, "His Heart," in which the speaker, who has just moved to a new foster home at age eleven, resigns herself to the fact that she will not return to her family: "When she was eleven, she realized she'd never return / to her father and sit at the table and tell / him about her day at school, / the spelling test she aced / and wait for his praise like a welcome rain" and that the only thing left for her to do is go it alone: "and in her own deep river she'd known / it was necessary that she / must create for herself a shell like a clam". I became so self-preserving I would often alter or sabotage my relationships with family members, biological or not—those relationships could not be trusted; too many has already been severed.

I was acutely reminded of my experiences when reading McLain's poetry and her memoir *Like Family*, about the foster families she was placed with—their own dysfunction and, often times, their inability to handle and understand the complex psychology of their foster children, in some cases even having to give them up. McLain's memoir echoes in my memory the experience of moving into a new home: "If there's anything odder than being introduced to your new family of complete strangers, I don't know what that might be. The social worker sticks around for a while, trying to break the ice, but when she leaves, it's just you and your questions, popping like flashbulbs, and

these people who will sit you down and feed you dinner and show you to your room" (4). Having such a surreal experience time and again only leaves a child feeling alone and bereft, and such emotions resound in several pieces I have written. I am quite mindful of my own experience "growing up in other people's houses" and the realization that I would not return home when my parents' marriage dissolved and my father's alcoholism persisted.

Because I was close to my grandmother on my father's side, I was very interested in who my father was. He was an endless enigma since he was typically muddled by alcohol, traversing through his life with the intention of never letting anyone, let alone himself, find out who he truly was. Instead, my father created his own version of his life, his own stories. Memoir by Jeannette Walls in *The Glass Castle* and Nick Flynn in *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* attracted my attention since both write about their alcoholic fathers as dreamers and ne'er-do-wells whose histories their children crave, even though those histories cannot be trusted. I understand Flynn's desire to explore his father's life, albeit in his father's "stories":

> "In this story my father's family is rich, with gardeners and chauffeurs during the Depression. His grandfather owned a roofing company that had the contracts for Faneuil Hall . . . Look inside the grasshopper weathervane on the roof of Faneuil Hall and you will see my great-grandfather's name . . . My father tells me this, but how to get inside this grasshopper he doesn't say" (*Another Bullshit Night in Suck City,* "the inventor of the life raft").

Such "stories" are what kept my own father afloat and his children adrift. So many more similarities exist between Flynn's father and my own that I understand his exhaustion with and reluctance to see his father: "My father answers the door with a huge gash above his eye . . . Here we go . . . After listening to this latest installment in his endless unraveling his room begins to feel especially suffocating, cramped" (*ABNISC,* "my tree"). The futile search for answers from my father is central to some of my later poems and the fiction and memoir pieces that explore his character and personality. In his memoir, Flynn seeks a connection and an understanding that may never fully materialize, yet his acceptance of his father comes in the process of telling the story of his journey. In the end, because his father truly cannot lay claim to him, Flynn's father lays claim to everything else, such as a tree: "See that tree? I'm responsible for that. I made a call, got the city to plant it. My tree" (*ANBNISC,* "the tree").

Studying memoir led me to the discovery that Flynn (and MacLain) had written poetry before writing memoir. The recurring theme of the absent father continued to resonate with me as a writer who sought a way to attain her own understanding of her father. In Flynn's poem "Glass Slipper," the demanding father is again similar to my own: "My father calls so I can wish him / a happy birthday. The next day / he calls again / for the same reason" (*Some Ether* 47). I remember such calls on my father's birthday and calls on holidays when I visited my foster family instead of having to deal with the guilt trips my dad might lay on me, along with the stories of his glorious past.

One of Flynn's objectives in writing both poetry and memoir is a search for universal truths and an exploration of the mystery of family. "Memoir is actually the

most egoless genre," he says, "even though it might seem ostensibly so much ego-driven. In order for it to succeed, you have to dissolve the self into these larger universal truths, and explore these deeper mysteries. If it's purely autobiographical and ego-driven, it's going to fail" ("nick flynn"). Like Flynn and other family memoirists, I am trying above all to make sense of a life surrounded by dysfunction and parents' inability or failure to connect and engage with family. Insofar as one may endure dysfunction to the point of feeling unworthy (as these writers and I have certainly done), I want to present a voice that is honest, vulnerable, and defiant, yet loving, caring, and triumphant.

Like me, McLain and Flynn have made the distinctive shift from poetry to memoir to more thoroughly explore the process of fashioning a meaningful place for themselves and their partners, children, and extended families in the traditional sense. Writers compelled to share their family histories often have in common the need to understand why they have been neglected or abandoned, and through writing, they come to make sense of their pasts and move forward with understanding and to fashion their own lives. Olds, McLain, and Flynn have inspired my writing, empowering me to share my experience.

Meditations & Motivations

When I began writing poetry and fiction twenty years ago, I was a single mother returning to college. The desire to create a better life for my daughter than I had thus far lived was a driving force, and I strove to be a model of independence, motivation, and perseverance. I chose to become an English teacher so I could help adolescents discover and express themselves through writing and literature. What I discovered in studying English was a passion for poetry, specifically the way in which one could express an idea or an emotion through a single word, image, or metaphor.

My early work revealed a particular voice—angry and defiant—which over time, inevitably settled into a tone of resolution. My poetry was sharp and image-driven, reflecting my newfound voice, my poetic independence and my confidence as a writer. I resolved to explore my childhood and adolescent experiences in foster care when my poetry writing class introduced me to Sharon Olds. I admired her bravery in telling the truth about her very difficult childhood; her poems inspired the raw, honest words and images characteristic of my early poems about the trauma I faced upon first entering foster care.

Fiction writing class also provided the inspiration to write about my foster care experience. I was particularly attracted to Flannery O'Connor, whose ability to reveal the folly and prejudice of people through vivid characterization and plot inspired my own fiction, which sought to bring about my audience's awareness of the people and institutions that had controlled my life and the lives of others. O'Connor also inspired me

to work toward creating stories which would present protagonists who could experience or elicit moments of hope and grace, no matter their struggles. In *On Her Own Work: The Element of Suspense in "A Good Man is Hard to Find,"* O'Connor asks herself "what makes a story work and what makes it hold up as a story" (Gioia and Kennedy 264), and she decides "it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies" (264).

I learned more about plot and characterization in graduate school, which gave me the opportunity to further develop my writing craft, beginning with a fiction writing workshop and then in several poetry workshops, where I experimented with new forms and structures and entered new metaphorical terrain. I was reintroduced to Olds and met new writers whose sensibilities and subject matter intrigued me, poets such as Lucille Clifton and Li-Young Lee. My writing became more disciplined as I was instructed to write in various open and closed form poems and work in terms of lines and stanzas. My poetry writing course text, Wendy Bishop's *Thirteen Ways of Looking for a Poem* was, in a sense, a poetry primer, providing a close study of the poetic genre and its various manifestations.

I also began to explore more closely the memory of my alcoholic father who, for the first time, had evolved into a character in my first graduate course, Fiction Writing Workshop. Fiction writing provided a bridge from poetry to memoir—from representing my experience to realizing it and rounding it out. The scope of fiction allowed me to understand and create the "significant detail" (Burroway 55) necessary in rendering

environment, character, conflict, and dialogue in my short stories. I learned that characters "need to exhibit enough conflict and contradiction that we can recognize them as belonging to the contradictory human race" and "they need to be capable of change" (101). Writing fiction offered a valuable framework to explore the believable ways in which my characters could deal with and grow from their struggles, as well as provided training (just like poetry) for memoir.

The opportunity to take an independent study course in memoir placed me back in the realm of what was real, and my reading of memoirists Jeannette Walls and Nick Flynn further inspired writing that more fully explored the implications of my experience as a foster child with an absent, alcoholic father. While I was encouraged by the possibilities of memoir, the question about what I should share and how much inevitably nagged at my conscience. To be honest, there are some experiences I have not written about because they would be too hurtful to people that I love. Nevertheless, I have written about experiences that some family members might be uncomfortable reading about simply because of the subject matter, not because it would be unkind or damaging to them. I agree with Judith Barrington in *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art* that, as memoirists, "Each of us must balance the reasons for writing a story or for using real names, against the harm that might be done to someone else" (131).

The experiences in my life I was compelled to explore through writing were generally the ones that were traumatic and unresolved, and writing helped me resolve them to some extent. Just as important to me, however, was striving to write text that was creative and aesthetic. I have been careful to share only experiences that happened so

long ago, I am no longer connected to the individuals I am writing about, or those that have been shaped objectively through name changes or a more objective perspective. The "writer must have done her work, made her peace with the facts, and be telling the story for the story's sake (72).

My writing in each genre primarily focuses on the emotional journey of a speaker or narrator who grows up in the foster care system, struggling through a variety of placements along the way, and her encounters with unexpected and unimagined flashes of love and hope that sustain her in her search for family. Some pieces reflect upon the speaker's experience as a mother and the challenges and doubts she faces in assuming the role of caregiver when she herself had only tenuous bonds with father and mother figures. The main themes deal with the speaker's struggle to define and construct a family in light of the family cycles of abandonment, alcoholism, teenage pregnancy, and poverty.

In the process of articulating her experience, my speaker moves from poetry and short story to memoir to mirror the development of her recollections and ideas about the architecture of family. The poetry at the start of the collection features strong, singular images the speaker associates with key emotional experiences in different foster homes, memories visited through the eyes of a child and requiring a child's voice. Following are more developed poems, as well as short stories, which use more figurative language and imagery to focus on the speaker's ongoing struggle to understand the concept of family as she matures. In the short story "Orphanage," for example, her foster father's experience growing up in an orphanage is important to the writer's own notion of family and her desire to connect with others with similar experiences. The final section will consist of

short memoirs in which the speaker seeks to discover the emotional truth about her experiences.

For me, the need to write about my family was imperative to the formation of my identity. My voice was silent until I encountered the power of poetry to convey experience and emotion. Once I discovered a way to express my feelings, it felt natural and liberating to create images and figurative language on the page that identified and clarified a vision of my life. In its unfolding, the theme of my search for an understanding of "family" shaped a speaker or narrator who, despite growing up without her biological family, held on to the hope that a sense of family and place could be fashioned out of the fragments of her broken biological family and the foster families commissioned to care for her.

Retrospective

To write, Sharon Olds suggests, is to "(be) an ordinary observer and liver and feeler and letting the experience get through you onto the notebook with the pen, through the arm, out of the body, onto the page, without distortion" (Garner). It has always been my belief that the act of writing is a conduit of the senses as well as both the conscious and unconscious minds. To express one's thoughts or feelings in writing necessitates a trust in one's own voice and her particular vision of experience. The search for the perfect image or language to convey an event or observation requires a most intimate trust in the self, and I strive to achieve my best writing in that search. As Mary Oliver asserts in *A Poetry Handbook*, "The language of the poem is the language of particulars. Without it, poetry might still be wise, but it would surely be pallid. And thin. It is the detailed, sensory language incorporating images that gives the poem dash and tenderness. And authenticity" (92).

Overall, the act of writing has been a release for me, beginning with the focus and freedom of poetry and culminating in the wish to remember and render more clearly my experiences through memoir. In each genre, I try to present a real picture of those events most representative of my experience, with the end product reflecting the childhood struggle to survive and belong, as well as the adult acceptance of those trials as part of a whole which makes up my conception of family and love.

A *New York Times* book review of Flynn's memoir *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* notes that his writing "is an artful meditation on how we decide how much we are limited—or enhanced by—what we inherit, and on how difficult it is to give and receive

care in this world" (Vida). Such is the paradox of my experience. While I am vulnerable, I am strong, and while I have several times thrown in the towel, I have also accomplished beyond what I imagined my limits to be. I have discovered that my inheritance has enhanced my understanding of the universe and its inhabitants, and that I have the capacity to gently open my heart precisely because it has been broken. The works in this collection often reflect this paradox, originating with poetry and evolving into fiction and memoir to reveal the nature of my writing craft and the ongoing struggle to find my family and embrace them as I bring them home.

I have ultimately come to understand that so many of us struggle to find connection with our families, and it is our challenge and responsibility to appreciate the love that can, and does, exist. Li-Young Lee in "Eating Alone" sees that the father is present in Lee's life even after death:

> Once, years back, I walked beside my father
> among the windfall pears. I can't recall
> our words. We may have strolled in silence. But
> I still see him bend that way—left hand braced
> on knee, creaky—to lift and hold to my
> eye a rotten pear. In it, a hornet
> spun crazily, glazed in slow, glistening juice.
>
> It was my father I saw this morning
> waving to me from the trees. I almost

called to him, until I came close enough
to see the shovel, leaning where I had
left it, in the flickering, deep green shade (1043).

In Lee's poem, the images drawn from memory, the lessons imparted, the symbols left behind are reminders of the life he has inherited from his father. Just so, we must comprehend the legacy of our own fathers and family members and trust our hearts to decide what to cherish and what to pass on.

FROM POETRY TO MEMOIR: A FIGURATIVE SEARCH FOR FAMILY

Discovery and Conviction

Strawberries

Forced to eat them:
rough red complexions
full of blemishes,
the slimy insides,
seedy crunch
between baby teeth.
Hating them because she said
they were good for me,
the way she was good for me,
watching me cry
into my bowl of red hearts
Twenty years later,
sweet strawberry blood
on my tongue, I taste again,
give them a chance.

The Dress

I cut the dress you bought me
for school, the brown one
with the tiny diamond patterns
of yellow stitching over the chest, the one
for which my sister Lisa had a blue mate, the one
I wore when our grandmother visited us
in our new foster home
and brought me a book to read about losing a first tooth.

At the new school,
drooping at my desk,
I fingered the left-handed scissors,
considered the plaid of the skirt.
Wondered what might happen
if I cut, then made

the small incision
along one beige edge,
and with my thumb and forefinger
opened the cut to form an “O,”
exposed to the listening air.

You didn't hear
the tiny sound
of fabric giving way, or
the brief gasp of that wound,
but witnessed my crying admission
dress paid for with your hard-earned
money from the state.

You might have stitched the cut,
healed it before it spread,
but you—ignorant, blameless—
shook the remnant in my face.

How could you? you said.

How could I not?

Pots and Pans

The pots and pans
stuck in the oven drawer—
I did that on purpose
so you could strike us
with the stick,
my arm bent backward
like a tail between my legs.

I ran away on purpose
so you could strike me
with the stick
for saying I didn't like living with you.
To liberate my spirit
I would risk its death,
a slave mother
killing her child.

No matter how often
you raised that stick
I misbehaved everything on purpose,
a child showing love,
wanting your love,
putting the pots
and pans away, for you.

What If They?—after Sharon Olds' "What If God?"

And what if They had been watching when the foster mother
set me on the toilet? What would They have done
when her bone-wrinkled hand spanked me—a sound
like the whipping of downed wires from a storm,
anger flashing from her eyes when my back
arched from the sting, the thin
crack of my buttocks exposed—
what were They? Were They dragons breathing
fire, guarding the golden treasure
I longed for, or were They snakes,
sliding into my mouth forced open, snakes with Their
tongues at the back of my throat, flicking the fork,
licking, licking the blood? Or were They
teachers of psychology, dissecting me while She
held my split brain apart so They could
analyze the lobes little by little, were They
fairy tale tellers, delivering me up to the gingerbread house where She
pried my lips open in the silver kitchen?
For my own good, She said.

What were They doing as She watched me weeping
into my bowl, crumbs slipping from my fingers,
a small defense. Did They
turn their heads from me as I turned mine
from Them? Are there social workers in the city?
Are there social workers in the city? Then come forth
and take my body away from that wretched house,
take me by the softness of my wrist
and give me to someone who loves me, someone
who'll help me scratch Their eyes out.

Elegy for My First Foster Father

When you carried me up the porch steps,
you almost stumbled, tightly cradling
my shuddering shoulders, trembling knees,
to stop my cries from carrying back
to my real mother, who used to sit in the recliner at night,
watching television, who made room for me because
when the dreams tapped on my head,
I trembled and cried.

Your open front door was an open mouth
I clawed to find a hold in, my feet,
my fingers grazing the frame,
but you swiveled your hips and arms
still clutching me close,
and I went in head first,
to the davenport, wetting the nubby
upholstery with tears, the fabric like steel wool
scratching my cheeks.

Then came the shadow of your wife,
who punished and petrified with interrogations—
Why did you wet the bed?
At age four, sitting on a toilet,
I knew then the spanking would come.
Then sent to the back yard,
where the dog who bit her finger—drawing
blood—would bite me, too.

You wanted to play catch with me,
lift me to your lap for *Cinderella*,
hold me as I closed my eyes
to dreams of good fathers
and wicked stepmothers.

That first Christmas Eve,
you told me to pray
for the gifts I wanted.
And when I stood before
the glowing tree lights?

There was a doll in a crib.
I lifted her into my arms
and cradled her and never
let her go.

Spelling Bee

Those finger curls brought me
bad luck, the eight slinky coils
my foster mother fashioned,

wrapping portions of my wet hair
around her fingers, molding each
to replace the cascading curls

that fell from large plastic rollers
set in my hair the night before,
the ones my sisters teased and combed
and sprayed into waves of curls,

now heavy like bed springs around my neck,
finger curls Laura Ingalls wore
on the prairie. Later I spelled the word “meant”
m-e-n-t. That’s not what I meant, that hair,

not at all what I meant. I’d wanted
a word I could wrap and tease
and twist and taste on my tongue,
and hair that would spell “me” perfectly.

Washing Dishes

As you skate on the circle of ice
silver blades of sunlight streak
and purple lightning skims
the etched glass surface.
When I rap on the window
you wave, cheeks burned from flight,
smile warmed by internal heat.
I smile back and wave my soapy hand
as you turn away, toe the ice
and push. Balancing your arms,
you twirl precariously and sprawl
in your snowsuit, sliding,
then catch my eye and grin,
push yourself up on frosty mittens.
I watch and worry and laugh
as you glide and stumble, my hands
pruning in the warm dishwater.

Heat

The old neighborhood is even tougher
now, sidewalks simmering in the August heat
like the kill floor at the nearby meat packing plant.

I'm boiling noodles when you burst through the back door
with your two buddies, still in suspension, all of you
wide-eyed and open-mouthed, you with blood

streaked down your shirt. The fever-pitched flow
of words is quick as bees protecting a disturbed hive.
Matt and Andy hover behind you on each side,

witnesses, defenders, their chests puffing in and out,
in front of the queen, who must, though the triad is impressive,
dispense some wisdom to her charge. This is what happens

when you insult a boy's soccer skills,
even if you think you're the better player.
I thank them for their honesty, soak

your shirt with shaky hands.
I worried for you two blocks away,
imagining you on the bus-line street.

I stirred the spaghetti sauce thickening in the pan.
How many times have I put out the fires
flicking at your heels? This time I didn't

call the other mother.
The punch in the nose was enough.
You're a boy whose will might detonate.

I cannot temper that heat.

For a Fatherless Daughter—after Sylvia Plath's "For a Fatherless Son"

You understand his alcoholic absence, now, the charm,
Finally inside you, like a morning alarm,
A wind-up alarm, the hour set, a droning alarm,
Ticking, aroused by sound—a clock face,
And the dawn like an uncluttered stream, a new kind of pace.

And now you are free.
And I love your maturity,
The open door of it. I look in
And see no room but your own, and I think it is peace.
It is good for you

To grab your lover's hand, a bridge.
Each day you will touch what's right
The full moons, the thrashing blue gills, the campfire night.
And the remnants of doubt are no longer alight.

Going Home

Eggs

On the way back from the farm in Humboldt,
down Luxemburg Road, I count road signs
to mark the distance to Van Ess.
I wonder if my father's family lived out here,
next to the potato fields, if my real story begins
on this gravel road, with this sign that holds
my surname in green metal.
On a semi-circle driveway farther down the road,
we park next to the stucco farmhouse that boasts the brown eggs
my foster mother always buys on our way home.
My sister kneels on the vinyl back seat while we wait.
"Did you see there was a Van Ess Road?" I ask her,
but she is staring out the back window at the chickens
strutting and jabbing their beaks in the wavy air.
She is laughing and flapping her elbows.

Booyah

The hard yellow grease floats on top
of the broth, above stripped chicken and sliced vegetables,
and potato cubes that will soon dissolve between my teeth.

"Is Van Ess Road where my family comes from?" I ask my next foster mother,
who I have recently discovered grew up in that stucco farmhouse.
When she stirs the booyah, the grease disappears into broth.

"My sister Joan, the oldest, knew your dad," she replies.
I take this admission as an opening, conjuring images of my father
building tunnels in the hayloft with my foster uncles and aunts.

I am almost 40 when my I ask my foster mother
for the booyah ingredients over the phone.
The recipe's so simple, but still secret,

like a love letter in a box. Something saved,
something passed on, something hoped for,
something stirred and held in place.

Beer

The answers my father gave me brought more questions.
How could I gather family pictures from a man who'd scattered
his past like beer cans thrown into the back of his powder blue Chrysler?

Before his liver gave out, when he stopped drinking, he asked me to
drive him to visit the gravesite of Matthew, stillborn, the eighth of us ten.
The tiny cemetery was only a country block

from Van Ess Road. Maybe twenty gravestones stood or lay nestled
around a lone tree, Matthew's marker in the last row.
I was afraid to ask my father, "Did we settle here?"

I don't remember the names scripted on the stones,
only remember my father, standing before Matthew's tiny speckled slab,
his dark, aching silhouette against the blank sky.

I wanted the ground to move and the earth to tell its secrets.
I still want the story—the family who sowed its seeds
but could not survive the drought.

Devil River

Small rows of parapets like saw teeth on the bridge sidewalk
sunk hot into the soles of my bare feet after swimming at Joannes pool,
burned into the thin soles of my tennis shoes after volleyball practice at East High.

I refused to look down through the tiny murder holes
to the red-brown water below: Devil River, named for its red clay
by the natives, for the unmerciful fate of any who fell into its swirl.

I tried to keep my gaze over the bridge, to Three Corners, where my dad
used to live, surrounded by the moat of the river, blind to the punches
his drunken father inflicted on his mother while he played in the yard.

He walked over this bridge from Three Corners to East High, his alma mater too,
their mascot Red Devils, whose football field used to be City Stadium, home of the
Green Bay Packers, formerly Indian Packers, named after a local meat packing plant.

My grandmother walked over this bridge with Penny, her Chihuahua,
to my 8th birthday party at the foster home. "I wish I could have tooken you kids,"
she said as she left, and I watched her bent frame waddle down the sidewalk back home.

A young man walked over this bridge one night with friends, stood on the railing and
jumped off, drunk on a dare, and got stuck up to his knees in the red muck of
the bottom; surely he struggled, but the river is unforgiving and won't let go.

My grandfather, then my father, might as well have fallen into and drunk from that river,
unmerciful, unforgiving, toxic with waste from the paper mills, home to the bullheads my
childhood friends, cruel and naïve, would catch and bludgeon on its banks.

His Heart—after Bob Hicok's "The Wish"

When she was eleven, she realized she'd never return
to her father and sit at the table and tell
him about her day at school,
the spelling test she aced
and wait for his praise like a welcome rain . . . She thought
they'd walk over the Baird Street bridge some day
and he'd pause, look down
and tell her about some things, but
she already knew that the heart was a black
box bulging with so many secrets
it was a wonder one was able
to keep them. She'd
heard stories of when
he was beaten by his father, the time
he killed someone in drunken defense at basic,
his discharge after acquittal,
and in her own deep river she'd known
it was necessary that she
must create for herself a shell like a clam
as they watched the dirty water
smooth itself over its red banks.
He did not understand her veiled language,
the grit she'd spit at him sometimes,
and this would anger him, would be
what his heart expected of him.
He'd shake his fist at her, hug her too hard and
pretend they were father and daughter standing
on the bridge over the river, until
she would remember where she did not come from
and think *I'm alone; I*
am afraid to swim . . . When she was sixteen,
at the make-shift bar in his garage, she realized
from his permanent perch
he would never lift off. He would always
have fear and the need
to forge his heart
metallic and unyielding
with the fire of the next drink. She learned

that if she knew anything
when he died, she'd know
one thing, that his heart
would finally break open and
the sky the color of his eyes
would receive his secrets.

Ghazal of Hope

for my foster brother Donnie

I want Queen Anne's lace to be classified as a flower.
And the stones on the shore to be studied as art.

I want the autumn leaves to remain on the trees in winter
and the bears to hibernate for a while in summer.

If the shapes on ancient stone walls could be translated
and the sun could shine around the earth at once,

I'd want the scorpions to glow in the desert,
and their curved tails to take back the poison.

I see glints of glass next to the broken, mangled dead;
a triangular shard reflects your darkened eyes.

I fight the urge to turn away from this unintentional grave,
with its brilliant weeds poking through the ground.

Let the darkness come and steal the sun's light
in the canopied forest where owls cry.

Leave me a shiny token of your revolution,
but do not arrive unannounced at my door.

Perspectives on Family

Que Sera, Sera

Leanne strapped Aaron into his baby carrier securely and placed the pink and blue blanket over him. “Is that warm enough? Grandma knit it just for you,” she said, tucking the blanket between the upholstered pads and Aaron’s arms and legs.

Leanne touched her lips to his soft forehead. “Save some of that smiling for Grandma, okay?” He smiled again and grabbed for her hair, catching some curls and pulling. She untangled the strands from his fingers, slung a purse and diaper bag over her shoulder, and lifted the carrier off the table. She managed to open the apartment door and headed down the hall and bumped the screen door open with her hip. She set the car seat on the driveway next to the brown Maverick.

Leanne had bought the car for $500 from her boyfriend’s brother, John, who taught her how to drive the stick shift when she was eight months pregnant. She had started out fine and was getting the hang of the manual, but after half an hour, she began to miscalculate the clutch; every time she released it, the car sputtered out, especially on the hills. She wondered if her swollen feet were too numb to sense the sync needed between them. Looking back, she thought maybe she’d wanted to appear helpless so John could save her. He began to get frustrated, but she also knew he was trying to be patient because he couldn’t get mad at a pregnant woman. Besides, he was a nice guy, straight-laced, college-educated. She kind of had a little crush on him. But she seemed destined to hook up with his brother, Mark, whom she’d met when she moved to a new foster home in their neighborhood when she was eleven. Her then-foster parents’ own three girls had dated Mark’s three older brothers, in kind of a twisted Brady Bunch scenario. It seemed

inevitable, even natural, that she and Mark should become boyfriend and girlfriend some day. John seemed happy when she told him she needed a break from the driving lesson and he could take over the wheel and drive her home.

She buckled Aaron's carrier in the front bucket seat. He looked ready for take-off in his simulated cockpit, his right hand on the rattle stuck between his right leg and the pad. She switched on the radio and backed out of the driveway. Aaron's head cocked to the right and softly drummed against the pad with each shock the car absorbed.

Her grandmother, who had agreed to watch Aaron for a while, lived on the other side of town, close to where she would be playing volleyball. Leanne was grateful. She thought her grandmother was cool and looked forward to getting to know her better now that she was independent. She remembered the time she broke the news that she was pregnant with Aaron. Her grandmother had seemed so relaxed about it. Because she thought she would be disappointed, Leanne had been afraid to tell her. But her grandmother didn't know her that well, so she couldn't really get mad, could she? She certainly hadn't been a typical grandmother who had spent lots of time with her while she grew up. It didn't help to try to rationalize it, though. Leanne was still afraid.

"Grandma, I have to tell you something," she said, watching as her grandmother sat down in her rocking chair, and grasped the arms, settled in and lit a cigarette.

Leanne felt her knees shaking. She sat down on the couch, and the afghan scratched the bottom of her thighs. She clasped her hands and laid them on her lap; her heart beat at her chest.

"What is it, toots?" her grandmother asked, her voice a deep quaver.

"Well . . ." Leanne looked at her hands, noticing how nicely her fingernails were growing as a result of the prenatal vitamins. She felt the pressure in her throat. "I'm pregnant," she whispered, looking up. "But I'm going to keep the baby."

Her grandmother coolly blew cigarette smoke through her wrinkled lips.

"Are you upset?" Leanne asked, trying to read her grandmother's expression.

"Que sera, sera," she replied, waving her hand in the air, cutting through the dallying smoke.

"What does that mean?"

"What will be, will be," she said.

"Oh yeah, I remember, the theme song from the Doris Day show, right?" Leanne smiled as the song popped in her head. *Que sera, sera; whatever will be, will be; the future's not ours to see; que sera, sera*. Along with the music, an image appeared of Doris Day sitting in bleachers, clasping her hands and shaking them on one side of her head and then the other, rooting for her television son. Maybe her grandmother had once been like Doris Day.

"That's right, tootsie roll."

"Why do you call me tootsie roll all the time?"

"Because when you kids were real small and still living with your parents, I used to come over occasionally to help out. You know, your mother didn't take real good care of you kids. She got hooked on television, watching those silly soaps. Your dad was working. You kids were always dirty and the house was a mess. Anyway, I used to say you looked like tootsie rolls, your bodies full of dirt and all, but you were still sweet."

Leanne tried to remember, wanting to picture a time with her family.

"Grandma, I'm going to keep this baby and make it work out. I have the whole thing figured out."

"Is that right? Well, you can do it as well as anyone. I've seen worse situations. You're a smart girl; you have a job. You'll be fine. You know, your father and mother were not married when they had Lynn."

"Really?" Leanne replied, although it didn't seem implausible. "Why did they have more kids after four of us were in foster care?"

"I don't know," Grandma sighed. "I guess your father always thought everyone would get back together. It was tough for him, made him drink more."

Leanne briefly thought about Mark and how much he drank, but the thought was just that, brief. "Here's what I have planned. I've already begun the process of withdrawing from college because my supervisor at the bank said I could work full-time and get insurance. We won't have to worry about that anymore."

"It sounds like you've got it together. You'll be fine."

Leanne parked the car in her grandmother's parking slot, used for building guests since she didn't drive. The marigolds her grandmother had planted shivered along the side of the duplex. Goosebumps flared up Leanne's legs and ran under her shorts as she bent to retrieve Aaron from the car. "It's windy out here," she whispered to her son. She covered Aaron's head with the blanket and kicked the passenger door shut. He jumbled

the blanket with his outstretched limbs. The wind blew the blanket down from his face, revealing his toothless grin and blinking blue eyes.

Leanne rang the doorbell while she balanced the carrier with a raised knee. She saw her grandmother peek through her living room curtains.

"Hi tootsie," she said when she opened the door. The smell of dusty plastic flower arrangements greeted Leanne as she entered the small apartment. Her grandmother was wearing a flowered robe buttoned to the top and draped over her shins. Her hair was brown and fuzzy from a recent dye and permanent.

"Hi, Grandma, how are you?" Leanne placed the car seat on the kitchen table, unstrapped Aaron, and lifted him out carefully.

"Oh, my back hurts again. I just went to the doctor today, and he gave me some pills. They're not working very well." She walked slowly into the hallway, opened the closet door, and brought out a paper bag. "I have some pictures to show you."

"Oh, Grandma, I can't right now. I have to get to volleyball in about five minutes. I can look at them when I get back."

"All right. You run along. Here, I'll sit down in my chair and take Aaron. Where are you playing?"

At East Side Pub. I'll be back in about two hours. Okay?"

"That's fine, you go on now. We'll be fine."

"I'll set Aaron's car seat right next to you. He doesn't mind sitting in it. It's comfortable for him with his blanket. He's already been fed, so he probably won't need another feeding until I get back. Just in case, though, there's a bottle in the bag."

"Don't you worry now, just go. I love seeing little ones, especially my great grandson."

Aaron was asleep, bundled snugly in his carrier, when Leanne returned. She was proud he didn't need a pacifier. He had spit it out repeatedly when she first tried to give it to him. He certainly didn't need it to sleep. He was sleeping through the night after two weeks at home despite having had to stay an extra week at the hospital for observation. They were concerned he might develop a lung infection from meconium staining during delivery. Leanne had returned to the hospital daily to breastfeed him even though she was discharged earlier. She had fallen into the role of mother instinctively and hadn't felt such purpose before, or such breast pain.

When she couldn't see Aaron immediately after he was born, Leanne kept buzzing the nurse's station to ask when he'd be coming to her room so she could begin breastfeeding. When a sweet, young nurse finally came with Aaron, who was bundled tight in a receiving blanket, Leanne was teary-eyed. She had just gotten off the phone with Mark, who hated hospitals and wasn't in the delivery room, nor would he come to visit. Leanne sensed he was happier celebrating with his friends at the bar.

She wondered what the nurse thought of her, crying and alone, whether she could handle a baby at eighteen. When she held her son for the first time, Leanne felt protective, afraid, and powerful all at the same time. The nurse told her to lie down on her side and instructed her to place Aaron on his side. The nurse lifted Leanne's breast to his mouth. Leanne moved forward, and after a few tries, he latched on. She probably could have done this herself, but she didn't feel overly confident. The whole experience had

been surreal. Part of her was ashamed; another part was determined. She didn't want others to see her vulnerability, but she also needed their help.

"How did the game go, toots?"

"Not too well; we lost two of three games, but they were close. It's always the same. We have a decent team, but it would be nice to win all three for once."

Her grandmother chuckled and started coughing, then hacking, and didn't stop for about a minute. "I have to go to the doctor again tomorrow. He'll let me know about this cough. Here, I want to show you these pictures."

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Are any of me and my sisters when we were little?"

"Not too many, just a few."

One thing that frustrated Leanne was that her parents hadn't taken any infant pictures, or perhaps they had, but lost them. The youngest she had seen herself in a picture was age four, sitting on a rocking horse in front of a Christmas tree. That was probably the last Christmas she had spent with her parents and siblings. Leanne couldn't shake the desire to see herself as a baby, to know what she looked like. Did her son look like she did?

They scanned through the pictures, some of them black and white, until they came upon one from a visit to Leanne's aunt and uncle.

"Here's the whole group at Uncle Carmon and Aunt Mary's. Do you remember that?" Her hand shaking, she passed the picture to Leanne.

"Yeah, I do. That was fun with everyone together." She studied the picture. All nine of them were there—eight sisters and one brother—smiling, together, yet somehow separate. No one had his or her arm around the other, not even the twins, who were split up right after they were born. After the twins, the doctors convinced their mother to tie her tubes. In the picture, Leanne was holding Peppy, Grandma's Chihuahua.

Another picture revealed Leanne and three of her sisters at one of her foster homes when she was eight. Her grandmother had made a surprise visit, and Leanne had been so happy. "Do you remember this one, Grandma? That was my best birthday. I had that cake with the doll in the middle and the frosting made it look like a dress. I didn't want anyone to cut it." In the picture, they were lined up from shortest to tallest: Lynn, Lori, Leanne, Lisa, and Grandma. Peppy sat next to Grandma's feet, while she held his leash.

"Oh yes, I remember walking over that day. It was nice that I didn't live too far. Otherwise, I may not have been able to come. And, I wanted to surprise my tootsie roll." She grasped my hand and held it. "I always wished I could have tooken all of you, but they wouldn't let me. Social Services said I was too old to handle that many kids. It broke my heart. We tried so hard to keep you all together, too, but it wasn't possible." She turned on her air filter and lit another cigarette.

"It's okay, Grandma. It wasn't your fault."

One month later, after being diagnosed with cancer, her grandmother was in the hospital. Leanne visited, running into all of her unfamiliar relatives.

"The cancer spread fast to her other vital organs. It started in her lungs, though," her Aunt Mary whispered. "Go ahead and say hi to her."

Her grandmother lay in the hospital bed, struggling to breathe despite being hooked up to a respirator. She smiled up at Leanne when she sat down on the side of the bed.

"How are you doing, tootsie?"

"I'm fine, Grandma." Leanne held her wrinkled hand.

"How's my great-grandson?"

"He's good. He's with my foster parents. They're a big help to me."

"I'm sure they are. I wish I could see him, but they're worried about little ones coming in to see me and spreading something. It's silly."

"I know, Grandma. It's okay."

"Your hair is just like mine used to be, long and curly and thick."

"Really?" It made Leanne feel good knowing she was like her grandmother in some way.

"And, you still have those beauty marks on your neck." Since she was little, her grandmother had always told Leanne her moles were beauty marks. "I'm going to miss you all. I'm sorry I couldn't have done more for you."

Leanne didn't know how to say to her grandma she had done more than anyone. She squeezed her hand and kissed her cheek.

When she stepped back into the hall, her Uncle Carmon was leaning against the marble that surrounded the statue of the Virgin Mary across from the nurse's station. His eyes were tired and his head drooped slightly. "Will she get any better?" Leanne asked.

"It doesn't sound good," he intoned. His voice had always sounded effeminate for such a large man. He stood at least six feet, six inches and was broad as a tree trunk. "I don't know really what they can do for her. You know, she really is happy you kids are here."

Two weeks later, her grandmother was in the hospice. The assembled relatives held vigil outside her room, sitting in comfortable chairs. The lighting was soft and it was quiet. They whispered conversation and tried to talk with Leanne and her sister Laura, but it was awkward. What could she say to people she barely knew?

When several of them went in to see her grandmother, Leanne turned to Laura. "I feel like I don't belong here. We hardly know these people. They know Grandma better than us and got to spend so much time with her. I don't like the way they're looking at us, or not looking at us."

"They're not looking at us any particular way. You're analyzing it too much,: Laura said.

"It's just not comfortable. I don't know how to act. I wish I were more upset about Grandma dying. They're all crying, and here we sit dry-eyed. They probably think we don't care. I'm sure they know Grandma wants us here, but do you really think they believe we care?"

"I'm sure they know we care. And you know Grandma cares, that's what's important."

"I know. She's really the only one who seemed to care about all of us. She even wanted to take us all. Did you know that? They wouldn't let her; they said she wouldn't be able to handle it. Like Mom or Dad knew how!"

"Leanne, come on. It's over. We're adults now. We have to move on."

"Do you two want to see Grandma again?" asked Uncle Carmon.

Grandma's wake and funeral were just as awkward, not only because Leanne was unable to grieve, but also because she felt as if she didn't belong there, and she was angry about her grandmother's death. Her uncle Carmon about had a mental breakdown, and everyone was worried her father would be drunk at the wake. Fortunately, he wasn't. Leanne and her siblings had learned that if they talked to him in the morning, he was fine, but by mid-afternoon, they might as well not bother, and they hoped he didn't try to call. Not that he called too often, but when he did, he was usually drunk. He had to point out that the whole situation wasn't his fault—he hadn't wanted them to be taken away. He was still their father, he reminded them sometimes, and he could still take them over his knee. He would say this if they attempted to counter him on any point. Lastly, he had to mention he had served his country. What that had to do with anything, Leanne didn't know. She could imagine the sadness of his mother, her grandmother, who never said anything negative about him.

Leanne felt cheated because now that she could see her grandmother, she was beginning to know her better and better. There was still so much she wanted to learn about her family. Her Aunt Mary had taken her aside at the wake and asked how she was doing. Leanne told her she was fine. She didn't need her aunt to patronize her now.

"You know, your grandmother was a very strong person," she said. "She had a lot of problems with your grandfather. He was a drinker, just like your father, and he beat her badly. Your Uncle Carmon hated leaving her with him. Every day after school, he would get home as soon as he could. That's why he's so torn up about her death. It's brought back a lot of memories."

"Oh." Leanne looked away abruptly, shocked. "Why did she stay with him?"

"She loved him, I guess."

On the coffee table, Leanne arranged the photographs her grandmother had given her, ready to put them into an album. Aaron was in his swing. She held up one picture at a time. "See, Aaron, that's me when I turned eight. And here are your aunts and grandma. And here's one of all of us together at Christmas when I was thirteen. This one's my favorite, a black and white of Lisa and me when Grandma visited us at our foster home. I was six and Lisa was five. I'm holding a book Grandma gave me."

When she finished showing him the pictures, Leanne placed the album on the end table, picked up Aaron from his swing, and brought him to the changing table in her bedroom. She selected his best outfit, a corduroy jumper with a striped shirt, for his twelve-month portraits.

Lily

The stack of files on the credenza to the right of Elizabeth's desk blocked her view of the alley. An alley wasn't a view one might immediately be drawn to, but the parking lot adjacent to it had some nice-looking cars, courtesy of the bank officers who worked in the building across the alley, and two pretty oak trees stood at the far end of the lot. The trees flanked a pathway to Adams Street, and one could turn left down the sidewalk to the corner drugstore and soda fountain where Elizabeth often went for an egg salad sandwich for lunch. The drugstore offered red swivel stools, magazines, quarter sodas, and other sundries for the downtown workers.

It was only ten in the morning, and Elizabeth was already thinking about lunch. She had hardly managed to get through three files. Two files required typed case reports for children who had to be placed in foster homes. It wasn't easy to be objective about the details of neglect or abuse, but her twenty years of experience gave her a business-like formula to follow. Despite her ability to immunize herself, the strain of filing repeated reports had deepened the dark circles under Elizabeth's eyes. She wondered whether the circles would ever go away, and if her various gray hairs would decide to multiply. She reminded herself that ten years to retirement wasn't too far away.

She was determined to get through several more files before lunch to lower the stack; she had appointments all afternoon with clients, including one to arrange the removal of three brothers from an abusive home to a temporary placement until a foster home became available.

Elizabeth shifted her weight on the chair, which squeaked loudly, to retrieve a Hershey's bar from the bottom right drawer of her desk. Her snug-fitting skirt dug into her waist. She had gained weight recently and couldn't seem to take it off. She tore the wrapper from the bar, split a square from the top, and popped it in her mouth.

She quickly placed a call to a foster home to schedule an appointment to meet with the Andrews boys, who had been caught stealing gum from the corner grocer on Bell and Washington. This was their second offense, according to the foster mother. The chocolate melted slowly in Elizabeth's mouth.

When she reached for the next file, the tab read Lily and Lisa Miller, birth dates May 20, 1963, and September 7, 1964. She had just placed them this summer, a few months ago, with Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael, an older couple in their 50's, who had successfully completed their first placement with two children. Mr. Carmichael was working as an insurance salesman, and the Mrs. was a housewife.

Lisa was three at the time, and Lily was four. Lily had been a difficult and feisty one her first day, kicking and grabbing onto the doorframe as if she had slipped through ice and was sinking into a cold lake. Elizabeth imagined that was exactly how Lily felt. It had taken all of Elizabeth's strength to get her through the front door. She'd placed Lily on the couch to cry and sputter until she collapsed. Her sister, Lisa, a year younger, hadn't said a word and calmly walked through the door before the struggle with Lily. Elizabeth had a hard time forgetting Lily's flushed face and angry blue eyes and her image stayed in Elizabeth's mind for days afterward.

She sifted through the file and refreshed her memory of the case. There was neglect at Lily and Lisa's home and little food. The children's father was an alcoholic, and the mother was mildly mentally retarded. Another sister, a year older than Lily, hadn't even been sent to school. Lily had been fortunate to attend Head Start, a preschool program designed for disadvantaged children. Elizabeth strongly supported the burgeoning program and attended their monthly meetings. Lily was currently at Roosevelt Elementary in kindergarten.

Elizabeth called the foster home to schedule a visit with Lisa and also called the school to schedule one with Lily, to see how she was managing there. She would see the girls in a week. Elizabeth placed her initial report in her appointment file.

Her supervisor Darlene poked her head in the door. "Want to go to lunch today?" She was wearing a red scarf that matched her lipstick. Darlene's black pantsuit was crisp and efficient.

"I'm too busy, Darlene." She waved her hand toward the stack.

"Let me pick something up for you at the drugstore, then," Darlene offered.

"Fine, make it an egg salad, and some Bayer."

"Everything all right?" Darlene stepped into the office.

"I'm fine, really. Only two more days until Friday, and I'm not on call this weekend. I'll make it."

"Let me take a few files for you." She advanced toward the pile. "I'm not very busy before two this afternoon. Are there any cases I worked before?"

"You don't have to do that, Darlene." Elizabeth didn't want to appear inadequate.

"It's fine," Darlene insisted. "I know how stressful it is. I'll take a few that simply require scheduling appointments or background checks on applicants to the program."

"All right." Elizabeth pulled four files from the pile and handed them to Darlene. "Thanks," she said.

When Elizabeth knocked on the door of Lily and Lisa's foster home a week later, Mrs. Carmichael greeted her through the screen with curlers in her peppery hair, covered by a light blue scarf tied at the nape of her neck. Elizabeth noticed the delicacy with which she opened the door and realized she had just polished her fingernails. Shaking hands would be impossible.

"How are you, Elizabeth?" Her voice veiled a nervous twitch in her left eye.

"I'm good, thank you. And you, Mrs. Carmichael?"

"Oh, just fine. Lisa's in her bedroom playing. I'll get her for you. Please have a seat." She turned and headed to the dining room. "And please call me Marion." Her voice trailed away.

Elizabeth hesitated, then called, "Marion?" She reappeared.

"Yes?"

"Marion, why don't we talk first if Lisa is playing. We can discuss how things are going with the girls. I haven't talked to you for a while."

"Well, all right." She sat down across from Elizabeth in the lounger and crossed her legs. Her pants lifted slightly to reveal liver spots on her shins. "Let's see, well, Lisa is a doll. She's quiet and plays well. The special school says she is doing well, despite her

retardation. Sometimes it's hard to talk to her, but she seems content." She looked at Elizabeth hopefully.

"It would be normal for her to be quiet, but it's important to draw her out, engage her in play with others as well. And, I think it's unnecessary to call her retarded out loud. I would think Lily might be having a more difficult time?"

Mrs. Carmichael stiffened slightly, grasped the arms of the chair, uncrossed her legs, and leaned forward. "Oh heavens, she has been difficult. She doesn't listen very well, and I seem to always be dealing with her misbehavior—cutting through back yards, not eating properly. It's certainly been a strain at times."

"It's important to understand the trauma both Lisa and Lily have been through. Lisa seems to have internalized her trauma, and Lily is displaying it. She wants attention, but she's seeking it negatively. Give her some time. Reassure both of them that they will see their family soon. It's not unusual that Lily would reject your rules and routine."

"I just don't understand. We didn't have this problem with our previous foster children. Besides, it's got to be better here for Lily. Well-balanced meals, a regular schedule, two normal adults . . ." She trailed off, looked out the window, and fanned her red nails in the air.

"Again, try to be patient with her, and caring. That's what Lily needs." Elizabeth wasn't sure she understood. Oftentimes, people who wanted to become foster parents didn't realize the challenges. It wasn't easy to find the ideal homes.

Marion stood up. "Lisa's been waiting for you. Would you like to see her now?"

"Of course."

Elizabeth listened to the scruff of Marion's polyester pants as she shuffled through the dining room and turned left down the hall to Lisa's room. The house was very clean and smelled of bleach. She hadn't noticed the smell when she first visited the Carmichael's for the home interview. She leaned to her left and looked through the dining room into the kitchen. The plates, bowls, and glasses were stacked neatly in the dish rack on the counter. The silverware flashed from the sun shining through the window above. She spotted laundry on the line, bed sheets, shirts, and children's pajamas.

Elizabeth arrived at Roosevelt Elementary early that afternoon and went directly to the office. Her visit with Lisa had gone well despite her quietness, and she hoped Lily would be fine, too. She was worried about her after speaking with Mrs. Carmichael.

"Good afternoon," said the secretary, not looking up. She was seated at her typewriter composing a letter. The keys plunked efficiently. Elizabeth waited a moment before the familiar bell sounded to indicate the end of the line and the rip of the return bar moved the cartridge back to the left margin.

"Hello, I'm Elizabeth Rowland with Social Services. I have an appointment to see Lily Miller?"

"Oh, yes." She rolled to the receiving desk and confirmed the appointment on her calendar. "They've just begun their nap. You can go get her if you like and just bring her back to the office. We have several rooms available. She's in Room 100, Mrs. Rushford. It's out the door and straight down the hall, last door on the left."

"Thank you." The click of Elizabeth's heels echoed on the terrazzo floors. She passed lockers and rooms with desks that were so small she felt as if she was in a dollhouse. That's what happens when you go back she had heard people say. Everything suddenly has shrunk. You forget that you've grown up.

She knocked quietly on the door of Lily's classroom. Mrs. Rushford answered. She had black bouffant hair and soft brown eyes behind dark-rimmed glasses. "May I help you?" she whispered.

"I'm Lily's social worker, Mrs. Rowland. I have an appointment to see her?"

"Oh yes. Please come in. I'll get Lily for you right away. Actually, would you mind using the cloakroom to talk? It's quite a large room, with a table and a few chairs, and it will make Lily feel more comfortable. She doesn't like to be too far away from the classroom, or from me. She's rather anxious, but so sweet and polite."

"That would be fine." Elizabeth mentally noted the teacher's observations.

Mrs. Rushford approached Lily in the middle of an array of colored mats. She skillfully stepped between them and gently placed her hand on Lily's shoulder. Elizabeth had stepped to her right a few paces to get a look at Lily's face.

She lay on her mat staring out the large paned windows. She was rubbing her knees. Elizabeth looked outside. The sky was blue and a solitary cloud shaped like a submarine floated by. Lily looked up at Mrs. Rushford and smiled. That was a good sign. Mrs. Rushford whispered to her. The boy next to Lily was lying on a green mat, drooling spit. A little girl on a red mat was sucking her thumb. The children were sprawled in various sleeping positions, asleep or ready to nod off. Elizabeth longed for a nap herself.

She quickly walked to the cloakroom to wait for Lily. She wasn't quite sure how Lily would react to her; she hadn't seen her since the placement. She sat down at the table in a small chair and took out her coloring pad and crayons from her briefcase. The room was well organized. She scanned the hooks with the names of the children above and spotted Lily's. Her jacket was worn but functional. Mrs. Rushford ushered Lily into the room.

"Lily, here's Mrs. Rowland. She's here to see how you're doing. I'll be at my desk if you need anything."

"Hi, Lily. Do you remember me?" Elizabeth asked. "Have a seat. I have some colors and paper if you'd like to draw something."

She stared at Elizabeth distantly and frowned, but sat down obediently and hung her head. Her brown hair was braided on each side and lay on her shoulders.

"How are you liking school?"

Lily hunched her shoulders. She reached for the colors and dumped them on the table.

"Is there anyone you really like here?"

"I like Mrs. Rushford. She lets me help her with things, and she didn't get mad at me today."

"What happened?"

Lily was silent.

"It's all right, Lily, you can tell me about it. That's why I'm here."

She began to draw a picture of monkey bars with a black crayon.

"Did something happen on the playground?"

She nodded. "Gary chased me at morning recess. I had my black dress shoes on, but I still got away from him. I wasn't going to let him catch me."

"Why was he chasing you?"

She suddenly became earnest. "I climbed the bars that are shaped like the space ship that landed on the moon. We got to watch the first moon landing on television. The whole school sat in the big hallway at the front of the school with one television to watch. Did you see the moon landing?"

"Yes, I did, Lily. What happened when you were on the space ship?"

I got to the top, and Gary started climbing up**.** He said he was going to kiss me. His face was all red, and I didn't want to see his ugly freckles. I screamed when he touched the top bar with his hand, and I stomped on his hand with my shoe. He yelled. He almost fell. I think I made him cry, and I hurt his hand. It was all red. He was holding it and crying."

Elizabeth observed her more closely. Lily's eyes were very bright, yet hollow.

"My dad chased a boy at our house once for throwing sticks at me and my sisters. He grabbed him and told him he would flush him down the toilet. Maybe Gary should be flushed down the toilet."

"I don't think he would fit, Lily."

"Gary told on me, but Mrs. Rushford said I was protecting myself. Next time I need to run to the playground supervisor." Tears were beginning to pool in her eyelids. She lowered her head and two tears fell to her lap. "I didn't mean to hurt him."

"We all know that, Lily. You like Mrs. Rushford, don't you?"

"Yes. She never yells at me or punishes me. She always helps me, and I get to help her during nap time."

"How do you help her during nap time?"

"I put letter pictures on everyone's desks, and I help her put stuff away." She drew the letters A, B, and C in upper and lower case. She wrote her name.

"Who taught you how to write your name?"

"Mrs. Rushford wrote it down for me, and I learned myself."

"Very good, Lily. You must be very smart." Lily smiled and Elizabeth smiled back, happy to have taken a step.

Elizabeth carefully asked the next question. "Are you taking naps, Lily?" A lack of sleep was normal when changing households, Elizabeth thought, but Lily had already been there for several months. She should be settling into a routine.

"I don't want to sleep." Lily didn't look up.

"Can you tell me why?"

"I don't know."

Elizabeth tried for the remainder of their visit to get Lily to open up, but no further details could be prodded from her; she had shut down and simply colored hearts and written her name under each one for Mrs. Rushford. She was obviously fond of her.

"I'll let you get back to your nap, Lily, and I'll come see you again in two weeks. Okay?"

"Okay." Lily stood and looked at Elizabeth briefly. Elizabeth eyes were drawn to the rough redness of Lily's knees.

"Lily?"

"Yes?"

"I want you to be happy. I know it's hard to be away from your mom and dad. It's okay to tell me how you feel. Remember, you'll be able to visit your mom and dad at Thanksgiving."

"Will I see my other sisters?"

"Of course you will. Now why don't you try to nap."

Lily quietly left the room in her white laced anklets.

Mrs. Rushford entered after Elizabeth had gathered her coat and briefcase. "How is she?" she asked.

"I think she's okay. She still seems to be dealing with the trauma. She likes you a lot. You're doing a great job with her. but I'm actually quite concerned about . .," Elizabeth hesitated, ". . her sleeping. Does she sleep during nap time?"

"Not much. She either stays awake on her mat looking out the window, or comes to my desk asking to help me with things. I try to encourage her to sleep, but it happens very rarely."

"Will you let me know if anything unusual happens? My number is with the Main Office. I plan to be back in a few weeks."

"I will. Thank you for coming."

The sky was cloudless and pale when Elizabeth drove back to the office after three more appointments that afternoon. At her desk, she unloaded her files from her bag and filed three away. She kept Lily's file out. She decided to call on her again next week. She didn't want to wait.

On Friday, Elizabeth returned to the office at 4:00. The receptionist handed several messages to her. When she finally sat at her desk, she flipped through them. She was surprised to see one from Mrs. Rushford. She had called at 3:45.

Elizabeth called her immediately, hoping she might still be at school. She anxiously waited as the phone rang three, then four times. She held a pen in her left hand tapping it on the wood desktop. She got an answer. "Hello?"

"Yes, Mrs. Rushford? This is Elizabeth Rowland. You called?"

"Yes, I'm glad you caught me. I heard the phone as I was locking my door. I felt I should tell you about something that happened with Lily today."

"What is it?"

"Well, she actually fell asleep during nap time today. I was so proud of her. I always ring a bell for the students to wake up. They fold their mats and then sit around the piano for music. Lily didn't get up. I went over to her and asked her what was wrong. She said she had wet her nap mat. She seemed very upset, which sometimes happens, but then she asked me if I would be taking her to the bathroom to be spanked. I, of course, told her no. I told the students to pick out their instruments and took Lily to the cloak-room to quickly change. She seemed relieved I wouldn't be spanking her for wetting."

"She asked if you were going to spank her?"

"Yes. I'm afraid she's being punished at home for wetting the bed. What do you think?"

"I agree. Thank you, Mrs. Rushford. I'll look into it right away, I assure you."

Elizabeth was angry with herself. The image of the sheets and pajamas on the clothesline flashed through her mind. What had happened to her instincts about people? While Mrs. Carmichael was capable of handling Lisa, Lily was too much for her. Elizabeth immediately called Lily's foster home.

"Mrs. Carmichael, this is Mrs. Rowland. I'd like to schedule another visit at your home next week to discuss your concerns about Lily. After visiting with her at school, I think I have some ideas of how best to handle some of her behavioral problems. Does Monday at three work for you?"

"I guess so. This is a bit short notice, but it should be all right. I can change my hair appointment. I'll write it down."

"Good, I'll see you then, Mrs. Carmichael."

"Please, call me Marion."

"Good bye, Marion." She hung up the phone too abruptly and let out a breath. She hoped the call would appease Mrs. Carmichael slightly and she'd go easy on Lily this weekend. Elizabeth knew it would not be easy investigating this. Many people thought it was fine to spank a child for wetting the bed, but Elizabeth had recently read some research on such punishment, and initial findings showed that physical or emotional punishment for bed-wetting resulting from recent trauma only exacerbated the problem. Elizabeth also knew it just didn't make sense to spank a child for something they had no

control over. Another foster child, a boy who she had worked with since he was six and who now was fourteen, had recently confided to her that he had to wash and hang his sheets every day that he wet his bed. He didn't stop bed-wetting until he was ten years old and had to endure years of ridicule from the extended foster family, who used it as a discussion topic at family gatherings. Elizabeth understood why Lily couldn't tell her about this. It was a miracle she said something to Mrs. Rushford.

Elizabeth called Darlene into her office and informed her of the situation. "I'd like to meet with Lily on Monday to talk to her more, to see if anything else is going on. I did notice her knees were quite red. She was rubbing them quite often when I met with her."

"You suspect other abuse?" asked Darlene.

"Yes, I do, and not just physical. Lily has been difficult for Mrs. Carmichael, which isn't unusual, but Mrs. Carmichael seemed a bit nervous, even agitated, when we discussed Lily. I just don't want to go there and say you can't spank her. I want to know if we need to get her out of there."

"All right, but let's follow the rules. If we're not able to uncover more, there's not much we can do. I'll come with you as a witness and tape record the session."

"That would be great, Darlene. Thanks."

Lily sat across from Elizabeth on Monday morning in the school office. Her hair fell down in curls over her blue headband. Darlene sat at the other end of the room. She punched *record* on the tape recorder.

"Hi, Lily. I came back sooner than I planned. I was thinking about you since I last saw you. How have you been?"

"Okay."

"Did you have a nice weekend?"

"No. I don't like it when I can't go to school."

"Why not?"

"I like school."

"What do you do when you're at home?"

"I play with Lisa or with the dog in the back yard. He bit my foster mom in the finger, but he likes me."

"I bet he knows you're a nice girl. What's his name?"

"Max."

"How did you sleep this weekend?" Lily looked at the floor. She didn't answer. Elizabeth couldn't wait any longer. "Lily, I talked to Mrs. Rushford on Friday. She told me you took a nap. Good for you! She told me, too, that she was worried about you after you woke up. She said you thought she might spank you for wetting on your mat. Lily, it's not okay for anyone to spank you. Is that happening to you?"

Lily looked at Elizabeth and nodded her head. She began to sob as if a crack had burst in a dam. Elizabeth went to her and put her arms around her and held her shaking body. "It's going to be okay, Lily. No one will do this to you again." Lily's shaking eventually faded to shudders and she finally collapsed in Elizabeth's arms, falling asleep. Elizabeth held her for an hour until Lily woke up.

"Hey, Lily, did you have a good nap?" She nodded her head. "Here's some water. Would you like some?" She gulped it down and asked for more. "You're very brave, Lily. I know it wasn't easy for you to let someone know about this."

"I can't sleep with my sister because I pee in my bed."

"That's too bad, Lily. Maybe you'll be able to do that again soon."

"She's not very nice to me."

"Lisa?"

"No, my foster mom."

"What do you mean?"

"When I'm sassy, she grabs my arm and makes me kneel in the corner. It hurts my knees. See?" Lily showed Elizabeth her knees. The skin was almost rubbed raw.

"How long do you kneel?"

"I don't know. When she's not looking, I sit on my feet because my knees hurt. But then I kneel again when she comes back. I don't want to get spanked again."

"When does she spank you?"

"She spanks my butt hard when I wet the bed. Sometimes I dream I'm sitting on the toilet. I have to go very bad, and it feels better when I go. When I wake up in the morning, I'm afraid. I can feel my wet pajamas. My throat hurts because I have to tell her. She stands by the door and waits for me to tell her."

"What happens then, Lily?"

"She tells me to get up and take off my wet panties and pajamas. Then I go sit on the toilet, but I can't go pee and I'm cold. She sits on the tub. She says, 'Why did you wet the bed?' three times. I tell her I don't know why, but she still, she . . ." Lily began to cry again.

"It's all right, honey. We're almost done. Can you finish telling me?"

"No. I don't want to." Lily slipped off Elizabeth's lap and sat in the opposite chair with her back to her.

"Do you want to show me with this doll?" Darlene had placed the doll on the table while Lily slept.

Lily turned and picked up the doll and took off its clothes and underwear. She lifted it up and put its stomach on her lap. She spanked the doll's butt hard with her hands several times. "Don't put your hands behind your back!" she yelled. She spanked her some more. "Now, get in the tub and clean up." Lily placed the doll in the sink and sat down again.

Darlene hit the stop button on the tape recorder.

"Lily, you did a good job telling us what happened. I'm very proud of you. You won't have to go back."

"What about Lisa?" Lily was on the verge of tears again.

"I'll get her. You'll be together soon."

Elizabeth arranged for an emergency placement for Lily and Lisa that afternoon. She brought Lily directly there and went to remove Lisa from the home.

Mrs. Carmichael was incredulous when Elizabeth informed her of their decision. She wept as she gathered some essential clothing for Lily and Lisa. “I tried my best to give them structure and discipline. They were no worse off than at their parents.”

Elizabeth remained quiet until Mrs. Carmichael gave her the bags of clothing. “We’ll have someone pick up the remainder of their things in the next few days. Please have them ready. Someone will call you ahead of time.”

Within two weeks, Lisa and Lily had been placed in a permanent foster home. Elizabeth had, on her own time, the following weekend, sat down with the new foster parents to discuss Lily’s behaviors. She hoped they would be patient.

Elizabeth looked at her stack of files on the credenza Monday morning. It was only four up from the windowsill. The yellow leaves of the oak tree were turning and lifting in the wind.

Memory Refrain

Down the Toilet

In 1968, before I entered foster care, we lived in a house on East Mason Street near the Fox River in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The house was demolished a few years later to make way for a newer bridge, aptly named the Ray Nitschke Bridge, perhaps for its massive structure (Nitschke was a goliath as a Packers linebacker), but certainly because he was a favorite legendary player. My sister Lori, in her first foster home, virtually lived next-door to the Nitschke family for ten years and often played with his son, John. When I was fortunate to visit Lori at her foster home, we would drive up Peppermint Court toward the wooded subdivision in Oneida, just outside Green Bay, and behold Ray Nitschke's house, a mansion at the top of the hill, with four white columns spanning the front of the brick façade. I got to meet his son John, but I never saw the legend.

Building the bridge with its cloverleaf exchanges was progressive for the city of 50,000, creating exits to downtown and several roads parallel to the river, Ashland and Broadway on the west side, and the presidential Monroe and Madison Avenues on the east side. We were East-Siders, a fact my sister Lori, who now lives on the opposite side of the river, seems to have forgotten. Lori and I are only 11 months apart in age, but the river has separated us throughout childhood. I still live on the east side. I attended East High School, but I have forgiven my sister (who attended West High) since she had no choice but to live in foster homes on the west side.

My four sisters and I were under the age of seven in the house on East Mason. I remember nothing about my sisters from that time, except that I slept with all of them in the same bed, heads and toes alternating. I have little memory of the details of the house

itself other than it must have been bare of food most of the time—I still have a vision of empty cupboards in the kitchen. I also know we had a television, a luxury which some in my family claim was partially responsible for supplanting my mother's maternal instincts once she got hooked on the soaps. This might explain why Lynn, although she was the oldest sister, once used the sidewalk as her personal toilet, apparently not having been taught the proper graces.

From the kitchen, through the side door, one walked onto a porch. There was a gravelly sort of cul-de-sac before our house, perhaps the end of a road; Lori remembers it as an alley. This image of the neighborhood is part of the only visual memory I have of my father before I entered the foster care system at age four.

I was outside on the porch one day with a few of my sisters when a stick fight broke out between us and a neighbor boy, who I remember as Frankie. "We've got more sticks than you!" we said, shoving our chins forward. I ran quickly to retrieve a stick from the ground to add to our collection.

As Lori recalls, Frankie found a piece of Lynn's poop on the sidewalk. Lori had just walked outside in a fresh dress, and Frankie took the opportunity to poke the poop with his stick and smudge it on her dress. I don't know where my dad came from, but he suddenly appeared on the porch and barreled toward Frankie, who immediately took off, white dust pluming behind him. My dad ran after Frankie, so fast that I was surprised and impressed. He was tall and his legs were quick, racing after Frankie, zigzagging down the alley until he grabbed the back of the Frankie's shirt and scooped him up with the other arm. The boy couldn't have been more than six or seven, so he was easily pinned against

my father's waist between his bicep and forearm. My father marched back toward our house, his face firm. "Do you want to get flushed down the toilet?" he barked at the boy.

"Nooooo!" screamed Frankie, whose arms and legs were flailing like those of a captured frog in the fingers of a sadistic boy.

"I'm gonna flush you down the toilet!" my dad yelled.

Frankie writhed and screamed, tears streaking his dirty cheeks. As my dad continued his maniacal march and threats of toilet flushing, I wondered whether he would follow through. Frankie craned his neck and choked on his sobs. Just before he reached the porch, my dad let him go, and Frankie scrambled for footing and peeled out of our yard.

"Don't you ever mess with my girls again!" screamed my father, red with rage, and probably drunk. I don't remember seeing my father drink that day, but Lori does. No matter. We had been saved by my father, had witnessed what lengths he would go to prove his strength and deliver his own sense of justice. Whenever I would visit him throughout my childhood and adolescent years, he would invariably, drunkenly, come around to the subject of his physical strength, describing encounters with the people he had threatened, especially those he'd met in one bar or another on Broadway. Up until about 2000, Broadway was a harbor for alcoholics, bar after bar laid out like a trough, Pabst Blue Ribbon signs lighting the way. My dad, who eventually lost his driver's license, lived on the near west side, close enough to Broadway to walk there and haunt a few places. In these bars, men who were unfortunate enough to irk or disagree with my father faced a predictable reaction. At some point in his stories, he would raise a clenched

fist and shove it close to my nose to simulate how he'd threatened someone, how he could level them with one punch. I would stiffen and blanch at the thought he might actually punch me. He was frightening, yet I imagined his physical strength to be an asset I'd inherited, handy for sports or arm wrestling. At the height of his tirades, he would emphatically state, "Nobody messes with me. I can kill a man with my bare hands."

Indeed, he did kill a man once, while stationed in the Army. According to our Uncle Carmon, my dad's brother, dad was provoked into a drunken fight and needed to defend himself. Tragically, the one blow my father inflicted sent the other man to the ground, and he was killed instantly. At the military trial the deceased's buddies testified that our father wasn't responsible for their friend's death, and my dad was honorably discharged. My father never told any of his children about this incident, his only reference to the service being, "I served my country!" This drunken proclamation would often follow his conversations with us, as a final edict. It seemed to erase all of his mistakes. "Just wait until I die," he'd say, "you kids will be taken care of." I used to think we had some major inheritance coming, but when he died, no such benefit appeared. Each of us children did receive a letter from President Bill Clinton thanking our father for his service.

I can only imagine the guilt my father carried for accidentally killing a man. For someone who sought security in the service, the unfortunate incident, I'm certain, further deepened the well he filled with drink to hide a painful, difficult childhood. Often, my father witnessed his mother being beaten by his drunken, enraged father, whose own

father was also an alcoholic. My father and his brothers were put down and shut out of opportunities. My father wanted to play football at East High, but my grandfather refused to sign the permission slip. Uncle Carmon had the opportunity to attend design school on a scholarship, but remained home to protect our grandmother.

My father drank his entire life. He even had his own bar in his garage, which made sense since he couldn't drive. When I was of age to drink, he would invite me to his bar, decorated with Miller and Bud neon signs and boasting its own fridge. We'd sit on the bar stools he'd scavenged, hang out and talk—about the Packers or his exploits on Broadway. It wasn't his fault we'd been in foster care, he would say. *I didn't sign those papers*. I would sit and listen and wonder about this man, tall and handsome, for whom all potential seemed to be lost. I wanted my father to share the story, no matter how difficult, and know that he did want to be a good father. I desperately wanted to know our history, but it must have been too painful for him to talk about. I wanted to walk with him through his old neighborhood, Three Corners on the Northeast Side. Maybe walk over the bridge to the football field at East High so he could tell me about wanting to be a kicker for the Packers. Then again, why would he want to talk about dreams that were flushed down the toilet so long ago, or risk the pain of peering into the deep chasm of his past?

Remnant

When I was eight, I had already been living with the Muellers for three years on Crooks Street, close to Joannes Park, up the street and around the corner, and Meyers Park, which was at the end of our street, banking the East River. Every summer, my sister Lisa, who was a year younger than I, and our foster brother Gary, who was my age, spent most of our time at Joannes Park and swimming pool. We were called the "three little ones" by the older foster siblings, especially Marie, Terry, and Sue. Despite our young age, we could walk to either park on our own. It was 1971, and kids in daylight could walk to school or to a friend's or to the park without too much worry.

To go swimming, we needed 20 cents, 10 for the pool and 10 for a treat afterward. I always got a Fudgesicle, and I'd sit on the concrete steps outside the pool, water from my hair still dripping onto my towel around my neck and a wet spot forming under my butt, and lick or bite the cold treat until I reached the stick, careful not to catch a few splinters of wood. We were consumed by swimming at Joannes pool, running there barefoot virtually every day. We'd buy our ticket, enter the locker room, never take a shower, and step into the pool at the shallow end.

Every hour on the hour there were pool checks. The lifeguards would, in sync, rise and pierce the air with their whistles. They'd step down and walk coolly toward their next station, nonchalantly checking the pool for bodies, sometimes chatting with the other lifeguards. During their check, we would lie on our stomachs or backs on the hot concrete, the sun burning our shoulders and faces. The sparkling concrete was like a bed of nails that impressed my thighs with tiny holes and pilled the torso and butt of my suit.

The time of the check was perfect; by the time the lifeguards mounted their chairs and blew the whistle, we were hot enough to jump into the cool water.

Sometimes my foster sisters would go swimming, too. When I was brave enough, I'd cling to the side of the pool and venture into the five-foot deep area, where I would find one or two of them, forearms draped over the edge of the pool, talking to guys behind the fence.

One time, I asked Sue to watch me swim out to the second black line and back to the pool's edge. The black lines marked the lanes which ran the length of the pool. She said she'd watch me. I had no problem reaching the second line, actually simulating a decent crawl, but when I saw the line below me, I stopped. I was able to shift my body around, but I didn't know how to tread water, and despite moving my arms back and forth and kicking my feet a little, I went under. My body sunk, and when my feet touched the bottom, I bent my knees and pushed up so I could reach the surface. I was able to break the surface a few times, gasping for whatever amount of air I could get. The bobbing strategy soon began to fail, and underwater my eyes focused on swimmers' legs and arms and, through the water on the blue sky, the outline of a lifeguard in a red suit on a vaulted bench. Couldn't anyone see me?

It is hard to describe what I felt when I realized I could no longer reach the surface. I think I swallowed some water, and then suddenly someone grabbed me and lifted me out of the water. It was Sue. She pulled me back to the edge where I hung on, breathing deeply, looking at the chipped pool paint as water lapped into the drain. I don't remember what Sue said. I think she apologized.

Despite continuous swimming lessons at the pool over the next several years, deep water made me anxious. I could swim well, having advanced to one of the highest levels, and even considered competition. But when it came to the test for survival skills in the water, I was uncomfortable. We had to jump into the diving well wearing clothes and shoes. I first removed my shoes and let them sink. Then I had to remove my shirt and pants, and somehow capture air into them to create floatation devices. I struggled with gathering air into the clothing and tying it off. Having to stay in the deep water for that long, despite having the skills and strength to do so, began to panic me. Despite my instructor's presence and encouragement, I failed the lesson.

Much of our summer was also spent at Joannes Park. The parkies, mostly college students, were always there ready to talk or engage us in activities. Chris was a tan, bearded parkie I admired and sought attention from. He tried to teach me how to paddle a canoe on a trip the park sponsored to Camp U-Nah-Li-Ya, a popular kid's camp destination up north. Not long after being in a canoe with another kid, I became anxious about the water surrounding the canoe. Was it deep? Chris calmly and patiently gave directions from his own canoe. I was panicked, frantically slapping the paddles on the water and tilting our canoe. He asked if I would be more comfortable if he were in my canoe. I said yes. After the switch, his soft voice drifted from the back of the canoe, directing me how to paddle, and I was able to calm down. My paddling skills improved dramatically.

Toward the end of the summer season, my sister and Gary and I would join friends at Joannes Park and work on the float that would be in the Kiddie Parade and Kiddie Karnival. All city parks created a float for the parade, which moved from Downtown Green Bay to Joannes Stadium, where the Karnival would be set up for the next night. Our park's float that year was going to be a large whale from which Pinnochio would emerge. The whale began as a wooden frame, upon which chicken wire was attached so that the shape could be molded. Further engineering created a movable tail and mouth. To cover the chicken wire, we created hundreds of pink, blue and white blossoms by meticulously folding toilet paper squares accordion-style, then separating and fanning them with careful fingers.

The best thing about the float was that the mouth could open to reveal Pinnochio popping his head out. I had wanted to be Pinnochio, but someone else was chosen. Instead I had to be a cardboard octopus and march in formation ahead of the float next to Lisa, who was a shark. At the carnival the next night, our park won Best Float. I ran to Chris and jumped into his outstretched hands. He lifted me into the humid sky and smiled up at me. He made me feel like a real girl, not so wooden.

The summer was coming to an end. The pool would be closing soon; the swings and trapezes in the park would be taken down. I could still play on the monkey bars, but they couldn't lift me into the sky. I didn't want the connection to the park to end. I think that's why I asked Gary if he wanted to run away. He didn't answer right away. He looked down at the ground, his white-blonde bangs with the curled edge hiding his eyes.

When he finally agreed, Lisa came with us. We must have told our sisters we were going to the park.

When we got to Meyers Park, we ventured beyond the playground equipment toward the river. There was a marble sign we hadn't seen before that explained the park's name. We reached the bank of the East River and followed it up to East Mason Street. We walked over the bridge. By this time, we were excited to be on our own, skipping and singing 'Follow the Yellow Brick Road." On the other side of the river, we turned left onto a street parallel to the river, which brought us, at a curve in the street, to a trail that edged the river. We followed the trail to a small concrete and stone footbridge which crossed over Baird's Creek close to where it entered the East River. Ahead was a large parking lot behind the Clark gas station on Main Street. When we reached Main, we could see McDonald's to our right.

Inside McDonald's, because we had no money, we had nothing to do but cause trouble. We collected a handful of straws one at a time by pushing the lever on the wooden dispensers. Once we each had our handful, we pretended they were swords and began to thrust and dodge and squeal. Our duel didn't last long before we were told to leave.

It was now dark outside. We looked around to reassess our environment. We recognized the huge white buildings behind McDonald's. I could see smoke rising from the roof of the factory, and gagged on the stale, chalky smell of the cheese processing. Ma Mueller worked the night shift at Schreiber Cheese. "Let's go back there," Gary said.

"Why do you want to go there? That's where Ma works," I said, confused. I'm not sure what he said next, but the three of us began to walk toward the buildings. Despite the fact I was enjoying this freedom, maybe I sensed we were running out of time. When we reached the back of the building, there were some employees outside on a smoke break. One of them asked what we were doing there.

Brazenly, I said, "We ran away from home."

"My mom works here," Gary said.

"Who is she?" one of them asked, and Gary promptly gave them her name.

A lump began to form in my throat. A few employees put out their cigarettes and walked back into the building; some stayed outside and talked to us. I hung my head and stared at the blacktop. When Ma Mueller came out of the building in her white factory uniform, her hairnet still in place, keys and nerves jangling, I knew we were in for it.

When we were away from the building, she said, "You little shits, I had to get off work to take you home. And, I had to ask someone for their keys." She walked quickly through the parking lot, going on about how we'd embarrassed her and having to go back to work. "Just wait until tomorrow."

Marie, Sue, and Terry had been frantic and had called the cops to help find us. When we arrived home, they were outside and a cop car was in front of the house. Terry ran us up to bed and lectured us. "Do you know how worried we were?" She said that now they would be in trouble, too, because they were responsible for us.

Later the next day, Ma, with the stick in her hand, asked us why we had run away. I looked at her and flatly said, “Because I don’t like it here.” Her eyes hardened with anger, but I’m sure she was hurt by my words. The licking came swift and sharp on my butt, a few more whacks than usual to teach me a lesson. But the stick didn’t change anything; it just made me angrier and lonelier.

Why didn’t she ask me why I didn’t like it there? Why couldn’t she realize I ran away because I didn’t feel anything? That I felt like a left-over piece of wood, not part of the construction of something? The entire time I lived in foster homes, I would reference my “real” family, my “real” sisters and brother as if it anchored me to something, anything. But my real family wouldn’t stay anchored, and my foster parents up to that point couldn’t provide an anchor either, perhaps for fear that they would someday have to let me go.

Fifth Grade

I inherited my mother's natural curly hair, a curse (I'd never have the Mod Squad chick's perfectly straight hair) and a blessing (I had a thick mane of waves). When I was younger, my hair was thick and snarly with curls, mostly kept long, sometimes with bangs, always with the cowlick that sprouted to the left of the part in the middle. Anytime my hair had been cut too short or was layered or feathered, curls jumped out haphazardly and wildly like Medusa's snakes. I was never truly able to manage many hairstyles, and after attempting both the Dorothy Hamill and the Farrah Fawcett, I learned that long, wavy hair was most suited to my large head and my sanity. My hair has always confounded me—should I get layers, a permanent, a page boy, bangs? Maybe pull it back, straighten it, angle the sides to frame my face? I've rarely been completely satisfied with how it looks, so I tend to keep it long and pull it back, mostly to keep it away from my face, suppressing any strays. So much depends on one's hair. My first awareness of its importance came in the fifth grade.

As I recall, curling irons weren't a big part of styling in the early 70's. They came into play in the late 70's, when my friends and I would try to curl the sides of our hair back into rolls like long wieners that framed our faces. My three foster sisters, the Mueller girls, all of whom were teenagers in 1973, would iron their hair straight on the ironing board, carefully brushing one side onto the board and smoothing over the hair with the iron, with steam and sizzle and crackle sputtering in the air. My hair was long, too, but wavy, and when they allowed me to participate in the ritual burning I humbly, nervously bowed next to the board. Long straight hair, parted in the middle, was in, and

my best friends in fifth grade, Paula and Tracy, had the look. Paula had straight brown hair and bangs, and wore her yellow turtlenecks with a gold medallion necklace and plaid skirts. Tracy had striking jet black hair and wore hot purple suede boots.

All of us lived in Howard, a developing suburb of Green Bay. My sister Lisa and I had just moved there with the Muellers from the east side of Green Bay. The streets in Howard were named after birds (Cardinal) or flowers (Tulip) or came from a blend of the names of the town's original residents (Danbar or Kenhill). Today, it has stretched into a teeming village, set apart from the increasingly diverse and low-income neighborhoods in Green Bay; in other words, white flight landed in Howard, with the requisite new suburban schools, YMCAs, and libraries.

Paula and I met halfway through fourth grade, on the bus to Howard Elementary, as we both lived on Cardinal Lane. We were the first to be picked up and the last to be dropped off on a route that spanned quite a rural distance. Paula was working hard to develop a sophisticated maturity, sitting like a queen bee in the center of the back seat of the bus, responding to the buzz of her workers, showcasing her feigned indifference to others by raising her eyebrows and frowning. Tracy was trendy, gorgeous, olive-skinned, smiling, and confident with her collection of boots and seeming affluence, boarding the bus from Moon Drive, where modern split levels lined the streets, much more glamorous than the ranches and two-stories on Cardinal Lane.

Paula, Tracy, and I were best friends throughout most of fifth grade at the middle school. So when I got my hair cut to a simple shoulder length style in the spring of fifth grade, I was surprised by their response. As I approached them in the hallway the

morning after my hair cut, they giggled, pointed, and whispered with their hands cupped around the other's ear to hide their secret communication. Then they turned and walked away. I stood still, my chest contracting. I wondered whether they planned this response. Had someone seen my haircut and said something to them about it? It all seemed very calculated. And what was so wrong with my hair?

It hit me that Paula and Tracy were probably dumping me, if not because of the haircut, because of some other offense. What had I done wrong? I couldn't stop crying. Another friend tried to convince me I was over-reacting to their teasing, but I couldn't deal with this shunning. Although there were some moments of caring in my foster home, it just wasn't enough to override the growing loneliness, the daily treading of water, the fear of drowning in the middle of an empty lake.

How did I stay afloat? We become jealous of others; they become jealous of us. Too young to understand, and having no one to guide me, I measured my worth based on how other's viewed me, which too often corrupted my view of myself. "You're pretty and you know it," was once the sneering comment from one of my foster sisters when I tied my hair back with a pony tail holder I had received as a birthday gift. But just as often, my foster sisters were kind.

At one time during my fifth grade year, they set my hair in plastic curlers with bobby pins the night before a regional spelling bee competition. I had won the school spelling bee, and everyone in the house seemed excited. The next morning, after releasing the hair from the curlers and gently combing and spraying it, I felt beautiful and confident. As I exited the bathroom, to my amazement, my foster father, who rarely

cracked a grin, grasped my chin and looked down at me with a smile, saying “We are so proud of you.”

Unfortunately, my foster mother assessed my hairdo and perhaps decided it was too mature for a ten-year-old, wetting it all down to form finger curls around my neck. Suddenly my confidence vanished, along with my focus. The truth is I won the school spelling bee not knowing I was competing for something. Now that I actually knew I was competing and being judged, not to mention I looked ridiculously like Shirley Temple, my mindset changed.

I failed the first round of the spelling bee, a written portion where I managed to misspell the easiest words. Afterward, I wept, stooped over the heat register outside the testing room, even when my foster mother tried to console me. Although I could not understand my reaction then, I know now that having finally received some praise and acceptance, and even love from my foster family, I thought I would lose it because I failed the test. I began to believe I wasn’t good enough and never would be. The same thing happened when I didn’t pass my first driver’s test. I had a complete breakdown, sobbing uncontrollably in the Department of Motor Vehicles, my next foster mother standing next to me, bewildered about my reaction.

Fifth grade was a turning point for me. The isolation I had experienced since entering foster care, and the events that year, oddly surrounding my hair, were irrevocable. The walls came up, strong and impenetrable. At the same time, my real parents divorced, and Lisa and I would leave for separate foster homes that summer after school let out.

Orphanage

After living in three foster homes, I moved in with my foster parents Sharon and Steve on the northeast side of Green Bay. I was back in the old neighborhood, catching up with old friends from elementary school upon entering seventh grade at Washington Junior High. Aside from the familiarity and security of the neighborhood—I had lived on the east side with the exception of one year, not to mention my father had been raised nearby—I was finally with foster parents who intuitively understood the needs of foster children, and they delivered their best to me, even offering to adopt me. Maybe that's because my foster father knew what it was like to be separated from his family since he spent five years in an orphanage.

Steve relayed his story to me when, as a young adult, I became interested in writing. I was excited to learn more about his experience and understand it in relation to my own. He was happy to share the details of his story, so we sat down one day across from each other at his kitchen table for the interview I would conduct using questions I had prepared and a cassette player. I was reminded of a picture of him at about seven or eight, with smiling eyes and freckles. Despite the black and white photograph, I knew his hair was red because of the freckles. He looked at me from across the table with the same physical features, although he now had glasses and his freckles had surely become a more subdued brown. His tongue played with the toothpick in his mouth. When I simultaneously pushed the red 'record' and black 'play' buttons on the cassette player to begin, Steve effortlessly recollected that time in his childhood and gave voice to the boy

in the orphanage in his characteristic down-to-earth tone mixed with wonder and reverence.

In the era when his parents divorced, there were no foster home programs. For some reason, it seemed Social Services felt that a single parent was incapable of taking care of her kids. There was just a hearing of the divorce, and the children were taken away. And the kids were last to know what was actually happening. Their ma was really tore up about it.

There were six of them going to the orphanage. Dennis was the oldest at eleven, Donna was nine, my foster father Steve was eight, Ray was seven, Gary was six, and Mike was four. Then there was Debbie, who wasn't even a year old yet. She would be going to St. Mary's Hospital on Webster Avenue. Even the babies had to leave, and their Ma went nuts.

Steve said the social worker painted an idyllic scene of the place they were going: it was up on a big hill and there were apple orchards all around and it was like a medieval castle. He said, "If you're eight years old, that's kind of exciting, and we were pretty adventurous kids anyway." Actually, he had this idea of a cottage set-up, instead of a castle, and he was excited they were going. That's why he couldn't understand why Dennis ran away the morning they were supposed to leave. They had to wait until Dennis was found and brought back before they could go to the orphanage.

They left Appleton in the early afternoon of Monday, June 1, 1952, to go to St. Joseph's Orphanage in Green Bay. Steve remembers that date because he had written it in the prayer book he had just received from his First Communion the previous day. He

wrote it down because he was told they would be leaving the orphanage a year after they arrived. They were led to believe it was a short visit to a nice place and then they would go back home.

They were all piled into the social worker's sedan. Dennis sat by the window in front. He leaned against the door and stared ahead, unmoving. Ray and Steve and Gary and Donna were squished into the back seat. Their ma was standing on the porch crying as they drove away. The kids in the back turned around to kneel on the seat and wave through the back window until they could no longer see her. On the way, the social worker stopped for an ice cream cone for everyone.

The orphanage was nothing like he had imagined it. The car turned into a driveway that seemed to stretch the length of a football field and moved up the hill. True, there were apple trees all over the place, and the hill was big, but the building on top looked dark and dingy and sad. There wasn't a white picket fence anywhere, and nothing was inviting or cheery. A tower with a parapet rose up from the large building. His nervousness changed to uneasiness. The imposing façade of the building flickered in his mind for the first few days after they arrived.

Soon they were brought into the foyer of the main building, which had dimly lit cavernous halls and high ceilings. A few feet ahead, from left to right, was a long hallway. Across the hall was a large auditorium with rows of metal seats and a stage. There were stairs on each side of the entrance to the auditorium, leading straight up to a

landing, and in the middle of that landing was one staircase leading up to the dorms. They never used those stairs.

They sat on thick wooden benches and silently waited for a few minutes. Donna held Dennis' hand so tight her knuckles were white. Steve pushed up his glasses, which had slid down his sweaty nose. Gary rested his head on Ray's shoulder.

Five nuns came toward them. They were Notre Dame nuns, very stiff and stern with their starched wimples and veils and yards of black gown. They looked like they might wrap their gowns around them and take them to the dungeon.

The kids were split up and siphoned off to the dorms according to age group, seventh and eighth grade kids, fifth and sixth grade, third and fourth, and then nursery age. Ray and Steve, third and fourth graders, were brought down the hall to the right. At the very end of the hall was another stairway leading up to the dorms.

Steve stared at the huge dorm room with rows and rows of cots, lockers, and sinks, each with its own mirror like a military barracks. He was assigned a lock with the number W11. Ray's was W7. Steve later found out there were a lot of W's, mostly because there was a large family there called the Williquettes.

After unpacking, they were led to the dining hall in the basement. It was completely filled with kids. There were over 150 kids in the orphanage then, and all of them were in the dining hall at one time for meals. It was so strange and huge, but Steve's interest was aroused. Dennis, Donna, Gary, Ray, and he sat at the same table. "Monkey," their nickname for Mike, was just a toddler yet and was in the nursery. They didn't see him very often, but when one of them happened to, he or she waved and called his name.

The table at the orphanage was set just like in a restaurant. The linen napkins were rolled up in rings, and all the dinnerware and utensils were set perfectly. They all obeyed a stern sister's directions as she instructed them in the proper eating habits. She left to inspect another table. They found out soon enough they couldn't talk.

"Talking is not permitted." The nun had returned.

They looked down at their plates.

"You are not to talk while eating, going from place to place, or after bedtime. Is that understood?"

They all nodded and finished their meal in silence. That was the last time they had a meal together. They ate with their assigned groups from then on.

After dinner they were grouped, lined up, and directed single file out of the dining room and to playrooms, which were also separate according to age. It felt good to Steve to at least have Ray in his group. They could protect each other.

The playrooms provided a little more freedom. Everyone had a wooden box with his identifying number on it for his toys. They were called number boxes. Steve had his W11 number on it. There were also many games, including carom (a much smaller version of billiards shot with one's fingers on a square tabletop plywood board with four corner pockets), puzzles, and wooden hockey. Steve got pretty good at making puzzles and was able to do a 500-piece puzzle in a few hours. He also became the carom champion for his age group. Nobody could beat him. He couldn't wait to get to the big room to challenge Sister Laurice. She always played with the older boys, and she was *good*. Sometimes if Steve finished his chores early on a Saturday morning, he could go

watch her play. As he watched her fingers flick and propel the white ring into the colored rings to make her shots, he thought to himself, *I think I can beat all of these guys and her.* He couldn't say that out loud though, not in front of the big kids. His chance came when he entered the seventh and eighth grade group, and one day he beat her 40 straight games. She wouldn't let him stop playing until she won a game, but she never did. He wouldn't let her. She couldn't believe it. Just out of luck, she should have won at least one game, but he figured God was trying to send some sort of message.

The first night at the orphanage, Ray and Steve were instructed on their bedtime routine. They had to undress, put their shoes at the foot of the bed, put their pajamas on, and turn their beds back. Then they brushed their teeth and climbed in bed. Steve was excited when he discovered they had comic books for everyone. The nuns let them read for a while before turning out the lights at about 8 p.m. He read a Spider Man comic book that first night and felt okay.

The next morning, everyone in the dorm got up together. They had to make their beds to perfection, army-style with hospital corners. Sister Ricarda's quarter had to bounce on it, or they would have to do it over. Then they went to church. They went to church every day. After church, they went to the dining room for breakfast, did their chores afterward, and then went to school.

The Notre Dame nuns were excellent teachers. Steve said he learned more in grade school than some kids learn in grade school and high school put together. One nun's name was even Sister Scholastica. She had a limp. Steve thought she and the other sisters scared the learning right into them.

He remembered the first day of school in fifth grade. A kid named Duane was clowning around, talking, and making faces at everyone. Sister Scholastica limped out of the room and came back with a candy tin.

"Duane, would you please come up to the front of the room?" she asked. "Get that chair and bring it here."

Duane smiled as he walked to the front and picked up the chair. Steve thought Duane was going to give out candy on the first day of school.

"Now lean over the chair, please," she said.

Duane leaned over. She opened the tin and brought out a rubber hose. She whipped Duane long and hard. Steve was shocked and scared. It was the first time he had witnessed an incident with the hose. He doesn't recall if Duane screwed around at all for the rest of the school year, but he knows he didn't. He soon found out every nun had a large round tin with a hose inside. If you were really bad, you got the hose.

Steve's brother Gary got the hose many times because he was a bed-wetter, which was taboo. It was as if the nuns thought you deliberately went out of your way to create problems. If you broke the routine, you threw everything out of whack, and they didn't like it. Steve didn't know which punishment was worse—the hose or the gauntlet. Gary received both. All the kids would form two lines facing each other down the long hallway on the main floor, and Gary would have to go through the line, all the while being inflicted with punches. Then Steve would have to sit in the corner for the rest of the morning because he refused to participate.

A year after they entered the orphanage, on June 1, 1953, Steve left his table at breakfast, went up to his dorm and packed his box with the clothes and things he was going to bring home that day. He carried it down to the foyer where they had first arrived, sat dutifully on the same bench they had sat on, and waited to go home. He was anxious and ready. He wondered where his brothers and sister were. They should have been ready to go home, too. He peered down the hallway.

Only Sister Roberta, looking very angry, swept down the hallway toward him. "What are you doing here away from the group?"

"I'm going home today." He tried to say it convincingly as a rush of hotness spread to his cheeks.

"You're not going anywhere. You're not allowed to leave the group without permission. Bring your things back up to the dorm."

He picked up his box and returned to his dorm, devastated. He felt betrayed. He thought he would be at the orphanage forever.

They remained for another four years. Despite the regimented system they lived in, Steve and his siblings adapted and turned to each other for support. They stayed very close, cherishing every small sighting of each other. Their mother was a good mother. She cared, and so did their dad, but their ma was the all-embracing figure, and they had all received the nurturing that only a mother can provide. Their parents visited regularly, which kept the family strong. Steve always felt bad for those kids whose parents never visited, so he would share with them the candy his mother brought every time she visited.

When I pressed the stop button on the tape recorder, Steve used his fingers to comb his long red bangs aside, and he smiled his supportive smile, the closed one that juts out his chin a bit and brightens his thoughtful eyes. His orphanage story triggered a few interesting memories of living with Steve and Sharon—the carom board we played on as kids (I even bought one for my own kids) and his love of puzzles. Most important, however, it explained why he is so loving and affectionate. When his family visits, one must be prepared for a lot of hugs, which I have no problem participating in. Conversely, Sharon's family, which grew up very traditionally on a farm, is not inclined to hug; however, their love is shown differently in the welcoming and caring attitude that comes from a more solid upbringing and a strong belief in community.

By sharing his story with me, my foster father helped me understand that many other kids have gone through experiences similar to mine as a foster child. He also had to deal with the separation of family members, yet he is never negative about his childhood and is completely happy around his family, biological or fostered, always letting everyone know how special he or she is. "You know how much you're loved, right?" or "You are some of my favorite people" are common sentiments he shares at family gatherings. He and Sharon have shown extraordinary compassion as foster parents for many children for many years, compassion that I did not expect and had to learn to trust. In very large measure, I learned my values and traditions from these remarkable people, who kindly accepted me into their lives and set an example of what family means.

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