

THE HARD, SOFT, AND PSUEDO SCIENCE OF LOVE AND SEX IN MEMOIR

by

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To Jason Escher for “booping my balloon” back into the air whenever it came near the ground and for encouraging me to shuck off adult expectations to pursue a dream I thought was too old to pursue. I wouldn’t have attempted any of this if not for your coaxing and support. Thank you.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I: “Chemical Dependency”.....	10
CHAPTER II: “Boy Crazy”.....	34
CHAPTER III: “Saturn in Cancer”.....	59
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED.....	84

INTRODUCTION

In academia there is an overwhelming need to validate the importance of one's area of study. In the arts this need is even more fervent. In his article "The Sciences vs. the Humanities: A Power Struggle," Michael Brown highlights how this longstanding need seems to be gaining in urgency as higher education "proposes a core curriculum consisting of fundamentally science, technology, engineering, and math" over the "knowledge of social nature" provided by a humanities-based curriculum. Defending the academic purpose of creative writing, memoir in particular, is more difficult still. Writers of memoir find themselves in a position to defend the academic validity of their work in the academic community as a whole as well as in their own department. As Candace Spigelman points out in her article "Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal," literary studies have "sought credibility in a scientific model in which literary criticism tried to appear objective, factual, and impersonal," giving the art of literary criticism validity (66). However, the art of memoir and the personal narrative is still seen by many within the department as "untrustworthy or sentimental" (63). Writers of memoir are not changing the world by curing diseases or creating new technologies, but they are, in the case of women and minorities in particular, making an impact by "giving voice and authority to [our] claims to knowledge by naming [our] experiences as relevant and admissible" (66).

The field of science has this same need for validation within its own ranks. The hard sciences of biology and chemistry seldom find themselves having to defend their

area of study because they are backed by data and verifiable research. The results of many scientific studies often benefit the world at large in some readily recognizable way. The soft science of psychology is also verified by research, though the human mind is complex and difficult to measure. Psychological results can be manipulated more easily, prompting some within the hard sciences to create research groups such as the Reproducibility Project. According to Tom Bartlett's article "Is Psychology About to Come Undone," this project "aims to replicate every study from [three psychological journals in 2008]". The purpose, in simple terms, is "to see how much of what [the field of psychology] publishes is bunk." Psychological disorders and developmental stages cannot easily be seen under a microscope. This inability to show hard proof, and the ever changing trends in psychological diagnosis, lead many to question the validity of psychology altogether. Much like many question the validity of memoir writing.

Memoir writing is a genre rooted in memory, but it is also a genre of personal emotional truth. As Thomas Larson summarizes in *The Memoir and The Memoirist*, "A novel emphasizes the emotional truth of a character while a memoir emphasizes the emotional truth of the author" (104). In many of the books I have read and collected on memoir writing, the writer's emotional truth is what is being highlighted. Memoir is for telling the author's story and if the memoirist approaches this task honestly, from a distance after some time and introspection has taken place (memoir is not therapy) — and without malice — it will be successful.

Of the many memoirs I have read the ones that struck me most profoundly embedded humor within tragedy. As William Zinsser says of his memoir *Five Boyhoods* in his introduction to *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, “Humor is the writer’s armor against hard emotions — and therefore, in the case of memoir, one more distortion of truth” (11). I find coloring the more painful realities of my truth in humor to be a familiar and comfortable method for writing. It doesn’t change the reality of an experience (if it is done honestly and in reflection), and the armor is needed. In memoir the writer is naked in front of the crowd, much more so than any other genre of writing. The memoirists who most inspire me most are ones who utilize the armor of humor successfully: Caitlyn Moran, David Sedaris, and Augusten Burroughs, just to name a few. I strive to use it successfully as well.

A good memoir must ask and attempt to answer questions. A rambling dictation of an experience is not memoir; it is journaling. Though journaling can serve a purpose in the building of a memoir, it is the questions, the research, and the honing down of the author’s experiences which make a memoir successful. It is through questioning and research we give memoir its structure and validity, though in a different way than in journalism or critical academic writing. Bill Roorbach aptly relays this major distinction in *Writing Life Stories* by saying, “The [memoir’s] author speaks as a person rather than as a disembodied voice of knowledge, the writer speaks from the heart...speaks honestly, admits he is there behind the words — complete with prejudices, interests, passions, hatreds, tastes, and pet peeves” (69).

For research on this thesis, I immersed myself in scientific writings, studies, and reports on love and attraction — the biological, chemical, and psychological propellants behind love and sex. Many of the studies go all the way back to the mid-twentieth century, when it became somewhat safer for scientists and psychologists — pioneers in the field of study such as Masters and Johnson, Kinsey, and Freud — to research sexual behaviors. I also read modern texts on the science of attraction, such as Robin Dunbar's book *The Science of Love*, in which Dunbar puts new research in the fields of chemistry and biology into laymen's terms, and Diane Ackerman's *A Natural History of Love*, in which Ackerman takes her reader through love's history, biology, literature, and beyond. For the astrological components, I read books on astrology and articles on its history and the attempts to validate or invalidate it as an actual science. Throughout my research, I kept my questions about love (romantic, familial, maternal) and sex at the forefront of my mind. My experiences were the lenses through which I read. What I found was that love may raise unanswerable questions, but they are ones worth exploring.

So, how do we answer the unanswerable questions of love? Intellectual minds turn to science. Biology, chemistry, and psychology have all attempted to answer, in theoretical terms, the following sorts of questions: Is love merely a chemical released in our brains and bodies propelling us to breed? Are we attracted to particular types of physiques, not because of what we appreciate aesthetically, but because that body type will guarantee healthy or strong offspring? Scientists would have us believe that that may be all there is to it. And because science is considered a legitimate realm of study, we tend to want to believe them.

In the article “Mammalian Pheromones — Sense or Nonsense,” Frances Clegg writes, “In the 1960’s there was an upsurge of interest in the role of smell in mammalian behavior and the possibility that pheromones might elicit specific responses in higher order animals was considered” (63). Clegg goes on to attempt to debunk the existence of a human pheromone, but that hadn’t stopped others from trying to prove it again and again. Since the suspected existence of human pheromones in 1959, there has been much debate over whether or not there is a measurable olfactory effect on humans by other humans, specifically in regards to mating. There have been theories that pheromones explain why women’s menstrual cycles align when they live in close quarters, and how men may unconsciously detect when a woman is ovulating. But there has never been unmitigated proof one way or the other.

Despite this lack of hard evidence, however, there has been forward momentum in fields of human sexual research. In his article on the Sexual Behavior Sequence, William Fisher states that “Human beings respond to certain cues — unconditioned erotic stimuli — with unlearned sexual-physiological responses. For human beings, unconditioned erotic stimuli involve tactile stimulation of the genitals or erogenous zones, and possibly chemical secretions called pheromones that act as sexual attractants” (134). These stimulants result in swelling of the genitals, increased or rapid heart rates, and pupil dilation — all documented physiological cues for sexual arousal and for falling in love.

“Love at first sight” has been defended, written about, sung about, and dreamt about for as long as humans have recorded their thoughts and feelings. Blame for our

irrational impulses and heart-wrenching decisions have been laid at Cupid's sandal-less feet. For most people, there is no arguing: love certainly seems to be a phenomenon outside of our control. But scientists point to physiological reasons for this phenomenon, attempting to prove that love, the age-old literary and musical trope, is nothing more than a biological and chemical drive to breed. There is no romance — only pheromones.

Psychologists attempt to follow the same experimental controls as are put forth in the hard sciences when testing out their theories on love and sex. Psychologists ask, could who or how we love be manipulated by the cumulative effect of years of nurturing or damaging experiences? Is love simply a fixation, something we obsess over to fill an emotional hole left within us from being removed from mother's breast too soon, as Freud would have us believe?

In 1902, Freud began his controversial studies and writings on the Oedipus complex, a theory that boys felt a strong sexual attraction to their mothers and unconsciously wanted to replace their fathers in the marriage relationship. In his book *Science in the Bedroom*, Vern Bullough summarizes how this theory earned Freud revulsion among many of his colleagues, as there is nothing more taboo in human history than incest. However, Freud persevered and stood by his theory, believing these sorts of sexual problems or fixations to be the "Organic foundation for mental disease" (87).

In Freud's essay "Development of the Libido and Sexual Organizations," much of the blame for human neurosis is piled high at the tired feet of the mother. Oral fixations are said to derive from object fixation, not of suckling at the mother's breast, but of

remembering and yearning for that closeness after we, as infants, are cast aside for a new sibling. According to Freud, we transfer that need onto other objects. Mother, and her fleeting and fickle love, is also the focus of the Oedipus complex. The father/daughter equivalent, which he refers to simply as the “reverse relation,” Freud claims, “is justifiably regarded as the kernel of neuroses” (40). Jung later coined the term Electra complex to better suit the “reverse relation”.

As the incestuous connotations of these theories continued to make people uncomfortable, society began to develop new names for them, in part due to changes in the family unit. Higher divorce rates of the Baby Boomer generation led to the Generation X term “Daddy Issues,” an updated variation on the Electra complex. With the Electra complex, women seek an idealized version of their father in relationships, and never find a man to live up to daddy’s image. It is theorized (mainly through pop psychology) that “Daddy Issues” result when a father is absent or the relationship between a father and daughter is abusive. The daughter enters into the world of men with a dangerous promiscuity.

Like pop psychology, astrology is a pseudoscience at best. It is scoffed at by the analytical world as a simple parlor trick or “Forer Effect” in which generalized statements are thrown out to a “mark” in the hope that one will stick. Throughout history, however, astrology has been relied upon by dictators and rulers to make major decisions almost as often as it has been used to determine relationship compatibility in love. People list their zodiac signs on dating sites right alongside their physical characteristics,

hobbies, and relationship must-haves, as if this were pertinent information. Many have faith in astrology's validity, and have for hundreds of years.

In Brad Kochunas's article for *The Mountain Astrologer Magazine*, "Why Astrology Works", Kochunas says, "Astrology works, not because of its factual validity but because of its functional validity (its usefulness in providing a satisfying aesthetic)...Astrology works in the fashion of great drama, lyric, narrative, or religious experience...To suggest these experiences have little value because they are not amendable to empirical testing or because they don't demonstrate a literal truth is simply specious" (2). So how does this "usefulness" of astrology, particularly in regards to compatibility in love, translate into the love between a mother and her children? Biologically and psychologically, maternal love has deep roots which grow around or through any incompatibility between her and her children's personalities. Though astrological compatibility in romantic relationships is a strong draw for many who delve into the mists of the Milky Way, astrological compatibility with one's children is one aspect seldom considered. If a couple is not compatible, they can end their relationship. Parents and children are stuck with each other — navigating one another's personalities and hoping to find common ground.

In the end, all of these sciences, like love, require some semblance of faith. When an individual believes — has faith in anything — it becomes his or her truth. Scientists place faith in their theories as accurate and reproducible, sometimes to the extent of unconsciously skewing the results. Psychologists faithfully diagnose and label patients

with disorders in permanent records based on observations of behaviors or on a client's interpretation of symptoms, and alter those findings as changes in society and the field dictate. Astrologists do birth charts and claim they have summarized a personality or can predict the course of a person's life or experiences based on where planets were aligned on the day they were born. The latter sounds like magic, but in a sense it all is. Validity is based on faith in the results. The hard, soft, and pseudo sciences are, in the end, differing and stronger degrees of that faith — the validity is in who and how many people believe.

What better way to explore love — via the lens of these three sciences — than the genre of memoir? My memory is flawed, but no more unreliable than a psychological diagnosis. My experiences are filtered through neurological responses and genetic data before they are filed away in my brain to become truth. My personal truth can be as fluid as the faith one has in destiny or as prejudiced as one can be against an opposing astrological sign. Memoir is however, in the end, a literary work of exploration in hindsight — one in which the author is thoroughly exposed. It requires as much skill as any other writing endeavor. As Annie Dillard suggests in *Inventing the Truth*, “memoir writers [should] embark upon a memoir for the same reason that you would embark upon any other book: to fashion a text” (156). Fashioning a text is my intention here. A text of experiences remembered and explored through the hard, soft, and pseudo sciences of love and sex.

CHAPTER I: “Chemical Dependency”

Late weeknight phone calls throw me into a panic — fearing news of car accidents, mangled kids, suddenly dead parents. I staggered across my bedroom to the dresser and fumbled to unplug my ringing phone. “Hello?”

“Jenny?” The voice of Nancy, my ex-mother-in-law, one of the few people who called me by the childish name I no longer used. Nancy called me frequently — sometimes too frequently — and always started her phone calls with my name as a question, as if she weren’t sure who would answer at the number she seemed to have on speed dial.

“Yeah,” I responded, relieved but annoyed, assuming I was awoken for something inconsequential.

“Joe’s dead,” she said. Just like that — two and a half syllables forming a sentence — akin to being stabbed with a paring knife. She continued speaking calmly, as if she were giving me directions to her house instead of telling me that her son — my ex-husband and the father of my teenage sons — was dead at forty. I couldn’t hear her words any longer, just the murmur of her voice. My mind drifted to the last time Joe and I had spoken. He sounded happy. I should’ve known something was wrong.

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I met Joe in the summer of 1993. I was homeless by choice, living in a Dodge Shadow with three other small-town misfits: Julie, Wes, and Brian. We traveled,

scavenging the Midwest by breaking into small-town bars and lake houses for liquor, food, and money. We were America's unwashed and wasted youth, all of us avoiding someone back home in Hatton, North Dakota. Wes was avoiding the police. Julie and Brian were avoiding overbearing mothers. I was avoiding my abusive boyfriend of five years who had just returned — dejected in his unattained rock star aspirations — from Arizona. I thought I had finally discovered a way to break off the relationship safely via a long-distance phone call. I had not anticipated his return or his unwavering desire for vengeance.

On a hot July morning, our delinquent posse stopped by the dilapidated, cat-piss-and-gym-socks-smelling trailer of Brian's friend, Scott. We needed weed and a shower. While Brian and Scott talked business, I sat in a recliner which shown too many questionable stains and attempted to play a note or two on a guitar I found leaning up against the wall.

The horrible twanging I produced seemed to summon an apparition. A tall, thin, but muscular man in his early twenties with a hawk-like nose and a shiny cap of strawberry-blonde hair appeared at the edge of the room. His stare was both predatory and sorrowful. His eyes were yellowish-green — a color I had only seen in the eyes of animals — which made me stop mid-twang. An about-to-burst duffle bag was flung over one shoulder and a Bad Religion *Suffer* t-shirt stretched across his broad chest.

“This is my roommate, Joe,” Scott said gesturing to the man briefly with a head nod before continuing to pull seeds and stems from the buds on the dinner plate in his lap. “That’s his guitar you’re playing.”

“Oh! I’m sorry,” I said, holding the guitar out for Joe to take as he crossed the room toward me. “I wasn’t so much playing it as hindering its potential to play.”

Unfazed by my attempts to be cute and self-abasing — or by the weight of the heavy bag and now guitar — Joe mumbled, “Thanks,” and walked out the front door without another word.

“It’s cool,” Scott said, picking up on my embarrassment and confusion. “That’s just how he is — doesn’t talk much. He’s actually moving out today, to a motel on Gateway Drive, which is awesome because he made the place smell like dirty socks.”

I looked around the filthy trailer and at the matted hair of its disheveled owner and concluded it was not the mysterious ginger giant who made the place reek of locker room. Besides, I had smelled the clean scent of soap and deodorant overlaying something pleasantly primordial wafting toward me when Joe had moved in to take his guitar. I wanted to bury my face in the front of his t-shirt, feel the hair on his chest rustle like a lion in the brush, and inhale. But I didn’t say any of that aloud. I just smiled my best dimply smile and accepted the pipe being passed my way. After a quick and cold shower, in a bathroom so nasty I almost felt dirtier afterwards, we were back on the road. I didn’t see Joe for awhile after that, but I found myself thinking of him frequently — his smell, his broad chest, but mostly those sad yellow-green eyes.

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In the days following Joe's death, I did my best to comfort our children. Isaac, our older son with an even older soul, was quiet and withdrawn. An anxious child, he seemed to have been preparing for Joe's death for most of his seventeen years. William, our younger son, a six-foot-two inch giant by the age of fifteen, howled with grief upon hearing the news — a sound which still echoes in my prefrontal cortex. Will believed his father to have nine lives, and not without reason. Joe had survived car accidents, drinking binges, over-doses, deadly falls, and suicide attempts. William couldn't comprehend how something as dull as a seizure, something he himself had dealt with since infancy, could be the neurological bullet that took down his aberrant hero.

Nancy took care of all of the arrangements for the funeral, and I numbly agreed to anything she suggested: the headstone, the cremation, the pictures, and the obituary. The boys and I picked the music for the DVD of old pictures that would play on the screen in the funeral parlor — Social Distortion — and were confident Joe would have appreciated the nihilistic lyrics of "Story of My Life". To this day I can't hear that song without immediately seeing the pictures from our life together fading in and out on a perpetual loop. But it was more fitting for remembering Joe than "Amazing Grace" or some other hymn would have been. A self-proclaimed atheist, Joe wasn't one for religious dogma or tradition. I recalled him telling me — after one of his many suicide attempts — "When I do finally get to die, Jenny, I want you to throw this mangled piece of shit body in a dumpster. I'll be dead. I won't give a shit." Obviously, we couldn't honor his wishes.

He was cremated and his ashes were buried in a secluded country cemetery under a marble headstone imprinted with his sons' names and a shadowy resemblance of himself wearing his Hunter S. Thompson hat and flying a remote control airplane.

Joe and I had been divorced for almost a decade by the time he died, but Nancy listed our marriage in his obituary. My maiden name and the date we were married was placed, as if it were one of his achievements, alongside “avid model airplane builder and gunsmith”. Our divorce date was not mentioned. I was compressed by guilt and resignation simultaneously. Guilt that I was included at all, but resigned to the sense it made to freeze time that way. Signing the divorce papers never did free us from one another. Regardless of legalities, other romantic relationships, and living in different residences, Joe and I were chemically bonded like atoms that *lost* stability by joining together instead of gaining it. Until death did we part.

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In late September of 1993, my merry band of homeless criminals and I had grown weary of our summer of freedom on the road. We had started to bicker and the chilly North Dakota autumn was sucking all of the fun out of bathing in creeks and sleeping under the stars. Wes had started hanging out with some shady bikers and was seldom around. Julie and Brian were looking into getting a place together after they worked up the nerve to reconcile with their parents. I was just hovering — waiting to see what came next — afraid to return to Hatton.

Kelly, the abusive ex-boyfriend, had confirmed the small town gossip that I had been sleeping with Wes when he spotted us together at a gas station in Grand Forks a few weeks earlier. He ran at me as I pumped gas and grabbed me by the throat. I hung in the air with my back against the car and my feet kicking, for what felt like hours but was merely seconds. My eyes pled with the polite, staring, mid-western strangers walking by to help me, but they did nothing. Just as the world began to fade, he growled in my ear, “I *will* kill you, slut!” and let me fall to the ground.

Kelly ran to his 1970 bile-green Mustang — the car I had spent many nights wishing on falling stars or on clocks that read 12:34 he would die in — and tore onto the interstate as my “friends” scrambled out of the car to help me up. For the rest of the night they talked big about what they would do if Kelly ever pulled a stunt like that again or what they would’ve done had my body not been blocking the only working door on the car. I humored them with a “thanks” and nods of confirmation, but I was plotting my escape from them now as well.

Our decent stash of stolen liquor provided us with the dues required to hang out at Joe’s motel room. We supplied the booze, and he provided the warm room and music, mainly Soul Asylum, The Pixies, and Ministry. One night —when Wes was off fucking the biker chick he didn’t think I knew about — Julie, Brian, and I showed up at the motel with a few bottles of Bacardi. Joe opened the door and let us in without a word, sat down on one of the two beds in the room, and started strumming his guitar. He was fresh from

the shower and his red hair hung wet and limp on his forehead. I could smell the steam and soap and grew envious.

“Can I use your shower?” I asked him quietly.

He looked up at me as if he were memorizing every freckle on my face, ran his eyes down my wrinkled flannel shirt and ripped stolen-from-step-dad-jeans and said, “Sure. There are some clean clothes in that bag by the door. That crazy bitch left them here. She won’t be back.”

“That crazy bitch” was a girl we had given a ride to earlier in the evening — a friend of Brian’s. She was missing part of her jaw from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. I felt sorry for this girl, who Joe proceeded to rip on in gruesome detail, but I was in desperate need of new clothes, and her body was just the right size. I took him up on his offer by grabbing a pair of jeans and a too-tight black tank top. Joe was right. The girl never came back for her bag of discarded clothes. I know because I never strayed from Joe’s side after that night.

Clean, rum-buzzed, and feeling pretty in my new/used clothes, I rejoined the party with enthusiasm. They were discussing the new Aerosmith music video in which Alicia Silverstone gets her belly button pierced and jumps off a bridge. I didn’t care for Aerosmith, but I loved the wild girl in the video, which prompted me to ask Joe to pierce my belly button. I fetched a needle and ring from my bag. I don’t recall why I carried such equipment. I must’ve stolen it from somewhere.

There was no ice, so Joe went to the mini-fridge in search of something cold. He emerged with a small jar of Smucker's strawberry jelly. He held it up and turned to me with a playful look that seemed uncharacteristic. It was as if the bottle of Bacardi we passed between us contained Tristan and Iseult's love potion. The room vanished and nothing existed to me but this man. In reality, the alcohol had shut down our frontal lobes and we were functioning at a reptilian level — fight, fuck, eat — but at the time it felt magical.

I lay back and exposed my stomach as seductively as possible, sucking it in a little as insecure girls tend to do. The jar sat cocked on my stomach and moved like a buoy at sea when I breathed. I watched Joe's eyes scan up and down my body, wild and as animalistic as their color implied — his pupils dilated. He smiled as he removed the jar from my stomach and, instead of reaching for the needle, unscrewed the lid. Pushing his long and slender fingers into the jar, he pulled out the jelly, pulled my shirt and bra up to my chin, and rubbed it all over my exposed torso. Julie and Brian, whose presence I had completely forgotten, decided to leave when Joe started licking the jelly off my breasts.

We never spoke more than a few words to each other before that night. Our wants and needs were communicated in a silent language concocted of animal attraction, youth, and alcohol. We were married two months later in a North Dakota blizzard. I was nineteen. He was twenty-one.

In the decade we were married, whenever the inevitable question that plagues couples was asked, "So, how did you two meet?" Joe responded, "She came over one

night and then wouldn't leave." I found his answer insulting, but not completely inaccurate.

* * *

After the funeral and memorial, my sons and I set out to heal. We took some solace in knowing Joe didn't die by his own hand, not in the technical sense. Years of heavy drinking, drug abuse, and head injuries had led to seizures. It was one of those seizures that killed him.

Joe was living with his parents. Between the seizures and the Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome — which caused lapses in conversation, memory-loss, dementia, and hallucinations — Joe couldn't hold a job or even his volunteer position at the Humane Society. He certainly couldn't live on his own. He was alone the night he died. His parents had gone to a reunion in Missouri. Joe was sitting at his computer when the seizure started. He was thrust back in his chair and landed with his throat against the cushion of the couch directly behind him. He suffocated. It was another whole day before his body was discovered. The coroner said he would not have known what was happening. The misfiring neurons in his brain would have prevented any conscious thought. I hope that is true. To be completely honest, I visualize Joe's spirit leaving his body, looking down on the scarred and chemical-worn shell of it, giving it a swift kick, a ceremonious spit, and the middle finger before floating off into the afterlife. That's just the kind of guy he was.

Six months before Joe died, he had attempted suicide. It was his sixth attempt in the seven years since I had left him. He took thirty Sudafed tablets and passed out in his parents' basement. He was taken by ambulance to the hospital after his father had found him unresponsive. Nancy called me at work the next day to tell me Joe was in a coma and they weren't sure if he would come out of it.

For years I tried to shield Isaac and Will from these suicide attempts — whether because of maternal guarding or my own sense of responsibility for Joe's hopelessness, I'm not sure. It wasn't as difficult to hide Joe's nihilism when they were little and less mobile, but Isaac had his license then so he and Will went out to visit Joe more frequently. I had no choice but to tell them what happened. Isaac was angry. Will was sad. I was both.

When Joe came out of his coma a few days later, he was sent to a psychiatric facility. We had done this dance before, and I didn't expect this time would be any different. The staff would try to medicate him. He would be belligerent. They would send him home after 72 hours. And so it would go, until the next time. I went to visit him. He looked aged in his green hospital gown. I wanted so badly to hug him, touch him, but I couldn't. Physical proximity seemed to cause an immediate reaction between us, regardless of the environment or circumstances. I sat next to him, feeling the buzz in the air between our arms, and tried to help him remember why he needed to stay alive.

“The boys need you, Joe. You're the only father they have and they love you. Can you try to hold on, for them? Please?”

“That’s what you don’t get, Jenny,” the volume of his voice rising with each word. “They’d be better off. My sole fucking parenting skill is to show them what *not* to do! I can provide nothing else! I fucking hate my life. I fucking hate people. I can’t fucking drink so I’m stuck in this repetitive and lonely fucking hell that I can’t escape from and you could never understand!” He entwined his long fingers together and held them in his lap as if he were trying to hold back hitting something. They reminded me of the hands of our children.

We talked for about an hour, only breaking for Joe to yell at another patient for trying to say hello to me. “Fuck off and find your own visitor, you Git!” His silverback gorilla-like tendency to protect me, what was his, had not faded with his neurological decline. As I was leaving, I again fought the urge to hug him. I now wished I had. He needed to be comforted. But I didn’t do it. I couldn’t.

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Joe and I were married during a blizzard in December of 1993. I found out I was pregnant with Isaac in January. I honestly didn’t think I would ever have children. I was not particularly careful to avoid it either. Much like delinquent nineteen-year-old girls think they are immortal, promiscuous nineteen-year-old girls think they are infertile.

All Joe and I did in those early months of our relationship was drink and fuck. In fact, a shared bottle of tequila prompted me to get down on one knee and propose to him after only a week of living together. He said, “Ask me again in two months,” and I handled the postponement like a champ, crawling to the bathroom where I threw up and

passed out with my forehead on the cold base of the toilet. I awoke in the morning with a pillow under my head and knew he loved me. We depended on chemicals as well as sex to escape our neurological and psychological predators. And we escaped every night. We scavenged for food to be thrown away at a local Taco Bell and ate toasted white bread with catsup from packets for dinner, but we were never without booze. And the sex, well, that was free.

When I started feeling nauseated from the smell of the fresh baked bread wafting from the Subway next door, I bought a pregnancy test. It was positive, so I bought three more to be sure. I was frightened but not disappointed to find out I was pregnant. At least I was married first. *Take that, high school rumor mill!* Joe, however, was not pleased. He asked me to abort, which I couldn't do. He accused me of trying to trap him, which struck me as a pointless tactic since I had already legally trapped him in matrimony.

I understood his apprehension and waited for him to digest the information in his own time. He viewed the pregnancy as my fault, though he did nothing to prevent it either. In a weak and clinging moment, when the progesterone levels in my body had reached critical mass, I asked him why he married me. I asked him what he loved about me. He shrugged and responded, "I loved your big tits and round ass, but your eyes and smile grew on me." How ironic that his adoration stemmed from my physical attributes for breeding.

A third of the way into my pregnancy, Joe told me he could no longer have sex with me until after the baby was born. He had stopped deep kissing me only months into our relationship — when I casually mentioned to him that his breath smelled like canned corn — but no sex was unthinkable. The true cruelty of it was that sex was all we shared in common once I couldn't drink. Sex was also the *only* thing I thought about. The pregnancy seemed to have sent all of my blood to my vagina; I was a seventh-grade boy with an all-day boner and no math book to cover my shame. Joe explained to me that he thought sex would make the baby (who he knew was a boy) gay, if the fetus were to see his dick coming at him over and over again. I could not believe the man I married and bred with was that stupid. He seemed to understand very little of what women wanted or needed, let alone how they worked from a basic biological standpoint. I attempted to educate him, only to find his feigned ignorance was a ploy for him to request more blow-jobs. The honeymoon, as they say, was over. I enacted my revenge unintentionally by puking in his lap one day when I was too nauseated and he was too insistent.

We moved out of the motel and into an apartment three months before Isaac was born. I experienced a difficult pregnancy — mating with a six-foot, two-inch giant when you're only five-foot- one proved to be problematic — and Isaac was taken via cesarean section a week prior to his due date. On Isaac's actual due date of October 5th, I was admitted to the hospital with a severe kidney infection after passing out with a temperature of 104 in Isaac's pediatrician's office. I called Joe to come pick up Isaac, who could not stay in the room with me despite my tearful pleas to the nursing staff. Joe told me he was stressed out and needed to get away for awhile. He packed up our Ford

Escort and drove to Wisconsin that afternoon to go fishing (binge-drinking) with a friend. Isaac was taken and almost processed for temporary foster care before a kind friend of my mother's showed up to take him home with her until I was released.

I thought I had forgiven Joe for leaving, for almost having my baby thrust into the foster care system, but I never did. The tumor of his selfishness grew in my brain until it pressed on every nerve and neuron causing my head to pound and my eye sockets to throb but I stayed, I tried, and I loved him.

Becoming pregnant with and giving birth to Isaac changed something fundamental in me. I was no longer that nihilistic and impulsive girl who married a man who should have been, by all logic, a one-night-stand. I was a mother and I took my role as protector very seriously. I no longer drank, except for rare weekends when my mother or sister would take Isaac for the night. On those baby-free weekends, Joe and I would temporarily return to the early days of our relationship, doing shots chased with Kool-Aid and fucking on every surface of our little apartment, but most times, I just caught up on much-needed sleep.

We had also taken to smoking a lot of weed around that time. I suffered from debilitating post-partum depression after Isaac was born. I called doctors and psychiatrists for help but was turned away for my lack of insurance and money. Joe handled my newly acquired mental illness as best he knew how and prescribed me a joint. For the next eight years, I smoked my demons away while he drank his away. The difference was I could function on my demon repellent and Joe's got him arrested and

fired from jobs. But because I knew that Joe was an alcoholic when I married him, I couldn't be mad at him for it. Instead, I just made him another male dependent. And years later, whether from my own need to feel wanted or as a passive-aggressive stab at his lack of affection and intimacy, I cheated on him—a lot. I never got what I was looking for from those men either.

* * *

In the spring of 2012, Joe never missed a single one of Isaac's baseball games. The team struggled, never won a game, but Joe sat through every one. I would see him, always perched in the top right corner of the bleachers, shifting uncomfortably to relieve the pressure of a back injury he incurred a few years earlier from flying through the windshield of the car he had stolen from his parents. He spent three months in the ICU in Milwaukee and was escorted directly to prison to serve three years for his fifth OWI.

Despite his obvious discomfort—and having to listen to Nancy scream like a Russian gymnastics coach from the other end of the bleachers—Joe made that baseball season his unwavering effort to be a father to his first-born son. Looking back, it was as if he were saying good-bye, leaving Isaac on good terms.

Isaac loved Joe deeply, but from a safe distance. He always seemed to fear him and idolize him simultaneously. Joe was clever, funny, and rebellious, everything a teenage boy wants in a friend. He would tell Isaac stories of his misspent youth with pride. How he had been kicked out of public school and sent to Catholic school by Nancy, in hopes he could graduate, knowing it was his last chance at an education. But

when Joe was caught smoking by the Virgin Mary statue and told by the principal he had to clean her as punishment, he pissed on the statue instead — smoking and smiling at the mortified principal the whole time his stream was defiling Jesus’ precious mother. That act led to Joe’s final expulsion. Isaac laughed and listened raptly to Joe’s stories, envying his father’s lack of anxiety or fear of consequence.

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When I became pregnant with Will, I recognized the symptoms immediately. I woke up puking, my olfactory senses assaulted by the three drunk men (Joe included) passed out on my living room floor. We were living in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, Joe’s hometown, and Nancy had taken Isaac overnight. I high-stepped over the snoring and gaseous bodies on the floor and left to buy pregnancy tests.

My fears were confirmed. Isaac was only a little over a year old, and I was pregnant again. This time I had taken precautions. I was on the pill! I didn’t know what had happened. I was convinced that Joe’s sperm could plow through the Great Wall of China and give Genghis Khan’s legacy a ginger-haired battle for supremacy. I stayed in the bathroom for a long while before I tried to wake up Joe to tell him. When I shook him awake, made sure he made eye-contact, and said, “Joe. I’m pregnant.” He rolled his eyes and responded, “No you’re not.” and fell back into unconsciousness.

Will was born in December of 1996, three days before our three-year wedding anniversary. He looked exactly like me, but with Joe’s hooked nose — it took Will until he was five to grow into that proboscis. Will had seizures which lasted for up to an hour

and spent many of his toddler years in the hospital or medicated. He may have looked like me, but he had inherited his father's temper, obstinence, and neurological misfiring. He was kicked out of four pre-schools for fighting. Whether it was due to genetic inclination or hero worship, I'll never know. To Will, Joe was a god. However, due to Will's Asperger's Syndrome, he seldom spoke to Joe. When we all still lived together, Will was afraid of his father and cowered next to me whenever Joe would yell. But after the divorce, Will was angry with me and incredibly protective of Joe. As they got older, the boys would go out to Nancy's to visit Joe, who would call me after they left complaining of Will's apparent lack of interest in developing a relationship.

“Will doesn't fucking talk to me! Never says shit. Just sits there. I don't get it. It's pretty fucked up that we have these two kids, one looks like me and acts like you and the other looks like you and acts like me. *You're* fucked, Ms. Kitty.” Apparently the function of genetics eluded him as much as his parental responsibilities did. Not me. I knew I was fucked. I crossed my fingers and toes that nurture would override nature.

Joe never grasped that despite Will's silence, he idolized his father. Joe would greet Will with a, “Hello, you mute fucker!” and Will would only smile. Will may not have said a word while he was there, but when he came home, he was a whirl-wind of Joe-isms and long, flailing arms — every movement making him an exact replica of his father. He would relay to me every vulgar and inappropriate thing Joe said with pride. But Joe never saw that. He lived in a box made of mirrors. He couldn't empathize with his children's perceptions of him. Only how they made him feel.

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Our marriage lasted almost ten years. Not a bad run for two kids who barely knew each other, had nothing in common, and lived in a fog of chemical alterations. The biological attraction that initially drew us together had died out early in the marriage, though we fought and fucked with the same intensity right up to the end. Those ten years were beautiful, strange, amusing, and terrible. We had two children together, tackled baby seizures, poverty, accidents, illnesses, DUI's (on his part), and infidelity (on my part).

As I look back, I know we tried. Joe tried; it just wasn't in his nature to think of anyone but himself and alcohol — his one true love. And I tried, but my insatiable need to feel loved, if even for a fleeting moment through sexual contact, overrode my capacity to remain faithful.

Joe set fire to himself and our backyard, with a little help from Captain Morgan and a can of gasoline. I let his best friend go down on me on the back porch steps while Joe was passed out in the living room. Joe walked out into the front yard with an assault rifle, drunk on gin and mistaking the neighbor kid's laser pointer light aimed at his chest as an immediate threat. I went to North Dakota and indulged in a one-night stand with an old classmate. Joe drove my car up a curb and was arrested for his third DUI. I enrolled in college and, having found a way to feel more confident and complete through academia, was lost to him within the first year.

Our love was a Newton's Cradle — swinging between chaos and stagnation — and I put my hand in to stop it. I told Joe I was leaving on Mother's Day 2002.

I tried talking to Joe about my discontent — my reservations about his drinking and my concerns for our children, our lack of intimacy — many times over the years. He would just pat me on the head and say in his exaggerated baby-talk voice, “Oh, Wif. You're too cute to be sad.” Sweet, but not helpful. On that Mother's Day when I told him I wanted a divorce — words I had never uttered even in anger, as I was not one for empty threats and ultimatums — he knew it was over. It was the first time I had ever seen him cry. Until I saw the tears actually fall over the lower lid, I hadn't believed he could cry. My guilt gland burst, spread into my chest, and flooded every organ. It was not just that I had finally found the self-confidence to leave or that I had decided my children would be better off, though those things were factors in my decision. I had fallen in love with someone else, someone patient, kind, and empathetic who made me feel like I deserved better without ever actually saying it. Because I had loved Joe for so long, and still did in an almost maternal way, I could physically feel the pain I was causing him and it was excruciating. The attraction was gone but the drive to protect him as if he were one of my children seemed to linger.

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The beginning of July 2012, Joe and I sat together watching Isaac's baseball game. I blathered on with my usual nervous banter, awkwardly twisting my new wedding ring, as he threw in a short response here and there. Something was different

about him, I could sense it, but I wasn't sure what it was. He seemed almost peaceful. I sat there looking at him. At that familiar mole that served as a reminder as to which ear he was deaf in, the thinning strawberry blond hair that he rebelliously kept long despite its out datedness, the deep scar that ran the length of his forearm (another result of that car accident), but I could not see his eyes, as he had taken to wearing sunglasses all of the time claiming the sun gave him terrible headaches, a side effect of the medications and seizures. I remember wanting him to hold me. I wanted to feel his long arms around me. It felt like we were married again — me craving his affection and protection, and him withholding it. The inclination was so strange and strong that I feared I would actually grab him.

I had very recently married — after a long, foot-dragging engagement — Jason, the friend I fell in love with when Joe and I were still together. Jason was tolerant and understood that I'd come to view marriage as a room with no windows or doors being pumped with cyanide. I felt I was being marched into a trap and had to pop anxiety medication just to get to the courthouse.

Joe sent me a Facebook message, the day after I was married — the day after his fortieth birthday — that simply read: “Congrats on the new husband, Ex-Wif. I hope this one works out better than the first one did”. Despite how much it wreaks havoc on my spirit, I've saved all of his messages. I read them when I get to thinking about him too much.

When the game ended, we climbed down from the bleachers to congratulate Isaac on a game well played, despite the loss. As Isaac gathered up his equipment and loaded his bat and mitt into his bag, Joe and I stood by the dug-out looking at each other, unsure of what to do or say next. He kicked at the sand with his foot, like a shy suitor in an old movie or a bull, and looked over to his parents who had just said their good-byes to Isaac and were heading for their van, arms full of bleacher cushions and bottled water.

“Looks like we’re leaving,” he said, motioning to the shrinking silhouettes of his parents. “Good-bye, Jenny.” His words felt calm and strange. I still experienced visceral reactions to my name in his mouth.

“Bye, Joe.” I responded as I watched him walk away.

I talked to him on the phone once more after that, but I never saw him again. That last night when he called, he wanted to let Isaac know that he would not need a ride to his new volunteer position at the library the next day. He was taking the day off. He sounded almost chipper on the phone, a tone that was definitely unusual for him. I feared for a fleeting moment that he may have picked up drinking again (he had been sober for almost a year when he died), but quickly dismissed it after recalling his last relapse. The slurred phone call and resulting seizure scare. He had called me because he had experienced a seizure the night before and he was scared and alone. I talked to him for almost an hour, just to hang up and have him call back apologizing that he had lied, he *had* been drinking before it happened.

I told him it was fine and that he needs to know that he is doing well, one slip up doesn't constitute failure. It was his last slip up as far as I know.

That last phone call, however, ended more abruptly. Joe usually kept me on the line for at least an hour.

“All righty then,” he said in that unfamiliar, happy tone. “You have a good night, Jenny.”

“Ah...? Thanks, Joe. You too.” I hung up and proceeded to finish up my nightly rituals of making coffee for the morning and confirming that everyone's alarms were set. Lost in my routine, I didn't give the call another thought until days later.

The coroner estimated Joe's time of death to be shortly after midnight that same night.

* * *

A little over a month after I left Joe and moved into my own apartment with the boys, he was found by his father lying in a pool of blood in our bed. The kitchen, dining room, and living room of our old house looked like a horror movie. His father had seen the carnage and broke in through a window. I was questioned by a detective who told me that it looked like Joe had tried to shoot himself in the head but was too drunk and just took off a chunk of his own scalp instead. Another detective asked me if I had a boyfriend that may have wanted Joe dead and possibly beat him with a crowbar. It turned out he had just gotten drunk, hit his head on the counter and passed out a few times throughout the house, losing deadly amounts of blood, on his way to the bedroom

where he had at last managed to wrap a t-shirt around his head before he had passed out again. But I didn't know the real story until years later.

I rushed to the hospital to see him, guilt ridden and horrified. He lay in the hospital bed, his head wrapped up in gauze like a battle survivor, crying and begging me to come back to him.

“Please, Jenny!” he sobbed. “I’m so fucking lonely. I can’t live without you.”

“Joe, I’m so sorry, but if I came back I would be miserable. I’d end up bitter toward you. I love you. I just don’t love you the way I should.” I tried to remain unyielding, but culpability was thrashing at me with his every tearful word.

“I don’t care. I’ll make you love me that way again,” he pleaded. “I will treat you the way I should have all along. Please, Jenny! Fuck! I’m fucking miserable! Please?!”

The Joe I knew didn’t cry and beg, he yelled and flailed. I had wrecked him.

“O.K., Joe,” I resigned, seeing no alternative. “I’ll come home.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt the weight of that resignation pressing down on me. He grew more relaxed. His desperation and despair transferred to me in crushing pulses as he kissed each of my fingers, planting an especially long one on the deep scar where my wedding ring had only recently been removed. I sobbed then. I was dying a martyr’s death.

I took care of him at my apartment for a week after he was released from the

hospital. I changed his bandages, kept an eye on his stitches, and fed him comfort foods. But I reneged on my promise to return home and despised myself for it. I had never felt more selfish, more malevolent, than I did when I dropped him off at our old house and watched him make the slow climb up the stairs and back into his solitude.

We “made love” for the first and last time in that gutted and blood-stained living room a year later, after we left the courthouse, having signed off on our final divorce papers. The living room where we had watched cartoons with our children, where we opened Christmas presents, where I stripped for him when we were drunk on gin, where we fought over his drinking and my “babying” our boys. Our farewell kisses delved deep and contained more passion and grief than either of us could have communicated with our words and voices. I guess we had always communicated better that way.

CHAPTER II: “Boy Crazy”

My mother made the ten-hour drive from Grand Forks Air Force Base in North Dakota to Upper Michigan to drop me off with my grandparents every summer. Mom was a victim of teenage pregnancy, which she attributes to my seventeen-year-old father’s faulty understanding of the rhythm method. Married her senior year, divorced with two children by twenty, and remarried by twenty-one, she now lived hundreds of miles from home and she needed a break from me. I was “too rowdy” and “never stopped talking/moving/asking questions/running off.” She also needed to work and find time for her new husband. My baby brother Jer stayed home most of those early summers. He was not as much trouble as I was.

I didn’t mind being dumped on my grandparents’ doorstep in Kingsford, Michigan each June. I looked forward to it. The Snowball Flower Bushes, the forests to explore, the smell in the air after it rained, the hills to roll down, the lakes, Blue Moon ice cream, and even the skunks struck me as exotic compared to the neutral base housing and flat tree-less plains of North Dakota. But the best part of summers in Michigan was Grandpa — a tall, thin man with a hawk-like nose, dirty hands, and a kind smile. He was patient with me. Something so few grown-ups were.

Grandpa never raised his baritone voice except to sing me songs in German. He called me “Lovey”. He played the accordion. He read me bedtime stories from a heavy, gold bible with a lenticular picture of baby lambs on the cover that went *wicky wicky wicky* when I ran my thumb nail across it. He made me banana splits. He took me to the

The Wooden Nickel — a bar over the hill — and bought me an orange Crush if I promised to tell Grandma we were only there for a few minutes to buy eggs and got to talkin'. He gave me rides in his wheelbarrow. He hung a tire swing for me over the big hill in the back yard. He lugged home a long and heavy piece of petrified wood from the lake because I insisted it looked like a horse and I *needed* it. He dried my tears when I cried for him to stay home from his job at the paper mill.

“I don't want to stay home with Grandma. She's cranky.”

He would pick me up, chuckle, and say, “I *have* to go to work, Lovey. I need to buy you cowboy boots with spurs so you can ride your horsey around the yard like a real cowgirl.”

He was the only man who ever loved me without expecting a single thing in return. The only father I ever had despite having two dads.

Mom married Larry, my dad's First Sergeant, shortly after Jer was born. Dad faded from the picture quickly, starting a new family with his young wife. After bringing me home smelling of marijuana (for “the last damn time!” according to Larry), Dad was conveniently transferred from the base in North Dakota to California, Colorado, Quebec, England, and eventually Texas – the farthest bases from North Dakota. I only saw him in person a handful of times between the ages of three and forty, and those visits were always disappointing for both of us.

I grew content with the annual birthday phone calls, that is, up until my later teen years when I had become bored of what I perceived as his denunciation of me. Those

were the years in which I would sit silently while he spoke of his adventures in hiking, kayaking, and playing in bands. For anyone watching me, it would have looked like I was just listening to a monotonous dial tone, twirling the phone cord around my chewed down fingernail nubs.

Those conversations with Dad haven't changed much, though I'm older now and more patient, I still hear judgment and rejection in almost every word he says:

“So I started jamming with a couple of guys. We started a band and we play every Saturday night...I went to [*a location really close to you to go kayaking but didn't bother to visit you*]...Your sister [*my good daughter because she does stuff I like*] won a tennis championship [*a sport I really enjoy myself so that makes her awesome*]...” And then, always, the inevitable question, “Have you heard from your brother? I've tried calling/texting/emailing and he never responds.”

My brother and I both dread those phone calls, though they are fewer and farther between now. I always answer; I do my best to be interested, polite, and less sensitive. *I* feel guilty if I don't answer. *Jer* never does. So dad tries harder with *Jer*. He always has. The only boy in a brood of three daughters, *Jer* is the one who will pass on the family name, and Dad finds that kind of thing very important.

With Dad gone, I looked to Larry to fill the fatherly void. He wasn't interested. Larry will readily admit he hated me almost immediately. He loves to tell the story, even now in front of squirming friends and relatives, of how at the age three, in a fit of toddler-*rage* over not being allowed to stay with my dad, I yelled at him, “I hate you!” and sealed

my own fate. He only tolerated me because my mother and I were a package deal. He had no choice. It was as if my mom had come into the relationship with herpes instead of a little girl. *I love this woman, so I will just ignore that other thing until it flares up again.*

As Larry and I grew older — he's in his 60's now — we developed an actual relationship. I'd go so far as to say a good relationship. He looks back on my childhood with the same venomous hatred of me. But, because he is weary and because I am “much less of an asshole since I had kids,” he is able to explain in more reasonable terms how it was difficult for him to be a parent to me. He hadn't a clue what to do, short of trying not to beat me, which he considers one of his greatest parenting achievements.

Looking back, I can laugh at my barely visible emotional scars as he brags and puts on a show for his friends (in that Larry way, which pings between fatherly pride and jeering insults) of my successes and his wish to live vicariously through me.

“She's the only one of these kids who graduated high school — though barely.”
“She's gonna go to college for the rest of her life so she doesn't have to get a real job.”
“More drunk pictures on Facebook? Partyin' like a rock star at 40! Good God! Are you kissing that girl!?”

Now, he doesn't hate me. Now, I make him proud. But back then, with the exception of ten glorious summers with Grandpa, my life was a series of fatherly rejections and abandonments. Larry provided the disdain and rejection, while Dad provided the abandonment and general lack of interest. Both of my dads provided me

with all of the best ingredients for a steaming pot of “Daddy-Issue” stew, and I served a heaping bowl up to any boy in the neighborhood who seemed hungry for it.

Before the dichotomously empathetic and accusatory phrase “Daddy Issues” and before my cruelly whispered high school nicknames “slut” or “whore” emerged, there was the much gentler label of “Boy Crazy”. When I was small, I would sit on my grandpa’s lap on the rough plaid fabric-covered couch my grandma referred to as the davenport. Through the blue haze of cigarette smoke — from my chain-smoking grandmother in her recliner and my grandfather’s vanilla-scented tobacco pipe — we would watch *Dragnet* and *M.A.S.H.* until it was time for me to go to bed. Grandpa would share his sardines and crackers with me and Grandma would growl under her breath for us to watch our crumbs. When a commercial came on and I would get fidgety, Grandpa would grab onto my knee with his calloused hand and squeeze.

“Are you boy crazy?” he would ask. “If you laugh you are.” Being extremely ticklish, I would laugh until I couldn’t breathe. “Wow!” Grandpa would say. “You are the most boy crazy little girl I have ever seen. We’ll have to lock this one up, Mama,” he would say to Grandma who would yell. “Quiet down now! The show is back on!” In hindsight, I realize that innocent little game significantly molded my self-perception.

Until I was well into my final years of grade school, I genuinely believed that Grandpa had squeezed out some genetic material that made me boy crazy. He had squeezed that spot so hard that it had sent some unidentifiable slut fluid coursing through my body and into my brain. It was the only way I could explain why I was so curious

about sex. Why, at the age of six, I would sneak boys out to the tree belts on the base to show them my Wonder Woman Under-Roos and ask them if they wanted to touch me on my privates. Why, from 4th grade on, I would get in trouble for writing dirty stories in class — romantic and passionate scenes of being kissed and fondled against the seventh grade lockers. Why, in kindergarten, the Larson twins were not allowed to play with me anymore after their mother found us behind the garage where I made them take turns kissing me. Why, at twelve, I let the neighbor boy who was five years older than me, finger me in the basement of an empty base housing unit while his mother, my babysitter, cleaned the walls with bleach upstairs. In hindsight, I guess “Daddy Issues” would be a more accurate theory for my behavior than the release of some boy crazy gene. But you know what they say about hindsight.

The phrase “Daddy Issues” is a repurposed, Urban Dictionary version of Jung’s Electra Complex, a counter to Freud’s Oedipus Complex. Jung theorized that girls are in competition to fuck their fathers and remove their mothers from the equation — through matricide in the case of Electra. Generation-X, in its infinite introspective narcissism, coined “Daddy Issues” as a way to explain promiscuous behavior in women who had bad or non-existent relationships with their fathers. The belief is that these lost girls are seeking the love they did not receive at home through sexual relationships with men.

The obvious double-standard implied here is for a woman to pursue sex there must be something psychologically wrong with her; only men are allowed to seek out sexual gratification in excess without being labeled as mentally ill. To be fair, there is

often a psychological catalyst behind promiscuity, but I believe this applies to men as well. People do enjoy sex for the sex sake. Endorphins are released with orgasm. One cannot deny sex's addictive qualities on a purely physiological level. If it didn't feel good, our species would die out. But there is a huge psychological aspect that lands more in the laps of women than of men. When I have engaged in conversations with women over the years, self-proclaimed sluts or just plain lovers of sex, I am seldom told that they just like the physical feeling of sex. There is almost always emotional currency of some kind, whether it is love, power, validation of their attractiveness, or attention. It is unusual for me to meet a woman who claims to be in it for the orgasm. To be blunt, very few women seem to get that from a superficial sexual encounter anyway.

In my teen years, I did not have the presence of mind to understand the more complex psychological motivations behind my promiscuous behavior. I just wanted to be loved. It was that simple. I had discovered by the age of nine — through a bad experience with a pedophile which should only be spoken of in the sanctity of a psychologist's office — that it was not through a man's stomach that one reached a man's heart, but through his dick. It may not have been a conscious or verbalized knowledge then, but it was knowledge none the less. It was a knowledge based on experience, the kind of knowledge that sticks like tar.

My memory of an event leading up to my first real application of this knowledge has me sitting next to my crush Sean in sixth grade. Ms. White turned off the lights to start a film strip and then she left the room. I was buzzing with anticipation when Sean

leaned in closely to say something to me. Visions of a passionate kiss, our up-coming nuptials, and our brown-eyed babies fought for space in my active imagination.

“You know,” he said through his pillow lips, “I never realized how pretty you were until the lights were out and I couldn’t see all of your freckles.” He did not laugh or elbow the ribs of his friend Scotty. He was serious. He meant it to be a compliment.

I was devastated. I ran to the bathroom where I stared into my own freckle-faced reflection and cried through the entire film on the Cold War. Eventually, I went to the office claiming to be ill. I couldn’t go back to the classroom and face Sean with my red-rimmed eyes. He couldn’t know he had hurt me.

Sean only liked blonde girls with flawless skin and tiny bodies — like my best friend Dina whom he dated for five weeks in seventh grade, an eternity in teen time. As Mom would say, I didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell with Sean. I had brown hair, wide hips, big breasts, and those damn freckles. Nope. Not a chance — until the summer after eighth grade. With my confidence chemically boosted by a pint of root beer schnapps and two years of jading sexual experience, I was ready to make my move. I sat through Sean’s mind-numbing afternoon baseball game and then, after everyone had cleared out, I screwed that boy cross-eyed in a baseball dugout. (Turns out he was cross-eyed due to an eye injury involving a BB Gun the summer before, but since I didn’t know that at the time I took full credit.) He was finally mine! He gaped blankly up at my freckled face, and I reveled in my feminine power.

I didn't marry Sean or have his brown-eyed babies, but for a fleeting moment, I had him. I had his love. I had the power to make him say or do anything. I was the sole focus of his attention. And then, I wasn't. He awkwardly kissed me good-bye and left me sitting alone and half-naked in the dugout. It would appear my glorious reign was finished as soon as he was.

* * *

On Christmas day of my tenth year, I was sent to stay with my mom's mean friend Blanche who banished me to a spare room. For what, I don't recall. Blanche was easy for me to piss off. I knew something was dreadfully wrong when my mom came to get me and her eyes were red from crying. That's how I learned of my beloved grandpa's death. No one had to tell me. I just knew, probably because Mom seldom cried. I was not allowed to go to his funeral. The grown-ups in the family had determined that I was far too young. I babysat my twin cousins at my uncle's house instead. As my adorable red-haired cousins sat on the braided oval rug on the floor and played board games, I flipped through cable stations I didn't have back home and thought about the last summer I had spent time with Grandpa.

That was the summer he had tubes jutting out of his concave chest, tubes which Grandma had to inject with syringes full of medicine. We made the long drive to the VA hospital in Green Bay where the nurses taught me about red and white blood cells and how Grandpa was sick because the cancer had made one or the other go away. Grandpa drank wine and ginger ale to offset the pain in his stomach. Through what must have

been excruciating pain, he remained the kind-hearted man I had always known him to be. And because he didn't have to go to work at the paper mill anymore, he had plenty of time to spend with me.

That same summer, my cousins, aunt, and uncle came over from New York to visit. My uncle was a scary and intimidating Italian man with a booming voice and a wicked temper. My Aunt Greta, my mother's sister, was a skinny, frightened mouse of a woman who looked like a younger version of Grandma. My cousins and aunt tip-toed around my uncle, and I remember being really weirded-out by my uncle's insistence that my aunt shower with him every day.

One afternoon we all went to a park with a creek running through it. I had collected some crawdads in my sand bucket and wanted to take them home as my pets. Grandpa told me I couldn't, "The crawdads have to stay where their parents were so they can get food." I was, of course, insistent. Grandpa patiently told me "no" again. By this time, my uncle had become angry with me for arguing and threatened to spank me. His barreled, hairy chest puffed out as if ready to blow fire and his dark eyes glared at me. My grandfather, painfully thin and frail, said, "If you lay one hand on that girl I will beat you into next week!" My uncle looked at my dwindling grandfather in amused but violent astonishment, leaned down to my mean-girl cousin, and said, "She'd probably pee in her pants if I spanked her anyway. She's a spoiled little baby!"

Grandpa was my protector and I was his spoiled little baby. He was my reason for believing in God and guardian angels and that frogs jumped out of people's throats

and that eating wild mushrooms would grow hair on my chest and that I would bleed to death if I cut the ugly mole off of my neck and that, despite the mole, I was the most beautiful and special girl in the world.

When we got back home from Michigan, after the funeral, I pulled out a collection of porcelain figurines Grandpa had given me. Beautiful, brown-haired princesses in pastel ball gowns holding a number for every year, ages one through ten, for each of my birthdays. Every June 13th, Grandpa would take me to the drugstore and buy me a new one. I realized in that moment that I would never have one for age eleven. They were all broken before my golden birthday, and so was I.

Grandma was never the same after Grandpa died. She was broken too. She aged ten years in the six months between that Christmas and the next June when Jer and I stayed with her. She had lost the love of her life, and each mourning tear seemed to have etched new wrinkles into her face. I painted her nicotine-yellow nails and put rollers in her thin, white hair while she reminisced on how she had met Grandpa and became married.

“I met him at a dance right before he was shipped out to fight in World War II,” she said. “He was leaving in two weeks and against his mother’s wishes — she wanted him to marry a nice Hungarian girl — we were hitched before he boarded the train.”

“You only knew him two weeks?” I asked astounded. “How romantic!”

She smiled at me and said, “Oh, Dolly,” (Her nickname for me.) “It really was.”

Years later, when I married my first husband Joe after only knowing him for two months, my grandmother chastised me. “You barely know this man and you married him?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s romantic isn’t it? Just like you and Grandpa. You only knew him two weeks and look how that worked out.” I smiled, hopeful.

“What? I knew grandpa for years before I married him! Why are you always making up stories? Where do you get these ideas from?”

I received the same response during a conversation I had with her in my twenties on reincarnation. I clearly recalled the childhood memory in which I had asked her about her obsession with Native Americans and why she had paintings and statues all through the house. “I was an Indian princess in a past life,” she told me matter-of-factly. When I brought it up all those years later, she wrinkled her paper-thin forehead at me and said, “Bull-pucky! I never said that.”

It was these conversations with Grandma that gave me the reasonable doubt I needed to process the horrible family secret I was told decades later.

Despite her cranky demeanor and her panache for telling tales, I adored my grandmother and still looked forward to my trips to Michigan. I returned every summer even after I married and had children. That house and its wooded surroundings were my sanctuary. To this day, I still go there in dreams.

As a teenager and into adulthood, I sat on the same corner of the davenport I had sat on as a child, chain-smoking right along with Grandma. We argued about politics and watched John Wayne movies or *Wheel of Fortune* on the same box television. She kicked me out of her house for saying Rush Limbaugh was a dick. She encouraged me to run for Ms. America because I was “just as pretty as those girls.” She confessed if she was four decades younger she’d sleep with Tiger Woods. She scolded me to stop flushing the toilet every time I used the bathroom. She mistakenly called me Greta. Everyone in the family did, because I reminded them of her, though I didn’t understand why until years later. She confided in me that the newspaper girl was stealing from her. It was actually Jer. He used her rare coins up in an arcade. He still hasn’t forgiven me for unintentionally tattling.

Grandma played me cassette tapes she and my grandfather had recorded of me when I was little, singing songs about pencils and cups and telling stories about how I saw the movie *Star Wars* with my dad. “That’s no movie to take a little girl to,” my grandmother’s voice chided from the speaker. She cried with me as my grandfather’s deep voice filled the smoky air between us after my small but excited three-year-old voice pleaded with him to sing us a song in German. She would say, “I miss him, Dolly. Why was I always so mean?” I would hug her and tell her she wasn’t. And I meant it.

Losing Grandpa made Grandma turn on herself, and though I didn’t know it at the time, I was turning on myself too. I embarked on an emotional mission to fill the void in myself like a landfill. My boy crazy had mutated and infected my psyche. When my

behavior escalated to “Code Red” status my freshman year, Mom determined that the best way to save me from myself was rural seclusion.

Mom and Larry moved us off of the base to a little town about 45 miles away — a million miles to a girl with no license. Hatton, North Dakota had a population of only 600 people, half of whom were elderly. For the first few weeks of the moving process, I stayed on the base to “sleep over with friends.” In reality, I was being snuck into the barracks by young soldiers who felt the risk of a dishonorable discharge was worth a fourteen-year-old piece of ass.

During the day, while my soldiers were at work, I wandered the barbed-wire enclosed perimeter of my hometown, smoking the Marlboros they had bought for me (sex was continuing to pay off), avoiding the Military Police, and trying to figure out how I would be able to stay on the base instead of moving to Hatton. When Mom came for me and the last load of boxes from the house, I had no choice but to go with her. It was impossible to be a teen runaway on a military base or to live on the streets anywhere in North Dakota in October.

In Hatton, my shenanigans and I went off like a bomb on Main Street. The residents there had never encountered anyone quite like me. In a town where generation after generation of Lutherans raised their families, worked their farms, married their third cousins, and eventually went to the nursing home to die, a family of “wing-nuts” with a rowdy teenage daughter was not a welcome addition to the census. Within the first few weeks, I had established my presence as a slut and a bad-ass. Instead of using the move

as an opportunity to reinvent myself, I watered and fertilized the bad reputation I had already cultivated. I didn't even deny the rumors that *weren't* true, like how I had been kicked off the base for stabbing a girl who had called me a bitch. Why should I? I was the new girl. If people feared me, they wouldn't hurt me.

In the short span of three months I got drunk a lot, deflowered two virgins, got crabs from the town rebel, and was publicly spanked in the street by a friend's grandmother for being a "jezebel", which made me laugh so hard I almost choked on my gum. I was also suspended for initiating three fist fights at school, two of which were with boys. My red-faced principal pounded his desk with his fist and yelled, startling my exhausted, third-shift working mother who sat across from him stoically.

"Are you proud? You have raised the first young lady to be in a physical altercation in the entire history of this school!" No. Mom was not proud at all. But I sure as hell was.

After that meeting with the principal, Mom gave up on me for a while and added a part-time job to her already hectic 50 hour work week. With even less supervision, I was free to do whatever I wanted. That was until Kelly, my first real boyfriend, came along. Mom was, in her naivety, relieved to have someone to keep me in line. And he certainly did. Kelly, a Joey-Ramone-looking misfit and high school dropout, didn't *ask* me out. He *told* me we were going out and then didn't let me out of his sight for almost five years. A musician like Dad, Kelly made me sit in his basement and listen to squealing guitar riffs for hours. I still can't stand squealing guitar solos or 80's hair

bands. Whenever I tried to break up with Kelly, he beat me up, choked me, or threatened suicide. Initially, this obsession felt like love.

Being desperately clung to instead of discarded was a powerful shift, but even Kelly's stalking, controlling, and threats of violence didn't curb my promiscuity. I just got sneakier about it. I waited for him to stop circling my house at around 10:30 p.m. every night, turned off all the lights, and snuck out to meet whomever was next on the roster — hopefully someone old enough to buy me beer. Having found love, I was still in it for the escape, the power, the validation, and the rush of being wanted — all of which was perpetuated when I discovered my oral fixation was good for more than just chain smoking, gum chewing, and nail biting. Turns out, I had real talent. With this talent came all of the sexual control and excitement with none of the vulnerability of rape, rejection, or crabs. It was quite brilliant. At 15, I had finally figured it out. And once the rumors hit Main Street, few boys at school or men in town could walk by me in the street without lustfully staring at my always smiling mouth. I felt invincible.

After graduation, I enrolled in beauty school, and Kelly went to Arizona to get famous. I was supposed to follow when I was done with school, but instead I dropped out and signed on for a three-month long affair with the married town sheriff. When Kelly's rock star aspiration didn't pan out, and he couldn't pay his rent (full-time musician is Latin for unemployed narcissist) he came home, and I ran away. I lived in a Dodge Shadow with a new boyfriend and two other delinquents. We drove, drank, and pillaged our way across the Midwest. Kelly found us one day at a gas station in Grand

Forks where he almost choked me unconscious in front of my friends and boyfriend. When he got into his car to leave — too many witnesses to finish the job, I suppose — we took off and I didn't see him again until many neutralizing years later. Tired of my friends, my boyfriend, and my gypsy existence, I met a ginger boy named Joe and settled down for a while.

I married Joe after two months of dating/fucking/ being a squatter in his rented-by-the-month motel room. Joe let me come and go as I pleased, he wasn't jealous or possessive, and he made me laugh. His fuming but innocuous rants reminded me a little bit of Larry. Joe was never cruel to me. He was a tall and broad shouldered alcoholic, amateur writer, and a genius at the art of self-destruction. He wrote poetry and quoted Monty Python. I loved him with white hot intensity which I *knew* would keep me faithful. And it did, for a little while.

Joe and I made two beautiful children who changed my life by giving me purpose. We moved to Wisconsin, stayed married for nine tumultuous years, and eventually divorced. Joe spiraled into a suicidal oblivion as I raised our boys without him. He popped in and out of our lives between girlfriends, prison time, hospital stays, and psychiatric holds. Joe never stopped needing me and I never really stopped loving him. We just weren't good together.

I justified leaving Joe because of his drinking. I couldn't handle the side-effects. The neglecting of (or raging at) our children when he was hung over, the bouncing from job to job, the unpredictable and straight up rapacious characters he would bring home,

the hospital bills from his drunken injuries, and the emotional neglect. I believe those reasons are all valid. But they are invalidated by the weight of the fact that I had fallen in love with someone else. I had evolved (or devolved) from that vulnerable girl left half-naked in a dugout into a relationship-overlapping succubus. I left *them* before they had a chance to leave *me*. Joe died in July of 2012, suffocated during a seizure. He was only 40.

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The year after my and Joe's second son was born, Grandma died. I left the boys with Joe's parents (Joe couldn't be trusted) and drove to Michigan for the funeral. By this time, Aunt Greta had divorced her abusive husband, had moved in with Grandma, and was dating a kind, younger man. Divorce had taken a visible toll on Aunt Greta. She was beginning to look exactly like Grandma. She was still the same mousy woman, but she seemed somehow freer and happier on her new love's arm. I could not figure out what it was about this woman that reminded the family of me. I couldn't see it. I asked my mother that night when we were sitting alone on Grandma's patio.

The patio beside Grandma's house brought back fond memories of late night fires and marshmallow roasts with Grandpa. He had poured that patio himself and in one corner were faded handprints and names pressed into the concrete of Grandpa, Grandma, my two uncles, Aunt Greta, Mom, and their dog Pudgy. I remembered the many summers I had put my hands into the large impression left by my Grandfather and marveled over the tiny prints left by my mother, "Steffie". After all of the relatives left,

Mom and I sat out under the stars and the swooping bats and talked like we hadn't talked in years. She was looking through a sketchbook of Grandma's old drawings and I was playing with a gaudy orange Virgo pin I found in a box of Grandma's old costume jewelry. When I asked Mom about Aunt Greta, her face did that thing it does when I ask something most people had the sense not to — a split-second flash in her eyes implying secrets or confrontation.

She told me that Aunt Greta struggled with depression, that her ex-husband abused her (which I had already gathered), that Greta was promiscuous in high school, and that as a result, Grandpa was harder on her than any of the other kids.

“He beat her — only her — frequently and badly,” my mother whispered. “She was always in trouble for something. But that was back when Mom and Dad drank a lot.”

I was shocked. My sweet grandpa, who defended me against a spanking from Aunt Greta's husband, was abusive? Having been blind-sided by the revelation about my grandfather, I no longer had much interest in pursuing the similarities between me and my aunt. It seemed obvious enough. The years of hearing, “Greta...I mean...Jenny” made sense. Grandpa must've squeezed her boy crazy out too. Or beat it out of her. And she *obviously* had some “Daddy Issues.” It took Mom another fifteen years to tell me the rest of the story.

I have not been back to the house in Michigan since Grandma's funeral. I do still go there in dreams and through the magic of Google Maps Street View. When I dream of

or see the house, I am overcome with feelings of joyous nostalgia and something more ominous that I can't quite describe. I came to realize that sense of danger was always there, lurking just under the surface. It was as if the energy of the past had embedded itself in walls of the long spooky hallway which led to the bedrooms and in the stairs of the damp dark basement where Grandma kept the Blue Moon ice cream in the freezer.

When I was in my thirties, my uncle's beautiful log cabin nestled in a wooded hill by a raging gorge became the new meeting place for trips to Michigan. It was there that I would hear the "grown-up" stories of my grandparents. Both my Grandpa and Grandma drank excessively. There were stories of Grandpa, who was supposed to be supervising a band trip in Chicago for my uncle's school, being found passed out drunk in an alley behind the students' hotel. There were stories of Grandma calling my mother from an institution where she was sent to "dry out", pleading with my teenage mother to come get her. Grandma told me that story, but in her version it was a tuberculosis ward. And there were stories of Grandpa coming home drunk and pulling a hutch full of Grandma's wedding china onto himself while Grandma screamed at him for breaking her stuff. These were not the grandparents I knew. I had never met those people.

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Whenever I am asked, "Where did you meet your husband?" I cringe. I am too embarrassed to say, "Well, I was working as an assistant manager at an incense-reeking porn store slash head shop off of the interstate." (Romantic, right?!) Jason was my 2nd shift trainee.

It was the perfect job for me at the time. I was paid \$10 an hour to sit on my ass, surrounded by porn and “marital aids”, babysitting leering perverts, chain smoking, and reading novels. Jason was not as suited for the job. He was too nice of a guy. But because he was desperate for a job, fit the eclectic fringe employee prerequisite, and had an in through a friend of the manager, he applied.

Jason was a little weird and a lot androgynous. He had a head full of long, curly hair which he dyed a different color every month, full girly-lips, and a painfully skinny but muscular body. He was an optimistic goth who was always smiling. He bragged that he was granted official lesbian status by his gay roommates for being a better feminist than they were. Jason was cool, friendly, and respectful. Not the type of guy I was prone to sleep with.

Over the course of his training and our budding friendship, Jason and I talked incessantly. I would find I had stayed three hours after my shift was over, leaning over the glass case which housed nude playing cards and sour drinks made to pass a piss test, locked into a conversation about kids (he had a daughter), astrology (he was the only person I had ever met who knew their own astrological chart by heart), politics, psychology, history, or destiny. He was a tall man with kind eyes. He bounced on his tip-toes when he walked and his boot buckles jangled like spurs. He was a vegetarian who bought me Burger King Whoppers on payday. He anonymously sent me a dozen roses on Valentine’s Day because he “knew I never got so much as a card.” (He only admitted they were from him weeks later because I feared one of the creepy customers

was stalking me.) He sang a Tool song in German, the lyrics of which were a recipe for Mexican Wedding Cakes. He fixed cars and anything else that was broken with strong, dirty, and calloused hands. He hummed while he worked. He urged me to trust my intuition. He assured me I was not crazy, I was insightful. He poured out his lower lip in sympathy over my struggles with Joe's drinking. He gave me a four heaping boxes of Stephen King books for Christmas. And after a few years of working together, he shyly confessed, he had fallen in love with me.

I had not slept with Jason. He fell in love with my “intelligence, curiosity, self-deprecating honesty, crassness, duality, empathy, emotionality,” and my “amazing funhouse eyes that always seem to be holding back a juicy secret or an idea for an adventure.” For the first time in my life, I entered into a romantic relationship with a friend. I had not used sex as an icebreaker/a control tactic/a manipulation/or bait. When we did have sex — emotional intimacy led to simultaneous orgasms, and selflessness led to the mythical female orgasm — it was amazing! I cautiously entered into the relationship I had been seeking my whole life.

It took me eight years of dating, five years of engagement, to marry Jason. He understood my fear and patiently talked me through my doubts. I wanted to be sure I was over the hump of the “Seven Year Itch.” I didn't want to mess this one up.

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One winter, seven months before my 40th birthday, I sat in my cold garage in front of a space heater, smoking, and writing on my laptop. I was working on a short memoir

piece about my promiscuous teen years and my childish theory that my grandpa had unleashed my boy crazy tendencies. I was stuck. I couldn't seem to write it the way I wanted to. It kept circling over sad memories and draining into childhood traumas. I called my mom to verify some funny story about my grandpa and to ask how she had met my dad. The conversation that followed, after a bit of small talk and the usual bitter remembrance of my dad, was not what I had expected. She told me my grandmother wanted to be cremated and sprinkled over Lake Michigan. That, in her final year, Grandma had refused to be buried in the plot reserved for her next to Grandpa a decade before she died. Then she told me why.

“So Mom, I mean, Grandma was watching some movie on Lifetime about a teenage girl who was acting out and sleeping with a lot of different boys,” Mom said. “It turned out that this girl in the movie, well, that her father was molesting her. So Grandma called Aunt Greta at work and told her she needed to talk. The movie must've rang some bell in Gran's head that got her thinking about Greta's childhood. Greta confirmed that it was true and then Grandma called me crying, to ask me if Dad...Grandpa had ever touched me. I told her I didn't think so. But, to be honest, my childhood is blurry and kind of scary to remember.”

I fell silent. This secret had been alluded to so many times since Grandma's funeral that it didn't come as a complete shock. I was certain, however, that if I had ever heard the actual words spoken, it would kill me. It didn't.

“I figure that’s why Grandpa beat her up so bad all of the time,” Mom continued. “Because he was jealous or something of the boys she went with. Mom and Dad drank so much back then, I guess it wouldn’t surprise me,” Mom stated matter-of-factly. She’d had more time to reconcile this information than I had.

“Did you hear all of this from Grandma or did you hear it from Aunt Greta?” I asked, hopeful for doubt. “Grandma liked to tell tales.”

“I heard it from Grandma,” she said. “But Greta verified it too. Honestly, it explains a lot about Greta’s life and the way that she was. You know, kind of like you were? Anyway, let’s not talk about this anymore. How are the boys? How’s Jason and Raven?”

I wasn’t able to finish that version of this memoir. It sits somewhere in my documents like an infected cyst I can’t bring myself to lance. The best part of my childhood had become sullied in the span of a phone call. Every loving and cherished memory of the greatest man I had ever known felt tainted.

I have come to see things differently since then. My memories of Grandpa are real and they are my own. I have accepted that the grandfather I knew and loved was not the same man that my mom and her siblings knew. The man I knew was kind, generous, and loving. The man I knew would never hurt me. Maybe he was saved through his big gold bible. Maybe he exorcised his demons when he stopped drinking anything but the occasional beer or glass of wine. Maybe he found redemption in my blind devotion to him. Maybe my love washed him clean of his sins. Love can do that.

I will not condone what my grandfather may have done to my aunt. My heart breaks for her. I know her whole being was erected around that experience. I can relate to her in this way. I can empathize with the burden she carried to seek love through sex because it was the only way she knew how and the situations she found herself in through that search. I cannot even begin to imagine the scars she bears. But for the sake of my few happy childhood memories, I must accept that she was hurt by a different man than the one who loved and protected me.

True and selfless love has the power to fundamentally change a person. Just as a lack of love or a reckless search for love can. Through my experiences and introspection, and by befriending and marrying a man with so many of the admirable traits of my grandfather, I have been altered. Safe and satisfied, I have learned to find validation and power through more productive means. I gain validation through the raising of my boys and Jason's daughter. I find power in education and writing.

I am no longer the same desperate boy crazy girl I once was — although I feel boy craziness lingering dormant inside of me. It occasionally flares up in the presence of an intellectually stimulating man. Nor am I a slave to my “Daddy Issues,” though they still resurface in drunken, flirty encounters or in a desperate plea for sex from Jason when his words just aren't enough. Jason understands. He sits across from me, crosses his long legs tightly at the knees — just like Grandpa always did — holds my hands in his, and says, “I love you. I am so glad you are mine.” And mostly, I *feel* loved — whether he puts out or not.

CHAPTER III: “Saturn in Cancer”

September 1994 — under the Libra sun and Cancer moon — I was handed my first born son, Isaac. The minute I looked at his face, round and pink and framed in blonde curls, I knew this wasn't his first time around on the planet. He looked at me with eyes that said, 'I am older than this wriggling little body would have you believe, and I'm here to help you get your shit together'. And that's exactly what he did. I've heard from countless new mothers, there is nothing comparable to that moment when you see your baby for the first time. A newborn alters everything you ever knew and believed, as if someone has removed your heart from your body and threatened to roll it out into traffic. Protecting that fragile little being becomes the mother's whole reason for existing.

To be completely honest, Isaac was dreadful as a baby. He never got enough milk from breast feeding to sleep, despite my ample bosom, and I had to give in and feed him formula, which gave him colic. When he wasn't screaming, he was wide awake and ready for more food. He slept in two-hour intervals. Those first few months were the closest I had ever come to complete madness. I had no idea what I was doing, was married to a less than supportive man, and was suffering from Postpartum Depression. So many nights I thought of killing myself — but never Isaac. Whether it was my break with sanity or just a mother's love, I believed him to be somehow divine. Though I didn't really believe in God, I knew this child was meant for something bigger than just being raised in poverty and sent out into the world to breed and toil. In hindsight, I was not wrong, but my scope was too broad. Isaac didn't save the world, he just saved me.

Isaac is a Libra and I am a Gemini — air signs ruled by Venus and Mercury respectively: intelligent, balance-seeking, and social signs who are exceptionally compatible with one another. When I learned to map out complete birth charts, I found my chart and Isaac's were very similar. There were aspects, planets in our zodiac, associated with being emotional, intuitive, sensitive, and empathetic. When Isaac was six years old, we had an experience which solidified my belief in our shared sensitivity.

Isaac and I stopped by the apartment of my old high school friend, Julie. I hadn't seen her in some time — we had been close, had lived in her car together one summer, but we lost touch after I married — and she asked if we wanted to sleep over on our way back to Wisconsin from visiting my mom in North Dakota. I agreed. When Isaac and I arrived at Julie's door and were ushered in by a welcoming hand gesture, I was inexplicably struck by a fear whose origins I couldn't identify. I had anticipated a happy reunion with an old friend, not a panic attack. I had known Julie and her nephew Jason for years, but I suddenly felt as though Isaac and I were in danger being there with them. They felt like strangers.

The four of us hung out in Julie's dirty dish-strewn living room talking about old times. Stories about my youthful antics felt like they were about another person, someone I no longer related to. I was trying to act normal, and Isaac, who was usually a social child, was stuck to my leg like a Velcro teddy bear. Though the conversation and behavior of our hosts seemed harmless — they were laughing and smiling — I felt an overwhelming need to get away from them. After an hour of awkward catching-up

conversation, I politely excused Isaac and myself to go to bed — much to their dismay — claiming we were tired from a long week and the prospect of our long journey home.

Neither Isaac nor I slept much that night. Every creak of the floor and murmuring din of voice had me on guard, and I feared my anxiety was causing Isaac's anxiety. I whispered to him, "Are you okay, Boo Bear? Can't you sleep?"

He looked at me with those wise old eyes of his and said, "Those are bad people. You need a knife under your pillow."

My hackles raised, and those superstitious beliefs which seem more authentic in the dark solidified in my already anxious mind. I felt it too. We were in peril, but I didn't know how. Isaac eventually slipped in and out of sleep; I couldn't. All night long I strained my senses to prepare for an attack I was sure would be coming. At the first pink hint of dawn through the smeared 2nd story window, I gathered up my son and crept down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs, the acrid smell of chemicals and sweat slapped at my sleep deprived face.

In the living room, I saw three sleeping but restless bodies — Julie, her nephew, and a stranger. On the coffee table in front of the ratty couch were half-cut straws and two empty baggies, the pinkish-orange remnants of crystal meth stained into the plastic. They must've been snorting meth for days before Isaac and I had shown up. I had no idea how they would've fallen asleep otherwise. I knew from my one experience with the popular Midwestern drug that the high lasted a lot longer than just a few hours — up to 12 hours on just one line — and caused users to become violently paranoid and

hallucinate. The stranger, a large woman passed out on her stomach, had a small handgun tucked into the back of her jeans. I grabbed my backpack, quietly opened and closed the door, and ran for my car like a spooked little kid coming up the cellar stairs of Grandma's house at night.

I drove to a nearby rest area, where I sat Isaac on the sink to clean him up and change his clothes before tackling the 10 hour drive back home. We didn't have to say anything to one another. Isaac didn't know what he saw, but he felt it. I didn't know how to explain to him what I saw or felt, either way. But we both knew we had narrowly escaped something terrifying. All I could do was hug him and tell him I was sorry I had brought him there and that we would never go back.

I never hung out with Julie again after that night fourteen years ago, but Isaac never forgot her or how he felt at his one and only visit to her home. In hindsight, in that logical part of my mind, I try to attribute the experience to a more solid scientific source. Maybe I recognized the smell of meth without thinking when we walked in. Maybe my fear was causing me to release some pheromone that only my own offspring could register. Maybe Isaac was picking up on subtle physical cues of my anxiety, and they were triggering his own. Maybe I heard something, almost unconsciously, when we walked in Julie's door — like rabbits in the woods may hear the wind and think it's a coyote howling in the distance. Regardless, our shared sense of danger was powerful and turned out to be accurate — more akin to magic than primitive survival — and this experience made us feel psychically connected, intuitive, and special to one another.

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Will was born in December of 1996, under the snow filtered Sagittarius Sun and Virgo Moon. My Jupiter-ruled, Sagittarius boy — idealistic, adventurous, and jovial — would need to roam and would understand my carefree skimming of the surface of life, but try to instill a sense of purpose and idealism in me. From the time Will was born until today, he and I moved eight times: Gemini and Sagittarius are said to move more than any other sign in the zodiac, relishing the change of environment.

I was excited to meet Will. There was something easier, less frightening, about my second experience with motherhood than the first. I knew what to expect, how I would feel, and what I was in for when I got home with my new baby. My cockiness proved to be premature.

When I looked into Will's eyes for the first time, I did not see the wise old soul I saw in Isaac's eyes. I saw shooting stars of mischief and fun. I saw my own flirtatious and excitable eyes, in a deeper blue under thick black lashes, staring back at me. Every nurse that came in to the room to check on us couldn't resist commenting on Will's beautiful eyes, and on his prominent nose. His father Joe's hooked nose stood out on his tiny little face making him look like (as I overheard the nurses in the hallway comment) "A little, old, Jewish man". But he grew into it, eventually.

Will was an incredibly easy baby. He slept for twelve hours straight his first night home. I found myself checking on him every few hours for fear he had died. He ate well. I opted out of breastfeeding this time around — convinced there something was

wrong with me — and I soon regretted my decision. My mother had come from North Dakota to stay with us and help with Will and Isaac. When she was feeding Will one day she asked me, “Have you noticed how he twitches?” I hadn’t. But after, I watched Will very closely as he fed. His head would jerk to the side periodically and his eyes would roll back for short intervals. I called the pediatrician, and upon further expensive and time-consuming testing, she discovered Will had a calcium deficiency which was causing him to have tiny seizures. Will’s neurological problems only got worse after, and I blamed myself. I had no excuses.

Despite astrology’s lack of provability and mystical implications, I relied on it to make excuses for myself and the people around me for decades. My interest started out simply enough. As a teenager, I read the description of a Gemini and instantly felt a sense of relief and epiphany. I wasn’t bi-polar; I was versatile, capricious, and energetic. I wasn’t a cheating slut; I was flirtatious, butterfly-like, and easily bored in relationships that didn’t appeal to my changing nature. I wasn’t two-faced or flip-floppy; I was intelligent, a quick-thinker who saw both sides of every situation and person. Once I learned how to do entire birth charts — where every planet was on the day of a person’s birth and what aspects of personality were affected by each planet — the possibilities were infinite. I could also use astrology to understand my children — a skill I had hoped would make up for all of the parenting skills I lacked. I could use it to feel as though I had some control, by memorizing their predetermined destinies.

With my belief in astrology also came a vague and loose sense of karma and fate. After Will was born, I believed in a sort of instant karma. My Saturn, the planet associated with karmic paths, was in Cancer, the mother's sign — a placement built on fear, early responsibility, and unhealthy escapisms — and every one of those early years with Will proved I was susceptible to Saturn's influence. I believed my bad decisions or selfish choices would be thrown back at me immediately and swiftly through the suffering of my child. In hindsight, this may have been a symptom of paranoia brought on by my well-established pot habit. Unlike when Isaac was born, I didn't discontinue my bad behaviors when Will was born; I embraced them. My need to escape my own mind and the stresses of my marriage outweighed my twenty-two-year-old, moral sense of what a mother was supposed to do or not do. I had taken to smoking weed on a daily basis. I thought it was harmless enough, I thought 'there are worse things', I thought it calmed my anxiety and obsessive need to clean — controlling my outside world when I couldn't control my inside world — but it didn't. Pot only perpetuated my neurosis.

My belief in karma kept me in line, most days, but my faith in it was manic, not much different than the obsessive-compulsions of my fellow Gemini friend Brenda, who has to repeat every action four times so her children won't die. Logically she knows her children won't die if she doesn't pump the soap four times when she washes her hands, but the impulse is so strong she's afraid to take the chance.

Further proof of my irrational belief that my behavior controlled the universe came one Saturday afternoon when the boys were settled in on our second-hand couch

watching *Winnie the Pooh*. I intended to join them after I hit the bong in my bedroom — coloring, crafts, and cartoons were the three “C’s” of motherhood I always enjoyed best when high. Will was a year old and Isaac was three. As I stepped out of the bedroom, shutting the door and the smell of my sins off behind me, I heard Isaac hollering for me from the living room a few feet away, “Momma, something is wrong with the baby!” I ran in to find Will on his side, stiff little legs pushed out straight, eyes rolled up into his head, and jaw clenched. I grabbed him up — he was as hot as embers — and rushed to the phone to dial 911. I hysterically sobbed at the operator as she tried in vain to ask me questions to help determine the emergency. I didn’t know if Will was breathing, I didn’t know if he was conscious, I didn’t know what to say except to scream again and again, “Come help my baby!”

Joe and his friend Tim, suddenly sober in light of my hysterics, sat with a terrified Isaac in the living room. I wrapped a blanket around Will and ran stocking-footed out into the snowy street to meet the ambulance. I made it to the end of the block before they arrived. On the ride to the hospital, as the paramedics shot Will’s tiny body full of Valium and still couldn’t stop the seizures, I promised the God I didn’t believe in I would never smoke weed again if He would let my son live. Will lived, and I broke my promise.

Will’s febrile seizures occurred off and on for the next four years. His seizures were atypical of febrile seizures in the sense that instead of only lasting a few minutes, they would last upwards of an hour or more if not brought to a halt by Valium. When

Will was three years old, and the doctors determined the seizures were dangerous and weren't going to stop on their own, they gave me Valium suppositories to give him. This gave me a sense of control I had not had previously. Though it would've been helpful earlier when Will had a seizure in the middle of Nowhere Minnesota on the interstate as he, Isaac, and I traveled to visit my mother. My only life-line was a giant car phone and hope that the ambulance from a town thirty miles away would come in time. Will's medical problems made me treat him differently. As a young and (let's be honest) kind of unstable mother, I hovered over both of my children excessively, but with Will I lived in constant fear of losing him, and therefore I obsessed more.

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In September 2000, a beautiful round-faced, black-haired baby girl was born under the Virgo sun and Taurus moon to a skinny, mop-haired goth man and a young, emotionally wounded ex-stripper. They had broken up months before, but they shared the experience of their daughter's birth together. He wasn't, until further testing, positive the baby was his. She was. The baby, aptly named Raven, would, in a little over a year, be abandoned by her mother who took her older daughter and moved away to Minneapolis. Raven was left in the care of her unprepared but lovingly devoted father, Jason, whom I had been dating, fallen in love with, and eventually married in 2012.

Virgo, like Gemini, is ruled by the planet Mercury and associated with intelligence, but is most known for being overly critical, stubborn in beliefs and opinions, and relentless in shoving said opinions and beliefs down other people's throats. If there

is one zodiac sign in my life who has proven to be challenging and impactful, it was Virgo: my grumpy but beloved grandmother — Virgo; Kelly, my abusive and obsessive ex-boyfriend — Virgo; Nancy, my meddling ex-mother-in-law — Virgo. Being presented with the frightening, but welcomed, responsibility of helping to raise Raven, I would work out whatever cosmic prejudice I had towards Virgos. I loved her too much not to.

The first time I ever met Raven, we were sitting together on Jason's cracker-crumbed stuffed couch. I was waiting for him to come chat me up, and she was waiting for him to finish making her lunch in the kitchen. She looked up at me with a disdain which could only be felt by a daddy's girl in the company of obvious competition. She stood up on the couch cushion on her wobbly and rolled little baby legs, her diaper comically sagging under her belly-button-revealing baby shirt, and screamed an inch from my face. Initially startled, I laughed at her which made her angrier. With her budding Electra Complex determination to intimidate me out of her father's house, she took a deep theatrical breath and screamed again. Like an idiot, I returned fire and screamed back. Her little bottom lip jutted out as she collapsed to her diapered bottom and started wailing, giant genuine tears rolling down her chubby pink cheeks. When Jason entered the room to see what in the hell was going on, I was as appalled with myself as he was with me. But from that moment on Raven and I were bonded. Our battle ended in a draw. I became the mother she never consistently had, and she became the daughter I never knew I wanted. Apparently, we just needed to get the screaming out of our systems first.

Years later — our relationship solidly fortified by love, but occasionally shaken by fundamental personality differences (mainly my inability to take anything too seriously and her inability to take anything lightly) — Raven and I had gone to the mall to buy clothes for her first day of kindergarten coming up in the fall. Jason had been struggling to keep the bills and rent paid, and I wanted to help out. Despite Raven having lived with him for years, child support was still taken from Jason's checks, so he had started working for cash "under the table" at a web-based small business. When Jason attempted to get legal placement from Raven's mother, the elusive woman conference-called the judge to say Jason had refused to let her have contact with Raven, and so she refused to give him legal placement. She hadn't been heard from in years, except through the rumor mill, which whispered of how her older daughter had been temporarily removed from her custody after she'd been molested by mom's new boyfriend. As a result of her phone call to the judge, however, Jason's financial difficulties continued. Their water was turned off, but he was always able to make the rent and keep Raven fed. I had them come over to the apartment the boys and I shared for meals and baths, but otherwise they got by. Jason made sure Raven was cared for. That day at the mall was important for me as well as them. I wanted to give Raven and myself a "girl's day". We bought a few dresses, some My Little Pony underwear, and some shoes. We drank Orange Julius, we rode on the quarter rides, and we took silly pictures in the photo booth.

Back at Jason's apartment after shopping, Raven and I colored in her pretty princess coloring book. She looked up at me and said, "Would you be my mom?" My maternally driven Saturn in Cancer heart burst, I hugged her and said, "It would be a

great honor to be your mom.” For the rest of the afternoon she took every opportunity to use my new title, which sounded like tiny bells in her mouth. I went home that evening changed. I was a mother for the third time —this time to a little girl.

The next day, as if she intuited her daughter’s revolt, Raven’s real mom unexpectedly showed up at Jason’s apartment. She was back from Minneapolis, had a new and stable boyfriend, had “found God”, and wanted her daughter back. I was on a short break between classes and had stopped by their apartment with some broccoli cheese soup. When the knock came, and Jason looked through the gauzy curtain on the door, I could tell by the look on his face something that was wrong. “Nicole,” he mouthed silently to me. It was a name we never used in Raven’s presence, because we never really knew if she would come back.

When Nicole walked into the apartment, I was struck by how incredibly beautiful she was. She wore caked-thick make-up, but I saw Raven’s high, wide cheekbones and dazzling smile in her face. She had her long blonde hair up, with small ringlets circling her face, and legs that seemed to go on forever. She smiled at me and dismissed me almost simultaneously. Nicole bent down in front of Raven, who was sitting on the floor playing with her ponies having abandoning her coloring, and said, “Hi, Raven. Oh, you’re so pretty. Do you know who I am?”

Raven looked up at her. She knew. She smiled and asked, “Are you my new mom?”

After a few months of supervised visits, Jason — who was exhausted from single parenting, bringing his daughter to work with him, and having no time to himself — agreed to let Raven go and live with Nicole. She was there for two worrisome years before the calls from Child Protective Services became increasingly serious in nature and I begged Jason to fight for full custody. The final straw came when CPS called to inform Jason that Raven, who weighed 38 pounds, was being given adult doses of Tylenol PM by her mother to help her sleep. After a long court battle, during which we were unable to see Raven for two months due to an investigation into Nicole’s desperate accusation that both Jason and I had molested Raven, we finally gained full custody. With the exception of twenty or so sporadic visits with Nicole a year, she has been in our care ever since.

Nicole tells Raven I stole her because I wanted a daughter. I just laugh and tell Raven, “No way! Boys are easier, Chica. I have more experience with boys. You’ll have to teach me how to do this girl-thang. Mostly, I just want you to be safe, whether here or there. I just want you to be safe.” (I always repeat myself to her when I am tempted to say something horrible about her mom.)

If I knew Nicole would care for her, I would have no reservations about Jason handing her back over. I love Raven, but I also know how important a relationship with her mother is to her. I have never tried to take Nicole’s place. I’ve not been “Mom” to Raven since that day in Jason’s apartment. I am just “Jen”: maker of her favorite yams and cake for breakfast birthdays, school taxi driver, giver of hugs, buyer of bras, and

annoyingly enthusiastic singer of “Girl, You’ll Be a Woman Soon” when she gets her period.

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Isaac, now twenty, and his friends gather around me on the patio. I have my computer on my lap and I am utilizing a program to do astrological charts for them, their girlfriends, their parents, and their siblings. The computer program allows me to do in minutes what used to take me hours by hand. The young adults laugh, confirming or denying, the personality traits assigned to their particular birth charts. Isaac smiles at me with pride.

Isaac and I have traveled a long road from our poverty-stricken and chaotic younger years. He has grown into a handsome, responsible, and kind young man. He plays bass guitar. The reverberating riffs of Nirvana and The Violent Femmes, music from his childhood and my own adolescence, resonate through the house and fill my heart with pride. We remain close, even closer than we were in his youth. We talk about everything. There are no secrets between us and he relies on me for advice and direction as strongly as I rely on him for silent confirmation that I did a good job raising him despite my rough start.

Just as his birth chart indicates, he is charming, polite, fair, and charismatic. But the scarier aspects, those watery escapist aspects which led his father and I down a road laden with alcohol and drug abuse, do not plague him. Isaac has admittedly dabbled in binge-drinking and smoking weed in high school — he told me he had a pretty scary

experiences with cocaine-laced weed at a party his sophomore year — but when his father died his senior year he turned his back on that lifestyle and all of his friends who were in it. He occasionally drinks (socially) in moderation, but fears he could easily slip into the black hole of addiction, so he mostly abstains.

Isaac is living in his own apartment now with his girlfriend, Emily — a dark-haired, blue-eyed, ample-breasted, and playful Capricorn girl. She makes him happy and that makes me love her. Isaac works upwards of 50 hours a week, but makes time to come over every Sunday to do laundry, eat a home-cooked meal, and watch *Shameless* — a show we both find tragically relatable. Looking at him makes me want to cry sometimes; the love and pride is overwhelming. He makes me laugh, hugs me, and teases me. He is my savior and my son all rolled into one. On his back is a tattoo of angels holding up the wings of a plane — a memorial to his father, Joe. On his calf is an hourglass, the upper half heaven imagery and the lower half hell imagery. On his upper left arm is a bright, feminine Buddha head, floating in a purple and blue mist which will eventually be filled in with planets and stars. It is his homage to me, our shared sense of karma, and our shared attempt to make sense of a world we find plagued with confusion and anxiety by looking to the sky.

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Will stopped having seizures around the age of five, but was soon diagnosed with a plethora of psychological and autism-spectrum disorders. Whether due to his fiery Sagittarian temper, his father's genetically inherited rage, or the chaotic environment of

his youth, Will got booted out of three preschools and by the end of kindergarten his school's principal threatened expulsion if I did not medicate him. Because Will was already on seizure medications, the pill regiment became excessive. By third grade, I stopped everything and put him on supplements instead.

The older Will became, (and the more his environment settled into normalcy) the less violent and obstinate he was — though he still struggled with impulsiveness and a dangerous desire for adventure. Unlike Isaac, who took Joe's death as a sign to get on a more enlightened path, Will reacted by emulating Joe even more than he already did. The gestures and rants were no longer enough to bring him closer to his dead father. He began to chase Joe's demons down, tackle them aggressively, and claim them as his own.

The summer before Will turned eighteen, he had his driver's license and was seldom home. I worried about him having petit mal seizures while driving, but with no evidence to back up my fears, I kept them to myself. I grounded him from his vehicle a few times, when he'd come home with himself and his car reeking of weed. I explained that weed, despite my opinions on its harmlessness, was illegal and that driving under the influence of *any* substance was dangerous and stupid. I tried to keep an open dialogue with Will as I had with Isaac, relaying my understanding of how the teen years are rife with change, choices, and confusion — drugs, sex, and alcohol being the most dangerous as they have the potential to ruin one's life if not kept in check. He didn't want my words. He wanted the experience and adventure. I couldn't fault him for that.

In early July of 2014, I received a call from the police. Will had been in an accident. He was not hurt, but his car was totaled. He had hit a telephone pole, a stop sign, and a parked car. There were also minor children in the vehicle with him — a fourteen-year-old friend and that friend's ten-year-old cousin — who were thankfully unharmed. The snarky officer on the phone stated, "Mrs. Escher, Will was huffing computer duster and apparently passed out behind the wheel. He will be charged as an adult. I sure hope you have insurance because this is gonna cost you plenty of money." Anger singed my terrified tears dry and I screamed into the phone at Officer Obvious, "You just told me my son is huffing fucking duster! You think I give a fuck about money right now?"

I waited an endless hour before I was called and told I could come to the hospital. I sped to pick Will up from the emergency room where the police had taken him for blood tests. As I sat in the lobby waiting for him to be released into my custody, I sat across from a young mother with two small boys, an infant and a two-year-old with curly blonde hair and a lot of energy. The toddler was paging through a coloring book of dinosaurs, pausing once every few pages to show me a picture because his mother was preoccupied with his baby brother. I smiled and nodded for each one, probably confusing him with the asymmetry of my smile and my constantly flowing tears. I fought the urge to pessimistically and unfairly inform his mother, "Hey! Enjoy this while it lasts. It all goes to shit soon." I also fought the urge to grab her children up and cry into their milky-smelling pajama shoulders.

When the officer brought *my* 6-foot-2-inch baby out to the lobby, I saw the tears on his face and the regret in his eyes. He knew he had made a terrible mistake. The first thing he said to me was, “I’m sorry. I need to get help.”

Will lost his license but completed AODA counseling and was eventually, after nine months of judicial system fuckery, convicted of an OWI. The whole situation was frightening and too reminiscent of my marriage to Joe, but because no one was hurt, I came to be grateful for the incident. Will’s compulsion for danger and excitement had punched him square in the face and that was exactly what needed to happen. Now eighteen years old and in the home stretch of his senior year, Will volunteers at the Humane Society, gets straight A’s on his report card, and feeds his sense of adventure climbing down small cliff faces in a forest frighteningly called “Breakneck”. He is funny, incredibly smart, handsome, and can talk a pauper out of his last dollar. If his astrological chart is correct, he will be a shrewd and successful businessman one day. That is if uses his persuasive abilities for good and not evil.

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Raven is sitting in a chair at the beauty parlor. Her waist-length, dirty-blonde hair is about to be colored for the first time. She never wants her hair cut, preferring to keep it unmanageably long like her mother’s and sister’s, but because at fourteen years old she wants her hair bright red in the front and black in the back like her favorite You Tuber, the deal is she has to cut off 6 inches first. As we sit there talking to the stylist, Raven recalls fond memories with her mother and sister. Times like this — anything relating to

hair and makeup — is when she feels closest to them. I smile and nod, never saying anything negative or contradictory. Her Virgo mind latches on to everything and stores it as truth. I have to be very conscientious of my words.

The summer before Raven turned fourteen, Nicole became pregnant by a new boyfriend and decided to move to Florida — without him or Raven. Jason and I worked to help Raven through the separation, the second abandonment, as best we could. Raven seemed to be most concerned about Nicole's three cats, as she only saw her mother sporadically anyway.

After being in Florida a few months, Nicole married a man she had met there who was willing to take on the role of father to her unborn son. Raven was not told in advance. She found out through Nicole's changing Facebook relationship status. When I picked Raven up from school that day, her eyes were red-rimmed from crying. She was angry at her mother for not telling her about the marriage. I handled the situation as I often do. I took her out for greasy fast-food and ice cream, just the two of us, so we could talk it out.

I struggle to come up with excuses for Nicole — just as I did for Joe during the boys' more vulnerable years — but I do, to give Raven a more nurturing and positive vision of her. I believe the woman to be selfish and manipulative, but she is Raven's mother and somewhere alongside her pathological self-absorption and bad decision making, I know there is a strong maternal love for her daughter. How could there not be? I remind Raven of this, try to smooth out her angry ridges by reiterating how much her

mother, her father, and I love her. I remind her of how proud we all are of her. It's an act of constant checking and balancing to be a good step-parent. I am always aware of how much damage I am capable of doing if I don't watch myself and my tongue. Mothering Raven can be heartbreaking sometimes, I relate too strongly to her sense of abandonment and her thirst for love. It is cosmically crucial that I raise her to feel as whole and loved as is possible so she turns out better than I did — than her mother did.

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Sunday dinner — our new-born family tradition — has become my favorite time of the week. Every Sunday I make a huge meal, enough to feed my three kids, the boys' girlfriends, and any of the many teenage friends who happen to wander in. Spaghetti and meatballs, build-your-own-taco-bars, chili — all of the comfort foods and played-out classics from those rare days of their childhood when we had grocery money — are the norm. Sunday dinners never remind us of those poorer years of fish sticks and tater tots, but of holidays defined by over-indulgence and a butt in every dining room chair.

I sit at the head of the table, facing a green ceramic rendition of the zodiac on a garden stone hung above the reflective patio doors. Everyone else sits in their usual places. Raven sits to my left with her face shyly hidden beneath her sweatshirt hood and her hair, so the other kids don't see her laughing at their inappropriate banter. Aley — Will's tattooed, wide-hipped, cat-eyed, kind-hearted Taurus girlfriend — is sitting to Raven's left, hollering in her high-pitched voice about something rude or thoughtless Will had done prior to dinner. Will is at the other end of the table stepping up his rude

game, for the benefit of his brother and to egg Aley on and up to an even higher pitch. Isaac is to Will's left, laughing at everything his brother says, exchanging head-shakes and knowing looks with me, and intermittently getting a flirtatious elbow to his ribs from Emily, seated to my right.

I consult them over dinner about their childhood memories. I want to know how their memories differ from mine and if I had forgotten anything. "Hey, kids. I'm working on this story about being a mom to you all and it would help me out if you could tell me what memory from your childhood most stands out in your mind."

Isaac looked at me and smirked. "You sure you wanna know?"

"Yes," I answered, laughing. "I wouldn't have asked if I didn't."

"Okay," he shrugs. "So do you remember 'The House'?"

"Ugh!" I groaned. "Yes."

And, I did. "The House" was a small wooden craft house, about the size of a toaster, a painted blue door and windows on the front and a roof that lifted up on hinges to reveal a hollowed-out inside. It was where I used to hide my weed, pipes, and scraping utensils for the resin that built up after time. That house sat on a bookshelf that I blockaded by putting a baby gate inside the front lip of the shelf, locking it in and away from prying toddler fingers.

Isaac continued, shooting mischievous glances from me, to Will, to Emily. "Well, the first time I ever went to a party, I think it was like freshman year, everyone was

smoking weed. The place was filled with smoke. As soon as I walked in and smelled it, I was transported to my childhood. I thought to myself, ‘Weed smells like my childhood’. And ‘The House’ was the first image that popped into my head.” He laughs and Will looks at him confused but smiling. He doesn’t remember the House. Thank goddess!

“That’s fuckin’ terrible!” I said, laughing but jutting my lower lip out with guilt. “How did you guys not turn out to be junkies or maniacs?”

Isaac shrugs again as he shovels a meatball into his mouth and continues talking through it, muffling his already muffled voice, “It’s all good. I don’t care that you were a druggie loser. It would also explain the way Will turned out.” That sends the whole table into hysterics and Will shakes a meaty fist at Isaac. Raven’s head lowers closer to her plate and her shoulders are shaking, trying to contain her laughter and her mouth full of spaghetti.

Will chimes in, “I don’t remember that, but I do remember all of the weird games and stuff you came up with at the apartment.”

After Joe and I divorced, the boys and I lived in a little two bedroom apartment across the street from their school. By that time, I was enrolled in college as a single mother, and had left my weed and “The House” in the custody of Joe. The first few years after the divorce were hectic and hard on all of us, but Will in particular. He missed his dad, was angry at me for leaving, and was dealing with the side-effects of medications I would soon remove from his daily routine. Will was incredibly violent towards me back then. He would hit me and throw fierce, red-faced tantrums. He would scream into the

heat registers in hopes that the neighbor's complaints would get us kicked out so we could move back home to Joe. He would laugh at me when I cried from frustration. Those were the hardest years.

“Remember,” Will continues, “You would come up with these crazy ways to make us behave? Like the marble jar, where you put marbles in when we did something good and took marbles out when we did something bad. You had lines drawn on the jar for rewards, like going out to dinner or a new toy, and if the marbles fell below the bottom line we couldn't watch t.v. or play the Playstation.”

“Oh, yes!” I say, feeling redeemed.

The conversation orbits away as Emily and Aley share similar strategies from their teachers at school or parents, and Isaac teases Will for being a delinquent and breaking the marble jar in a fit of rage one morning when he had lost all of his marbles. I give Raven a wink, my way of including her in a conversation I know she won't enter in to without someone bringing up My Little Pony (which they won't) or addressing her directly. Despite her lack of participation, she enjoys the swirling chaos of the show the boys put on and likes having other girls at the table.

Jason remains hidden away in the bedroom. He has no patience for the loud and vulgar teasing, much like my own step-father who hid away in his room for every holiday dinner. Jason finds these conversations uncouth; the jokes about violence and the incessant teasing make him uncomfortable. I, however, soak it all in. I know it's all posturing and ridiculousness. I love to listen to them talk. Will carries on about his silly

plans for world domination or his life of organized crime: “I refuse to work a boring factory job like Isaac.” He enthusiastically relays, in Joe’s flailing movements, what he would do if ever the zombie apocalypse came to fruition: “I couldn’t kill mom if she turned. I would just lock her in the bathroom and feed her Isaac.” He entertains me. The way Raven snickers under her hood at every word which can be taken as sexual, particularly the word “moist”, makes me laugh right along with her. Isaac’s proud displaying of a picture on his phone showing himself wearing a tie in a fancy art gallery, pretending to lick the nipple of some artist’s muse, makes me shake my head and laugh so hard tears form in the corners of my eyes. Aley and Emily — the grounded Earth signs my sons chose as partners — call me “Mom” and consult me on make-up, house decorating, and family struggles, which makes me feel like my family is growing larger and more whole.

As dinner continues on its inevitable path, Will says, “Mom! I’m going to shoot myself in the foot so I don’t have to fucking mow next weekend.”

“I’ll shoot you in the foot,” Aley chimes in. “I feel like it would make up for all the bullshit I deal with from you.” She gives him a big cheesy smile and we all laugh.

“I’d have to shoot you in the fuckin’ face if that were the case,” Will retorts, pretending to be mad.

“Ah! Young love,” Isaac says. “I wish Emily and I could be as fucking awesome as you morons.”

Emily gets up close to Isaac's face for a kiss and opens her mouth, full of chewed up spaghetti.

“Sick!” Isaac yells, playfully pushing her back with a palm to her face.

I look at Raven who is trying to hold it together and not choke on her garlic bread. I say, “What a fuckin’ madhouse, huh? I’m glad *you* turned out normal.”

She rolls her eyes with exaggeration. “Oh, yeah! I’m *so* normal!” she says just to me as the four older kids spiral off into another conversation, “We’re a family of dorks.”

The curse words fly indiscriminately and the conversation topics are open — sex, drugs, and bad decisions — nothing is sacred or off the table. It is a free-for-all. Sometimes topics of discussion are serious, but those are seldom. Sunday dinners are mostly for laughing.

I am grateful as I take it all in. I am proud to have raised these young people, these adults and almost adults, who feel comfortable enough to talk about anything in front of me — the mother who raised them just dysfunctional enough to be funny.

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