THESIS ABSTRACT

FIGHT FLIGHT FREEZE

By SARAH KENNEDY

Thesis Director:
Lisa Zeidner

_Fight Flight Freeze_ is a collection of nonfiction essays that blend personal narrative with research and contemplation. At their core, these essays are driven by questions about how we shape and define our lives. Through a series of encounters—with a libertarian survivalist and conspiracy theorist, with the wealthy patrons at Saks Fifth Avenue, with competitive stone-skippers, with Mormon missionaries, with the decaying town of my mother's youth—_Fight Flight Freeze_ seeks answers to the question, "How do we decide how to live?" While the essays are rarely overtly political, they reflect the questions and anxieties aroused by coming into adulthood in the decade since 9/11. I ask how we shape our individual lives in relation to those around us—both loved ones and strangers, communities and governments, and the generations that have come before.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Body of Knowledge</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behind Enemy Lines</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outtakes from a Resumé</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While You Were Out</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipping Stones</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Exactly a Morning Beer</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killer Instinct</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saved by Strangers</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wedding Plans</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With this Ring</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shout-out to the Catholics</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color Palette Blue #3</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dear Hunter, Nephew</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanctum</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the Platform</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Body of Knowledge

On an early March evening as winter's sloppy farewell tantrum descended upon New England, I stood on the Harvard Bridge, crossing the Charles River between Boston and Cambridge. It had been raining all day, and by the next morning it would be snowing, but for a brief period it was just drizzling and windy. That morning, I had waited in the rain for twenty minutes for a bus that was so crowded that I had to stand pressed against the front windshield, the front door colliding with my body every time it opened, folding back to let passengers out or in. I did not feel like enduring that again on the way back to the apartment in Cambridge where I was staying, so I decided to walk. The rain was light, but crossing the bridge, the wind blew the water straight toward my face and it was impossible to look, with eyes open, in the direction I was moving. I didn't mind—I had been inside all day in a convention center for a writers' conference, and it felt good to lean into the cold darkness.

The Charles River carves the north side of Boston into a U as it swoops down and back up on its path to the Boston Harbor. Cambridge sinks into the bowl-shaped contour like a heel pressing into soft earth. I stopped at the center point of the bridge, where the gradually ascending roadway reached its crest and would begin its slow decline. Boston
was behind me, but here where the river curves back north both upstream and down, I could see the city's skyline on my left and right as well. I knew the river extended far beyond my line of sight in both directions, but it looked like it bled into land on every side, as if it wasn't a river at all, but a lake. It is a strange view, the kind that becomes more disorienting the longer you consider it. Standing in the rain, with cars and stubborn cyclists spraying past in the darkness, I remembered the first time I saw it.

In August, 2001, I had recently graduated from Harvard and was continuing to live in Cambridge for the summer, working as an editor for a travel guide to the Southwest United States. I would be moving to Portland, Oregon a month later. On that morning, I had taken the subway southeast on the Red Line from Porter Square in Cambridge to the Park Street stop in Boston, where I changed trains and headed southwest on the Green Line to Brigham Circle. I had never taken the Green Line so far before, though it was only four miles on foot from where I lived. Counted in subway stops, it seemed another world. Nine stops past Park Street.

A trip like this was rare. As a student, most of my time was spent in and around Harvard Square, and when I ventured to Boston, I took the subway and popped up like a mole from underground, skittishly sniffing out my new surroundings, unsure how my subterranean path was mapped on the surface world of roads and rivers. I hesitate these days to claim that I even lived in Boston, because I know it so little. Walking the streets with friends from the conference, I was surprised to discover that Park Street is there . . . and Chinatown is there? Learning Boston from riding the subway is like guessing what someone looks like from examining an x-ray of their skull. He has those two eyes, yes,
and I'm pretty sure there are nostrils below . . .

During college, I was trained to peer critically outward at the world, but it was surprisingly easy not to touch, and not to see the places where it extended from my fingertips or brushed against my cheek. During my four years in Cambridge, I remember one trip to Walden Pond, a few bike rides to the Mt. Auburn Cemetery, occasional jaunts to the North End for Italian pastries, a few day trips to the North Shore. For the most part, life unfolded in a couple square miles of Cambridge and Somerville. In my junior and senior years, I lived at the campus co-op, the hippie enclave where we cooked and cleaned for one another and feared the day when another fire-code violation would give the university its long-coveted reason to shut us down. One night there, when I felt I could not endure another kosher casserole of root vegetables and phyllo dough, my friend Dac and I escaped in his blue rattling Volvo and found a Burger King in Union Square. Sprawled in a plastic booth under fluorescent lighting with a Filet-o-Fish and a milkshake, I felt like I had discovered a rare and distant place. That Burger King was two miles from campus. The Harvard Bridge is also two miles from campus. Two miles separated worlds.

I thought I was at home, back then, in school. I majored in Women's Studies and developed fluency in popular theories of gender, race, class, all of the meaty stuff. I was comfortable in conversations that included words like "hegemony" and "liminality," convinced that in abstract theory I had found a tool through which to comprehend the grit of life. But it was a precarious comfort. It seemed there were correct ways to think, acceptable and unacceptable ways to filter through the messy stimuli of lived experience. I was subject to a gentle and constant self-surveillance that shepherded my thoughts and
utterances, shaping confusion and conflict into a form that felt safe to express. It was a kind of carefulness. It didn't feel like fear, but fear takes many forms. College was mostly a good time—I lived in a world of ideas that kept my mind active and questioning, but there was little room left for experience unmediated by thought. I attempted to apply my understanding of Lacan, Kristeva, Butler, and Foucault to my relationship with the vegan punk biologist I was dating, but I was often afraid to reach across the table to touch his hand.

On that August morning, I was headed to Brigham and Women's Hospital for an MRI for something which turned out to be nothing, and even at the time, I don't remember feeling particularly concerned. I remember nothing of the procedure, but I remember leaving the hospital in the early afternoon, emerging into dry summer sunshine in a part of the city I had never seen, and deciding to walk. I was almost done with my work on the travel guide and I would be moving away from Boston in a couple weeks, taking a trip to Ireland, and then coming home to get on a plane to move across the country with two of my best friends from high school. I walked to the corner and turned right on Brookline Ave, then stopped into a Dunkin' Donuts for a bagel and a cup of coffee, as I supposed that people in Boston do. Continuing north on Brookline, I was keenly aware of feeling myself at a perfect pitch. I felt like a person at one with the flow of the city, attuned to the street and to the people I passed, as if utterly present in a way that I had not been present for a long time. I felt I could see everything at once and that I could feel the beat by which the world was moving.

This elation faded, as it always does. After a half mile, my serenity started to
prickle with static as the sidewalks filled with people heading to Fenway Park for a Red Sox game. A little later in the afternoon, they would watch as the Sox beat the Orioles 5-1. For now, they swarmed through the street wearing red hats and T-shirts, carrying signs and oversized foam hands with index fingers extended: Number One Fans. It was sunny and hot—over eighty degrees—and as I continued walking through the crowds, I started to feel uneasy. A few minutes earlier, I had been relatively alone with the city streets, blissfully observant but uninvolved. Now sweaty men and yelling children weaved in and out of my path, running to catch up with family members that got ahead, or stopping in the middle of the sidewalk to wait for friends that had fallen behind. The air around me was hot and still and I pushed through it, pushed through the air and the crowds until they began to thin, but when I emerged on the other side, I realized that something had changed in my body, something that had nothing to do with the baseball fans. An extreme drowsiness hung from my limbs and I felt loose and liquid at my core. Too much coffee, or too much sun, or not enough water, I figured, and I descended underground at the next subway stop, ready to just get home.

The train was crowded and I couldn't get a seat. I stood with my face against a cool metal pole and closed my eyes. When the train began to move, though, I was taken by waves of nausea so strong that I held my eyes wide open and braced myself to stay standing. The thick hot air in the train car was smothering me and my vision was slowly drifting in and out of a muddy blur. I knew I would not make it home, and I was focused only on not vomiting or passing out before we arrived at the next station.

At Hynes Convention Center I burst from the train car onto the platform and fell onto a bench by the wall, rocking my body to the churning waves inside me. Muscles and
bones and organs that ordinarily live quietly next to one another were rubbing and pushing against each other, hot and strained and toxic. I felt my insides rearing up with urgency, my body in liquid revolt against some part of itself, and I knew that I needed to move if I wanted what was about to come out of me to do so somewhere other than a subway station. I moved through a carnival mirror's reflection to a staircase and ascended to the light at the top, my body curled, nearly crawling. I didn't know where I was, but when I reached the outside I realized it was Newbury Street, one of Boston's most fashionable strips of boutiques and restaurants. I slid down a brick wall and collapsed on the sidewalk at the top of the stairs, exactly where I'd seen homeless people sleeping or panhandling in the past. There may have been one next to me then.

Swinging my head to the right, I saw a Starbucks one door down, and I gathered my dissolving parts up once more to thrash madly into the cafe's calm murmuring. I shuffled through the tunnel of my vision to the back hallway and muttered something frantic to the person standing near the bathroom door that made him quickly back away. The door was locked, but there was no more time. I raised my hand to my mouth and lurched forward, vomiting on my hand and the floor.

My body sighed. "Now was that so hard?" my organs seemed to ask, as they descended back into silence. The world reappeared.

I approached a barista behind the counter and spoke quietly, leaning toward him in a pose of solemn importance.

"I hate to have to tell you this, but I just vomited outside the bathroom door. Is there something I can clean it up with?"

"I'm sorry?" He couldn't hear me, and he seemed impatient. It struck me then that
there was nothing I could do to change the fact that I was about to become the worst part
of this poor guy's day, no matter how quietly I spoke. So I shouted, over the espresso
grinder, over the listless din of chit-chat and classical music.

"I just puked by the bathroom door!"

He grimaced. He hated me. He said that he would clean it up and that no, I
couldn't help. He probably assumed I was drunk or one of the junkies that lurked near the
top of the subway stairs. I walked back out into the sunlight.

I felt sorry for him, but I did not feel sad. I felt incredibly free.

I have told this story many times, usually because its climax—vomiting in a
Starbucks in a fancy shopping district because of an allergic reaction to the gadolinium
used as a contrast agent during my MRI—has a satisfying anti-corporate punchline. If I
had vomited at an independent bookstore or tea shop, it wouldn't be quite the same. But I
don't think that version of the story captures the memory that really matters. I remember
those minutes of serious illness as physically terrible, and I cannot imagine experiencing
such debilitation more than once a decade or so. But at the same time, I dwell here
because in that moment I was alone with myself in a way that was new. I was compelled
by internal forces and unable to care what impression I made. There was no self-
consciousness.

There are times when the mind leads the body, and there are times when the body
leads the mind. There are times too, I think, when the body acts alone. In these moments,
if you can glimpse them, the mind goes blank, and that blankness can feel like freedom.
When my sister gave birth to her oldest son, I was in the hospital room with her. Toward
the end, she sat on the toilet because it was the place where her body most readily gave way to pushing. She sat naked on the toilet, with her midwife, a nurse, her husband, and I huddled around her on white tile, and she screamed and groaned, possessed by her body and horribly alive. She was in a place of pain that I had never known, but she could not be embarrassed, and she was not afraid. She was surrounded but solitary, immune to being seen, alone with the agony of release and the alertness of creation.

I left the Starbucks and started walking. I was reluctant to get back on the train in case another wave of illness struck, and besides, I felt strangely elated. I walked to Massachusetts Avenue and turned right toward the river. Half a mile later, I was standing at the center of the Harvard Bridge, with Cambridge in front of me, Boston behind me as well as to my left and right, sculls crossing below the bridge, runners and bicyclists and cars passing me on the street. College was over, some other life was soon to begin. Nobody knew where I was, here, at the crest of a moment outside time. This was what it felt like to watch, unwatched. I felt that I could do anything.

I walked slow and steady back toward home. When I reached the Cambridge side of the bridge, I came across a narrow strip of deep green lawn that stretched between Mass Ave and a large stone building at the southern edge of the MIT campus. I crossed a barrier of shrubbery and lay down with my bag as a pillow. There was nobody else around—it didn't seem to be a lawn meant for sitting, but I was tired again, this time deliciously so. I fell into a viscous sleep for an hour, occasionally rolling into consciousness long enough to hear the hum of four lanes of traffic less than twenty feet away, or the voices of pedestrians hurrying up and down the sidewalk.
The conference was held a block away from that Starbucks on Newbury Street. It's been a dozen years since college, and so much has changed, but I've been wondering lately how much has stayed the same—whether my thoughts obscure my ability to see, whether self-consciousness obscures my ability to write what is real. Instead of creating, I can sometimes feel myself being created, molded into an impression of myself. But by what? What is the life I want to live? This question never tires out, though it is tiring and though it is old.

Standing at that spot on the bridge, I know I am on a river, but it looks like it's surrounded by land. There is earth in every direction and solid ground beneath me. Movement and stillness collide, like body and mind, but I forget which is which. Rain and wind are pushing toward me and I can't look where I'm going, so I stop trying. I can feel where I am right now, and that may be enough. I know the bridge will end if I keep walking.
A month after the September 11 attacks, the U.S. began an aerial bombing campaign in Afghanistan and I, fresh out of college, moved to Portland, Oregon. Two months later, Taliban fighters surrendered, Osama bin Laden disappeared, and I began working at Saks Fifth Avenue. At the time, Oregon boasted the highest unemployment rate in the country, but my friends and I did not know it, and we probably would have moved there even if we had. Portland was hip and down to earth, we were told. Like Seattle, but still affordable! I spent the fall applying for jobs at restaurants, coffee shops, book stores, clothing stores, and grocery stores. News of the war, of anti-Muslim racism, and of memorials at Ground Zero blurred together with weeks spent scouring the classifieds and walking the streets of my new city.

I failed to make it past first interviews at a large coffee shop franchise, an Irish-themed clothing and souvenir shop, and a glass-blowing warehouse an hour away. One of my roommates took a job as the cashier at a one hour photo lab, and the other suffered a stint at a shopping mall kiosk selling candles before delving into a year-long career as a temp. Finally, I wandered into Saks Fifth Avenue. The human resources manager seemed seduced by the idea of a Harvard graduate on the team, as if my Ivy League opinions on
handbags and thongs would carry sway with a certain brand of Saks clientele. I was hired just before Christmas and was to spend the first week wrapping gifts in the "Club," where the wealthiest customers were dressed and doted upon by personal shoppers.

Nobody asked where I had gone to college while I was toting their shopping bags to their cars.

I was sure I did not belong there. The majority of my clothing was purchased at thrift stores, and anything new had been found on sale or at a discount chain like T. J. Maxx or Marshall's. I didn't have a single outfit that established my credibility as someone who could sell a designer suit or even a pair of Calvin Klein jeans. I thought I would survive the job as a spy would, by impersonating someone with opinions about cashmere, gathering insight into this world that I hated, maybe getting fodder for some stories, and getting out as soon as I could get hired somewhere—anywhere—else.

Walking in for my first day of training, I passed sales associates in linen suits and high heels sauntering among the clothing racks with hands clasped behind their backs. I felt like a frumpy version of Julia Roberts in Pretty Woman, gawky and inappropriate and shunned when she enters an austere boutique.

Two women started on the same day as me. One, named Angela, had straight black hair pulled back into a tight slick ponytail and heavily penciled eyebrows. She was older than me but looked relatively young, and I was surprised to hear that she had a ten year old son. She had previously worked in ad sales for a radio station, but said she was interested in exploring the world of fashion and retail. The other, Patience, had long thick platinum hair and soft high cheekbones painted with thick foundation. She looked like a plasticine statue, all soft matte curves and a face that twinkled between a handful of
prefabricated expressions—broad wide eyed smile, ethereally indifferent gaze into the
distance, furrowed compassionate frown. She told us that she used to be a plus-size
model. Most recently, she had worked as a flight attendant for Alaska Airlines, and she
too was interested in making the shift into the world of retail.

Taking their lead, I also said that I was interested in retail. I said that I was
thinking of opening my own business someday, as if my position as a department store
salesperson would breed insights into small business ownership. It was a lie. I didn't have
an entrepreneurial bone in my body, but it still seemed a more plausible pitch than that I
cared about fashion. It took me a few weeks to realize that Angela and Patience were also
lying, that they had no more interest in working for a department store than I did. Angela
had recently lost her job for the radio station and just needed income to support herself
and her son. Patience had been furloughed from the airline after September 11th and had
to leave her twelve-year-old son in Texas with his father so she could move back home to
suburban Portland while she waited to find out if she would be rehired at the airline.

We weren't the only ones lying. Even the employees who had worked there for
years, the ones who strolled along the marble floors greeting regular clients with
outstretched arms and grimacing at the vultures who congregated around sales racks (I
once heard the manager of the store compare customers who only purchased discounted
items as "pigs digging for truffles") were struggling to make a living. Beneath their
apparent devotion for the wardrobe needs of Portland's upper crust, many of them were
barely holding on to their jobs. Piper Gibson, working in Women's Sportswear, had
worked there for eleven years and was making ten dollars an hour, less than my starting
wage, because she continued to receive pay cuts for not meeting sales goals. Nick
Utzinger, who managed the department called the Designer Salon—which housed labels like Armani, St. John's, and Dolce and Gabbana—loped with slumped shoulders through the store, sweet and anxious and defeated. When someone made a large sale, he would sigh, "It's a blessing," as if a loved one's death had been forestalled. His job rested on the sales of thousand dollar dresses and suits during a major recession. The only times I saw him happy was when he took a break to talk about his dog. Two other sales associates left while I was working there to go work for the new Aerosoles shoe store in the mall, because it would pay them more than they were making at Saks.

It was all a charade. Virtually nobody working there, with the exception of a couple retired women, could under ordinary circumstances afford the clothes that were sold in the store. Those sales associates who seemed most at home in the performances they enacted with customers were often those with the most riding on the job. Those of us who knew we would be moving on to other jobs and other futures could afford to look imperfect, to be ignorant of trends and fibers and suit sizing, to refuse to get on the phone with every Saks store in the country to find the size and color bra a client insisted she needed in two days. I could afford to casually shrug off a customer's needy requests, to do the bare minimum required to keep the job until I could find another. That is, I could afford not to care. And yet, despite my scorn and despite my indifference, another impulse started to rear its nosy head. "Care about this," it commanded. "Do your best. Try."

Every morning, before the store opened, we stood around in the shoe department near the entrance to the manager's office for a brief meeting and pep talk. Jeff Miller,
store manager, would review the goals for the day and then rattle off the names of the associates with the top sales the day before. Twice my name was read. The first time, I had been watching the Designer Salon a day earlier while the woman normally stationed there was at lunch. An older lady—dressed conservatively in a way that did not immediately reveal her wealth—wandered in, solicited my advice on Armani skirts, and bought a thousand dollars of clothes in a matter of minutes. I scampered from rack to rack grabbing minor variations on the theme of "black skirt," venturing opinions and reverent enthusiasm for her choices. I watched the tally of purchases get higher and higher, and my excitement was real. I would like to say that it was feigned, that it was a savvy embodiment of an identity other than my own, that it was a sly mockery. It was not.

On the other occasion, I was working in "Men's Furnishings," one of the places I was least comfortable, where I was charged with selling unfamiliar items like ties, fitted shirts, cuff links, and watches. Most sales associates had a department where they worked full-time, but I was a "flyer," meaning that I filled in where they were lacking coverage that day, thus jumping all over the store in the course of a week. The only place worse than Men's Furnishings for me was Men's Suits, where my complete lack of knowledge of sizing, tailoring, and styles was too obvious to hide. Luckily, there was typically another person working there with me, and he was always happy to claim all the sales in the department for the day. In Men's Furnishings, on the other hand, I was left alone, and on that day, I sold a watch, a pair of shoes, and a few shirts to Boyd Tinsley, the violinist from the Dave Matthews Band. He wandered into the store, gestured half-heartedly at a few items he thought he might want, and then a few more ("Yeah, that too") and left
within ten minutes. The sale was huge, and it was rung up on my employee number. I
could have given it to one of the full-time employees whose wages actually depended
upon their numbers, but I did not. I wanted it to be mine, and when my name was read
aloud at the morning meeting the next day, I felt like I had actually done something that
mattered.

We all became part of the enterprise, though it was one toward which we thought
we were indifferent or even critical. All of us—whether in retail for the long haul or, like
me and Patience and Angela, biding our time until something better came along—
mocked the petty dramas that preoccupied our customers' lives, and yet we participated in
them. I remember a woman—glamorous, frantic, demanding—who was hosting a dinner
party in a few days and was insistent that she needed a particular belt for the occasion. I
got on the phone and found it at another store and cartwheeled through down-to-the-wire
logistics to get it to her at her house in the nick of time. I threw myself into the effort with
the tenacious persistence and savvy of a hostage negotiator or MacGuyver, as if I
believed that, indeed, the stakes were high. Very high. In those moments, there was a
clear distinction between success and failure, even though the definitions of each were by
most standards laughable.

I think there is a healthy and common impulse to try to find meaning in one's
work, to viscerally fight the knowledge that it may be futile or insignificant or possibly
harmful, even when your conscious mind sees it for what it is. Some would call this a
"work ethic," but I think it is more than that. We all crave a feeling of purpose, and
therefore, we try to make our actions feel purposeful, even if it requires a lie. Even if the
lie starts to feel like the truth. I allowed myself to be swept up in the theatre of Saks Fifth Avenue. Slowly, I came to embody the mindset that would allow my days to feel meaningful, even if it meant playing by their rules.

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Just inside the employee entrance at the back of the store, a small office with dozens of video screens provided headquarters for the Asset Protection department. For years prior, this same office had been known as "Loss Prevention," but in order to cast stores' theft-fighting efforts in a positive light, new terminology was handed down from corporate headquarters. "Loss Prevention," the story went, painted the picture of a store defensively awaiting theft and pillage. "Asset Protection," on the other hand, evoked the image of us standing tall, poised to protect and defend the store's treasures.

The guys working for Asset Protection moved through the store with an air of self-importance that blended security guard swagger with bureaucratic officiousness. Scott was a white man in his thirties, only a couple inches taller than me, clean shaven and slight, with brown hair that matched his leather bomber jacket. He was in charge. His underling was Ernie, a slightly younger Asian American with a round doughy face, a child's smile, and a crew cut. On his rounds through the store, Ernie would stop to say hello, always ready to lean in across the the sales counter with quiet cryptic news of the latest goings-on. Holding his hand gently on the walkie-talkie mounted at his hip like a weapon, his chest heaved with an awkward childish pride over his station in life. Sure, he wasn't a cop, and he would probably be cowed by the thick-necked officers around the corner in Pioneer Courthouse Square, but at least he wasn't merely a security guard. He was an Asset Protection Associate.
Scott and Ernie's primary duty was to apprehend shoplifters. Every few weeks, Ernie would wander toward the department where I was working and pointedly make eye contact but not say hello, and then start browsing casually through a rack of women's skirts or bras. In these moments, I was supposed to know that he had gone undercover as a "shopper," attempting to get a closer look at a suspicious person whom he had spotted on his control panel of video monitors. He often wore a baseball cap for these operations, as if requiring some such pedestrian accessory to blend in with the citizenry. I would play along, greeting him with a generic smiling hello as if he were, in fact, an anonymous customer. I would follow his glance to the person he was tracking, a thin black woman in her late fifties, perhaps, wearing large sunglasses and holding several shopping bags, slowly maneuvering through racks of Eileen Fisher tunics. He could do nothing until she actually left the store with unsold merchandise on her person, so until then he would stroll quietly, embodying his best guess of how a husband might appear as he twiddled his thumbs and waited for his wife while she shopped.

On a good day for Saks Fifth Avenue, this woman would not be intending to steal anything, as Ernie would slowly realize as he scrutinized her every move. Instead, she would approach me with armloads of cashmere and wool, croak excitedly about the way some particular sweater complimented her collarbone and proceed to buy one in every color. She would wander off, beckoned by the shimmer of buttons on a St. John's skirt suit while I tallied her purchases and, when I coaxed her back to her credit card receipt, she would sign it absently, barely glancing at the total.

This, however, would be a grave disappointment to Ernie, who was always hoping that he'd have an opportunity to whip his walkie talkie out from under its hiding place
beneath his windbreaker, shout his coordinates to Scott, and run up behind this woman as she flew through the exit without heeding the alarm at the security gate. Maybe, just maybe, she'd be a runner, and he would get to sprint down Fourth Ave, sprinting nimbly through a parting sea of office workers shuffling along the sidewalk. On those lucky days when Ernie did get to initiate a chase, it didn't seem to matter whether he caught the person he was chasing. Even if they got away, he would stride back through the double doors, wiping his brow, panting, grinning, scanning the floor for a sales associate he could regale with the tale of what had just transpired.

On the first day of my training, Scott showed us video footage of shoplifters caught in the act. One person, an overweight African-American woman, ripped shirts off hangers and shoved them under her large winter coat and then clumsily ran for the door. As Scott narrated over the silent grainy surveillance footage, he mocked her pathetic attempt to steal from a store such as ours, explaining that she was probably a drug addict and that people "like that" are easy to catch. I felt uneasy. I didn't expect a store to ignore shoplifting, but I was uncomfortable with the mirth with which he analyzed the methods of desperate people doing desperate, foolish things. I resolved to take no pleasure in this cops and robbers game.

Within weeks, though, while sauntering with arms behind my back around the sales floor in a perfect impression of the women I watched on my first day, I would glance toward a customer thumbing through a rack of shirts or scarves, and something would feel wrong. I would study her actions, trying to determine why she looked so suspicious. Sometimes they were the Winona Ryder types, well-dressed and hiding behind sunglasses, stealing for the thrill of it. More often, though, they were easy to spot
because they were haggard, the ones with extra shopping bags and stringy hair, the skittish ones who avoided saying hello. The ones I should have felt sorry for.

I could have looked the other way, let the drama unfold without my involvement. After all, I thought I did not care. Instead, I'd call Scott at Asset Protection to describe the object of my scrutiny and set the game in motion. Scott would thank me and inform me that he would keep me apprised of what happened. Usually, it was nothing. The real shoplifters, the good ones, were the well-dressed ones who lingered and chatted, who entered fitting rooms with piles of clothes that no one bothered to count and then layered themselves with three or four pairs of jeans and five or six shirts before donning a puffy coat, buying an item or two, and strolling out with head held high. I knew this because it was how my coworker, Jennifer, trained her girlfriend to steal from the store. If the security alarm sounded, they kept walking, knowing that nobody would dare chase customers like them. Years later, when the Department of Homeland Security rolled out its vague mandate, "If You See Something, Say Something," I wondered what we were being asked to watch for: "suspicious" behavior or "suspicious" people? A white woman in a pea coat rarely needs to wonder who's studying her movements. I knew about the racism and classism embedded in it all, and yet I canvassed the sales floor like a hawk, watchful of those who looked like they didn't belong. I had become a part of the thing I hated, and had forgotten which side I was on.

On most levels, I never stopped disliking the job. I ranted to my roommates about the people who shopped there—about the suburban socialite who complained that the fire department's 9/11 fundraising efforts had interfered with her attempts to raise funds for a beauty pageant; about the woman who demanded I stand in the dressing room with her to
discuss her distressingly long torso while she tried on bras and panties; about the aging
Pamela Anderson lookalike who bought and returned a pair of two hundred dollar
sunglasses every week. But participation in a thing is not antithetical to resenting it, and
the two forces wound their way through my being, pushing and pulling and rubbing out
the lines that had earlier been clear in my mind. I thought there were two sides, but there
were not two sides. There were people making a living, a store that probably had a
smaller impact on the shape of our economy and on people's lives than Walmart or
Starbucks, a job that I hated and yet, somehow, loved. This, therefore, was life, with all
its ordinary shades of gray and lack of clear well-packaged morals.

Six months after starting at Saks, I was hired as a waitress at a small local cafe
down the street from my apartment. When I told the Saks Human Resources Manager
that I was quitting, I told her that my life ambitions had shifted: I told her I was interested
now in exploring the restaurant world, because I thought I might someday open a
restaurant. I was pretending, but playing make believe can feel pretty real.
Outtakes from a Resumé

Bethlehem Public Library

Student Page. Reshelved books according to their Dewey Decimal System call numbers, knocked a cart of books on the floor in front of the circulation desk, glanced through The Joy of Sex (613.96) whenever possible. Resigned after sixteenth birthday to make time for Driver's Ed. Told by supervisor, "It's a shame we wasted time training you."

Hoffman's Playland

Ride Operator. Sat on small stool at entrance to kiddie rides including but not limited to Duck Boats, The Caterpillar, The Train, and Airplanes. Took one ticket from each child who entered, pushed the Start button, waited two minutes, and pushed the Stop button. Strung narrow chain across entrance to rides that broke down. Continued to smile even after realizing how slowly a five hour shift proceeds when timed in two minute intervals.

Sandwiches to Go

Sandwich Maker. Chopped onions at seven in the morning and mixed gallons of mayonnaise with pickle relish and ketchup and horseradish for Russian dressing at eight.
Laughed every time crazy old Charlie told me to die when I sneezed and dreamed of my grandpa whenever Charlie rose from his senile stupor to sing "When Irish Eyes are Smiling" with a voice like cracking cellophane. Hollered "next sandwich down here" over and over and over again. Sifted through piles of meat to find the perfect slices for state workers who liked their roast beef bloody.

**Harvard Music Library**

_Circulation Desk Employee_. Reshelved books according to their Library of Congress call number, handed CDs and headphones to doctoral students of ethnomusicology, treated the concerns of Baroque and Medieval music scholars as matters of utmost urgency.

_Cataloging Assistant_. Wrote Library of Congress call numbers in felt-tip marker on little white stickers and then glued those stickers onto the spines of books. Followed the orders of a forty-eight inch tall Polish woman in orthopedic sneakers and a navy cardigan sweater who spoke no English.

_Acquisitions Assistant_. Completed tasks later described as "assessing current library holdings and determining need for new material, ordering new books and scores, and paying invoices," but that would in truth be remembered only as typing on an old computer monitor with a black screen and orange lettering and occasionally putting papers in alphabetical order in an overstuffed filing cabinet. Occasionally napped on the bathroom floor.

**Dearborn Summer Program**

_Counselor_. Drove ten middle-school aged girls in a van in downtown Boston and rolled
down the window so the driver of a passing car could say that "your girls are flipping the
bird out the back window." Lectured campers who threw lit matches into dry pine needles
on a camping trip, who racked up ninety dollar phone bills at a New Hampshire motel
after visiting a water slide park, and who pulled other campers' weaves out while
swimming in the YMCA pool. Drank 40s in dorm room in the evenings while planning
the next day's activities, made out with a techno DJ with bleached blond hair and a
crushed velvet shirt named "Sketchy Pete," learned all the word to the TLC song
"Scrubs," and ate a lot of Whopper Juniors, Dunkin Donuts breakfast sandwiches, and 7-
11 slurpies.
While You Were Out

In my early twenties, I spent two years in Portland, Oregon, city of dollar Pabst Blue Ribbons and two dollar shots of Jim Beam, of rainy dawn bike rides to morning waitressing shifts, of roof sitting and dumpster diving and bonfires, and of resumés and cover letters hurled out like bottles to sea. When I was twenty four, I decided that life out there was too enjoyable to amount to much of anything and that I needed to move back across the country to start whatever phase of life was coming next. I bought my first car, left the first real love of my life, and drove to Ithaca, New York, where my sister lived but I knew few other people. I moved into a furnished room in a three-bedroom apartment I found advertised on the bulletin board of the local food co-op, and I fantasized about the productive use of solitude and isolation—I'd be able to get so much writing and reading done without the distractions of romance and friendship.

The first time I met my new roommate, Angela, she seemed prim and serious and hurried, but not unpleasant. She was a few inches shorter than me, with long straight hair and tightly pursed lips, and she flicked her little hand toward mine and shook it firmly. "Nice to meet you. I'm Angela," she declared, pronouncing her name with a wide-open aristocratic "A." "Aehn-gela," like Katherine Hepburn would have said it. On this first
meeting, she seemed primarily concerned with insisting that there not be any meat in the house, which was fine with me. I had lived in vegetarian houses before. The apartment was in a great location, it was affordable, and it was available for rent in the beginning of November, an unusual time to look for housing in a college town. Angela seemed a little tightly wound, but maybe that meant she would be clean and courteous. And she wouldn't even be around that much: she split her time between her Pennsylvania hometown and Ithaca, trying to cobble together a career teaching private piano lessons in both locations, so she only stayed in Ithaca for three or four nights a week. I wasn't looking for new friends. I just needed a quiet place to land. Telling my sister about it, I think I may have even uttered the words, "What's the worst that can happen?"

I felt prepared to live with a wide variety of personalities. The co-op where I lived in college was, by some standards, an asylum of eccentrics hiding within an institution of the well-behaved and proper. I lived there with Manoj, who was banned from campus after stealing thirteen laptops from the Economics department; and with Charles, a tiny, neurotic antisocialite with a huge mane of brown hair, thick glasses, and a fanny pack who would barely speak above a whisper but could be counted on to sing Prince in a shrieking falsetto for talent shows. I lived there with Frisbay, who had dropped out of school two years earlier but continued living in a storage room in the basement, and with Jana, who did not go to Harvard but spent every day in the living room knitting tube dresses and bell-bottoms of pink, orange, and green. I lived there with Dac, who had only one pair of pants, which he tied at the waist with a rope. Dac burst into my room every few days, exclaiming, "I need to man the console." He'd sit down in front of my computer and turn on the Rage Against the Machine cover of "Fuck the Police," head-banging and
thrashing in my desk chair until the song was over when he'd return to writing his physics thesis.

In Portland, I lived with Jennifer, a veteran of the 1980s New York fashion world whose life before working at Saks Fifth Avenue in Portland included cage-dancing in an early techno music video and posing with electrical tape across her nipples for a coffee table book of erotic photography. I remember waking once in the middle of the night and walking into the kitchen where Jennifer was standing at the counter in a G-string and a tank top, chopping onions, peaches, and tomatoes into large clumsy chunks. She grinned at me with wide glazed eyes.

"I'm just making a beautiful summer salad, Sarah!"

The next day, hungover from whatever combination of pills and beer she had consumed the night before, she opened the refrigerator.

"What the hell is that?" she asked. I stood a few feet behind her and watched her stare at the large bowl brimming with ruined produce.

"It's your summer salad," I told her.

I didn't mind "unpredictable." I didn't mind "unusual."

"The worst that can happen," of course, is that your roommate will murder you. More moderate horrible scenarios include the following: Your roommates can steal from you. They can lie to you and scheme against you. They can spy on you and share information about you with your enemies. These are not the kinds of things I make a habit of anticipating. Soon enough, though, I would learn that they were the very things that Angela feared. They were the things she convinced herself were happening or soon to
happen, and that I was, or would be, the perpetrator. It was nothing personal. Anyone who
knew her would surely come under suspicion eventually. But I was the new roommate, so
it was my turn.

After I moved in, there was a brief honeymoon period in which Angela treated me
as a confidante, telling me that she suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder because
of an ex-boyfriend who had stolen her money and stalked her. Maybe this was true;
maybe it was not—it soon became clear that her experience of reality was distorted by
paranoia and fear and suspicion of everyone around her, and while this could have been
the outcome of some traumatic event or relationship, I wondered sometimes if her stories
of trauma were some of the symptoms, not the causes, of a larger mental illness.

Soon, though, her intimate disclosures gave way to outbursts of hostility. I started
finding notes around the house with messages like, "DO NOT: recycle my returns or beer
bottles. KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF." They were trivial, in a way, and might have been
funny if not for the alarm bells they were sounding in my mind.

One morning, a note was taped on the refrigerator.

*Angela's stuff that is missing:*

1. *A grey suit skirt. New this week.*

2. *Three keys.*

3. *Hello Kitty Underwear.*

4. *Dell computer cable.*

There was space left at the bottom of the paper to add to the list as necessary.

Sometimes, a blowout started small. One day, she was complaining about the
coldness of her bedroom. She insisted that it did not meet city regulations and that she
could get the landlord in big trouble. I sat facing her at the peninsula counter in the kitchen, nodding when she spoke, making sympathetic murmuring sounds. It felt almost like an interaction between friends. "What do you think you'll do about it?" I asked, attempting the call and response structure of ordinary conversation. It was the wrong question. She leapt to her feet, her pencil-thin eyebrows raised and her eyes bulging round.

"What am I going to do?"

It was as if I had switched television channels mid-scene and landed into the middle of a hysterical soap opera tantrum. She stood over me, leaning forward with arms spread back: "You're not my mother! You're not my father! I don't need to justify my life to you!"

Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays were Angela-free. I cooked dinner, I watched TV, I left my bedroom door open. On Fridays, she arrived, and all afternoon I'd imagine her hurtling up Route 81 in her gold Pontiac Sunbird, screeching toward me to shred the tenuous peace I'd been cultivating for the past few days. One Friday, she arrived late. I was asleep when she exploded through the front door at two a.m., slamming it behind her and muttering to herself as she clomped down the hall in heavy heels. Our other roommate, Michele, had been cleaning the apartment earlier that day. She found some empty boxes in the top of the hall closet that could have easily belonged to one of the old tenants who lived there before she or I. She stacked a couple small ones by Angela's door with a note: "Are these yours? If not, I'll throw them out." Michele was not as careful around Angela as I was. She refused to tiptoe around, and if she wanted to
clean the hall closet, she'd clean the fucking hall closet, except she wouldn't say "fucking," because she was a conservative Seventh Day Adventist who wore floor-length flannel nightgowns and fuzzy slippers. When Angela got to her room, she saw the door partially obscured by the boxes, and she flew into a rage. I lay in my bed, pressing my pillow over my head as she screamed, throwing the boxes across the kitchen and down the hall past my door. At three, she stood outside my room and called the landlord crying and sputtering about how she was being tormented, about how we were trying to force her out.

Trying to defend myself against her accusations felt like a defeat in and of itself. The need to state that "I did not steal your Hello Kitty underwear" meant that I was living in a world in which such a defense was necessary—where my innocence was not presumed—and that was a depressing thought. Besides, could I even prove her wrong? So much of what I take for granted as reasonable first assumptions—that when I lose a pair of underwear, it is my own fault; that my roommates are not primarily concerned with ruining my life—admittedly rely on little hard evidence. But they make for a happier life, and I felt sorry for Angela for not sharing them. I felt sorry for her for whatever circumstances were to blame for the ways in which her perceptions had gone awry. But not that sorry. Mostly, I hated her. I hated her for drawing me into anger and fear. I hated her for how her poisonous outlook infected my own. I'd go to work in a rage and struggle to explain to my coworkers why I couldn't just ignore her, why she affected me so.

My failure to appease Angela felt like a failure of both reason and empathy, the gods I trusted above all others. My empathy for her had disintegrated as soon as her rage chose me as its object. As for the power of reason, I realized it was useless. Hers was a
mind impermeable to logic. Other people might bear this realization better than me. Other people are comfortable with the knowledge that some conflicts are unresolvable, that some personalities are toxic, that we can never trace our way back to the origins of some misunderstandings. I craved solutions, while some problems have none that are satisfactory. I was angry with Angela for challenging my view of human relationships— for taunting its limits.

My ex-boyfriend, Adam, the one I left in Portland, visited me after I'd been living with Angela for about a month. The fact of our breakup, so clear in my mind when I declared my intention to move across the country, felt a lot blurrier as soon as I drove away from Portland. It's not like I was leaving the perfect marriage. Adam had already ended the relationship once when he got scared of the commitment, and I was afraid that it was only a matter of time before it happened again. In a way, my leaving had a bit of the flavor of a preemptive strike. But a part of me knew I was keeping one foot in the door: In addition to being the town where my sister lived, Ithaca was coincidentally Adam's hometown. Portland—with its trees, creeks, hills, craft beer, and green living— was like Ithaca's big sister city, and while living there I found a surprising number of Ithaca ex-pats. So while I was moving away from Adam and my life out west, I was also worming my way deeper inside it.

When Adam arrived, Angela was zipping around the apartment like a spinning top, busying herself with imaginary tasks of great urgency. When she left the room, Adam opened his eyes wide and mouthed the syllables, "In-Tense." Adam would use the word "intense" to describe anything from a breakfast burrito to the experience of meeting his
biological mother for the first time at age twenty three. It was his main way to label something that aroused a reaction other than indifference. No need to dig deeper to name things as stressful, sad, or joyful. The traffic en route to the Oregon Coast was intense, our coworkers at the restaurant were intense, our break up was intense, and the conversations we'd been having ever since I left Portland were definitely intense. It was like I couldn't let go of him until I made painstakingly sure that we had achieved clarity about the time we had shared and the exact cause and nature of its unraveling. When we hit against the inevitable realization that our experiences of the relationship were different—at that point in time when separation might come most naturally—that was when I fought it most. I believed that I didn't want to be with him in the future, but I was addicted to the idea that our past was a concrete object with precise contours that we could agree upon if we brushed every bit of dirt and grime away. I claim that my sister was the main reason for moving to Ithaca, but I wonder if I ever would have done it if not for Adam and for my archeological obsession with understanding him better.

On the night he arrived, Adam and I drank at The Nine's all night, me mostly beer, he mostly whiskey. Our friend was bartending, and she made sure he had a glass of Maker's Mark at all times. This is how we drank back in Portland, too, so maybe getting drunk that night had nothing to do with how hard it was to see each other after three months. Adam was always drinking, and there always was a reason to justify it. That night, it'd been helping to keep the mood light. He sat cupping the glass at the bar, his hooded sweatshirt pushed up above his elbows to expose the tattoos along the soft underside of his forearm, his winter beard full and frizzy, his cheeks round and rosy. A couple years later, when he quit drinking, shaved his beard, and lost fifty pounds, his thin
cheeks surprised me more than anything else.

We'd be sharing my bed that night, but there would no hanky-panky. This was also the rule during the whole month before I moved away from Portland. Adam said he needed to stop being physically intimate as some sort of weaning regimen so that everything wouldn't end at once when I left, but later I wondered if it was because he was already starting to date someone else. I'd never ask this question outright, because I was afraid to have too many official reasons to doubt the goodness of what we used to share. So we followed our rules. They felt arbitrary but binding.

Adam and I shuffled down the long hill from the bar, cold and drunk and laughing. To warm up, we sprinted for a few short bursts, and when we got to the house, we were breathless. I unlocked the door and took a clumsy step inside, Adam close behind me. The hall light was on, and Angela was standing at the end of the hallway with pursed lip and wide unblinking eyes.

"A woman. Monica. From Portland. Called." Each staccato bit popped from her taut mouth like a bitter seed. "She said that you owe her a lot of money."

I stared at her loosely, waiting for her words to cohere. "What?"

"Monica. From Portland."

"I don't know anyone named Monica. What exactly did she say?"

"That's all she said. That you owe her a lot of money."

"She asked for me?"

"Yes. She said, 'Is Sarah there?' I wrote the message down."

Angela's eyes were sparking with something eager and scared and taunting. "My ex, the one who's been stalking me, was involved with some really strange stuff in
Portland."

She seemed almost gleeful as she connected the dots between me and the people in the past who haunted her. She believed she had struck upon a confirmation that there was dirtiness in my past.

In the kitchen, I ripped the top page from the "While You Were Out" memo pad sitting in the center of the small table by the telephone. Angela ordinarily scrawled phone messages in an ornate script, but this one was meticulously printed in all caps. The date and time were written out in full—November 28, 2003 10:35 pm—as if she was transcribing documentation for permanent legal records. There were perfect little X marks in the boxes for "Telephoned" and "Please Call." In the main section entitled "Message," it said, "You owe her A LOT of money."

Adam lay next to me in bed, listening as I tried to sort through the possible explanations to decide which was the least disturbing. In the scenario in which Angela made it all up, the good thing was that there was not, in fact, an angry woman named Monica who was hunting me down for unpaid debts. But this was a small comfort, because living with a woman who found reason to fabricate this story was almost worse. Did she imagine the conversation? (Delusional!) Did she invent it in an attempt to bait and manipulate me? (Sociopathic!) I'd need to confront her. I'd need to move out.

I knew there were some other less dire scenarios inaccessible to middle-of-the-night histrionics. Maybe something involving a wrong number, or a prank. But I couldn't grasp onto anything that made me feel comfortable, and Adam just kept promising that he would protect me from anybody who tried to hurt me. He was drunker than I was, and he locked his bloodshot gaze upon me as if he could fix my life through the earnestness of
his stare. He wanted to help solve this thing, but he had a girlfriend back in Portland, and when he left the next day, I would be alone. It made me feel sick to look to him for comfort. There was so little logic in all of it.

In the morning, I sat on the rug in the middle of the bedroom floor. Adam offered to make the call, but I said no, even though I was shaking. I dialed the number, and a man answered.

"Hello, is Monica there?" I asked.

I heard children shouting in the background.

"I'm sorry, I think you have the wrong number."

I hung up and looked at the pink slip of paper. MONICA CALLED. YOU OWE HER A LOT OF MONEY. Adam went outside to smoke and I stayed in my room.

Monica. Monica. In the middle of the night, all the possibilities felt sinister, but in the morning it felt like some kind of joke. I stood up and found the little black sketch book I kept with notes to myself and phone numbers and addresses in no particular order. I thumbed through the pages. Monica? Monica. Melinda. I found the page with Melinda's number. It was one digit off from the number Angela had written down.

Melinda answered the phone in a sing-song caricature of an old woman's cracking voice. "Hello-oo??"

Melinda loved to give people shit, but she was never malicious or unkind. Her laugh was pure joy. "Melinda, did you call me last night?" I asked, both dreading and hoping for the answer I now knew was inevitable. She laughed.

"What did you say to her? She seriously thinks I'm a criminal or something," I said.
Melinda shrieked with laughter. "Oh my god, I'm sorry."

I moaned. "What did you say to her?"

"I said, hey, is Sarah there? and she was all Who's this?!"

Angela always answered the phone with a prim and melodious "Angela speaking" as if our home phone was her business line, which in a way it was, since we often received calls from the parents of her piano students. If a call was for me, she'd proceed like a cranky secretary, demanding to know the caller's full name and purpose. When she asked Melinda what her call was "in regards to," Melinda saw her opening for a joke. A joke that nobody would mistake for seriousness.

"Ehhh, tell her that she owes me a LOT of money."

Angela didn't miss a beat. "How much are we talking?"

Melinda thought that Angela was playing along, and exclaimed like Dr. Evil from Austin Powers, "One millllion dollars!"

I laughed with Melinda—how hilarious that Angela didn't understand the joke!—and it felt so good to remember that almost everything is funny if you look at it right. But after I hung up the phone, the punchline ceased to register as comedy. What's so funny about a person who can't distinguish truth from fiction? What's so funny about the feeling that you are not trusted and that you cannot be understood?

Adam would be leaving later that day to drive to Columbus, Ohio, to visit his dad. As we drove to my sister's house for brunch, we started talking about our relationship, and about the possibility of getting back together, and about the woman he was dating. Adam got defensive. "You never asked me to come with you. I would have come with
you," he told me. I started to cry.

Sometimes I would hear Angela sobbing in the bathroom at night. It was the kind of loud gulping hysterics that take over your body and all you can do is ride it through to a place where your breathing calms down on its own time. When I cried like this, sometimes I'd look in the mirror, intrigued by the appearance of despair.

"Can't we just enjoy these last few hours together?" Adam asked, as if my sadness was a weapon.

After he left, I sulked in my room, avoiding Angela. I considered telling her about her misunderstanding with Melinda, but thought better of it. I was learning that explanations rarely solved anything with her—at least I had learned that much. I knew to just be quiet and wait for the next day, or the day after that, or the day after that, when eventually I'd wake to the sound of tittering laughter in the kitchen, and I'd press my ear to the door. She'd be organizing the refrigerator in a flurry of manic good will, and maybe she'd have bought me some coffee or fruit. But until then, I'd avoid her. I had no friends in town and nowhere to go, so I lay on my bed and watched a documentary about Wallace Stevens, unable to write, unable to think about anything but my unfamiliar loneliness. If this was the same thing as solitude, I needed to rethink what I was looking for. Angela was lonely too, I knew. She had no friends in town and would leave sometimes at night to go on dates with men who would inevitably disappoint and enrage her. I knew that we were not the same, and yet sitting across the wall from her, both of us simmering in isolation, the differences looked far less stark than I would have liked to believe.

Loneliness might be a powerful muse, but this was not a path I was willing to go down any further. It was time to make some freaking friends and get out of this place.
Skipping Stones

With our dog and camping gear in the car, my boyfriend Mike and I drove away from Philadelphia on a summer Saturday morning, but not for the purpose of hiking or lounging by a lake. We were heading to a stone-skipping championship. The trip had been on Mike's calendar for months—his friend Eric would be competing for the third time, and Mike didn't want to miss the chance to support him. I was happy to go along. I love to witness the intensity of effort that hobbyists devote to uncommon passions and the communities they create around them. I was hoping to discover some kind of wisdom about ambition and craft and devotion.

The pastime that Americans call stone skipping, or rock skipping, is known by many names across the world. In Denmark, it's called *smutting*. In the UK, *ducks and drakes*. In many languages, the term translates to something involving frogs—little frogs, frog jumps, letting the frogs out, etc. Whatever it's called, it is a thing that's long been done wherever there are stones and water. But is it a sport? By most criteria that call golf a sport—it involves the body, it can be competitive, it relies on skill—it's hard to see what would disqualify stone skipping from the same designation. Still, for most people who have stood barefoot along a lake shore, a beer in one hand, skimming a stone or two
while waiting for the charcoal on the grill to heat up, the term "sport" sounds like a stretch, not to mention "state championship," "nationals," and "world record." Of course, this is a world of hot dog eating championships, of blue ribbons awarded to the largest squash, of cockroach racing and thumb wrestling. Where there is a chance to win, people will compete. But I wanted to know: Is stone skipping more like rock-paper-scissors or golf? Is it a skill and a craft, undertaken with reverence and honed with dedication? Or is it a little bit of a joke?

The Rock in River Festival is held every year in the town of Franklin, eighty miles north of Pittsburgh, and it was a long drive from Philly. It's sometimes hard to believe that Pennsylvania is so big when I can't think of more than three or four landmarks between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. But when I consider that the state comprises 46,000 square miles, spread out like a blanket over 56 cities, 67 counties, 2562 municipalities, and thirteen million people, it starts to feel incomprehensibly vast. How can I ever be surprised that there are places and ways of life I have not imagined?

We passed signs for Punxsutawney, the location of Bill Murray's purgatory in *Groundhog Day*. We passed signs for Alleghany National Forest and a town called Snow Shoe as well as the marker for the highest point on Route 80 east of the Mississippi River: 2250 feet. We passed signs for Soap Fat Road and Oil City, Tennytown Motel, Eatin' Park, Taco and Shaggy Dogs to Go, and Vince's Tavern, where the "food is good but the parking is lousy." We passed a Methodist church where we could "come on in for a faith lift." We passed a blue two-tiered sign along the highway, the kind where they list the restaurants and gas stations at the next exit, that was completely blank but for the word "attractions" at the top.
We arrived over an hour late. When we finally pulled into town, I was fussing with the printout of Google directions in the passenger seat of our rented Dodge Avenger. Our old Subaru wagon had been totaled two weeks earlier after a sixteen year old boy rear-ended it in a parking lot. It doesn't take much for an insurance company to declare a fifteen year old car a total loss, even when it's got hand-sewn curtains and a custom wooden camping platform that I'd call priceless. So we were cruising in a large brand-new sedan in the most practical shade of dark gray on the market. I imagined it driven by fifty year old business men with large bellies and attache cases, not by women in their early thirties wearing Tom's and sundresses.

As I looked down at my paper and read aloud from the turn-by-turn directions, I failed to notice the large hand-written sign for the Rock in River Festival. Mike's head swiveled in the direction of its large arrow.

"Oh, it's right there. See it? That must be it right there."

And there it was, a grassy riverside expanse next to a playground and a small parking lot. I expected that parking would be a problem for late arrivals, but I was wrong. It's not that the place was empty. There were probably fifty or sixty cars parked along the lawn, a handful with out-of-state plates. But I've seen bigger crowds at the annual rutabaga-curling competition in Ithaca, New York, in which peeled rutabaga are hurled toward a target in a game loosely inspired by the Canadian sport of curling.

"Are you sure this isn't a handicapped spot? Can we really park this close?"

We could.

Walking from the car toward a cluster of pop-up tents, we passed an old mini-van with open doors. A teenager standing beside the van talked to a man in the passenger seat,
rattling off a list of the things he had spent money on so far—five dollars for a plate of chicken, three dollars for ice cream, a dollar for some water. Two women stood next to the van wearing little black bonnets and long plaid cotton dresses. They looked Amish. The contents of the open hatch—a pile of purple and yellow balloon animals and two cases of Pepsi—seemed incongruous with the women's clothing, but I realized that I have no idea whether the Amish drink soda. Perhaps it made perfect sense. Perhaps they had been looking at us—armed with titanium water bottles and notebooks and a pit bull—as we emerged from our large shining sedan and forming their own impressions.

We had missed the entire amateur division, but I wasn't too concerned. The pros had yet to begin, and there would be some big names participating: world record holder, Russ "Rock Bottom" Byars; former world record holder, Kurt "Mountain Man" Steiner, who won the previous two years; and our friend Eric Henne, the young guy from Ithaca who appeared out of nowhere at the Franklin championship in 2011 and nearly beat Steiner in 2011 and 2012.

Eric is tall and lanky, with a long protruding chin and light blue eyes that gleam beneath dark bushy eyebrows. When he laughs, his square shoulders bounce up and down and his mouth opens into a shape that looks like it was could have been drawn by a child—upper and lower lips curving into parallel semicircles that recede into deep creases on the sides. At times he looks like a goofy teenager, and at times he looks striking and sinister with his perpetual five o'clock shadow and a Marlboro. He dropped out of college after a couple years and moved back home to Ithaca, where he has worked at bars and restaurants for several years. Like a lot of folks we know, he is extremely intelligent and
underemployed. Before he left school, he spent time in Spain and was nearly fluent in Spanish. He talks about finishing his degree with a major in Romance Languages, and has started taking classes at community college. Sometimes he talks about getting out of Ithaca, but it's the kind of town that sucks you in. Before moving to Philadelphia, I lived in Ithaca for nine years, and in the humid cloak of Philadelphia summer, I long for the cool of its lakes and waterfalls. It's easy not to leave, even when you know it's time for a change.

Four or five years ago, Mike told me that Eric is serious about rock skipping.

"What do you mean by 'serious'?"

It seemed to me that the serious pursuit of rock skipping must come hand in hand with a deep current of ironic humor, like a young Brooklynite's serious pursuit of growing a mustache. But Eric is not an ironic guy. His humor is straightforward and earnest.

"Like, does he train?"

"Oh yeah. He's incredibly good. He could potentially set a world record."

In 2011, Eric appeared at the Franklin championship for the first time. As an unknown, he competed first in the amateur division. Any amateur who skips twenty five times is automatically qualified forever to compete as a pro. Eric did so easily, scoring a 33 and winning the division by five skips. Later in the afternoon, he threw stones as a "professional," while his then-girlfriend stood on the grassy hill, the words "Eric Henne makes my heart skip" emblazoned across her white T-shirt in black Sharpie marker.

The pros that day in 2011 included "Rock Bottom" Byars and "Mountain Man" Steiner. Byars, the current Guinness World Records holder with fifty-one skips, is a big guy with a broad barrel chest and skinny legs. Whenever he competes, he wears a t-shirt
that says "Skips Rocks for Fudge." His thick blond hair always looks like it's at an awkward stage of growing out a crew cut—the top spraying up in various directions like an unruly fountain. His face is pale and chubby, with light blond eyebrows and a long chin. He looks like an overgrown child, friendly and lacking hard edges.

Steiner, who held the record before Byars, is four or five inches shorter and of a much slighter build. He has a frizzy gray beard and wears his hair in a low ponytail. He's not old—pictures from ten years ago show him with a full head of dark brown hair that's slowly grayed over the last decade of stone skipping competitions and world record battles. He's probably in his early fifties, same as Byars, but he looks craggy and weathered next to Byars' doughy blond curves.

Elite stone-skipping seems to be a small club, with a couple dozen guys who travel to a few major contests and trade championship titles back and forth. New faces are rare. Eric came out of nowhere when he threw his final stone on that August afternoon in 2011, and so perhaps the judges couldn't accurately process the unexpected event transpiring before their eyes. It's not a straightforward business counting skips that recede into the distance with pitty-pats that come fast and close, the stone looking more like it's gliding across the water than making individual points of contact that can be counted. Beyond twenty five skips or so, you can no longer definitively count the individual skips without filming, so the numbers at a competition like this, judged by the naked eyes of three guys in Hawaiian shirts, can sometimes feel like they're being pulled out of thin air. It's usually possible to determine whether one skip is better than another, based on duration and distance, but the numbers eventually start to feel arbitrary and subjective. In 2011, Eric's final throw was announced at 37, but multiple bystanders claimed that it was
longer than that. People said it seemed longer than Mountain Man's 39 from the first round, but it was hard to be sure. Eric took 2nd place. Later that afternoon, walking from one Franklin bar to another, he was greeted by a drunken local who shouted across the street, "You were fucking robbed!"

In 2012, Eric returned. Each competitor threw six stones, one at a time over the course of six rounds. After all the stones were thrown, the contest was locked in a three-way tie with 40 skips each for Eric, Mountain Man, and a lesser-known named Paul Fero. To break a tie, they look to each contender's second-highest skip. For Mountain Man, it was a 39. For Eric, a 37. Once more, Mountain Man took first place and Eric took second.

It wasn't hard to locate Eric. He was flanked by his girlfriend, Kenlyn, and friends Micah and Matt, who had driven the five hours from Ithaca with him that morning and would serve as both his supporters and competitors this year. If the name "Mountain Man" weren't already taken as a stone-skipping moniker, Micah could have snatched it for himself. His cherubic face was buried behind a frizzy orange beard and thick yellow hair the color of straw that stands up in place when he runs his hands through it, as he often does while spouting philosophy or quoting the Greeks. He is a loud know-it-all with a twinkle in his eye, and while he knew that he was unlikely to reach Eric's level of mastery with a stone, he hoped he could make a decent showing. Matt, a short stocky guy with olive skin and a shaved head, is the forty year old uncle of another of their friends. He relishes his dual identity as a high school English teacher and an irreverent father who parties with his daughters and nieces and nephews. At a party, he is as likely to be found
playing beer pong as holding court in a lawn chair, reciting a soliloquy from *King Lear*. For stone-skipping, he wore a Bob Marley t-shirt and long cargo shorts. After failing to make it out of the amateurs in 2012, that morning Matt redeemed himself with a high skip of 32 and would be competing alongside Micah and Eric in the afternoon. He seemed his usual cocky self, though he was the decided underdog.

They were about to walk into town for a beer in the hour before the pro division began. Wanting to make sure I experienced as much of the festival as possible, I hesitated. If we left now, I would miss my chance to see any of the rock painting competition, to guess the weight of "Skippy the Rock," or to pet the animals in the small petting zoo, and I wondered if I would thus fail to decipher the *je ne sais quoi* of a stone-skipping festival. But the chance for a beer with friends trumped other motives, so I went with the five of them and drank a quick pint of beer on the back lawn of a bar enclosed by a white picket fence. The guys threw back a shot of liquor—Jagermeister for Eric and well gin for Micah—to fortify themselves before the competition. Then we walked back to the park along the picturesque main street of Franklin, its large brick buildings and ornate street lamps reminiscent of the town's 19th century oil boom heyday. Back at the festival, I took my seat among spectators—a couple hundred, tops—along a small grassy hillside overlooking the confluence of the Alleghany River and French Creek, where the water was still and the skipping was fine.

The question I began by asking myself—is this a serious thing or is it a joke—was the wrong question to ask. The question itself presumed that it couldn't be both, that you can't have a sense of humor about a thing you work hard at, that silliness and dedication
can't coexist. This is a sport with official terminology including the words *pitty-pat*, *skronker*, *plink*, and *plonk* and a world record holder who started competing in pursuit of the block of fudge given as a prize. The festivals are overseen by an appointee called the High Commissioner of Stone Skipping. Of *course* it's a little silly. And yet to send a stone skittering across the water thirty or forty or fifty times, eventually fading into flitting bounces more like an insect than a rock? This is very, very hard, and very few people can do it. It requires strength, precision, and technique. Maybe it's other sports that have it all wrong. Maybe stone skippers are rare in their ability to accurately grasp their sport's real significance and insignificance. A thing can be meaningful because it is fun. A person can be serious about a thing without believing that the nation will rise and fall around the tides of his individual successes or failures.

The competition consisted of eighteen men and two women. One woman had driven from Boston because she was looking to up the ante after twice winning a less elite contest in Boothbay Harbor, Maine. She wore a spaghetti strap tank top that revealed most of the tattoo on her right shoulder blade. It was an homage to stone skipping, with several sets of concentric circles decreasing in diameter as they arched up toward her shoulder, like the ripples that radiate from each plink of the stone as it skips into the distance. She threw the stone like a softball pitcher, with a powerful pinwheel wind-up that gave her the speed she needed for an impressive twenty-five skips on her final throw. The other woman, an older Franklinite with white hair, wasted no time with the pre-throw chit-chat, theatrics, or centering breaths that delayed most guys' throws by ten or fifteen seconds. She just walked to the water's edge, chucked a couple of stones that skipped
fifteen or eighteen times, turned around and walked back to her seat. The announcer, struck by her efficiency and anxious to provide a narrative, commented multiple times that she must have something cooking on the stove, something she needed to return to in the kitchen.

This announcer, Eric Steiner (no known relation to Kurt the Mountain Man), was a thick guy from Michigan who has found his little niche of fame as The Voice of stone skipping competitions, most notably the Mackinac Island, Michigan championship he organizes each summer. Despite an alleged inability to skip a stone himself, he has become the public face of the sport, interviewed by newspapers nationwide as well as for a short human interest piece on National Public Radio. He wore a pale yellow polo from Mackinac Island, which spread tight around his large belly and tucked into khaki shorts. His stream of commentary went uninterrupted for nearly an hour, but for the silences he occasionally afforded skippers about to launch their stones. If his performance was any indication of the culture of the sport, it would seem that trash-talk is the main mode of dialogue between skippers. After a poor throw, The Voice took no mercy.

"Man, I have never seen someone throw a rock like that—it was a kerplop and a zero . . . And that's why you're not a professional . . . Oooh, man, that was ugly."

It seemed likely that the man with the microphone was irritating more people than he was entertaining. He was the only one heckling the skippers, and most folks near me sat quietly. The participants themselves ranged in reactions to bad throws. The old pros, with nicknames like "Rockbottom" and "Stone Whisperer" and "Airtight Alibi," usually grinned and threw up their hands. Their reputations were untouchable and they could afford to laugh off any gaffes. There were a few unknowns with similar attitudes, perhaps
the locals who wandered over on a whim. And then there were the folks who struggled to hide their frustration when they choked. A little grimace and a shake of the head as they walked back to the places they were sitting.

After Micah failed to hit twenty on any of his skips, he sat down in front of Mike on the grass, leaning back on his elbows. When the nine-year-old wunderkind who followed him hit 35 on his final throw, Mike leaned forward toward Micah.

"Dude, that kid kicked your ass."

Micah did not respond, so Mike repeated himself. Micah turned his head slightly to the left, enough to peer at us through the far corner of his peripheral vision.

"I heard you," Micah said.

Eric's first skip was a disappointment—only a 14—but it was beautiful to watch. The stone took a long time to hit the water on its first skip and when it did, it sprang back off the surface and then traced a slow sweeping arc to the left. The stone seemed to slowly lift itself with the air on each ascent and then plunge downward to ping the water and then release, creating a bouncing path by which the stone threaded sky into water.

Other guys threw the stones like a line drive, but Eric's had the uncanny path of a curve ball. This one failed to go far, but it felt like watching the creation of a piece of art. As far as scores go, his next three weren't much better—19, 18, and 19 again. He kept hitting a ripple in the water that made the stone hop and lose momentum. Others were having more luck—Mountain Man got a 40 on his first skip, and Dave "Spiderman" Ohmer got a 43 on his third. The Voice took it as his duty to leave as little silence as possible. During a brief lull in the action, he mused that "somebody up above" should be thanked for the
day's beautiful weather, and at one point he raised his arm with a flourish, alerting us to a majestic bald eagle flying past.

"It's an osprey," muttered Kenlyn, a veterinary science student.

The last round brought Eric a bit of rally, but it wasn't enough. His final skip was his highest for the day, but at a 35, it wasn't even enough to secure him third place. Matt threw last (scoring a proud 32) and after his final stone, Steiner announced "Spiderman" Ohmer the "unofficial" winner. It was a strange designation as there was no video footage to review, no way to insert any evidence or argument that would determine someone else to be the victor.

Steiner thanked us for coming, and invited us to Mackinac next summer. "Will somebody take that thing away from him," Micah called through the corner of his mouth before Steiner finally let the microphone fall to his side.

In the middle of the competition, Mike went to buy us lunch from one of the vendors and returned with two platters of barbecued chicken, baked beans, and cole slaw. The dog sat wide-eyed by our feet as we tore pieces of meat off bones and licked our fingers. Two small blond boys approached from behind us and crouched down. "Can we pet your dog?" one asked, and proceeded to cup his palm and pat her back lightly, barely touching her. An even littler girl, maybe three years old, wearing a bathing suit with a small pink ruffle around the waist, rolled like a log down the small hill beside us, shrieking with laughter. Behind us, the small crowd was rapt. In the moment when a stone was thrown, they grew hushed, as if watching tennis. I turned to my left toward Kenlyn and Eric and snapped a picture. Eric is looking at the camera and grinning, as if he's got everything he needs.
After the trophy ceremony, we went out for another beer on the back patio of a neighborhood bar. Eric, Micah, Matt and Kenlyn had the long drive back to Ithaca ahead, and Mike and I were heading to the Alleghany National Forest to camp for the night. We were all vaguely aware of the drives and the destinations ahead, but it was hard to leave. I figured that Eric's mediocre performance would disappoint him, but he seemed happy and relaxed. Nobody talked about stone-skipping anymore. The event, only an hour in the past, seemed ultimately inconsequential—not that it didn't have meaning, but that it didn't change anything. Even if Eric had won, he would be blessed with a distinction that would mean nothing to all but a handful of folks in the world. In a way, the whole thing started to feel almost spiritual—the striving for a thing that changes no one but yourself. I came hoping to understand this whole stone-skipping endeavor as if I could distill it into something with meaning for others. But perhaps this misses the whole point. It isn't about making meaning for others. It's about making meaning for yourself.
The first time I met Greg Reynolds he may have been shirtless with a cowboy hat, swaggering between tents at a music festival, a little high and drunker than he appeared, and when my sister, Rachel, introduced us, he may have glanced at me so briefly that there was no mistaking how little he cared about meeting his friend's little sister. Or the first time might have been at The Rongo, the bar where he and Rachel both worked, where he mixed me a strong drink and leaned across the bar and tried to convince me to learn to frame houses. He could teach me. I was looking for a job, and if I could learn a useful trade it might redeem me a bit for that useless Ivy League education that he just had the misfortune of learning about. Or the first time might have been upstairs from the bar, in the brick-walled loft he shared with the woman who would become his wife and later his ex-wife, where I sat mute on a futon while he leaned back, drunk and sullen in an armchair, peering with heavy eyes through the room's dim orange light. Each time I met him could have been the first, because for those first few years, he always looked at me like a stranger.

Greg was charismatic and handsome in a weather-beaten cowboy way, and he fancied himself a sort of redneck Da Vinci. If you drove by his house on a Saturday
afternoon, you'd be as likely to find him hammering at a typewriter or reading a history book as you would be to find him shooting at a snowman with his shot gun. He scoffed at conventions like "college" while simultaneously reminding anyone who would listen about all the careers he could have had.

"I'd be a great history teacher."

"I could be a lawyer. I could pass the bar right now."

He was only in his thirties, but said he couldn't sling a hammer and bartend forever and that it might be time to find himself a cushy career. And sometimes he almost seemed to mean it. But physical labor was the only work he seemed to respect, and besides, starting a new kind of life meant starting at the bottom, and Greg preferred to be the king of his domain.

Rachel lived in Trumansburg, New York, a little town outside Ithaca, a few hours from Albany where we grew up. Greg lived there too, though they had met years earlier in Binghamton, where Rachel went to college. Binghamton was a depressed city with too few jobs and too many crackheads and falling-down houses rented to college students, but something about the gritty life there appealed to Rachel. She attended the state university, but she made more of a mark as an adopted local—frequenting townie bars, working at a jewelry shop, a garden shop, and as a cocktail waitress in a dive bar that had never thought to have a cocktail waitress until she suggested it. For a time, she was Binghamton's darling. Greg was dating one of her coworkers, and he and Rachel became fast friends. I'm not sure why they never dated—maybe it was just a matter of timing, or maybe it was because they saw each other so clearly. Rachel loved a side of Greg that was smart and thoughtful and sad, but knew how often his cocky facade ran the show.
Greg loved how Rachel's sweet, coy exterior belied her cutting insights and her quick temper. In each other, they saw a side of themselves they kept tamped down. A year after college, Binghamton's bleak, empty streets had started to wear on Rachel and it was time for a change. She chose Trumansburg somewhat on a whim and moved there alone. Greg moved up shortly after.

I eventually moved to Ithaca—after living in Oregon after college, I wanted to move back east and thought I'd land temporarily in the familiar town that Rachel loved so well—but when I met Greg, I was an out-of-towner finishing up my degree at Harvard, and then an out-of-towner living across the country. Each time I came to visit, I'd see him, and each time he'd show little sign of recognition. He had a way of appearing busy and distracted, even when doing no more than drinking a beer—a way of making me feel that my presence, while perfectly welcome in his peripheral vision, wasn't worth his focus.

"Greg is so full of shit," Rachel would say, as a way of telling me not to care about his inattention. When Greg was drunk, he told the same stories over and over like an old man. He was becoming that kind of a guy, the kind whose company you could enjoy just so long as you didn't take him seriously. Rachel refused to let him off the hook so easily. She didn't laugh at his stories of madcap misadventure and when he acted like an asshole, she told him so. "He doesn't pay attention to anybody other than himself."

Their love for each other was something like the love of siblings—unquestioned, overlooked, volatile.

When she was in her late twenties, Rachel stopped working as a waitress and went to graduate school. It was hard to tell from the outside that she and Greg were old friends.
The connection between Greg and Rachel's boyfriend, Phil, made more sense to the outside world. They both hunted, they both worked as builders, they both loved smoked meats and bluegrass music and hippie girls and sitting on the porch drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. People who hadn't known them for long assumed that they were the ones with the decade-old friendship and that Rachel was just the wife tasked with tolerating Greg's frequent unannounced visits.

By the time Rachel and Phil were married, Greg was married and divorced and had moved into an ancient house around the corner from them. He started renovations on it, and then let it flounder. His daughter, Gwen, stayed there sometimes and when she did, he stayed sober and brought her around for family dinners. But when she was with her mom, which seemed to be more and more often the case, Greg drank all day.

After I moved to Ithaca and came around more often, Greg learned to treat me as a fond and familiar face but our conversations ran on a script. For a year or two, he'd say, "You live in Ithaca now, huh? How's it treating you?" as if I had arrived in town the previous week. I could have chalked it up to forgetfulness or to the near constant tipsiness with which he moved through life, but instead I was certain that there was something willful in his nearly senile inability to remember the first thing about me. I had failed to make an impression. Who was I but a girl who knew how to take tests and obey the rules?

When Rachel was pregnant, she asked me to be there with her when the baby was born. Phil, of course, would be the primary companion, but she wanted me there too—to help, to entertain, and to distract her during her labor. I was determined not to fail her. I
read *The Birth Partner* and *Ina May's Guide to Childbirth*. I watched *The Business of Being Born*, a documentary about the medicalization of childbirth, as well as YouTube videos showing home videos of real births. I needed to know how to be there for her, which meant I needed to know what to expect. No surprises. In unexpected ways during those nine months, I found myself responding to primordial emotional triggers I didn't even know I had. In every birthing video, at the moment when the newborn infant's head emerged, I cried a little. I imagined every scenario I could: talking with Rachel about whether the labor was too painful to endure without meds, holding her hand and smoothing her hair while she pushed, running to the cafeteria to buy snacks for Phil.

A few days before her due date, Rachel and Phil dropped their car at the mechanic—they needed to get the brakes fixed and wanted to be sure to do so before driving the baby home from the hospital. They asked me to drive them to the hospital if Rachel went into labor before the car was ready which, of course, she did. And so it went that on the morning that my nephew Finnegan was born, Rachel was waiting in the backseat of my Toyota Corolla, huffing through contractions while Phil and I hurriedly packed the car and prepared to drive her the thirty minutes to Schuyler Hospital. Cayuga Med was only ten minutes from their house, but her midwife didn't work with that hospital, so we were heading down to Montour Falls where the midwife's birthing suite awaited. I packed up the trunk and when I closed it, the following items were locked safely inside:

*Food.* When Rachel had called me at 7:30 that morning to tell me she was in labor, she told me not to rush, to wait for another call. What was an expecting auntie to do but head to the supermarket? Phil is a sandwich man and I suspected the hospital cafeteria would be found lacking, so for him I bought sliced turkey, peppered salami,
provolone cheese, bread, lettuce, tomato, mustard, mayo. For Rachel, granola bars. Six bagels and veggie cream cheese. A protein shake. A half dozen apples. I'm not sure where I imagined we were going.

*CD player and CDs.* Rachel's request that I select some music that could function as soundtrack to her labor seemed at first an easy request but ended up causing hours of anxiety. How many folk singers interrupted their gentle ballads for one shrill moment that might cause neonatal stress! How many classical piano pieces that start slow and lilting erupt in thumping bombast three quarters through! But could I really endorse Enya as the soundtrack to creation? I compiled a stack of options to suit every birthing mood: a zen meditation mix featuring reed flutes and distant drumming, something called Shiva's Garden that a yoga teacher friend lent me, a mix of mellow classical tunes I made for an insomniac boyfriend several years earlier, Enya, Nick Drake.

*An inflated balance ball,* because Rachel heard that some people find it a comfortable place to sit while laboring.

*A diaper bag,* clothes for the baby, clothes for Rachel.

*Water.*

*The car key.*

The car key. The key necessary to start the car that would drive my contracting sister and her husband to the hospital for the birth of her first child. The 1998 Toyota Corolla VE had no frills. No auto locks. No power windows. No clock. And no trunk latch. I packed up that trunk and slammed it closed and knew immediately what I had done. I could see Rachel's head through the rear window. She sat in the back, behind the
driver's seat, staring straight ahead, waiting.

Some people make little absent-minded mistakes all the time. They press Send on emails they haven't finished writing, lose twenty dollar bills, forget dentist appointments, spill their coffee on their work pants. They drunk dial ex-boyfriends, sleep through their alarms, forget their mothers' birthdays, rack up parking tickets. Not me. People knew me to be reliable, practical, careful, on time—in other words, I was on top of my shit. I wonder now if there is a quota of error we must each reach in our lifetimes, and those of us who stride through daily life skipping over puddles may be due for an occasional grand fiasco to make up for lost time. This was one of mine.

I only gave myself five seconds or so to feel the panicked no no no pummeling my head and racing through my veins. Then, after one futile tug on the closed trunk as if it might make a bargain with me, I turned from the car and walked up the stairs to the front door of their house, where Phil was walking toward me with the last bag. If love of a sibling can be measured by how stupid you're willing to appear during their time of need, my lack of excuses and time-wasting explanations should count for something.

"I locked my keys in the trunk."

His response, "okay," was slow and steady, as if Rachel and the fetus, sitting in the driveway out of sight below, would smell any hint of panic from afar.

When Greg drove up, he didn't bother pulling into the driveway. He left it idling at the curb and hopped out. He wore jeans, an unbuttoned shirt, and no shoes. He'd been sitting around his half-renovated kitchen drinking his morning coffee when Phil called to tell him they needed his car, now, and he concluded that there was no time for proper
dressing. Rachel pushed herself to standing and walked gingerly from my car to Greg's passenger seat. Phil took the driver's seat. I wanted to apologize and to be reassured that I wasn't an idiot, but there was no time for that. I said goodbye and that I would be right behind them, that somehow I would get there soon with all their things, but they weren't really listening and or looking at me. I had become irrelevant.

They drove away, and I stood stunned in the driveway. I knew there must be a set of logical steps to embark on next, but the only signal my brain was sending was a throbbing awareness of things going wrong. Of things going wrong because of me. The emotional alarm system had been activated and was impervious to the realization that everything was probably ok despite my gaffe—that Rachel was safely en route to the hospital, that the baby would be born whether or not it heard Enya, that Phil would become a dad even without a salami sandwich. Greg cocked his head toward me and smiled. When he smiles, creases appear at the corner of his eyes and at the sides of his mouths like a much older man with skin that folds like leather.

"So what the hell'd you do?"

I could see him mulling over how everything he knew in life was true: Girls like me with their fancy degrees proved once again to be idiots when it comes to living. Guys like him were there to save the day.

He didn't believe that there was no way into the trunk from inside the car, but after ten minutes of searching for secret latches in the glove box and under the steering wheel, he gave up. I knew a spare key existed but I hadn't seen it in months. I needed to get to my apartment to look for it. Phil's truck could be driven, but I didn't drive stick, so I needed Greg's help. I stood before him feeling pathetic and needy, a version of me that
most people had never seen. Of course he'd drive me. He didn't hesitate. We stopped at
his house for his coffee and his shoes. He told me to relax. There was no hurry. When
Erin, his ex, was pregnant with Gwenny, she was in labor for ten hours. I'd get to the
hospital with plenty of time to spare, and maybe I should just take a Xanax.

"Seriously, you need to relax," he told me. "You sure you don't want something?"

We stopped at the supermarket—the truck needed gas and Greg wanted beer. I
waited in the truck, staticky with nervous energy, but I didn't want to appear impatient or
ungrateful so I agreed that there was no rush, twenty minutes more or less wouldn't
change anything now. He reappeared with a twelve pack of Genny Cream Ale, hopped in
the driver's seat, and cracked one open. If I wouldn't take his Xanax, at least I could drink
a beer, so I took one too. I held the can on my lap and examined it. For the first time since
Rachel called me that morning, a thought occurred to me that did not pertain to her.

Genny Cream Ale?

"I thought you only drank Molson Canadian." Greg was known for bringing his
own supply wherever he went. It was his trademark.

"Sarah." He sounded exasperated, as if I should have known better. I felt like a
student faced with a teacher's faraway sigh. "Sarah, it's not exactly a morning beer."

While he drove, he told me about the current state of his life—about how he'd
been working on a crew building Panera Bread franchise locations around the Northeast,
about how Gwenny kicks ass, how he's got all this freedom now but couldn't bring
himself to have a one-night stand anymore, how he came to this realization when a cute
girl at a bar wanted to go home with him and he said no. He seemed fascinated by this
event, as if it revealed layers of depth he hadn't suspected of himself. He asked me what
I was reading and I told him that I was trying to get through *Don Quixote*. He looked pleased. *Don Quixote* was a thing he could get behind. He didn't know I was that kind of girl. Where had I been all his life?

He talked and I replied, and the conversation may have sounded normal to him, but I felt I was listening from underwater, from within a murky swirl of anxiety that rocked and swayed me. Every few minutes I would mutter, "I can't believe I did this," and he would try from a new angle to persuade me to take the edge off.

"If you just take one, you'll still be fine. You'll just be a little . . . calmer."

"Yeah, great, and then I can be out of it when I get to the hospital."

"That might be better than being all wound up like this."

He asked why he wasn't just driving me to the hospital. Why was it so important to get into the car? What was so important in the trunk, anyway? When I told him there was salami and mayonnaise at stake, he was finally convinced of our mission's urgency. He sat upright and leaned ever so slightly into the steering wheel, shifting into a posture of exaggerated attention.

"Salami! Why didn't you say so?!"

At my apartment, I tossed the contents of desk drawers onto the living room carpet, rifling through piles of old keys, supermarket discount cards, pens, binder clips, and post-it notes. Greg meandered slowly from room to room, glancing at books and photos. He picked up a picture of me and my old roommate, Wendy.

"What's the deal with Wendy Houseworth?" he asked. Wendy was a gorgeous Trumansburg native with high cheek bones and a way of coyly biting her lower lip and sending men into gutless tizzies. "She's cute."
When I first met her, I was jealous of all the attention she got. At this point it didn't faze me.

"She's actually dating a woman right now," I called back to him, knowing that this would only make it worse. He appeared in the doorway, nodding his approval.

"No kidding."

I didn't find the key, but I did talk to a locksmith who said that he could be out there in an hour or two. And he told me that you cannot pick a trunk lock. He'd have to cut a new key. I imagined hours passing. Surely it would take too long. I couldn't wait. Greg agreed to drive me to the hospital in the truck and return later to drop off my car, after the locksmith worked his magic. It was half an hour to the hospital, two hours of driving to make two round trips on top of the time he'd already spent.

"Greg, I feel bad asking you to do this."

His response was fierce and immediate.

"Rachel is family. I would do anything for her. Anything."

Rachel was family. Our family.

By the time we started driving to the hospital, Greg had stopped offering me pharmaceuticals. His words of wisdom had started to feel less like mockery and more like comfort. He had spent two hours helping me out and wasn't nearly done yet. My panic about missing the birth was coming and going like waves of nausea. I knew Greg was right—it might be hours before Rachel gave birth but I also knew that I was not where I was supposed to be, next to Greg Reynolds in the cab of a pickup truck instead of by my
sister's side. Soon, though, I'd be there.

After a few miles of driving in silence, Greg remembered something.

"Shit! I should have brought my bow."

The archery supply shop was out near the hospital, and he needed a repair on his compound bow before hunting season started. But he didn't say anything else. He didn't ask to turn around. I looked out the window at farm fields, imagined Rachel bearing down without me. I looked back at Greg. I'd been trying since we met to convince him that I was different than he thought I was, but really I was trying to convince myself. I wanted to convince myself that I could be both the straight A student and the girl who drank Pabst Blue Ribbon and Jim Beam at a dive bar. I wanted to be both the girl who coached her sister through labor and the girl who said she was nowhere ready to have kids of her own. I wanted to be a girl who everyone could count on and the girl from whom nobody knew what to expect.

I asked him if he wanted to go back for the bow. I'm not sure if I was still trying to prove something about myself or if I was just feeling grateful for his help. He looked me in the eyes and paused.

"Really?"

Yes, it was fine. What difference will fifteen minutes make? He swung the truck into the gravel driveway of a brick Greek Revival sitting close to the road.

"Ae you sure? Thank you. You're awesome."

I arrived at the hospital at one pm and Rachel gave birth to Finnegan at two. Somehow he was coaxed into this world without the soothing tones of Enya or Nick
Drake. The birthing suite had a real double bed with a wooden headboard, and a large whirlpool tub awaited anyone interested in a water birth. But when it came time to really push, Rachel rejected the bed and she rejected the tub and she opted to sit on the toilet where her body gave way most readily to pushing. And when the final minutes came, she didn't try to make it back to the bed and sank instead onto the tile of the bathroom floor, surrounded in the narrow doorway by Phil, the midwife, a nurse, and me.

It was not the birth we had imagined, but it was exactly right.

Greg dropped my car off a few hours later. As he crossed the room to Rachel and the baby, his face was a knot of muscles straining against emotion. A one syllable cry fell from his mouth and he looked like he might collapse.

"Look at you," he muttered, and he kissed Rachel's cheek.

I walked out a few minutes later to get the sandwich fixings out of the trunk. A sticker from Arnot Forest Archery shop shone on the upper corner of the Corolla's rear window. It was one of the transparent stickers that adheres to glass by static cling and can be removed with the flick of a finger, but I did not touch it. It stayed in the window for the five years until the car was totaled, and now, somewhere, that car is sitting in a junk yard still wearing Greg's seal of approval.
Killer Instinct

Fernando Antonio Salguero is all of the following things, but not necessarily in this order: firefighter, environmentalist, survivalist, firearms enthusiast, conspiracy theorist, self-proclaimed shaman, water purification expert, father, husband. Generous, idealistic, violent, paranoid. Angry, earnest, calculating, loving. He used to work for Moveon.org. He loves Ralph Nader and Dennis Kucinich. He begrudgingly campaigned for Kerry and Gore and, for a time, Obama. He wants to abolish the Federal Reserve and he believes that 9/11 was an inside job. He was beaten daily by his mother. He says that LSD saved his life. He is the founder of a group called Survive and Thrive, a rag-tag assemblage of folks in the Philadelphia area interested in learning skills of self-preservation.

Some people meet Fernando because they want to learn how to defend their families using lethal force. Some people meet Fernando because they want to learn how to identify wild mushrooms. I met Fernando because I wanted to know what these people have in common. I wanted to understand the paths and possibilities that are born out of a desire to live a self-sufficient life.
When I talk about self-sufficiency, I'm talking both about the practical skills that enable a person to take care of himself as well as an ethos that holds these skills in high esteem. It suggests a close and visceral connection between an individual and the necessary ingredients of his life: food, shelter, work, land. It suggests a decreasing dependence on the systems that distance us from these essential aspects of life. While at one extreme Walmart tempts us to complete our grocery, clothes, and appliance shopping under one roof while waiting for our cars to be repaired and our prescriptions to be filled, many people reject this mechanization and commoditization of our lives. These may be the people who are learning again how to grow and preserve food, to hunt, to raise chickens, to spin wool, and to install solar panels on their roofs.

In my own life, I've often chosen the company of folks who appear at least marginally self-sufficient. I'm marrying a man who wooed me with home-baked bread and home-brewed beer. My sister and brother-in-law's pantry is lined with jars of tomatoes, pickled green beans, and maple syrup tapped from their trees, and their basement fridge is filled with venison my brother-in-law shot and butchered. For a couple of years, one of my best friends slept in a tipi and went to the bathroom in a composting toilet he built overlooking miles of state forest land.

Despite my associations, I feel like a bit of a failure on the self-sufficiency front. I'm not much of a cook. I love to garden but have yielded mediocre results—I have yet to produce a tomato harvest untainted by deadly fungus. I want to want to spend my weekends immersed in a major canning project, but it does seem like an awful lot of work. Part of me insists on calculating my time versus the cost of a purchased can of tomato puree, though I'm pretty sure that cost effectiveness is not the value at stake here.
As a result, perhaps, of my own failure to embody this lifestyle, I am full of appreciation and awe for the range of skills among the people I know: woodworking and metalworking, brewing and distilling, hunting, butchering, curing, smoking, fermenting, canning, and sprouting. This knowledge and these practices seem to evoke a sense of vitality, as if the moments of life invested in these tasks are full of something more substantial than whatever it is that the rest of us are doing.

When I moved to Philadelphia, I discovered Fernando and Survive and Thrive on meetup.org. Part of what they do—the part that holds classes with titles like "Canning, Drying, Salt Curing and Fermenting Food for Your Family" and "Mother's Day Wild Food/Medicine Harvesting and Guerrilla Gardening Tour"—felt familiar. I was homesick for the forests and farms of rural New York that I had left behind for Philly's brick and concrete, and these parts of Survive and Thrive reminded me of home. But another part—the part leading trips to gun shows and teaching classes on preparing for nuclear disaster—was new.

I was intrigued by the range of viewpoints the group snagged in its net: members' professed interests ranged from "Food Preservation Techniques" and "Permaculture" to "Right to Bear Arms" and "United States Constitution." Clicking on member profiles, I discovered Paul, a "holistic physician" interested in "sustainable living techniques," as well as Mark, whose greatest concern is "personal sovereignty" and is also a member of the "9/11 Truth" and "Philadelphia UFO" groups. Carol is interested in "making Philadelphia a better place" and wants to learn about worm composting, and Cliff looks forward to sharing knowledge about homemade pepper spray and lethal and non-lethal
home defense. They seemed bound by an uneasiness about the direction the world is headed and by a desire for self-sufficiency, but the specific versions of their world-views seemed far-flung and incongruous. Did these wild foodies really find common ground with the folks who spend their weekends at gun shows? Was it just my narrow mind that had a hard time believing that the hippie homesteader has something to learn from the guy putting bars on his windows, or perhaps that the hippie homesteader is the guy putting bars on his windows?

Once I started looking in other places for this incongruous combination of traits—or what I thought was an incongruous combination—I discovered that it was not that unusual, and I found it popping up in unexpected places. Several of my friends "liked" a photo that was bouncing around Facebook showing a halved avocado with a paprika-speckled fried egg bubbling out of its center. The photo and the accompanying recipe, which had been "liked" 33,000 times and "shared" 55,000 times, had been posted on a page called "Homesteading / Survivalism," which calls itself "the largest homestead, survival, and self-reliance page on Facebook." They have over a million followers, including ten of my own Facebook friends. The photo at the top of their profile shows a lush expanse of hilly North Carolina pastureland—a patchwork of fields and trees rippling into the distance against a cloudless sky. Below this, a photo of a small farm includes hand-hewn fencing in the foreground and an old fashioned windmill and crimson barn in the background. The small green fields in the center are dotted with a few small fruit trees. It is idyllic, peaceful farmland, a world away from the madness of modern life. It is beautiful.

Among the recent postings I found on the page: Photos of a straw-bale
roundhouse and links to instructions for building one's own. Advice about cleaning rusty cast-iron skillets. A photograph of a waterfall in which mist cascades and sprays off emerald green moss lining sheer rock walls. Instructions for making vanilla extract. A photo of dozens of mason jars filled with home-canned tomatoes and links to books about canning and preserving. All of it seemed symbolic of a rustic and meaningful life. It seemed to represent slowing down and connecting, again, with food, with nature, with the processes that technology and industry have made alien to us.

But that was only half of it. Scrolling down the Facebook page, I came across a photo of a young man sitting on the floor of a mostly empty white-walled room. A stack of fifteen or twenty pizza boxes sits in the corner. In the foreground, six hand guns are lined up on a bed, in front of a long black gun. The man is holding another huge gun, and two more lean against the wall next to him. The caption says "Excessive Hoarding" and in small print below, "You do not need that many pizza boxes." The comment added by Homesteading / Survivalism says merely, "Get prepared."

In their online store, I found a library that reflected nearly every interest mentioned by the Survive and Thrivers' profiles: books about camping, cooking, and herb gardening alongside "documentaries" arguing that the JFK Assassination was a government plot and that vaccines are a government plot; a film called "Global Warming or Global Governance" that attempts to debunk the "global warming agenda"; several books by and about Ron Paul and his disciples; and a seminar by Bill Cooper, author of a book that has been described as "the manifesto of the militia movement."

The images of wood-fired hot tubs and herb gardens and home grown vegetables have a emotive power over me, and I wanted to convince myself that the guns and the
conspiracy theories and the isolationism are just some fringe loonies' misunderstanding of what this life could be. But it was starting to seem that this pairing—of homesteading and survivalism, of "thriving" and "surviving"—might be a union more natural than I wanted to believe.

I attended my first Survive and Thrive meeting on October 28, 2012. The date feels significant, because Hurricane Sandy struck the mid-Atlantic coast the following day. By the afternoon of the 28th, Philadelphia's Mayor Nutter had declared a State of Emergency for the city effective at 5 pm that day, and the entire public transportation system would be suspended shortly after midnight. Area schools and colleges had already announced that classes would be cancelled on Monday and Tuesday, and non-essential municipal employees were told to stay home from work. The Philadelphia Airport cancelled all flights in and out of the airport starting on Saturday night. Flashlights, batteries, and bottled water flew off the shelves of big box stores as area residents scrambled to prepare for widespread power outages.

Meanwhile, I was taking my seat among fifty or sixty people in an underground North Philly club, where Survive and Thrive had been given permission to gather. The room was large and black—black walls, a black concrete floor, long black velvet stage curtains hanging from poles along the ceiling. The only things that were not black were the exposed pipes and the bare fluorescent lightbulbs strung diagonally across the ceiling. It looked like some kind of experimental theater. Folding chairs were set up on banked rows in the center of the space, and I climbed to a seat near the back.

Survive and Thrive's website promises that it is "not a stereotypical (all male,
God and guns) survival group. Atheist, Muslim, Jew, LGBT, Families, Immigrants – all people are welcome." When I arrived, there were twenty or thirty people already sitting, and it did appear to be a wide-ranging crew. Four women sat in pairs two rows ahead of me. An elderly white woman with a lavender jacket and white orthopedic sneakers took the seat next to me. An African-American woman in her thirties with long dreadlocks and a young dreadlocked girl—aged five or six—came in shortly after. Behind me, a man with a frizzy gray beard and an enormous belly sat next to a mousy woman with long straight white hair and a knitted vest.

A man—who I soon learned was Fernando—stood on the stage and welcomed us. He has a round barrel torso, short legs, and tattooed forearms. A gold glowering skull spread across the entire torso of his black T-shirt, which was tucked into faded black cargo pants. His combat boots added an inch to his height, but he still looked to be only 5'7" or 5'8". A holstered handgun rested openly on his hip. To his left, sundry props covered two long folding tables, including a pressure canning pot, mason jars full of dried beans and grains, various toxic looking spray canisters, a solar light, a fire extinguisher, and a first aid kit.

"First of all, I want to congratulate you all for making it out this afternoon, when the stoooorm is on its way."

He hunched his shoulders and wagged his knees back and forth in mock terror, then stood upright and chuckled.

"The storm's not gonna be here until tomorrow night, and the city has already shut down."

A few voices pealed out from the audience, hooting about flashlight batteries and
the other careless last-minute preparations taken by those unprepared for disaster. These folks were already prepared, and not just for a few days without electricity.

"Survival," I learned, is different from plain old ordinary "life." It implies a fight to stay alive in the face of that which actively threatens life. Life can be threatened by a lot of things—disease, natural disaster, violence between people—and Survive and Thrive's web page is intentionally vague about the nature of the threats to which its members are preparing to respond. Richard Mitchell, author of Dancing at Armaggedon: Survivalism and Chaos in Modern Times, writes that "survivalism is centered on the continuing task of constructing 'what if' scenarios in which survival preparations will be at once necessary and sufficient. This is a tenuous process. Survivalism depends upon scenarios built on middle ground, delicately fashioned to fall between the extremes of disbelief and despair."

Some life-threatening scenarios do not seem to whet the survivalist appetite as keenly as others. They are not talking about surviving cancer in a hospital bed, with doctors and nurses beside you. They are not talking about surviving a hurricane with the help of a robust fleet of emergency responders employed by the city or state. They are talking about survival without the "Grid," that is, survival in the absence of at least some of the following: electricity, store-bought food, heating fuel, gasoline, potable water, cell phones, landline phones, trucks and trains to transport goods to stores and consumers, police, firefighters, EMTs. Most people know how to prepare for a few days without amenities. It's what the "sheepies" of Philadelphia were running around doing at that very moment. But the survivalists are preparing for something on a different scale: They are preparing for TEOTWAWKI—"The End of The World As We Know It."
For anyone who believes it unlikely that this kind of "Grid-down" scenario is likely to unfold, Survive and Thrive's literature provides a sampling of catastrophic possibilities:

- Economic collapse / solar flares / climate change / water contamination / global thermonuclear war / hurricane / nuke power plant meltdown / earthquake / police state and martial law / gun confiscations house to house / government couped'etat / foreign troops invading / hackers shutting down our Grid / war at home / famine / plague / civil unrest / real terrorism / false flag terrorism / extra terrestrial contact aftermath / inter dimensional entities / chemical tanker train crash / physical and metaphysical changes / Mayan / Biblical / Hope / I Ching / Timewave Zero / peak oil / population reduction using hard and soft killing methods / power outages from ice storms.

It seems like most people could find something in the list to fear. As their website says, "Chance favors the prepared mind." Perhaps it's merely common sense to cultivate the skills that will keep you alive in a radically altered world.

- In survivalist jargon, "Pollyanna" is a derisive term for someone in cheerful denial about the possibility of a large-scale disaster or about the real changes it could cause. Pollyanna was a 1913 book about a ceaselessly optimistic child of the same name who singlehandedly transformed the solemn town where she lived through her sunny disposition. Even before the term was appropriated by those anticipating Y2K disasters to describe people with a particular brand of anti-doomsday naïvete, "Pollyanna" was used to describe a person with excessive, blind, and often irritating optimism. It is typically
understood as an insult.

I am a Pollyanna. I've long intended to take a self-defense class, to brush up on first aid training, and to really learn to build a fire rather than always being the one gathering kindling on camping trips. But there are miles and years of distractions that lie between "intending" and "doing." And then there's the fact that I really just can't see myself stock-piling Ramen noodles in the basement, let alone spending my weekends building bullet-proof walls and water filtration systems. It's where I see "prepared" slipping into "paranoid." I read The Road, but I read it as fiction, not as prophesy. And when the weekends roll around, I will always choose a hike or dinner with friends over a trip to Walmart for solar flares and Mylar food storage bags. Nevertheless, sitting among fifty burgeoning "survivors," I didn't want to be pegged as the one naïf in the group, so when Fernando asked, "How many of you have people in your life who think you're a little crazy, paranoid, wacko?" I limply raised my hand. I was lying. Nobody thinks I'm wacko. But here, a different logic prevailed. I knew that here, I would be the wacko if I admitted how little my actions are compelled by the specter of What's Coming.

Mitchell writes that "without 'the system' survivalists must provide their own means of production, their own essentials of life. But which are the most essential essentials? All-terrain vehicles? Rural property? Toilet tissue and soap powder? Perhaps in time. But in warrior world scenarios, a more urgent essential must be produced: security." Fernando appears to agree.

The whole first segment of the meeting, lasting more than an hour, revolved around the topics of self-defense and home security, including a rapid-fire overview of
hand-to-hand combat techniques, methods for safeguarding your home against invasion and gunfire, and a primer on guns. Fernando recommended purchasing a shotgun as the first thing to do when starting to consider matters of home security. He demonstrated the rapid assembly of a three and a half pound collapsible shotgun that can live in your Go Bag—a deal at $200, with extremely inexpensive ammunition. His friend Yuri, who runs a firing range nearby, volunteered information about "youth sized" shotguns that serve as appropriate options for children and women of small stature.

I began to feel that I had inadvertently infiltrated a gathering of radical militiamen. Where was the tutorial on canning and gardening in small spaces? This was the sort of ideology I'd have expected from militias and radical separatists, but Survive and Thrive was supposed to be different. The website promises that it is "open to all faiths, beliefs, and lifestyles. BAR NONE." It was a difficult sentiment for me to reconcile with Fernando's venomous side-note about New Jersey's oppressive gun control restrictions and another member's spiel about going to as many gun shows as possible. To these guys, the acquisition of firearms and ammunition is the way that trumps all other ways to be prepared for disaster, and anything that limits their readiness to unleash lethal force is indefensible. Later, I looked again at their website, where it says that they "insist that ALL POLITICS BE LEFT AT THE DOOR," noting this time the adjoining phrase: "With the exception of the U.S. Constitution." I realized, then, that this was code for the Second Amendment, which gun rights advocates cite as support for their desire to purchase and carry weapons without restriction. It was the only political belief that was nonnegotiable here.

Fernando explained that, in Pennsylvanial, you can buy a shotgun from a private
buyer without any kind of registration—this is useful, he told us, for "anyone who would want to have one without being on any kind of a 'grid awareness' list." I am not sure what a "grid awareness" list is, but it was clear that Fernando feared the watchful eye of Big Brother more intently than he feared guns in the "wrong hands." I thought of Camden, New Jersey, the city where I teach. Chris Hedges writes in *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* that Camden is "awash in guns" because of Pennsylvania's "notoriously lax" gun laws. Guns in the hands of gang members in a street-level arms race makes nonviolence "a luxury," out of reach for many. I never previously understood why a non-criminal would resent the red tape of stricter gun regulations, and now, faced with one of the "reasons," I felt equally confused. These people would rather allow guns to slip into the hands of every teenager in Camden than risk the possibility of Big Brother knowing their names. This is a conflict between people speaking different languages. The prospect of common ground seems slim.

I wondered whether this was really the shared priority of all of the group's eight hundred members. Even Carol with her worm composting bin? Even Paul, the holistic physician? Perhaps you cannot prepare to be self-sufficient—to take care of yourself and your family without outside assistance—unless you are prepared to kill. I sat stiffly in my seat, taking notes and staring at those sitting around me. I imagined the old lady sitting next to me shooting a kid she found sneaking on her porch, only to later learn that he was just there to smash a pumpkin. I feared that Fernando would defend her right to do so.

Perhaps none of this should have come as a surprise, because for all the differences among the people in Survive and Thrive, they seemed to share a libertarian sentiment, that is, a set of values centered around the ideal of a self-sufficient life
independent of government intervention. Later, when I interviewed Fernando, he told me that he is happy to be called a Libertarian.

"I'm very liberal," he told me, "but it gets to a point where it's libertarian."

He spread his arms out to the left and right and then theatrically arced them around his back until his fingers touched behind him. "The left and the right only go so far before they meet behind the back like that."

I remember learning in high school that the political spectrum is more like a circle than a line—that the radical left has more in common with the radical right than either has in common with those in the middle. I wasn't surprised to hear him say this, but I got the sense he thought he was telling me something new. He often sounds like this—one part teacher, one part preacher, explaining the truths he knows in a slow methodical sing-song, stretching out certain words for dramatic effect.

"If you look at the word government," he explained, "if you break it down to the et-y-mo-logy, its Latin, 'govern' is from the term 'gu-ber-na-torial' . . . to govern is to control."

He paused. "And then ment is mind . . . so 'government' can actually be perceived in two ways—one is 'mind control,' and the other is 'the controlling mind.'"

This is not true. The -ment in government is simply a generic suffix that turns verbs into nouns, and it has nothing to do with the Latin root mens, which does mean 'mind.' I had a hunch that this etymology lesson was one hatched on an anarchist blog, but I didn't say anything. I wasn't entirely sure of myself—he seemed so confident.

This is what it often feels like to talk with Fernando. Part of your brain says, "Now, that can't be right," but the other half pauses. He has read so much. He seems so
sure. And, in fact, he knows a lot. For every half-baked etymology lesson, he presents at least one thought-provoking truth. Did Descartes really believe that the pineal gland is the physical seat of the soul? He did. Is LSD derived from ergot, a fungus found on rye? It is. Did the National Defense Authorization Act signed into law on December 31, 2011 give carte blanche to the federal government to indefinitely detain anyone, including U.S. citizens, without trial? It did. Did the Obama campaign stage the several incidents in 2007 and 2008 during which a woman fainted at a campaign speech causing Obama to intervene and reassure the onlookers, savior-like, as part of a calculated effort to manipulate our hearts and minds? Is the FBI tracking Fernando's movements, and was his recent arrest in New Jersey premeditated? Is it physically impossible that the World Trade Center towers collapsed in the way that they did on 9/11 based on the impact of isolated pockets of fire and thermal expansion alone? The line between true and false, between rational and paranoid, is hard to pinpoint. I am virtually certain that Fernando crosses it, but I cannot tell you precisely where.

Fernando grew up in Kensington, a neighborhood that used to be one of Philadelphia's roughest. His mother was physically abusive and a drug addict and, living with her, Fernando spent much of his childhood squatting in abandoned buildings. He described being beaten with wire hangers and electrical cords and having more wooden brooms broken over his back than he can count. His parents were not together, and he told me his father was a sociopath who tortured small animals like cats and birds.

"This is the stock that I come from," he said.

It was a childhood defined by violence, both in and outside the home. He couldn't
bathe regularly, and his clothes were filthy, and so he was bullied viciously by his peers. In response, he became incredibly violent and comfortable with violence.

"I have permanently marked faces," he told me. "I made it an effort when I was young to make it so they would never forget me when they looked in the mirror."

Fernando values this past, because he says it makes him strong and it makes him ready. "These are experiences that I have come through, and no one can take away from me."

He motioned to the people in the coffee shop where we were meeting and speculated that most of these people have never been punched in the face. And when they are confronted by a "predator" who wants their money or their life, they will not be able to defend themselves. Fernando will not be afraid.

"I have a part of me that has been forged by these trials and that is indomitable."

The mission of Survive and Thrive is to empower people to face the circumstances of a future whose contours are as-yet unknown. Fernando claims to take an agnostic attitude about the likelihood of various threats—whether you think it'll be an earthquake, nuclear attack, government coup, or extra-terrestrial invasion that knocks out the Grid, you'll need bottled water and canned food just the same. It's about techniques for surviving when the systems we rely on are unavailable.

Hearing Fernando talk about his childhood, though, it became clear that the specter of collapse is not merely a scenario he anticipates in the future. It is the rubble out of which he grew. Collapse and chaos is his past, and he anticipates it in every moment of his life. It's hard for me to call someone paranoid when he knows what it is to be stabbed by his mother in the arm with a fork. The worst does sometimes happen. When I asked
him whether Survive and Thrive is about awaiting disaster or about living in the present, he told me, "I have to say that I embrace the paradox that is both."

I had originally expected Survive and Thrive to focus on nourishment, shelter, and warmth—our basic needs—not on self-defense, weaponry, and hand-to-hand lethal combat. Then again, I suppose knowledge of food preservation techniques will be meaningless if your home is pillaged; the ability to make a campfire in your living room irrelevant if you and your loved ones have been raped and murdered.

When talking to the new members of Survive and Thrive, Fernando introduced his discussion of self-defense with a section on "survival psyche." One of the first things for each of us to determine, he said, is our own instinctive threat response. The options: Fight, Flight, or Freeze.

"One of these three stands dominant in each of our hearts."

The Fighter is prepared to harness his "killer instinct" to resist the violence of a predator. But not everyone is a fighter, he acknowledged, and flight is sometimes an option. A "flighter" is one who runs away. But an unprepared flighter is doomed if they don't have a well-conceived escape plan and survival skills, Fernando warned.

"What are your exit strategies? What can you do today that will stack the odds of escape in your favor? Where can you go? How will you get there? Those who fail to plan, plan to fail."

He described a Survive and Thriver named John, who is a self-pronounced Flighter. John is also a master of bushcraft and wilderness survival, and his plan is to flee into the woods when the time comes. He has everything he needs in his car, and he is prepared at any moment to leave it on the highway and disappear into the woods forever.
John is an example of a Flighter who might survive. But Fernando's implication was clear: unless we are as prepared as John, flight will fail us.

As for those inclined to freeze, that is, to "do nothing, stay still, do what you are told to do and hope that it will all be over soon," Fernando isn't optimistic. To freeze is to be compliant, to hope and wait for mercy, to refuse to believe in the gravity of what is happening.

"Freezing has contributed to the deaths of countless millions of humans through history," he told us. He spoke, then, of the early years of the Holocaust, when Jews were rounded up and forced to live in ghettos, believing and hoping that the worst had arrived. Predators have not meted out their worst until you are dead, Fernando insisted, and freezing in compliant desperation is "the worst thing that you can do."

"Never believe a predator when he says, 'just do what I say and I'll let you go.' Refuse and Resist."

I wasn't convinced that freezing "in the moment" of a fight, a fire, or a home invasion was the same as acts of calculated compliance over days, months, or years. One thing seems to come, as Fernando argued, out of instinct. The other, whether successful or unsuccessful, seems to emerge from a process of reasoning—reasoning through one's odds, one's capabilities, one's assessment of an enemy's motivation and will, one's faith and hope in humanity. There seemed to me something fundamentally different between the "stunned drivers [who] burn in cars when they don't remove a seatbelt" and whole populations who make passive or subversive attempts to survive oppression. Fernando's notion of "freezing" seemed way too simple.

But if I can narrow my scope to one's reaction to some specific concrete threat,
like, say, the moment when armed neighbors attack my home to pillage my food stores when there's no other food for miles around, then I can see where "freezing" would do no good. Unfortunately, I have an uneasy feeling that I might be a Freezer, especially if "freezing" is ever accompanied by "futile attempts to reason with predators." I've been told that I exhibit a combination of empathy and hyper-rationality that works well with sisters and best friends in periods of personal crisis, and the praise has gone to my head. I've occasionally fantasized about being a labor dispute mediator, or perhaps a hostage negotiator. I might just be the person who tries to convince a ravenous armed intruder to reconsider his tactics in the moments before he knocks me unconscious.

Fernando says that we need to identify this threat response within ourselves, but I'm not sure how to do so, short of confronting the sorts of violent or traumatic events from which I have been gratefully sheltered. Here is a partial list of things that I have never experienced: I have never been punched. I have never been mugged or pickpocketed. I have never been shot or stabbed. I have never come close to drowning, been seriously burned, suffered from a major illness, or given birth. My home has never been robbed, my loved ones have never been murdered, my identity has never been stolen. I have never witnessed a bank robbery, a plane hijacking, or an act of significant violence. I have never been in a serious car accident. I have never been raped. I have never been homeless.

Fernando would probably say that my limited experience with violence makes me unable to understand some of humanity's dirtier truths. Perhaps. But I can't help but wonder if it cuts both ways—if the abuse and trauma he has suffered compromises his ability to see the world for what it is. He says that his past makes him strong, and that it
makes him able to face realities that many of us cannot face. But perhaps it's something else entirely. I think of the accounts I've read of people with post-traumatic stress disorder, of the paranoia they may suffer and the inability to effectively integrate themselves into society. Fernando might be an individual whose traumatic past allows him to part the curtain and see the true contours of a government that is rapidly moving toward tyranny, or maybe his is an example of a perspective gone awry, rewired and distorted by pain and anger that colors every thought. It's hard to determine whether he is speaking from a place of wisdom or a place of wounds.

Fernando presents his worldview as one that naturally emerges from common sense, pragmatism, and life experience. It hinges, however, on a very particular notion of human nature and its relationship to the society we have made. "In a lot of ways, we are savages," he told us with grave satisfaction, and in a post-grid world, our natural instincts are revealed. At the end of the day, society has merely cloaked—not changed—the animalism that is at our core. When society comes unpinned, he believes it obvious that we will respond with the primacy of instinct. We are savages, we have primal needs, and when shit hits the fan, we may find ourselves compelled not by reason or even emotion but by deeper biological drives—for nourishment, for warmth, for life.

Sure, we humans are animals. Like lions and bears and wolves. This basic taxonomic revelation thrilled and entertained me in elementary school, not unlike the discovery that a tomato is a fruit. But while I know that "we are animals," it remains a fact that is rarely felt. The knowledge that I evolved from the same organism as my dog does little to arouse a feeling of real biological commonality. My power of language and
reasoning seems to separate us more than we are bound by the commonality of mammary glands. It's not that I believe biology to be insignificant; it's that I believe that our morality, our reasoning, our capacity for compassion and for decision-making is as much a part of it—as integral to our "core selves"—as are our more primal urges. I have a hard time sustaining the belief that my relationships with other humans would ever be fundamentally reconfigured, even if the realities of my life were to change in substantial ways. My world view feels dependent upon the notion that people are not three meals away from killing one another, even if there is truth there.

In *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit examines the communities that spring up in the wake of natural disasters, and she argues that these terrible circumstances often reveal the finest aspects of humanity. She studied disasters ranging from the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 to Hurricane Katrina and concluded that "the prevalent human nature in disaster is resilient, resourceful, generous, empathic, and brave." In the "chaos" wrought by storms, fires, and earthquakes, Solnit found people at their best: "These remarkable societies suggest that, just as many machines reset themselves to their original settings after a power outage, so human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful, and imaginative after a disaster, that we revert to something we already know how to do."

Fernando might not disagree. He believes that "99% of people are inherently good in their being," but he would argue that this does not lessen the need to prepare for the other 1%—the predators that will prey upon us. But for Solnit, Fernando's obsession with that 1% is itself the problem. She writes that the "image of the selfish, panicky, or regressively savage human being in times of disaster has little truth to it" and that "often
the worst behavior in the wake of a calamity is on the part of those who believe that others will behave savagely and that they themselves are taking defensive measures against barbarism." Through this lens, those focused on defensive preparedness are not acting in defense of good; they may, through anticipation of worst-case scenarios, become the agents of greater chaos.

Fernando talked a lot about "predators," but he never clearly defined the term. "Predator means a lot of different things to a lot of different people." Sometimes he seemed to identify with a fellow Survive and Thrive's assertion that "the predator could end up being your next door neighbor" after he discovers that you have months of canned goods in your basement and he has nothing. Other times, though, Fernando's predators seem to be the boys who bullied him as a child, or the cops who "bully" him now: "And now these groups of bullies aren't just a group of kids who are picking on a kid who smells bad. It's these other kids—thugs with badges, and their egos have led them to blowing open my trunk." And sometimes they are the corporate CEOs and politicians that call the bigger shots. He sees a seamless connection between individual predators and the systems of power he believes are to blame for most of society's ills. And while his politics are not solely defined by the conspiracy theories he supports, it is hard to talk to him for more than a few minutes without learning about his deep distrust of all institutions of power, and his impassioned certainty that "elements within our government" are responsible for events such as 9/11.

Some people dismiss conspiracy theories for the complexity of the cover-ups on which they are based, but in fact, conspiracy theories enable a structured world view with
a clear line between malevolent and manipulative forces that conspire against us, and good but brainwashed masses that cannot see the truth. It makes sense that Fernando—whose very life depended upon climbing out of chaos—craves a story with clear-cut heroes and villains and people who need saving.

Fernando told me he has been thinking about compassion: "Like where does it come from?"

He told me about a photo he saw online, of a window washer at Children's Hospital. In the photo there are children with IVs and tubes in their noses.

"They're sick, and they're up against this window, and outside there's a window washer dressed up as Spiderman. It's so simple."

His face was furrowed by the effort to explain that feeling—the feeling you get when a glimpse of something sends a charge through the soul and enlarges it.

"It might not seem like a lot to someone else." His jawline had changed and his chin slackened slightly, wiggling softly, and I stared at it. He looked like he might cry.

"To me it had a really profound impact," he said.

He searched for words with a hesitance that I hadn't heard in him before. "It really spun me off... to take a look at what compassion is... to give hope and relief and mercy—It's a huge motivator for me."

Later, I looked for the photo online. It's hard to know which one he was talking about, because there are many. I found Spiderman window washers at Children's Hospitals in Pittsburgh, St. Louis, St. Petersburg, Memphis, Chicago, London, Madison, and more. A perfect photo opportunity for a hospital CEO. Surely Fernando could not be
so naïve as to find in this the unadulterated seeds of human compassion. How could the same man profess to see through hype and "messaging" and manipulative public relations tactics but regard this treacly internet meme as earnest and pure? I was surprised by this innocence.

While Fernando and I talked, I was facing a large window. After an hour, the sun had moved above the roofs of the row homes across the street and was shining in my eyes. He saw me squinting, and in the middle of a sentence he stood up and reached for the gauzy curtain and pulled it toward the center of the window. He sat back down, smiling slightly. He shrugged. "I'm sensitive," he quipped, and continued his story.

After Hurricane Sandy, Fernando launched a emotional appeal for donations on the Survive and Thrive website: "Please dig into your heart and pantry for these fellow Americans." He was prepared to come to any location in Southeastern Pennsylvania to pick up donations that he would drive to Staten Island himself. There was a condescending evangelism to his generosity ("... these are folks that have not prepared to take care of themselves") but he was taking time to do something I was not: helping those in need. His concern felt genuine. He can be accused of many things, but indifference is not one of them.

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I believe that Fernando is a good person, but I am afraid of him. He says he is motivated solely by love, but he also says he is forged out of violence and anger.

"I am an angry man, and there's no getting around that, and that keeps me sharp," he tells me.

I am afraid of extremism in all its forms, including this one, but it is not always
clear where the line between conviction and extremism may lie. I begin to fear that the ways of life I admire—the return to simplicity, the knowledge of life-sustaining crafts, places and people apart from the contagious intensity of consumer culture—might all be underpinned by an ideology that knows only unpleasant extremes. Does the desire to disassociate oneself from Walmart, Unilever, and Lockheed Martin ultimately lead to a rejection of all our governing principles? Does the desire to know how to sustain your life and the lives of your family members lead logically to a stockpile of weapons? Homesteading/Survivalism seems to think so. Fernando seems to think so. Backwoods Home Magazine, which offers articles about every aspect of sustainable rural living interspersed with articles about personal sovereignty, firearms, and the fascism of the U.S. government, seems to think so. And yet I can't accept anarcho-libertarian ideology as the inevitable companion to a desire to own a chicken coop.

A writer like Shannon Hayes provides a peek at one alternative in her book Radical Homemakers, in which she describes the lives of men and women who "have chosen to make family, community, social justice and the health of the planet the governing principles of their lives." In contrast to the ruling logic that "he who holds the gold makes the rules," she claims that "the greater our domestic skills, be they to plant a garden, grow tomatoes on an apartment balcony, mend a shirt, repair an appliance, provide for our own entertainment, cook and preserve a local harvest or care for our children and loved ones, the less dependent we are on the gold." "The gold," she says, is the symbol of a system in which corporations and profit hold all the power, and while she seems quietly hopeful that these power structures will be undermined by the way we choose to live our lives, she seems little plagued by fear. Unlike Fernando, who is braced
at all times to *react*, Hayes gives me hope that there's still room to simply act, day by day, without constantly looking over your shoulder for what's coming next. As I try to trace how the desire for self-sufficiency turns into paranoiac survivalism, I wonder if it comes down to the distinction between a life defined by action and one defined by reaction. The survivalists are very busy with their plans for preventing death, but that may take them on a very different path than one that embraces life.

I think again about "freezing," and wonder if it can be understood in a different light than the one that Fernando shed upon it: Maybe freezing is not merely compliance. Maybe it is the refusal to live in a state of anticipating disaster; maybe it's the refusal to live in anger and fear—that is, the refusal to fight or flee. Freezing food is a method of preserving it, and maybe the metaphor applies: In an uncertain future, maybe we can preserve ourselves by claiming our right to be present and in control of the parts of our life that we can shape, as uncompromising and as certain as ice.
Saved by Strangers

Last year, my sister befriended the two young Mormon missionaries stationed for the fall in her small upstate New York town. Whatever I expected young religious zealots to be like, these guys were not it. Once, when I was visiting, I looked out the back window and saw them standing in the backyard throwing snowballs at her house to get her attention. Another time, they texted her at ten p.m. to say that they were in the backyard jumping on her trampoline, and that she should come join them immediately. Their earnest devotion to their faith coexisted with loud farts and video games. One of the boys had a public Facebook page that included a photo of him posing on his bicycle wearing flip-flops and long board shorts, staring sideways at the camera with sunglasses and his tongue hanging from his mouth. His favorite TV shows included *South Park* and *Jersey Shore*.

I know enough about Mormonism to know that its followers are fully integrated into all areas of mainstream American life—that it produces figures as apparently diverse as Mitt Romney, Harry Reid, and Jon Heder of *Napolean Dynamite*. So it's not all that surprising to learn that these kids are as ordinary as any kids in the weird borderland between adolescence and adulthood. That is, that they are as perplexing and amusing and
strange as people ordinarily are. That's not really the realization here. Of course these boys, once you get to know them, reveal themselves to be more and different than they appear when you spot them from afar in their matching uniforms and name tags walking in lockstep down a small town sidewalk. Then, when they are strangers, they look dull and robotic and I want to avoid them. When they cease to be strangers, they reveal themselves to be as surprising and ordinary and complex as every other human being reveals himself to be when he ceases to be a stranger.

If this is the case—if people are more fun, interesting, and engaging when you know them than when you stare from a distance—then why do I find it so tempting to isolate myself? If not for my sister, these Mormon boys would have remained anonymous and strange to me, because I would never have spoken to them. I feel myself stuck within a paradox: I like getting to know people, but I avoid encounters with strangers. I like talking and listening to people, but I avoid unexpected conversations. I want to learn about people who are different than I am, but I hide from chances to meet them.

A few days after I moved into a new house a few years ago, a wiry old woman with curled shoulders approached me in the driveway while I brought groceries inside. She told me that she collects cans, and she wanted to know if I would leave mine for her on the porch every few days. I couldn't imagine why anyone would choose such a small town for a can-collecting revenue stream. She didn't even push a shopping cart; she just carried a few small plastic grocery bags that couldn't have held more than a dollar's worth of returnables if packed full. Then again, she too, like the bags, looked like she couldn't have carried much more, so perhaps they served to limit her to quantities her small thin
frame could handle. She said I could just leave the cans on the porch, or, she said, she could just ring the doorbell when she was in the neighborhood to see if I had anything ready for her. "OK," I said, and I thought I meant it, but a week later when I saw her approaching the house, I hurried upstairs to my bedroom. She rang the doorbell and I did not respond. I don't know what I feared—conversation, I guess. I would have liked to learn more about her, but somehow I feared that the relationship would spin out of control, as if there was no braking point between a casual exchange of cans and inviting her to live in my spare room. Ashamed, I peeked out the window and watched her hobble away.

I wonder if she triggered the same visceral reaction provoked by religious missionaries on my doorstep. Maybe there's something scary about ceding the front porch to strangers as if they can hold you captive there. Once, I was caught off-guard when an elderly woman on my doorstep asked me to talk about Jesus and attempted to thrust a pamphlet in my hand. "I'm an atheist," I announced with a sneer, and shut the door. I felt compelled to get her away as quickly as possible, but then I found myself curious what she actually had to say. Was she the fire-and-brimstone type or more likely to tell me that Jesus was my friend? I'm fascinated by people's religious beliefs, but I rejected the chance to scrutinize the specimen of faith that had appeared before me. I believe that I am interested in talking to all types of people, but when cornered by an unbidden encounter, I flee within.

When the Mormons first knocked on Rachel's door in the early fall and asked if she had a few minutes to talk about The Bible, she did not mutter something about
atheism and shut the door on them. She did tell them that it wasn't a good time to talk, because she was leaving to bring her son to school. It was a perfect excuse to sneak away and never hear from them again, but instead, she invited them to come back another time. My sister is not looking for religion. She is simply curious about what people think and feel, especially people whose thoughts and feelings she finds perplexing or provocative. I'm curious about these things too, but unlike me, Rachel is not afraid of the awkward interactions and misunderstandings likely to stem from honest questions and answers. Unlike the rest of our family, she isn't afraid of a little confrontation. I sometimes believe that she would be more at home with the shouting Italians of "Moonstruck" than with the stoicism of our British/Irish stock. In a way, this confrontational edge makes her good with strangers. On the surface, I sometimes appear more comfortable in social situations, but it is because I excel at avoiding and deflecting awkward interactions. Rachel dives right in.

At first, she questioned the Mormons about the conflict between their version of American history and commonly accepted historic and archeological record, and through their responses learned what it means to believe in the infallibility of a book—how all other evidence and phenomena simply fall in line behind the unquestioned Truth of the Book of Mormon. She questioned them about the Church's homophobia. "God doesn't hate gay people," they told her. God doesn't hate anybody. It's not a sin to be gay; it's only a sin to act on those feelings. After it became clear that Rachel bore no interest in adopting their faith, though, the boys kept coming. They came over to the house for dinner. They showed up on Rachel's doorstep in running clothes at eight a.m. to invite her to join them jogging. They trudged through the woods and threw snowballs at the roof.
"What are they like?" I asked her. I found it hard to believe that their loud and feverish love of Jesus wouldn't color their every move.

"They're hilarious," she responded, in exactly the same voice in which she tells me that her two year old and five year old are hilarious. She loved their uncensored passion, their earnestness, their naïveté.

Rachel told our mother that she was spending time with Mormons.

"Oh, Rachel," my mom responded, exasperated, as if the whole thing was a provocation. "If you want to learn about people's religion, why don't you talk to some Buddhists or something?"

Later, my mom casually mentioned it to me: "Did Rachel tell you about her new friends?"

I was vehement in my support. "I think it's great. It's fascinating to get to try to understand how people live."

"Mmm," my mom responded, as she walked out of the room.

She probably feared that Rachel would be swept up by their zeal. It's not an entirely unfounded fear—Rachel once befriended a charismatic libertarian whose appealing logic intrigued her for a couple months until she confronted the ways in which the philosophy, when put into action, conflicted with her deeply-held belief in the importance of empathy. Maybe my mom was afraid that, in these kids' faith, Rachel would see something that's missing in her own life. Maybe she'd be seduced by an extreme version of a thing she could find in any religion. Or maybe Mom just believed that there are other people and other causes more deserving of Rachel's time and effort. I encountered this reaction in my mother when I told her I was interviewing a conspiracy-
theorizing survivalist. With all the people in the world willing to talk and share, she wondered, why would I pick his story to tell?

I guess it was my question, too. With so many people she could get to know, I didn't understand why Rachel chose the Mormons. For all the ways in which these boys proved themselves "typical," their lives were worlds apart from ours. They belong to a church that scatters its young adult males across the globe and tells them to knock on doors to share their faith. Whether you love it or hate it, it's hard to deny that a missionary is a weird thing to see in an American town or city. The sight of two young matching men on the prowl for converts unnerves me. When I've seen them approaching my doorstep, I've ignored the doorbell. When I see them standing on the sidewalk, huddled over a map, charting their path through an unfamiliar town, I feel sorry for them. What do they talk about?, I wonder. When a door slams in their faces, do they sustain pious thoughts or does a rebellious little fuck you bubble up inside them? It doesn't seem right to make people do this.

These kids, Rachel tells me, just feel that they are sharing something wonderful with those who want to hear it.

"Why is that so strange?" Rachel asks. "What's so bad about it?"

I tell her that there's just something offensive about proselytizing. I mean, come on, isn't there some precedent for the feeling that religious missionaries are up to no good? What about colonialism? What about the implicit condemnation of all the other religions people practice? What about sexism and racism and homophobia and the litany of other narrow-minded prejudices peddled by so many vocal religious groups? Rachel has talked to the Mormons about homosexuality, and she told them early on that it's a
deal-breaker for her—that even if she was looking for a religion, she could never convert to one that forbids homosexuality. It's true, though, that most conservative Christian churches are homophobic, so this may not be grounds for singling out the Mormons in particular.

Rachel grows a little defensive when I criticize them. "They know that most people are not interested and they're ok with that. I just don't understand why people hate them so much."

The Mormons told Rachel about the rage with which some people greet them. People chase them off their property. People curse at them. People peer at them through the window and then shut the blinds and turn off the lights. I try to imagine what it would feel like to enter a community in this way. I wonder whether faith and confidence in the worth of your mission can really assuage the loneliness of doors shutting in your face, especially for someone who is still almost a child. I wonder these things while sitting alone, but if a pair of missionaries knocked on my door right now, I would say little more than "no thank you" and "not interested" with my hand never moving from the doorknob. I doubt that I would ask them how they feel.

I imagine approaching a house with free pizzas or free novels or free Otis Redding albums in my arms—something that I see as indisputably great and joy-giving—and I imagine offering them to the middle-aged woman who opens the door. If she cursed at me and chased me from the property, then sure, I would be confused.

"I don't know, maybe it's not just about the religious aspect," I concede. "I guess I resent it when anyone comes to my home like that. It feels like an invasion of privacy."

Rachel thinks that all my resistance and annoyance boils down to one thing: "You
don't want to talk to them because you hate disappointing people. You hate telling them 'no so you'd rather not talk to them at all." It's true, I guess. I can't enter into a conversation without thinking ten steps ahead, and if I see the potential for misunderstanding, disappointment, or conflict, it's over before it begins.

In Ithaca, environmental groups often station themselves along the pedestrian mall called the Commons, and when I lived there I would sometimes walk fifty feet out of my way to avoid being approached. I would hold my cell phone to my ear and murmur "uh huh" and "yeah" into its silence. I would walk with frantic speed, looking at the clock on the bank tower, as if in far too great a hurry to stop, and if they didn't pick up this signal, I would respond to their hello with a panting smile: "Sorry, not right now. I'm in a hurry."

Some of the canvassers start with a line that is easy to deflect, like, "Do you have a minute?" But others have been trained to trap you with a line like, "You look like someone who cares about the environment." I struggle to find the appropriate response to this non-question, and have never tried the one that feels most honest: "Yes, I am, but I don't like it when people talk to me." Sometimes I genuinely want to know more about the cause they represent—I do want to understand more about the environmental impact of hydro-fracking in the Marcellus Shale region—but my visceral recoil preempts any logical reaction. It's as if I live in a bubble carefully inflated each morning with the amount of air I will need for all of the actions and interactions I can anticipate. There's nothing left for an unexpected encounter—it's like sucking on an empty balloon.

There's no good reason that I couldn't pump a little more air into that bubble—that I couldn't welcome the possibility of unpredicted interactions, but perhaps they threaten
some feeling of control that I cherish. I may not be afraid of disappointing these strangers on the street, but I am afraid of relinquishing control of my encounters. It takes so much time and effort to ensure that people understand the version of myself that I want to portray, and I am afraid of being misunderstood in these unbidden moments.

When I see a panhandler walking slowly between lanes of traffic at a stop light, I usually avoid eye contact. But recently a man held a sign that said "Even a smile helps," and though it's one of a handful of tired sentiments echoed on cardboard signs in every city I've lived, for some reason it penetrated my defenses that day. I locked eye contact with the man as I drove past, and I smiled a little, and he smiled a little. I know that what he needs more than smiles is money. And he knows that when you ask for money, many people will not give it. But why must we not look at each other? I feel like a coward when I look away, and yet I almost always look away.

In *The Book of Calamities*, Peter Trachtenberg struggles with this same question. While visiting Calcutta, he allocated ten dollars a day to give to people on the street, and when that money was gone, he would "skulk around the city, [his] gaze averted from every supplicant." He eventually realized, or decided, that "what was shameful wasn't [his] failure to give but [his] failure to look at the people [he] refused, for [he] was, tacitly, refusing them." He committed himself to maintaining eye contact with every person who asked him for money. In the end, though, he found that the gesture often caused anger and confusion—some people seemed to resent his eye contact when it wasn't accompanied by spare change, as if it was intended to mislead or manipulate them. The act of seeing and acknowledging a person might be important for the seer—it forces
confrontation with lives and situations that are easier to ignore—but this may not resonate with the ones who are the object of the seeing.

Last summer, visiting Prague, I found that the conventions for panhandling are different than in other places I have been. Nearly every panhandler in the city sits silently sculpted into the same submissive posture. Each is kneeling, his body bowed forward, his head curled down so far as to sometimes touch the cobblestones with his forehead. His face is always hidden. His arms extend forward to hold onto a cup or hat that is nestled in open hands in front of his supplicant form. The panhandlers never speak. They have no signs. They never look up to catch the eye of a curious woman who might, in a glance, be guilded into parting with a few Czech crowns, the change she received after buying souvenirs on the Charles Bridge. Targeted emotional manipulation has always seemed a necessary (though irritating) part of a panhandler's practices—it is too easy to walk on by when nobody speaks to you or even sees you.

At the time, I found the practice sad. It felt as if the panhandlers were deemed so low that they did not deserve even the opportunity to meet our glances. But I wonder now if there's actually some power in the gesture, because we tourists are no longer the ones choosing whether to look or to look away. The choice is not ours. Peter Trachtenberg found that his gaze was often unappreciated: It may have felt taunting, or at the very least meaningless. The comfort of not being invisible can perhaps be outweighed by the pain of being seen and dismissed without action. I weigh this notion against the idea that it's cowardly and unkind to hide from the strangers you encounter—the people you will most likely refuse.
In the end, I don't really know why the panhandlers do not look at me. I imagine Rachel grappling with the same question and deciding that it warrants an answer. I imagine her crouching down next to one of them and asking them, "Why do you sit like that? Why don't you look at us?" Rachel hates avoidance. She'd much rather take things head-on. Her temper sparks at inconvenient moments. She refuses to follow the rules that guarantee placidity and good humor in all her interactions, and she is drawn to people who similarly refuse to follow society's unwritten rules about when we look at each other and when we look away, about when we speak to each other and when we stay silent, about what we can ask of one another. Who, really, are served by these rules, and what's the harm in breaking them? They rules are broken by the Mormons and any other strangers who knock on your door to divulge their knowledge of life's greatest mysteries. They are broken by people on the street who reach beyond the gauze of self-enclosure that accompanies us into every public place. They are broken by the people who ask for the generosity of strangers. They are broken by people who insist on being seen and heard.

One day I was sitting on a sunny park bench staring without focus through trees and the bodies of playing children, lonely and morose over something an ex-boyfriend had said, when a man came shouting toward me and sat down by my side. For thirty minutes he spoke to me in riddles. His fiftieth birthday was coming up, he told me, and it was an important one because it was when he would stop being a student of life.

"I've been moving forward and now I'll start moving backward, but I won't be moving backward cuz the world is round, you know?"
He talked and talked and as he went on he kept grasping onto more threads of life and pulling them into the tapestry he was weaving—a homespun philosophy blending animism and pop philosophy and history and celebrity gossip and dreamy aspiration. He was crazy, I guess, but a word like "crazy" is designed to deflate his joy, to drain his words of value. He dreamed of moving to a tropical island where Marlon Brando would still be alive. Listening to him, I felt a tightness in my chest release. Sad things seemed silly and trivial. Life filled with possibility. When I stood to leave, he left me with just those words that a heart-broken girl needs to hear: "Remember, the world is BIG." On a day when I felt less aimless I might have walked away after he sat down. I might have felt my space invaded by his presence and his words. I might have declared that I needed to be somewhere else. But on that day I needed this stranger, and all I had to do was not to look away.
Wedding Plans

In the morning, with the dog, you and I watch men gather themselves for work along the river, clustered in helmeted twos and threes, like boys on the edge of a day beginning, lunchboxes swinging. They've been working on barges for weeks, driving piers past silty current into solid earth below. They're building a boardwalk, we're told—like a bridge, except it does not cross the river. It traces the bank, a path from one shore to itself. Two landings linked by an arc along the water. Train tracks run close to the river's edge—for years they claimed this place for smoke and steel, for things that move blind to station stops. Now someone has said, yes, we will make room for the living even if it means learning to walk on water. Construction's on schedule. Maybe by next summer we will walk from Locust Street to Gray's Ferry along this beam of solid ground by jogging strollers and old men slack-jawed on benches, by a freckled boy fishing, leaning on the rail like there's no hurry, ever. By next summer we'll be married, too, and I don't know how life will feel after all this building is done. Where will these men work next? Where do cranes and barges go? The scaffolding of change looms large until it disappears, and we may need a new project to contemplate on morning walks.
I am getting married in a few months, and I sometimes wonder if my students notice my engagement ring the way I notice piercings and airbrushed fingernails and mustaches on men under the age of thirty—whether it serves as a shortcut to certain assumptions about my identity. "Being engaged" feels like such a dainty—such a precious—state of being. If my students know I am engaged, I wonder if they imagine the wedding I am planning. I wonder if they think I am too old to be escorted down the aisle by my parents. I wonder if they imagine my drunken friends, my white gown, my first kiss, my bouquet. When I think of a bride, I don't usually think of a teacher. When I think of a wife, I don't usually think of myself.

For all of my life, I have found it comforting to think that I am moving toward some future version of myself—that I am in the process of becoming something that I need not be quite yet. The alternative—to feel that you have arrived at the state where you will remain—seems like the essence of stagnancy, though perhaps someone might argue that it could be called contentedness. Perhaps happiness does not require change and movement—perhaps it is possible to arrive at the place where you want to stay.

Planning the wedding has me thinking about this question of arrival—about the
anxiety of nearing a version of myself that I always imagined would someday exist, but
who hung out on the far horizon. I feel like a runner in a relay race: as the distance
narrows between me and a person called wife to whom I prepare to pass the baton, it's not
that the future has lost any of its uncertainty, but the version of myself lurching into that
next lap looks a little bit different than the person I've been so far.

When Mike purchased my engagement ring, the jeweler suggested that when we
are not so tight on cash we can have a replacement ring made. He suggested that this tiny
diamond can become one of the chorus girls flanking a much larger rock. I imagine it
shoved to the side like the pipsqueak inventor who rams his head against the large
corporation, squealing, "It was my idea! I was first!" Yes, maybe we could "upgrade" the
ring, as if the people we are now will become an embarrassment to some future version
of ourselves. But no—if this ring is going to mark me, I want it to mark me as the person
I am now, like the hatch marks on a door frame that show a child how she has grown, or
the high water mark that shows how flood waters have receded. This, it says, is where we
were.

Maybe this is melodramatic. So I'm getting married. So what? Mike and I have
dated for five years, have lived together for two—not much is likely to change that much.
But I look down at the ring adorning my finger as I write, and something about it does
seem significant: I've agreed to wear this marker on my body, to announce this liminal
stage between being an individual and being one of a pair, and in a few months, I will
wear a ring that announces that the transformation is complete. We don't wear rings to
show that we are students or teachers or parents or homeowners, but we wear rings that
say that we are married. This, the ring seems to say, is how you are defined. This is the
identity at which you have arrived. There is something disorienting about embracing this
state—of being wife, of being life partner—while still resisting the things with which it is
so often associated: completion, wholeness. I don't want to be complete. I don't want
Mike to make me whole. I don't want to be his.

If I'm so afraid of this marker, I could choose to not wear a wedding ring. I'd be in
good company. Forty years ago, before I was born, my mother lost hers while gardening.
She and my father rented a metal detector and searched for hours with no luck. Rather
than buy a replacement, they decided that my father would just take his off too, and
they've both been ringless ever since. And: The diamond fell out of my sister's
engagement ring and she never found it. It came from a pawn shop so they didn't really
care. And: She and her husband had matching silver wedding bands, but he developed an
allergic reaction to the silver and had to stop wearing it. A couple years later, he made
himself a new titanium ring on the lathe at his job. It looks like a piece of industrial
hardware. After getting to know my family, Mike's mom asked if we—my family—are
opposed in principle to rings. Of course not, I said. It just happened that way. But I
realize that I never asked my mother why they didn't buy new ones. Is there are part of
her that enjoys that strangers cannot think they have pinned her down with a glance?

There are many cultures that indicate a woman's marital status by some kind of
physical marker—through hair, jewelry, clothes, or makeup. In traditional Hopi culture,
unmarried women wear their hair in large symmetrical "squash blossom" or "butterfly"
whorls. After marriage, they wear their hair in low coiled pigtails. Married Hindu women
often apply bright red powder of vermillion along the part in the hair or on their forehead.
Many Orthodox Jewish women cover their hair after marriage with a headscarf or a wig.
Markers of men's marital status are far less common. Amish men shave their facial hair until they are married. After they marry, they continue to shave their mustache but let their beard grow long. There are few other examples of men bearing a physical marker of their marital status.

In the 1920s, the American jewelry industry launched a failed attempt to popularize engagement rings for men, marketing "masculine" rings with names like The Major, The Master, and The Stag. But similar attempts at marketing men's wedding rings met with more success: During and after World War II, the jewelry industry jumped on the opportunity presented by husbands' long absences, convincing Americans that rings for both men and women would help ease the burden of a soldier's tour of duty. "Double ring" ceremonies became and remain the overwhelming norm. The same industry that got women hooked on diamond engagement rings persuaded us that men and women both need markers of their marriage. It's one of few examples of an egalitarian display of marital status, and I wish we didn't have DeBeers to thank.

So while wedding rings might no longer represent gender difference, they still do suggest that our individuality is compromised and subsumed by our unions. But can't the same be said of much of the language of love?

"He's taken."

"She's mine."

"I give myself to you."

There's an allure to the limits on individuality that we willingly impose upon ourselves when we decide to live in a partnership. There is a joy and a satisfaction to knowing I am bound to someone else and feeling how this connection contains me. The
poet Nick Flynn wrote a poem for the wedding of friends that contains the lines, "One morning / you will turn toward him & ask, Why do I feel / I am falling into the center of the earth? That / same morning you will reach your hand up / & know it will be caught." I don't know what to make of this word, "caught." On one hand, I imagine the sensation of jumping and falling with the knowledge that I will be saved from hitting the hard ground. On the other, I imagine my hand reaching outward as another hand clamps down around my wrist like a handcuff. This catching has two sides, and perhaps this is the tension contained in the ring. It doesn't stop movement, and yet it feels like a monument. Like closure. Like stillness.

I am both comforted and anxious about this stillness. It's the question, again, of arriving, of anticipating standing in a place that has always been out of sight, and wondering what you will be able to see from this new vantage point. Of course this wedding isn't the end of change for me and Mike. Few thing in our lives are stable and foreseeable: our jobs are in flux; I don't know where we'll be living in six months; I don't know what city to call home. But this one certainty encircles me—this ring is a border that contains me. It holds me.

I started dating Mike because I was certain that it would not last. The night we exchanged numbers he told me he was moving to Brooklyn in three weeks, and had he not told me so, I never would have called him to invite him out for drinks the following week. He was twenty three and I was twenty nine; the thirty year old man I had recently dated professed to be years away from readiness for a serious commitment, so I had little hope or interest in what someone just out of college could offer. Mike and I went out a
few times, and he moved on schedule to Williamsburg. Then, the emails and phone calls and visits began, and through a long series of little steps too slow and seamless to recount, we became a couple who became the couple who is, five years later, getting married.

In the past, the only way I could approach that woman on the horizon, the "wife" I hoped to be someday, was by not looking in her direction. Whenever I met someone who seemed to be looking for a serious partner—who actually acknowledged his hopes for the future—I found the obviousness of that path to be embarrassingly plain, as if a forest had been razed for the purpose of clarifying the route by which one could walk through it. A relationship only felt authentic to me if we charted its path blindly—uncertain at all times of what came next, and delighted when our instincts kept us stepping along synchronous paths. Perhaps it was all a ruse: maybe I was walking toward that spot on the horizon the whole time, but the laziness of the route made me feel that I wasn't concerned with arriving.

A year or so into our relationship, Mike and I were walking through a farmer's market on my lunch hour. He was worrying about his career and about all the things he felt he needed to get straight in his life. I told him that he could take me off the list of things he needed to worry about in the short term.

"Don't even think about proposing to me. Not for a long time," I said.

And once, so early on that I wasn't even sure about calling him my boyfriend, we were out to eat with a pregnant friend and we were talking about baby names. I said that I had always liked the name Reid. Mike said that his much-loathed swim coach was named Reid, so that name was off-limits to us. I raised my eyebrows and took a bite of pickle.
Our kids? A part of me wanted to shout, *No! Don't wreck it!*, but at the same time, I felt something within me expand, as if I could see, for the first time, what lay beyond my next step, and that I could breathe a little into that space.

The first time we really talked about marriage—on purpose—was at an Ethiopian restaurant in Tucson. We were halfway through a three month road trip, living out of the back of Mike's Subaru. A circle of spongy injera bread two feet in diameter filled the table between us, soaking in the juices of the small portions of stewed meat and spicy beans that sat on top. Somehow we started talking about weddings, and about the type of wedding each of us imagines. Together, we imagined the possibilities: a morning wedding on the lake with a breakfast buffet, a mid-winter wedding with stewed meats and steins of beer, a weekend in a cabin with our twenty closest friends. We continued eating, and I sat back, washed in a strange warm silence.

"We just talked about getting married," I said, surprised by how freeing it felt to imagine a shared future.

"I know."

You can choose between a ring that fits when it's hot and a ring that fits when it's cold. Mine fits when it's hot, and when it's cold it spins loosely around the base of my finger.

"I think it's too big," Mike says, pushing it back and forth. "We should get it resized."

"I think it's right," I tell him.

When I come out of the shower, I show him how snug it fits. I'd rather have some
breathing room than to feel strangled and pinched. I like how it moves, how it's not just a part of me that I can ignore like a birthmark. It's a reminder of what I have chosen, and I breathe in and out of it with the season. I'm told that it's fine as long as it doesn't fall off. It hasn't fallen off yet.
"What about the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians?" my mother asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I feel like everyone uses that." And besides, you can't get more than a few lines before or after "Love is patient, love is kind" before he's talking about Christ again. Not that there's anything wrong with that—it's just not for me. I don't want a reading from the Bible at my wedding.

"How about something by Merton?" I suggest. My Grandma loved him, and he's a monk and all, but he's radical and philosophical and strange.

The thing about Merton, though, my uncle tells me, is that he was pretty gung-ho about monasticism (despite that brief tormenting love affair). He might not have much to offer on the topic of romantic love and marriage. But my uncle, a poet, is on the job now, and before I know it, we're deep into the guys he calls Merton's "Asian buddies," and I'm reading Merton's interpretations of Chuang Tzu's Taoist verses, and my uncle's getting pretty excited about lines like "it is this self awareness / which we try to increase and perfect / by all sorts of methods and practices / that is really a forgetfulness / of our own true roots and solidarity," and I wonder, is this really the right message for a wedding, and anyway, is it really any less contrived for a non-Taoist to include Taoist verses at her
wedding than it is for lapsed Catholic to include the New Testament?

It's hard to figure out how to give the Catholics a proper shout-out.

Don't get me wrong: Jesus does not need a shout-out in my wedding. I have nothing against Jesus, but I don't feel that he has anything to do with my decision to marry Mike. And my conservative second cousins don't need a shout-out. I don't really care that much what they think of my religion or my lack of religion. But since there will come a time in this wedding when Mike will stomp on a glass and shout "Mazel Tov," and since there will come a time in this wedding when I will be picked up in a chair while people dance around me singing Hava Nagila—even though that is the extent of Mike's family's Jewishness that will be felt, even though we're not signing a ketubah, nobody's reading the Seven Blessings, we're standing under more of an "arbor" than a "chuppah," and there will be no Hebrew, no yarmulkes, and no mention of Adonai—I feel like giving a shout-out to the Catholics who made me.

I don't mean my parents, because even their Catholicism feels halfhearted—they appreciate it for the dose of spiritualism it offers, but their anger toward the church's politics seems to outweigh any earnest faith in Jesus' resurrection. I mean I owe a shout-out to the Catholics who made them: my father's mother, Anne Kennedy, who read Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day and Father Berrigan and who protested the Vietnam War and who truly believed when she died, with peace and anticipation, that another world awaited her. I mean her great-grandmother, Anne Larkin, who eloped from Ireland
with the family gardener and moved to Manhattan where that asshole left her, alone, with
their daughter Julia, and where she stayed, even after her parents learned from a priest of
her whereabouts and sent money for her passage home. I mean my mother's father, who
mumbled grace before meals until the day he died, who would stand in the back of our
church at Christmas Eve mass because he hated the crowds and who would tell me, later
on, exactly how many pews and how many chandeliers and how many potted poinsettias
he counted from where he stood. I mean my father's father, who was gone from the
hospital when my father was born because he went out to eat some meatloaf at the pub. I
mean my mother's mother's father, who crossed the Atlantic ten times on steamer ships. I
mean all of them, the Kennedys and Clancys and Egans and Hargreaves and their First
Communions and their Easter hats and their rosary beads and their beer and their corned
beef and their off-key church organs. I mean the old man on the rocky shore of Ireland
who asked me my name and said, "ah, you're a good Irish girl." I mean that when I hear
about priests and sexual abuse, I feel my grandmother's heart break, and when I hear
about nuns who talk back to the Vatican, I feel her smile. I mean that I wore shamrock
boxer shorts over my jeans to a spelling bee in fifth grade. I mean that my children will
know the difference between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. I mean that I am proud of
Catholicism's weirdly mystical extremes and glad that it was never wiped Methodist
clean. I feel the centuries of faith that haunt cathedral walls and the power of that faith
feels real, and even though I reject their propriety and their tight-lipped suffering, I
welcome the Catholics' fierce attachments and their power and their pride. I need them as
I make this marriage, as I take this leap of faith.
What about Seamus Heaney? I wonder. What about Brian Doyle? What about Patrick Kavanagh? How can it be so hard to find twenty lines that represent my loyalty, my skepticism, my closeness, my distance, my gratitude, my resistance, and my love? Is it really so hard to explain how I feel the power of this current in my blood and yet believe in my brain that it does not define me?
Commuting between Philadelphia and Camden on the PATCO train, I sit on old vinyl seats in a train car that looks like it hasn't changed in fifty years, or has only changed in the ways that the colors have faded or darkened over years of exposure to skin, cleaning products, and the sunlight that flashes in and out of the windows as the train crosses the Delaware River along the Ben Franklin Bridge. I look at the yellowing walls, the speckled spearmint floor panels, and the durable dark green and tan vinyl, and I know the combination of colors is ugly, but it makes me comfortable. It reminds me of places that make me happy—places that haven't changed for decades, like my grandfather's kitchen.

A picture I drew when I was eleven was still scotch-taped to my grandfather's refrigerator when he died fourteen years later. The picture was called "Santa's Workshop." It depicted a lean Santa Claus walking in the foreground, holding a teddy bear. In the background, a single shelf spanning the length of the paper was filled with various toys, including a Jack-in-the-Box, a dollhouse, and some storybooks. A reindeer observed from the sidelines, his head poking in from off the page. My first attempt at drawing the reindeer's head had been vigorously erased but it had apparently been drawn with equal
vigor, and the faint outline of its misshapen form was still visible alongside the second, final, version. When I was young, I would draw pictures every time I went to my grandfather's house, and the refrigerator display would change with every visit. "Santa's Workshop," though, was the last drawing. It's rare to be able to pinpoint "the last time" you do something that was, in an earlier phase of life, commonplace. You almost never know, when doing something for the last time, that you are doing it for the last time. Surely, when I drew and colored "Santa's Workshop," I did not know it was the last picture I would draw in that house, but by the next year I had moved on to other small adventures, leaving that drawing to remain on the fridge, the colors fading a little each year until Santa's suit was a washed-out pink sometime in the early 2000s.

Grandpa's couch, which he called the davenport, had hefty wooden arms and brown and orange woolly plaid upholstery. The television was a piece of furniture in itself—the screen encased in a enormous wooden shell that sat alone on the rug beside the rocking chair. Looking at pictures taken when my mother was in college, I would see a room identical to the one I knew so well, different only in that the pictures had a cast of characters that no longer existed: a living grandmother, a father with long hair, and a mother with short skirts. I understand the desire to update a space, to tear out the old faded trappings of a time that has passed, but it's hard to argue that nothing is lost. Memories imprinted on physical spaces are lost. When I was twenty-seven, I moved from an apartment with a bright modern kitchen with white cabinets and a black-and-white checkered floor into an apartment with rust-colored linoleum, buttery yellow cabinets, mustard countertops, and pale yellow flowered wallpaper. There was little natural light but the whole room felt saturated with an old dark glow. All of my friends loved that
kitchen, not because it was a throwback to a decade—the 60s—that was nearing its fifty-year revival in fashion and home decor, but because it felt like all of our grandparents' kitchens, imbued with stagnancy and love.

The entire PATCO fleet is being renovated. The main objective is to update the technology of the cars, but the technological improvements will be accompanied by an interior redesign. Over a thousand PATCO riders participated in a survey to choose the color palette for the new seats, floor, and wall lining. "Color Palette Blue #3" won. The new seat cushions and floor will be an icy periwinkle and the walls and the seat frames will be slate grey. Black armrests and handles for standing riders will provide a flash of contrast to the cool tones that pervade. Looking at the computer-generated graphic posted on the PATCO website to display the winning design, I understand the psychology behind these color choices. The cool muted tones are neutral, calming, and evoke a feeling of spaciousness. They are sterile, and perhaps sterility is a good thing for public transportation. They are unobtrusive, intent on not invading our minds and emotions.

The PATCO cars themselves are not being replaced—they are being completely refurbished, but the exterior shell and major structural components will remain the same. In small batches, the train cars are trucked to a facility in western New York where they will stay for two years, gutted and then slowly rebuilt, remade, reborn. The company that works on them is called Alstom. The town in western New York that serves as home to Alstom's rolling stock manufacturing division is called Hornell. In addition to boasting the largest passenger rail car facility in the United States, Hornell is the town where my mother was born and raised, where my grandmother and grandfather lived until they died,
and where my mother's only brother lives to this day. It is the place I've been talking about—where my grandpa's house at 13 Mays Avenue didn't change for decades, where I went to buy ice cream cones in the same ice cream parlor where my mom worked as a teenager. It is that place imbued with stagnancy, decades of sameness, and love, and now it is the place that where the train car interiors—the ones that remind me of Hornell, of times and places that are warm and old and familiar—will disappear. It is just a coincidence—nearly all small towns in the United States probably manufacture some small part of the lives of Americans living and commuting in cities—but it's hard for me to think of the PATCO cars arriving on flat-bed trucks in the town where my mother was raised and not feel awestruck by the unexpected places where the past weaves its way into the present and ensures its grip on the future.

When I was young, it was hard to imagine that Hornell existed beyond my knowledge of it. Grandpa lived at 13 Mays Ave and Aunt Eileen lived on East Washington Street. The ice cream shop, the pizza shop, the school and its tennis courts and ball fields were all on Seneca Street, and the pet store was across from the school swimming pool on Adsit Street. The old JCPenney's department store and Friendly's Restaurant were about as far as I ventured, all the way down near the pedestrian mall on Main Street, almost a mile away. There were times when we drove further—to the James Street Park, to Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Gene's house, to the Chinese restaurant that I remember as the only restaurant I ever visited with Grandpa—but these locations felt impossibly distant from my walking world there. Looking now at a map, I see that the James Street Park was just under two miles from 13 Mays Ave., and Aunt Dorothy's place
was probably only a mile away, but it was across the four-lane highway that cleaved the town in two when it was constructed in 1972, so they might as well have lived in another city altogether. There were other things in Hornell that I had never seen or even heard about, and one of them was the Alstom Corporation and its rail car manufacturing plant down on Transit Drive.

For the bulk of its history, Hornell was a railroad town. In 1851, pre-railroad years, it was a tiny village with 700 residents. In 1852, after the opening of the Erie Railroad transformed it into a station stop on the first passenger railway from New York City to Lake Erie, the population started to grow. In 1852: 1,800; in 1865, over 5,000; by 1890, over 11,000; and by 1900, 14,000. And Hornell wasn't just any old railroad station town. It became home to the Erie Shops, the largest steam engine repair complex for Erie's rail cars. By 1891, visitors to Hornell would find a town with three hotels, four banks, five silk mills, a fairground with a horse racing park, a shoe factory, and a world-class opera house visited by the Russian Symphony Orchestra, John Philip Sousa's Marching Band, and the magician Harry Houdini.

In 1930, Hornell's population was over 16,000, but like for so many railroad towns, what followed was not pretty. The beginning of the end came in the year my mother was born, 1948, when Erie switched from steam to diesel locomotives that required less service. Hundreds of workers in Hornell were laid off. In 1960, Erie merged with the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad and the Hornell accounting office was closed. In 1970, Erie discontinued passenger service. In 1972, the year after my parents got married at St. Anne's Church with a reception at the Ponce De Leon Restaurant, the Erie-Lackawanna Railroad went bankrupt and the Hornell repair shops
closed completely. In 1990, when I drew "Santa's Workshop," the population of Hornell was 9,500 and dropping. After the Erie Shops closed, the facilities were leased for a time to General Electric and then to Morris-Knudsen, and then in 1995, Alstom began leasing the site. In the last twenty years there have been periods of hope and periods of despair as Alstom competes for contracts to renovate the nation's aging subway and rail cars. After years of uncertainty and layoffs, it won the PATCO contract in 2010, and while this allowed the company to start hiring again, it is a trickle compared to Hornell's old railroad days.

I knew none of this when I was young. It's difficult to overstate how much I loved Hornell and how little I knew of its deep, permanent depression. I played with the girls across the street whose father was, and continues to be, the mayor (in office for twenty-eight years so far, he is the longest serving in New York State). I sat at St. Anne's Church for Sunday mass where the priest's arms shook with Parkinson's and they read from thick song books instead of the photocopied song-sheets to which I was accustomed. I spent hours in the must-smelling cellar helping Uncle Bobby with his carpentry projects, occasionally rummaging through the stacks of old board games from when my mother was a kid. I followed Grandpa through the supermarket, smiling as he tipped his hat at the people we passed. He seemed to know everyone, and everyone knew him. Emmett Clancy: lifelong Hornell resident, baseball star, World War Two vet, grocery store owner, snow plow driver, Erie Railroad switch operator. He flirted with the cashiers, much as he flirted with me: "Now don’t hit me when I say this," he would tell me, "but you’re a good looking girl."

When it was time to leave at the end of a trip, I would hide between coats in the
walk-in closet while Mom and Grandpa shouted back and forth about how it was ok, she'd leave without me and I could stay and go to Hornell Elementary School for a year or two. "It's just up the street," Grandpa would say. "You just walk up to the corner and you're there." As I got older I knew it was a joke but I still wished that maybe, someday, I could stay. Maybe for a summer? A summer in Hornell meant trips up to my third cousins' farm and to the old wooded homestead at Hartsville Hill where the small stone foundation of Grandpa's childhood home lay hidden in the woods. It meant playing in the next-door neighbors' above-ground swimming pool. It meant rising early with Uncle Bobby and hiking down Mays Ave to the Canisteo River with fishing poles and lunchboxes ensuring we'd be gone until at least noon. It meant playing tiddly-winks on the green outdoor carpeting in the screened-in front porch as the Hornell Evening Tribune was tossed on the front steps by the paperboy in the late afternoon.

And then there was the food, an unchanging bounty of items that I never ate elsewhere: powdered doughnuts from a box, salted Planters peanuts, bologna, whole milk, yellow slices of cheese, soft sticks of real butter that were never refrigerated, soft sandwich bread with no crunchy grains inside. I didn't know it was a kitchen stuck in 1965, but I knew that it was food I would never see at my own house and would never bother even asking for. I can still taste the Oscar Meyer bologna on soft bread with butter and yellow mustard, served on a white plate at the round table with the faded plastic table cloth and round cloth placemats.

An old bronze grocery store scale sat on the counter next to the fridge, a relic of the days when Grandpa owned a store. After his time as a grocer ended, he never lost his knack for guessing an item's weight—I could hand him an orange or a coffee mug or a
carton of ice cream and he would stand in the middle of the kitchen, skinny legs spread with knees slightly bent, and he'd bob the item up and down in his open palm, testing its heft and density. "Ehhhh—fourteen ounces," he'd declare, and I'd scurry to put it on the scale. He was always right, even in the years when he couldn't remember how old I was or where I went to college, in the years when he paced all day between the living room and the kitchen, anxiously tapping his fingers on the kitchen counter and watching through the window for any disturbances in the neighborhood, constantly moving from one room to the next, forgetting as soon as he was in one place what was happening in the place he had left just a moment before.

"I'm losing control," he told me the last time I visited. "Where's Bobby?"

“He and mom went out. They’ll be back at nine.”

“That’s right. Thank you.”

“Grandpa, can I get anything for you?”

“No . . . I’m just looking for a can of beer but I can’t find one.”

“I don’t know where to find one either.”

“Well, I’m just going to look in here one more time.”

The carpet in the dining room along his path between the living room and kitchen was worn thin from his constant shuffling back and forth. There was a stack of old fedoras and fishing hats on top of the refrigerator. He never left home without a hat, but he didn't leave home much anymore. The air in the house felt caged and desperate. Grandpa would wake from his frequent naps and hurry up from his armchair to investigate what was happening in the other rooms, as if life was transpiring in the places he could not see. But no, it was quiet everywhere. There was nothing new to see.
After Grandpa died in 2005, Uncle Bobby continued to live in the house, and upon my mother's insistent prodding, he renovated the kitchen. The space is barely recognizable—the water-stained drop-ceiling panels are gone and the ceiling is two feet higher. The grease-stained peeling wallpaper has been replaced with new drywall painted bright salmon orange. A peninsula counter with tall stools bisects the room, lit by sleek hanging pendant lamps. There are large windows, stainless steel fixtures, maple cabinets, and the old buckling linoleum has been replaced by tiles. It is, by every standard, more attractive and more functional.

I miss the old kitchen, choosing to imagine a time before the anxious sadness began. It is easy to wax nostalgic for old, beaten-down places when you were present for neither their heyday nor the worst of their decline, when you don't remember the time when their colors were vivid and new, when you have no memories of what used to be. That kitchen was old and faded by the time I was born, and so was my grandpa, and so was Hornell. I just didn't know it. My mother told me about an argument she had with her father sometime during college or shortly after. They were bickering about something—anything—when unexpectedly my grandfather erupted with a defeated proclamation: "Whatever I've done, remember that I never asked you to come back to this town." It was the greatest gift—permission to leave, permission to invent herself anew. Permission to extract herself from the constant weight of memory and to have a daughter who can yearn naively for a place that no longer exists. A place, perhaps, that never did.

Several years ago, I was helping a friend and her boyfriend look for a house to rent. Every time we drove by a little bungalow with peeling paint and a teetering porch, she would joyfully exclaim, "It could be so cute! It's a fixer-upper!" The boyfriend and I
would correct her: "No, it's just shitty." I think about her while sitting on the PATCO train one morning and I look around at the dingy jaundiced walls and the saturated dullness of the seat's thick vinyl. I think about the elisions that make nostalgia possible. I think about whether it is places or people whose memory elicits the greatest longing. I think about how to love the past without grasping to keep it alive. I wonder if Hornell can be remade like these train cars or if the shell is too big and too broken to be occupied anew.
Dear Hunter, Nephew

I. You are T-Rex and I am all the people—the people with their round and unsuspecting heads. I am this plastic man in the ten-gallon hat. I am this small blue king in his yellow crown. I am this girl with orange freckles and I am her twin. I am this boy with eyes wiped off, my head a smooth blind sphere, no way to see the beast lumbering forth. You swallow your prey in one bite. Whole in one bite, again and again. When I flee to the turrets of the castle, you learn to fly and you swoop with guttural snarls. We know now there is no hope, no glory in this fight. I'm tired of dying, I tell you, as you assess your greedy wreckage. It's ok, you say. Ok, this man is not dead anymore. See? and you nudge your giant tail toward a toppled body in the corner—It's the king, or maybe a prince, or maybe just a kid with a Burger King hat. See, he was just pretending. He can be alive. I nudge him and find it's true—he stands up and hops past the pile of bodies—the bodies of brothers and sisters, dogs and horses and the small dinosaurs we keep as pets, but he is alive and there's no talk of mourning, for T-Rex knows no sorrow.

II. You take my hand and lead me to the deer hanging bare in your garage, drying cords of red muscle twisting across its flanks. My daddy killed it with his bow, you tell me. I
helped him butcher it. And now a deer passes in the yard and you scramble to follow, a quiet reed in rain boots, orange sweatpants creeping step by step, hands spread to the side like wings. Over your shoulder you smile, index finger to your lips. I follow far behind and wait for the deer to bolt but you have grown so small and so quiet, no longer the boy from this morning screaming T-Rex as you slip through the grass like a wraith. The deer chews blind, so dumb and unafraid that my pulse quickens. What if you catch it? You already told me: You will climb on top and ride it somewhere, wherever it goes, and for a moment, I see that deer as yours. I hope you will hang on tight as it takes you down to the creekside along the ravine's steep wall where we cannot walk because we will fall, where I won't be able to follow you and the deer. And I don't know if it's your fear or mine of making contact with this speechless body and its knowledge of forests and hidden gullies and whether it's your steps or mine that crunch louder now so the deer's long neck snaps up, but for that moment when it stares in your eyes that deer is yours and you know its secrets.
Sanctum

The hanging space in my childhood bedroom closet was obstructed by a sky blue carpeted step that stood two feet high—or not really a step, because it led only to the back of the closet, but a bench. I would climb onto that bench and pull the closet door closed. A thin beam of light traced the edge of the door, and I could see the dim outline of my body leaning against its reflection in the full-length mirror on the inside of the door. Clothes hung down and grazed my head and I imagined myself in a tent, a fort, a cave. I would sometimes invite my friends in there with me. Two of us could sit cross-legged, facing one other, just enough room to sit with knees touching knees. Mostly, though, I sat in there alone. With my back to one wall and legs stretched straight in front of me, I could touch my toes to the opposite wall. I could read by flashlight, or I could simply sit, boxed in a me-sized space at the center of—but inaccessible to—the larger lives of others around me.

At Disney World, I loved the Swiss Family Treehouse. Spiraling staircases and rickety bamboo bridges swooped like vines from one nook to the next and the rooms themselves sunk into the tree's giant branches. The house did not disappear into the tree but nor did
the tree feel absorbed by the structure it housed—together they made something new, something composed of the threads of the world I knew, but woven into a fabric I had never seen. I knew that Disneyworld was some kind of mirage, only vaguely connected to the facts of non-vacation life, but I also knew that this treehouse was a physical reality and that I was standing within it. It might not be anybody's real home, but it could be. I imagined life unfolding in a place like this, real life: cooking spaghetti, reading Beverly Cleary books, watching Punky Brewster, listening to my dad play the guitar. The motions would be the same, but each would be imbued by new possibility because we would look out the windows at a canopy of branches and leaves, because we would descend a rope ladder to get to school, and because my bedroom walls would be dotted by knots and whorls of wood polished to a warm caramel brown.

Last year, I visited Longwood Gardens, a vast estate of formal botanical gardens, meadows, and woodlands on the border of Pennsylvania and Delaware. I was there to see Light, the series of lighting installations that transformed the gardens at night. Twenty thousand reeds of light sprang from the ground of the forested walkway; seven thousand frosted glass spheres shifting through colors like an undulating rainbow lit the bank of a pond. These expansive transformations of landscape were stunning, but the installation that filled me with the deepest sense of longing was the one at the treehouse. Longwood Gardens is like a grown-up Disneyland—equally ostentatious and fantastical—and its version of a treehouse is about as close to what I might erect in my backyard as was Disney's spectacle. Longwood's treehouse is called the Canopy Cathedral and takes its inspiration from old wood-framed Norwegian churches. For Light, the exposed wooden
beams were lined with 177 candles and six large mirrors hung along various walls to
reflect the light into infinity. As I walked up and down the twin staircases surrounded by
the warm yellow of candle-lit wood, I felt the same wistful joy I felt as a child in spaces
housed deep inside the hollows—of a forest, of a home, of a city that somehow grows
space within itself for new beauty, new secrets. When I walk down the streets of
Philadelphia I peer down alleys, searching for the little courtyards hiding within a
labyrinth of brick facades. When an impractically narrow street reveals that it is
harboring an even narrower alley around the corner, I am thrilled by the feeling that I am
both on the map and hidden beyond its gross geometries.

My favorite book when I was nine was The Secret Garden. In later years, when my
friends recalled their childhood love of The Hobbit and The Dark is Rising, I sometimes
felt sheepish about my limited desire to imagine worlds other than my own. But there was
something strange and subversive beneath Frances Hodsgon Burnett's prim narratives of
wealth and imperialism. The Little Princess is a riches-to-rags-to-riches tale of a girl who
is banished by a sadistic headmistress to the attic of her boarding school after the death of
her father. She works as the scullery maid. From the single window in her squalid little
quarters, though, she can gaze out upon the London rooftops—terrain previously known
to me only as the world of Mary Poppins' chimney sweeps, a landscape of peaks, plains,
and cliffs made of brick, stone, and slate.

In The Secret Garden, an angry spoiled girl named Mary is sent to live with her
uncle, a depressed hunchbacked widower, on the bleak moors of northern England after
her rich parents and all of their servants die of cholera at her home in India. Mary begins
exploring the grounds and finds a walled garden that has been shuttered and locked for years. A helpful robin guides her to the buried key, and the garden becomes her own. She makes it grow again, and eventually she uses its healing powers to cure her sick cousin and to give her uncle the will to embrace life once more. I didn't care about the garden's healing powers, nor about the bird, which seemed a bit silly as it "spoke" to Mary and led her straight to the buried key like an avian Lassie. What I loved was the garden itself, hidden behind walls, untouched for years, rediscovered and nurtured by this one girl alone.

Mary asks her uncle for permission to tend the garden. I don't remember how I raised the question with my parents. I can't imagine that I said what Mary said: "Might I have a bit of earth? . . . to plant seeds in—to make things grow—to see them come alive."

But I had a vision. Twelve feet of grass ran between the side of the house and the fence that divided our yard from the Kahn's. But unlike on the south side of the house, where you could run from the front yard to the back, on this side a small chainlink fence bisected the side yard, running between the property line and the house. It seemed to have no purpose other than to prevent me from running laps around the house and to provide a dead end for those too small or slow to climb over it during games of tag. Sometimes, I would stand on one side of the fence and talk across it to my mother as if we were mere neighborly acquaintances, while she stood with a basket of laundry and clothespins, erecting a labyrinth of sheets and towels hanging from the clothesline into which I could later wander, cool billowing cotton brushing my shoulders and cheeks, nothing to see but the grass at my toes and the sky above. Mr. Davis, who owned the house before us and decorated it with wrought iron eagles, may have had a reason for building the little fence.
He may have wanted to prevent stray children from wandering into the backyard, perhaps. But those were adult reasons, and they were unknown to me.

I knew that patch of lawn was the perfect place for a hidden garden. I imagined a small wall or picket fence dividing it from the front yard, and a small bench inside it. Ivy tracing curling paths along its inner walls. Berry bushes and roses and other bright flowers whose names I did not know. We could lay a slate path. It could be my garden, cut off from the sprawling lawn, small and enclosed and full of secret pleasures.

My parents said yes, of course I could build a little garden, why not? There was nothing planted over there, and why shouldn't I have a secret garden? I broke ground on a Saturday in the springtime, digging up a narrow patch of grass under the den window. Using a small shovel and a hand trowel, I stabbed the dense sod and pulled it up in patches, shaking soil free from clumps of grass. The dirt below was dark and damp and rich and it formed a satisfying mound along the siding of the house, ready to be patted down over my garden's first seeds. It was tiring work, but I enjoyed it. I thumbed through my dad's packets of mixed flower seeds and imagined the thicket of color that would occupy that lonely purposeless chunk of yard.

After that day, I never again worked on the garden. Summer came and went and I never returned to kneel in that earth. When you are ten years old, perhaps it is hard to maintain focus. It was certainly not the first time I had fervently embraced and then abandoned a project. For Christmas one year, I begged for a chemistry set that I used once and, upon witnessing the fizzling reactions of stale powders and water in cheap plastic test tubes, I never touched it again. Another year, I decided to sew a set of stuffed dolls according to a pattern in the Better Homes and Gardens book, *Crafts to Make and*
Sell. I purchased peach cotton for the boy doll's face, blue and white gingham for his body, and navy felt for his Leiderhosen. After working for hours on cutting and sewing and stuffing, I was distraught to discover that his crotch started where his knees should have been. My mother, never one to watch me dwell in failure, spent the evening in emergency doll surgery, slicing into his massive torso and stitching the seams of a new crotch and thighs by hand. Back on track, all I needed to do was to add his eyes and his yellow yarn hair. I never did it, and the boy lived the rest of his days faceless in a plastic bag at the bottom of a chest of drawers.

But the garden felt different. Abandoning it felt different. "How's it going with your secret garden?" my father would ask, as if he did not know, as if he could not walk to the side of the house himself to observe the patch of dirt I had so diligently tilled. It had been dark and loamy; now it was pale and hard and cracked. I shrank from his question like he was asking me about my chores. It felt as if the words themselves—*your secret garden*—became a mockery of my desire for a place of my own. I couldn't explain that it wasn't the flowers that I wanted. It was the fact of a hidden space. Every time my father said it, it was pulled farther and farther onto the embarrassing stage of seen life. By encouraging me, my parents inadvertently erased the place where the desire resided. I saw it through their eyes, and there it just seemed cute and quaint. In a real secret garden, there would be no smiling parents. There would be no approval at all. Nobody would be watching.

Or maybe it wasn't even about the garden. Maybe it was the desire itself that compelled me and the desire itself, once it was known, that felt like flowers dyed in gaudy pinks and purples—its true nature distorted and impossible to recover or explain.
I've been reading about words in other languages that describe a type of longing for which we have no name. The Portuguese word *suadade* describes a feeling of deep nostalgic loss over something that is gone forever. In German, *sehnsucht* indicates a kind of wistful longing for that which is elusive. It is a sadness touched with joy and desire. I don't know if these words are any better than the words I know at describing how I feel about my secret garden—I regret that I never built it. I long for its containing walls. Though it never existed, I miss it. And yet there is some joy in the longing, and there always has been. Perhaps the longing *is* the joy. I feel an undiminishning desire to burrow into the crevices of ordinary life, certain both that secret places await me and that I will never quite reach them.
On the Platform

On the morning of July 7, 1993, my father stood on a subway platform at Penn Station, waiting for the #2 train that would take him to Fulton Street, where he would then walk two blocks to a meeting at the Office of Children’s and Family Services at 80 Maiden Lane. He worked for the Albany branch of the New York State Department of Social Services, and every two weeks he had to meet with his counterparts in the city, so once every two weeks he followed the same routine: He'd leave our house in Albany before dawn, take the 6:15 train to the city, and arrive at his meetings by 10. Back on Amtrak by 4 and home by 7. On July 7, 1993, though, he never boarded the #2, because while he was waiting there on the platform where he had waited so many times before, a blind woman fell onto the tracks. An oncoming train struck and killed her in the thick of morning rush hour as her guide dog stood on the yellow precipice, unsure how he had led her astray. These are the facts.

I try to imagine my father that day. I imagine him standing in a pale blue short sleeved button down shirt, his attache case hanging from one pale arm and his sports coat tucked into the elbow of the other. He is forty four. He just got bifocals. His hair is still strawberry blond. On the crowded platform, he breathes the exhaled air of businessmen,
security guards, drug addicts, and children. He grew up in the city and it will always be familiar but he's no longer quite at home in these crowds, in this noise, with all this dirt and rudeness. But neither will it ever leave him—Manhattan's streets and subway lines are wired within him like blood vessels, like nerves that trigger pleasure and pain without warning. He used to drive a taxi in Manhattan and when he's standing on the sidewalk as a pedestrian, watching the frenzied traffic push past, he can no longer imagine that life. But on the rare occasions when we drive our car into the city, an old heat rises within him and he knows how to weave between garbage trucks and white-knuckled tourists. My mother shakes her head in disbelief when this decades-old aggression peeks out from beneath his mild manners. Underground, in the tunnels, he knows which staircases lead him quickest to his destination and he stands with the passive confidence of someone who knows where he's going. He knows how to be alone in a crowd and how to ignore the little spasms of excitement that punctuate the morning din—a homeless man yelling into air, schoolchildren shrieking, a woman thrusting pamphlets about the Apocalypse into unguarded hands. So when that blind woman, walking slow and confident next to her dog, disappears beyond the platform's yellow precipice, and when the train's howling wail comes too close behind, and when the cries of disbelief rise up from the crowd, it takes my father a second to realize what is happening. It takes a second to comprehend that all these strangers are now bound in the same shared horror. People are turning around in aimless circles like ballerinas on a music box, raising shocked palms to open mouths, gasping and murmuring. It's too late to do anything, and my father is afraid of what he will see and feel if he stays standing in one place. He turns and runs up the stairs to the open sky above.
Both these facts and imaginations are new to me. For twenty years, my father never said a word about this day. Not to me, anyway. In 1993, I was thirteen years old. I strain to remember an evening that stands out as different from all the others when my father returned from a day in New York or any day at the Albany office, but the image I retrieve is the memory, I think, of every night: my father lying down on the couch with eyes closed and arms folded across his chest for five minutes before dinner—the five minutes in which he was able, on good days, to push the sapping drama of New York State bureaucracy into a hidden pocket of his brain. Even on bad days, when a friend was passed over for a civil service promotion again or he had to suffer through a particularly painful meeting with a cadre of state bureaucrats, he dismissed his own complaints with a stiff shudder and a wave of the hand. "Ehh, it's not worth talking about," and then brightly, a little too brightly, "How was your day?" Dad implied, and we believed, that the bleary hours between leaving the house in the morning and returning at night were not worth revisiting, so much less interesting than my homework, my piano lesson, the weather, the squirrels on the bird feeder.

Now, I imagine him returning home on that day when he saw the blind woman die. I imagine our placid dinner conversation and how he wouldn't have wanted to disturb it with news of the horrible thing he had seen. I imagine his emotions as deep burrowing channels through the earth, hidden from the flat green lawn above.

This past winter, when I was home in Albany for a visit, Dad and I sat together in the living room while my mother was at a board meeting for the local nature center. She
is typically able to clear her calendar for the duration of my visits and devote herself solely to my entertainment, so it is unusual for my dad and I to be alone in the house together, though I didn't realize it until I sat down and felt the quiet uniqueness of the circumstance. He crouched in front of the fireplace, studying the bed of growing embers with a tilted head. My parents rarely use their fireplace anymore. The trips to the garage for logs and kindling, the crouching and blowing, the worrying over whether the flue is operating properly—it rarely seems worth it for the hour or so of quiet time they allow themselves each evening. When I'm home around Christmas, though, my father will sometimes ask, with a little twinkle, "Should I make a fire?" That night he hadn't asked; he just went ahead and did it. It is a rare occasion on which my dad will make a unilateral decision about something like making a fire or deciding which bottle of wine to open. His strategy for living with daughters has been to defer to others' preferences on most all matters, but it is an awkward act to pull off, and he sometimes appears bumblingly acquiescent. I appreciate his decisive moments. A couple months earlier at a restaurant, when more dessert arrived at the table than we felt prepared to eat, he raised his hands and declared merrily that "No one is leaving this table until all of this is finished!" I considered hopefully that perhaps he was developing an assertive streak.

He made a minor adjustment to the angle of a log in the fireplace.

"Have you heard about all the people who got killed by subway trains recently?" he asked.

It was an unusual conversation opener, especially for my father. He tiptoes around bad or sad news, especially around me and my sister. He is likely to shrug and shake his head and leave the room if something on the TV is particularly gritty and disturbing. He
gardens and sings at nursing homes and bakes bread and goes to yoga class. He is neither edgy nor raw.

(On the other hand, he did recently bludgeon a mole to death. It had been digging holes in the yard for weeks and then one evening it was just standing there, in the middle of the driveway, slow and stupid. At first he was using the shovel to usher it out of the way, maybe scare it a little, but it didn't take the hint. It just sat there, blind and smug, waiting for my dad to move so it could go churn up some more of the lawn near the hostas. He sent my mother inside so she wouldn't see what would happen next. Why haven't I integrated this story into the version of him I first think to tell?)

I looked up from my book to consider his question. I had heard that a woman had pushed a man in front of a train and later admitted it was because he had brown skin, was perhaps a Muslim or a Hindu. I hadn't heard about the others.

"I guess I don't pay enough attention to New York news anymore," I said.

He went on. "There was an article in the paper about how many people actually die that way . . . mostly suicides, I guess . . . and there was an article about the effect it has on the MTA employees who are involved."

The sections of the day's paper—the *Albany Times Union* as well as the *New York Times*—were spread out on the coffee table in front of me. He stood up and picked up a section of the Times from the table, already deftly folded open and back onto itself into a page an eighth its original size—a skill he learned from a few years commuting in the tight quarters of the New York subway before he moved upstate in 1974. The piece showing as he handed me the paper was a collection of comments and testimonials submitted by readers in the days following the article about subway deaths. He pointed to
"Read this one."

I read it:

In 1993, I was in the front car of a train pulling into Penn Station that hit and killed a blind woman. She had fallen onto the tracks and there wasn’t enough time for the train to stop.

Everything that happened in the seconds before the accident is frozen in my memory forever. The cries from people on the platform, their arms waving to warn the motorman, the faces of my fellow passengers who stayed turned toward the platform, the jerk of the train, and that horrible sound. My heart goes out to the M.T.A. employees who unwittingly become part of such tragedies. -Susan, UWS

"God, that's awful."

It was awful, almost too awful to imagine concretely. But the newspaper is full of unimaginable horrors. Why was he showing me this one? My father does not share sad and scary news stories for the sake of conversation. Did we know the woman, Susan, who wrote the letter? I looked up at him. He was standing up but not doing anything, just sort of looking toward the fire, waiting to say what he said next.

"I was there. I was on the platform."

I consider now the range of reactions that may be appropriate when someone tells you that they witnessed a horrifying event. Most are some variation of "How awful. I'm sorry you had to see that."

My reaction: "How did I not know this? Why didn't you tell me?"

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We have a way of claiming our parents' and our parents' parents' stories as our own. I love to tell the story of my great-great-great grandmother, who eloped from
Ireland to New York with the family gardener, as if I can claim her rebelliousness as my own accomplishment. I am proud that my grandmother protested the Vietnam War and that my parents attended Nixon's anti-inauguration protest, as if their history of progressive politics lends some credibility to my own. I wonder if a parent or a child can ever have a story that is theirs alone.

It was as if my father's experience at Penn Station only had meaning to the extent that it pertained to me, and as if I had been deprived of something by not knowing the story. But I imagine my thirteen year old self hearing the news: I would have looked hard at his pursed lips and pale eyes and tried to determine the extent of his sadness. I would have focused my thoughts on making the events real in my mind, but it would feel far away and abstract. I would have felt somehow elevated by my association with someone who bore witness to this tragedy. I would have told a few friends, with a strange and solemn pride, about what he saw. I can think of nothing my father could have gained by sharing the news.

Why shouldn't my father get to choose which parts of his experiences to share? We dwell on notions of openness and revelation, but perhaps there is a power and a freedom to holding some things back. My father deserves to have some memories and experiences that he can keep shielded from the harsh glare of daughters' scrutiny. We say that we "keep things to ourselves," as if a certain kind of silence is like ownership. He kept it to himself. It was his story.

There is no way to know all the things I do not know about what my father has experienced and what he feels. Sometimes I think that I must not know some critical parts of who he is—that his authentic self is hiding beneath the man I know as Dad. But what
is an authentic self, anyway? Why must it include the sadness and the insecurity and the regret that lurks in our darkest corners? Perhaps, instead, it could be the side of ourself that we aspire toward, that finds us in our happiest moments. For my father, perhaps the man he can be when he is with his daughters and his wife, the man who shields us from realities he deems harsh or unpleasant, who leaves the baggage of work behind him, who finds the greatest joy in being a dad—perhaps that self is more real and more complete than any other.

And yet, as a daughter, I can't craft a theory of his silence that doesn't loop back upon myself.

"You probably didn't want to upset me," I suggested, except I placed the emphasis on "upset" in such a way that it belittled the gesture. "You probably didn't want to upset me." Eye roll. Oh, Dad, so concerned with protecting me.

"Yeah, probably," he replied, though now I realize that the real explanation is probably both simpler and harder to understand: "It didn't have anything to do with you."

But now he has told me, perhaps for no reason other than that it popped to mind when he saw the newspaper story and that he was looking for something to talk about while my mother was out. I don't know. But now it is my story too, and I get to imagine its significance. This is what we do. We absorb each other's stories. We share them. They become a part of who we are. I have no idea how it affected my dad to stand thirty feet from a woman who suffered a tragic, violent, and senseless death. Now it is twenty years later, and even if he was traumatized for weeks, it would feel like a distant memory now. But I can't forget how he described his flight away from the swelling chaos: "I started running in the opposite direction. I was so distraught—I just wanted to get as far away as
possible." I read the newspaper article from July 8, 1993: "A blind woman led by a guide dog was killed yesterday when she fell from a midtown subway platform and was struck by a train as she frantically tried to climb back over the platform edge, the transit police said." No one who saw it or who read about it or who dreams of it twenty years later can go unchanged by this. Even if its impact is fleeting and forgotten, it makes an impression, like a stone that hits water and sends ripples into the distance.