

DIMENSIONS OF MOTHERHOOD: A MULTI-GENRE EXPLORATION

by

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A Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Arts-English

at

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Oshkosh WI 54901-8621

December 2011

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To my husband Eric, for his extraordinary patience and unwavering support during my times of silence and stress, and for his perpetual willingness to answer my random fiction questions. To my sister Marie, always my first reader, for her careful feedback and unflinching honesty. To Tory, for her companionship and encouragement during this process, and for reminding me to “push” during these final stages of labor. To my mom and dad, for teaching me about perseverance, faith, and, of course, mothering. Finally, to my girls, Autumn, Meg, Cady, and Riley, for being a constant source of stimulus, for challenging me to live up to my own expectations, and for proving to me daily that motherhood is worth the effort.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee members for their time, commitment, and careful attention to my work. In particular, I wish to thank Laura Jean for having faith in my writing. Without her guidance and encouragement, this creative thesis would probably never have been realized. I would also like to thank Ron for always challenging me to look harder and dig deeper. I also must acknowledge the many writers who became my teachers, especially Anton Chekhov, Joan Didion, Anne Lamott, Flannery O'Connor, and Francine Prose. Finally, I would like to thank the extraordinary number of dignified women, past and present, who give the rest of us something to aspire to.

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Introduction

To the right of my bed there is a dresser. Its most important function over the last several months has not been to hold clothes, framed photographs, and fading birthday cards, but to give me immediate access to anthologies, essays, sticky notes, pens, and random envelopes should I require them at 4:03 in the morning. There are other places I work, of course. I have an office just off the top of the stairs on the second floor of my home. It has a tall oak bookshelf and an L-shaped desk scattered with open notebooks, loose-leaf papers with random scribbles, and a dozen or so books of various genres. There is also a space on the wall above my desk on which I've taped up quotes from writers like Francine Prose, Anne Lamott, and Anton Chekhov. They are what I call my you-can-do-this quotes, and say such things as, "You need to trust that you've got it in you," and "If you don't know which way to go, keep it simple."

Somehow, though, my dresser seems to better represent my process and, I admit, my *obsession* with this endeavor. It also speaks more precisely to the depth and the scope of the project, and demonstrates that neither my process nor the thesis itself could possibly follow an ordinary, straight-line trajectory. Not when I am assembling ideas, notes, theories, material, and musings for a one-hundred-plus page, six-piece, multi-genre project. Because it takes into its sweep creative nonfiction and fiction *and* a topic as multi-layered as motherhood, it stands to reason that the methodology might at times be

unconventional. When you finally figure out a line of dialogue, or when, at last, you realize that something you read two weeks ago from one of Flannery O'Connor's essays on short story technique applies perfectly to something you've been wrestling with, it hardly matters if all you have to write with is a crayon and that your only light is the green glow coming from your electric blanket control.

Because of the nature of this project, I often wondered (daily) if it could ever become a cohesive whole. I knew that motherhood would thread the various parts of the thesis, and I was confident that the multi-genre approach was the most appropriate mode of inquiry. But I never imagined the thick labyrinth of material *and* philosophies that I would encounter over the course of my research or, by extension, how much these would challenge, complicate, and stretch my own understanding about writing. How would it be possible to integrate the sometimes *very* disparate viewpoints about what makes for a brilliant essay, memoir, and short story with my own writing theories? Then, how would I successfully merge my topic into a fiction/nonfiction format--something I was quickly finding out had very blurry boundaries to begin with? I wanted to experiment with subcategories in these genres and assimilate what I wanted to say about women and mothers with the technique of the writers who had inspired me. So I realized that I needed to turn to the masters.

The theories of Francine Prose in *Reading Like a Writer* rely heavily on the principle that the study of literary powerhouses such as Franz Kafka, Katherine

Mansfield, Anton Chekhov, Henry Green, Virginia Woolf, Leo Tolstoy, and Alice Munro, is an indispensable part of polishing our own writing. Prose writes, “These are the teachers to whom I go, the authorities I consult, the models that still help to inspire me with the energy and courage it takes to sit down at a desk each day and resume the process of learning, anew, to write.” She believes in the process of slowing way down when reading so that everything, from these authors’ use of gestures to their employment of commas, may be properly absorbed.

I, too, have found that the “private lessons” offered by these and other great writers have been unquestionably critical to my writing. When I would deliberate how to begin one of my short stories, I would read and re-read O’Connor’s sharp and decisive opening paragraph to “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” When I would attempt to combine intelligence and wit in my essay, I turned to Woolf’s “On Being Ill” or any number of Joan Didion’s staggeringly beautiful essays: “On Morality,” “On Self-Respect,” “Goodbye to All That,” or “In Bed,” for instance. When I was in search of inspiration for more dramatic storytelling, I looked to the last several pages of James Joyce’s “The Dead.” When I wanted more of an abrupt, though resonating, conclusion to my stories, I studied the ending of O’Connor’s “Everything That Rises Must Converge” and several of Chekhov’s stories, including “The Lady With the Pet Dog” and “The Bishop.” When I struggled with detail or with character sympathy, I often turned to Kafka’s “Metamorphosis.” When I needed inspiration on how to structure my memoir or how to

avoid sentimentality, I looked to Patricia Hampl's *The Florist's Daughter* and to Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, respectively.

So these and many more works of literature were instrumental to my writing process. Often, I would lug certain books along with me to that day's writing workspace, if only just to glance at them now and then for comfort. I carried Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* around with me like it was a pan of cheesy lasagna on a frosty winter night. Usually, it was the classics that I was drawn to, that I organized around my computer like a rainbow. Why? As Montaigne once said, older books "seem to me fuller and stronger." Or, as Prose points out, though many contemporary writers are fantastic, we must remember that "they represent the dot at the end of the long, glorious, complex sentence in which literature has been written."

But whether the works were classic or contemporary, what I learned, aside from their literary value, was that while they were often inspirational, they could also be paralyzing. More than once (*fine*, almost every time I picked up a pen) I thought, how can I ever measure up to this? I would read Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" or Susan Minot's "Lust" and literally gawk at their poignancy and sincerity. And they did, in fact, paralyze me. I remember thinking once that perhaps, like Margaret Atwood's *Nine Beginnings*, I should entitle my thesis "264 Beginnings," or rather, "264 Days and Nights of Self-Inflicted Torment." But then I would always take a deep breath and remind myself to take these works for what they were--models of literary excellence. They were inspirational

and they were instructive, but I had to approach them as prototypes, as it were, of what writing could be. And then I needed to trust my own writing style. How else could I produce something unique and meaningful?

There are several ways that I have tried to integrate the creative and technical influences of fiction and nonfiction writers with my own writing. In my fiction writing, for instance, I have started to experiment with various points of view and various subcategories of fiction, have learned to value the art of subtlety, and have begun to question the necessity of conflict resolution. In addition, reading such stories as Mark Costello's "Murphy's Christmas" and Minot's "Lust" has helped me to finally discard the notion that writers need to stay within certain structural, linguistic, and narrative boundaries. What makes writing such a dynamic enterprise, in fact, is its resistance to clearly defined rules and formulas. Costello and Minot are examples of contemporary literary trailblazers. But even before postmodernism "sanctioned" literary experimentation, however, writers demonstrated their propensities for rule-breaking, as it were. Anton Chekhov, for instance, spurned subjectivity in his writing, and often even conflict itself. Francine Prose addresses his tendency to resist conventional storytelling in her discussion of his story "The Husband." "The point," she concludes, "is that lives go on without change, so why should fiction insist that major reverses should always, conveniently, occur?"

The degree to which writers distinguish themselves from other writers and shed literary conventions seems to depend upon their individual ideologies. Not surprisingly, there is much divergence here, as well. Charles Baxter writes an entire essay on the misuse and “fictionality” of epiphanies, yet James Joyce organizes his stories around them. Janet Burroway notes that her approach to fiction writing is to “divorce” herself from reality. By contrast, Flannery O’Connor’s self-described method involves the “strictest attention” to the real. It is true, of course, that many elements are common to any attempt at creative writing: characterization, gestures, pacing, and sensory detail, for example. But in terms of process, there is as much variety as there are writers. I have come to understand that my own writing does not have to submit to some template. In fact, it will most likely be fresher if it does not.

Likewise, my approach to nonfiction writing has been impacted by my exposure to a diverse group of writers and writing styles. While some suggest that nonfiction is more straightforward than fiction (and as such, “says what it means”), I have found that in many cases, nonfiction--particularly literary essays--can be approached just as creatively as fiction. We see satire in Mark Twain, for instance, irony in Joseph Addison, and allegory in Virginia Woolf. The voice may be playful, sentimental, or argumentative, and the writing economical, lyrical, persuasive, or expository. Some essays even employ a narrative structure, as in George Orwell’s “A Hanging.” Memoirists, too, express many moods in their writing, whether cynical, contemplative, spiteful, stoical, or vulnerable.

I have learned that the primary requisite for my own nonfiction writing is to approach the subject as honestly and accurately as possible, in terms of emotion and memory. I have also become very attentive to the importance of scene and sensory details in my creative nonfiction and to the eschewal of sentimentality and didacticism.

An introduction to this cross-genre thesis necessarily involves a closer look at its separate parts--how they are different from one another and how they overlap. In the first place, creative nonfiction and fiction are easily distinguished by the fact that nonfiction is based on truth. As Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, the authors of *Tell it Slant*, put it, one of the primary distinctions between creative nonfiction and fiction is that the former, though it may be artistic, has its basis in reality, not the imagination. It is an “artistic statement” that is rooted in real-life events, thoughts, and opinions of the author. Yet it is unlike many other forms of nonfiction, such as historical nonfiction and journalism, in its level of intimacy. In *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, Theodore Cheney notes that “creative nonfiction doesn’t just report facts, it delivers facts in ways that move the reader toward a deeper understanding of a topic.” And this is where we begin to see the first traces of overlap between the genres. They both often use the same literary techniques to accomplish their writing goals. Miller and Paola say that creative nonfiction “uses all the literary devices available to fiction writers and poets--vivid images, scenes, metaphors, dialogue, satisfying rhythms of language, and so forth--while still remaining true to experience and the world.” Cheney asserts something quite similar: “Creative nonfiction

tells a story using facts, but uses many of the techniques of fiction for its compelling qualities and emotional vibrancy.”

Within creative nonfiction there are several subcategories, but for the purposes of this outline, I will briefly examine the two that are included in this thesis: the personal essay and the memoir. Both forms are rooted in truth and both attempt personal contact with the reader through honest, intimate communication. Michel de Montaigne once said that “every man has within himself the entire human condition.” To me, this statement speaks to both the personal essay and the memoir. Both draw on the “human condition” and depend upon the universality of their subject matter to achieve a relationship or connection to other human beings. But they accomplish this in distinct ways.

The personal essay, according to one critic, is “the way a writer has found to an individual expression of a personal truth.” How this truth is expressed is perfectly articulated by Phillip Lopate in *The Art of the Personal Essay*: “The essayist attempts to surround a something--a subject, a mood, a problematic irritation--by coming at it from all angles, wheeling and diving like a hawk, each seemingly digressive spiral actually taking us closer to the heart of the matter.” It is not defined or organized, in other words, by a certain structure or linearity. Virginia Woolf once wrote that “the principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure ... It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. In the interval we may pass through the most various experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation.”

Cheney expands on this idea by pointing out that insofar as nonfiction is intended to teach readers, it is appropriate that it be a pleasurable experience because people learn best when they are being simultaneously entertained. He states, “Creative nonfiction writers inform their readers by making the reading experience vivid, emotionally compelling, and enjoyable while sticking to the facts.”

Memoir tends to be narrower in topic and more orderly in arrangement. In addition, according to Miller and Paola, it “must derive its energy, its narrative drive, from exploration of the past . . . examining it for shape and meaning, in the belief that from that act a larger, communal meaning can emerge.” As Thomas Larson notes, “In the memoir, writers use a modicum of summary and great swaths of narrative, scenic and historical, to sustain their single theme or emotional arc.” The emphasis, he says, is on “the who over the what.” Because of the thematic and contemplative nature of memoir, there are usually several guiding questions that organize the work.

To cite an example, Joan Didion, author of the memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, effectively uses several implicit and explicit guiding questions to structure the piece and guide the reader. In this memoir, Didion details and contemplates the sudden death of her husband, writer John Dunne, after forty years of marriage. Relying on many literary and medical resources to help her analyze her reaction to her husband’s death, she grapples with how she is supposed to react to such a tragedy and worries that her response has been more “magical” than realistic. Some of the guiding questions include:

“Is there a proper way to grieve?” “Why have I become so obsessed with such a detailed reconstruction of the moments, hours, days, and months prior to John’s death?” “Who am I apart from John and Quintana?” As Didion’s work shows, the thematic and structural arrangement of memoir helps to further distinguish it from other categories of creative nonfiction.

The short story, a subcategory of fiction that will be included in this project, is a work of narrative prose that typically uses dialogue, exposition, setting, and action to tell a story. Short stories are usually driven by character instead of plot and usually only admit a single thematic trajectory. However, as O’Connor points out in her essay “Writing Short Stories,” though it may be short in length, “a short story should be long in depth and should give us an experience of meaning.” Miller and Paola note that with short stories--as well as with other works of fiction--“some sense of forward movement emerges. Visualized as a horizontal line, this line keeps the story moving forward.” Other than the most basic structural and literary components, this form resists much specific definition because it admits so many authorial possibilities. As the editors of *The Contemporary American Short Story* observe, “Ever since Poe defined the short story other writers have been trying to redefine it.”

An overlap between the genres may by now be more apparent. As noted earlier, many of the techniques used in fiction are often used in creative non-fiction: characterization, narration, concrete details, and setting, for instance. Writers of both

genres address subject matter in similarly artistic ways, often using methods such as subtlety, satire, and tension to achieve the desired effect. Several authors experiment with various genres and some even use one genre within another, such as a short story within a piece of creative nonfiction. One critic observes, in fact, that “the line between Hemingway’s factual and fictional writings was often blurred . . . He regularly took pieces he first filed with magazines and newspapers and published them with virtually no change in his own books as short stories.” John McPhee and Joyce Carol Oates, as writers of both fiction and non-fiction, are examples of authors able to skillfully demonstrate how the genres intersect. Another critic notes that “their works have often beautifully combined the immediacy of journalism, the power of true accounts within the texture of the prose, and the emotional impact of the work of fiction.” Francine Prose suggests that genres are sometimes blurred when it comes to good writing, and this can be a good thing:

The well-made sentence transcends time and genre. A beautiful sentence is a beautiful sentence, regardless of when it was written, or whether it appears in a play or a magazine article. Which is just one of the many reasons why it’s pleasurable and useful to read outside of one’s own genre. The writer of the lyrical fiction or of the quirkiest, most free-form stream-of-consciousness novel can learn by paying close attention to the sentences of the most logical author of the exactly reasoned personal essay.

These points suggest that though there are significant distinctions among the genres, the creative overlap is an important reminder that good writing is sometimes defined less by its genre than by its capacity to move, inspire, and teach. Writers choose genres based on their literary properties, but a hallmark of writing in general--whether fiction or nonfiction--is to make meaning and pursue truth. In the end, any literary enterprise should strive to that end. Chekhov once said that “artistic literature is called so because it depicts life as it really is. Its aim is truth--unconditional and honest.” In the end, it is this principle that has driven my memoir, my short stories, and my personal essay.

Prior to giving an introduction to these works, I must begin with a confession. Often when people ask me what one of my stories or essays are about, or inquire about “the point,” I stammer. It is as challenging for me to summarize my work as it is to answer the question, “How would you describe your child?” So upon being asked, I usually have the impulse to quote Flannery O’Connor:

When you can state the theme of a story, when you can separate it from the story itself, then you can be sure the story is not a very good one. The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can’t be said in any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story

because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story.

But for the purposes of this introduction, I will do my best to at least familiarize the reader with the separate pieces and discuss my influences and other sources of inspiration.

My memoir, “Bye, Dolly,” examines the relationship between my father and me and is, at its core, my best attempt to discover who I am as a person and a mother because of it. I have tried to write and remember with as much precision as possible what was, at its worst, a sad, strained relationship, and at its best, one of the most powerful and far-reaching experiences of my life. These points suggest several questions that guided the memoir: “Can it ever be possible to fully heal a broken parent-child relationship?” “How did the relationship I had with my father affect me as a woman and as a mother?” “How will what I have learned from my experience translate into my own approach to discipline and overall parenting style?” “How did my father’s cancer and ultimate death impact our relationship, our willingness to forgive?” Approaching the memoir as a *mode of inquiry* helped me to put its purpose into perspective; that is, to examine, to discover, to illuminate, and, as Patricia Hampl describes it, “to transform experience into meaning.”

My short story “Homecoming” also addresses the challenges of parent-child relationships, but focuses in this case on that of a mother and teenage daughter. It was important in this story for me to bring in near the end a previously unseen, though vital,

character – much as James Joyce brought in Michael Furey in the last part of “The Dead.” As Charles Baxter explains in *Burning Down the House* during his discussion of “counterpoint characters,” the purpose of Michael Furey is to challenge main character Gabriel. Without Furey, it is impossible to see Gabriel’s shortcomings. Baxter says that without Michael Furey, “there is no contrast. We would have a mild satire on certain Dublin types ... But as an opposing counterpointed character, he exposes the weaknesses in Gabriel’s condition, bringing them to the surface.” Similarly, I wanted the grandmother to expose the weaknesses in my protagonist, Kaye. Before the character of the grandmother emerges, Kaye believes she has it all figured out. She has made significant decisions and changes in her life, including leaving her home, parents, even Freddy the Waver, behind. Even when she finally begins to understand what--or more specifically, who--has been sacrificed in the process, it takes the emergence of another character, her mother, to demonstrate what has been missing.

The hostess at the Buck Inn functions as a counterpoint character, as well, and therefore might be considered a lead-in, as it were, to the grandmother. Her fortitude and her candor expose Kaye’s resignation and pretentiousness. In addition, particularly by the end of the story, readers may notice the juxtaposition of the hostess’s pregnancy and Kaye’s, and may also perceive their respective attitudes toward maternal adversity.

“Strings Attached” is at once straightforward and abstruse. This story takes abortion and an incurable disease and levels them at one another. Simultaneously, it asks

the question, how does our culture respond to disease, to death, and to choice? It also explores the relationship between mother and child in several capacities: first, and most predominantly, between the protagonist Kate and her unborn child; second, between Kate and her mother; third, between Kate's sister-in-law and her newborn baby. It is through this third relationship, in fact, that I have attempted to again set up a counterpoint character, similar in some ways to that which I did in "Homecoming." Only by seeing the differences between her sister-in-law and herself is Kate finally able to ask herself the provocative question, "Am I beautiful?" In addition, as with the other stories, I have attempted in "Strings Attached" to bring generational and familial relationships into sharper focus.

"Annabelle" is the little story that almost wasn't. In its earlier versions, I was told that it needed *more*. More of an "emotional or narrative arc," more balance between past and present, more details to help develop the story's core. This was difficult for me to execute due to the story's linguistic and structural properties. In the first place, it is *sudden fiction*, a type of fiction that requires a high degree of lexical restraint. According to one writer, "very short stories need to be free of dithering, or false starts, of shallow exposition or commonplace dialogue. They require a writer to know just where he or she is going, and to be there swiftly." In the second place, the story is arranged according to a series of sketches--or anecdotal paragraphs--similar to Minot's "Lust," my story's creative and organizational inspiration.

So given these strictures, unquestionably exacerbated by my own perfectionistic tendencies, I very nearly eliminated “Annabelle” from this project. But one cold and contemplative day, it occurred to me that at this story’s emotional center is a young mother’s confusion, panic, and chaos--elements that actually parallel the complex, protean nature of the story’s structure. The story did need development, to be sure. But suddenly it became worth the challenge of resurrecting. Isn’t the messy, ever-changing, no-holds-barred nature of motherhood what this thesis is all about? In “Annabelle,” a young mother struggles to make sense of motherhood, children, love, her past, her position within her family. She tries to figure out what is right, what is real, and what is worth it. And aren’t these elements at the core of this inquiry?

The short story “Home Sweet Home” explores another emotional component of motherhood. In this second example of sudden fiction, I have attempted to demonstrate in an understated way both the emotional range and the strength of a mother. My primary structural influence for this story was Mary Robison’s “Yours,” which, in about two pages, explores the misunderstood relationship of a husband and his dying wife. The most important influence for “Home Sweet Home,” however, was the story of Jesus’s passion and death. My narrative’s arrangement, in fact, allegorizes Mary’s love, grief, and courage in the face of her son’s inevitable death. Here especially, in this abbreviated story, I went to considerable lengths to demonstrate these emotions through action rather than through words. Authors whose philosophies inspired this linguistic and literary decision include: first, Chekhov, who once wrote, “Best of all is it to avoid depicting the

hero's state of mind; you ought to try to make it clear from the hero's actions;" second, Flannery O'Connor, who made the simple though meaningful comment that "the fiction writer states as little as possible;" third, Philip Stevick, who in his commentary in *Sudden Fiction* states, "A writer who would write short does not merely choose; he strains, resists, contends against the compulsion to write long."

So in writing the scene, for instance, where Virginia uses a straw and finally her own finger to hydrate her lifeless son, I tried to depict her despair, her sorrow, and even her hopefulness. I wanted this scene, as one of her final acts of nurturing, to embody everything that this mother has done to care for and minister to her son. When she moves from the straw to her finger, I am trying to show how she is prepared to give her own self for her son, just as her son, we soon discover, has given himself for his friend. The reader, only through the careful reading that Francine Prose urges, can perhaps begin to see both the bond and the sacrifice between mother and son, as well as the allegorical relationship between the story and its theological source.

"On the Dignity of Women" is the first personal essay I have ever written, most likely because I have never had a course devoted to this particular scholarship. But if reading the works of brilliant essayists is, according to Francine Prose, my private set of lessons, then I feel as though I have become well-educated in this art over the last several months. During the writing of "Dignity," I was most particularly influenced by the dazzling essays of Joan Didion, not that this will be evident in even the smallest way. (I

am not trying to sound modest. Didion's essays are, truly, inspired.) Other important essayists I need to credit include Montaigne, Virginia Woolf, and George Orwell. And, of course, I also must acknowledge Phillip Lopate, whose text *The Art of the Personal Essay* was an outstanding reference tool in terms of theory *and* illustration.

With regard to the subject area and content of this essay, deciding to write about the dignity of women began with a simple set of beliefs--that every person is bestowed with dignity and that every person is charged with cultivating it. It is the particular challenge of women, especially mothers, to nurture dignity in themselves and in their children within a culture that contradicts the fundamental components of dignity--virtue, humility, selflessness--and applauds nearly the reverse--ostentation, pride, and self-gratification. Our culture's me-first mentality notwithstanding, we have a long history of distinguished and courageous women--women, like Lady Mary Wortley Montague--who dared to defend and protect their dignity when it was being threatened. So besides addressing the properties and implications of dignity, I attempted in this essay to demonstrate the strength, attributes, and potential of women.

It is hardly a revelatory point that motherhood is about more than cuddles and kisses, sand castles and stories. It is, of course, about panic and heartbreak, sacrifice and self-doubt. It is also about loving when you feel you can't, and letting go when you ache to hold on. But motherhood is even more about recognizing and claiming your identity as a woman and a mother, and accepting the responsibilities commensurate with these roles.

Chekhov speaks of truth, of depicting “life as it really is.” The six pieces in this thesis are structured around this principle. I have attempted to present several dimensions of motherhood that hopefully, in their linguistic and structural variety, offer readings as unique and individual as the person who reads them. It is my hope that their amalgamation will not only blend to make meaning, but will also entertain the reader, stimulate thinking, and generate discourse.

Bye, Dolly

When I open the door to the church, I don't expect my father to be *right there*. I want to be calm and poised. Seeing him lying in the casket with his hands folded should not be a surprise, but for some reason it is, and the moment I see it--see *him*--I stop my stride. My husband tries to lead me away but I resist and step toward the casket, where several aunts and uncles in dark polyester are huddled, speaking in hushed voices. I approach my dad and take the slow, deep breath that he cannot take.

My father wears his reddish-brown suit: the one with seven tiny red stitches at the bottom of his left sleeve, each one sewn in before walking another daughter down the aisle. The last time he wore that suit he was walking me, his youngest, down the aisle at St. Michael's Parish in Marquette. I remember how just before he took his place in the front pew with my mother, he had patted my hand between his own and smiled. I move closer to the casket, close enough to see a card from my niece tucked into his jacket pocket that says, "To Grampa, Love Steph." I am not poised. I feel weak and dizzy and empty. My husband holds me up and I finally let him lead me into the main part of the church.

Family members who have already arranged themselves in the front pews motion for me to join them, but something doesn't seem right, so I stay behind. I think of how we all used to go to this church together and how my dad used to enter the pew last. He would kneel and clasp his hands, praying, most likely, that God would get him through

another week with seven daughters. Now here he is, still and silent, no longer shushing us during mass or giving us the you-are-so-hauling-wood-when-we-get-home look. I look again at his face and think how peaceful it looks. His work is done. My head suddenly feels heavy and I move along the back wall to be alone for awhile before mass begins.

A few nights earlier my dad had been unconscious when my one-year-old daughter Autumn and I arrived at the Marinette hospital, having taken the first flight out of Kalamazoo after I was advised to “come right away.” He had been diagnosed with colon cancer six years earlier at the age of fifty-six and was within an hour of losing the battle. I rushed down the halls to his room with Autumn and a gigantic diaper bag and finally found the correct door number, which turned out to be a private sitting room attached suite-style to his room. Some of my sisters were there, while others, including my mom, were in by him. I pushed the door open to his room and saw him on my right. He lay on a narrow, mechanical bed in a cream-colored hospital gown, eyes closed and mouth set widely open. A white blanket covered most of his body, which looked child-like in size. It made his head seem disproportionate in size. I remember the long, audible breaths. Someone took Autumn. Another came up next to me and rubbed my back. I just wanted everyone to leave.

My mother moved across the room. “Why don’t you girls sing to him?” she said, finally stopping. “You know how much he loves hearing you harmonize.”

“We don’t feel like singing,” one of my sisters said flatly.

Some minutes later a nurse motioned to my mother from the hall. They needed to talk about morphine. My sisters and Autumn went, too. After they walked out, I quickly moved to the side of his bed and lifted his limp hand into my own. Still the loud, long breaths. I squeezed his hand.

“Dad!” I scolded him in a whisper. I looked quickly at the door and back at his face. “Dad, you’re scaring me!”

Many times he had scared me while I was getting punished for skipping school, for sneaking out of the house to meet my boyfriend, or for lying about where I had been. But I had never been more afraid of him than I was at that moment. He was so still, so unresponsive, so unlike my dad. I wanted consolation. I wanted it all to stop. I wanted him to tell me this wasn’t real, that he was going to come out of this. But his body did not move.

Two sisters who had just arrived at the hospital shoved the suite door open, breathless, and a moment later the others came back. Then a nurse with high cheekbones entered from the hallway, squatted next to Autumn, and handed her a massive M&M cookie. She held out her hand. “Do you want to go see the pretty pictures in the hall, honey?”

All eight of us stood around his bed and watched my dad's chest rise and fall leisurely. Once, four or five seconds passed between breaths and one of my sisters asked with wide eyes, "Did he die?" We all stared at him, holding our own breaths, until at last his chest lifted. A moment later his chest was still. It was over. The clock ticked loudly while we stood in silence. Someone suggested saying a prayer, so we held hands and prayed together, as we often used to do.

Just as I was stepping away from the bed trying to decide what I was supposed to do, the nurse returned with Autumn, who was still eating her cookie. Several months later my sister Marie said to me, "Wasn't it just amazing how Autumn started eating her cookie while dad was alive and was still eating it after he died?" She shook her head. "Life goes on, doesn't it."

Everyone talks about the stages of grief--denial, anger, acceptance, and so on--and nausea. But I don't think those stages were what I was working through on the day he died, when I needed to be alone with him; or on the day of his funeral when I just wanted to be by myself. Those days marked the conclusion of a long, complicated relationship between my father and me, a relationship that I still feel the impact of today, as a daughter and as a mother.

My dad had this way of making me feel tense, chilly, and guilty all at once. Before he even said anything at all, such as, “Were you with Wolf again?” or “Are you lying to me?” he would first just glare at me with these cool green eyes that would send shivers down my back and into my knee socks. He passed away fifteen years ago and I can still look at certain photographs--pictures of him looking right at the camera, at *me*--and feel as though I did something wrong. Like I should march straight to my room, close the door, and begin *War and Peace*. Might as well.

Not that I have all negative associations of him. Not even close. I learned some of my most valuable character traits from my father: mental and physical toughness, integrity, and firmness of faith, to name a few. He taught me how to respect authority, what to insist on in a husband, and what I should never tolerate on television. He taught me that girls were as capable as boys, that if you wanted money for spending or for college, then you'd better get a job, and that a song was always better with a little harmony. My dad also taught me how to chalk a cue stick, how to play the “gee-tar,” how to gut smelt, and how to shoot a pistol. But I think that it was during those formative teenage years, when we were at our most tenuous, most challenging juncture, that our relationship felt the most impact. Looking back, I realize that is when I saw for the first time, definitively, how far each of us would go, how much we were each willing to sacrifice, and how strong each of us really was.

My earliest memory of our relationship is not really a memory at all. My *mother* tells me that when I was a baby, I would scream “bloody murder” when my dad, who’d been traveling all week for work, would try to scoop me up on Friday afternoons. But then, after spending all weekend with him, I would cry again on Sundays because I didn’t want him to leave me.

Another story my mom tells is that as a toddler, I was the only one in the family who was never afraid to approach my dad during his private reading time in the evenings. After he would come in for the day, smelling like whatever plant or factory he’d worked in that day, my sisters and I would crawl under the table by his feet and unlace his brown, weathered work boots. We would eat supper, and then he’d make his way to his brown speckled recliner and sigh and unfold the newspaper. But as my sisters would play in whispers and sneak quick glances at him, my mom says that I never hesitated to climb onto his lap, toss his newspaper onto the floor, and tell him what he missed on Captain Kangaroo that morning.

My own memories are a trifle less cozy. I’m sure my dad loved me, but he was not what I would call nurturing. Not the type who would bend down on one knee, arms open, when I stepped off the school bus in the afternoon. Not the sort of dad who would perch at the edge of my bed as the sky darkened, set down the book we’d just read, and point to the emerging stars out the window. No, my father would have been busy when I came home from school, either working or, when he was laid off, puttering around in the

garage, stacking firewood, or standing on a ladder pounding a nail into something. And he would be waiting for my sisters and me to change our clothes and “pitch in,” I might add. And as I’d be settling in for sleep, he would have been in his recliner, ankles crossed and toes rubbing together, reading the Herald Leader or watching “Archie Bunker” or “Barney Miller.”

I remember that at the end of my father’s funeral mass, Father Rick read a letter addressed to my dad, written by one of my sisters on behalf of us all. It mentioned several memories of him from when we were kids and expressed how much we loved him: “Cancer took you away too soon,” he read. “We’ll miss you so much, Dad. You were always there for us.”

As he read those last words, I felt an ache in my chest, like the feeling I get when I have the bright idea to go running in January when the wind chill is thirty-three below. I suppose my father was “always there,” but not so much in a tender way. He was there to make sure we did our chores and homework, there when a sex scene came on television, and there watching from his tan Subaru when at fourteen, I would tiptoe away from the high school to where my boyfriend waited in his red Nova.

“Where were you this afternoon?” he asked from the supper table one night. A huge roast was on the table, flanked by chunks of white potatoes and garden beans. Chatter stopped and everyone looked at me.

“I was at school,” I said, pausing between each word. Was this one of those times when, like Atticus Finch, my dad wasn’t going to ask a question he didn’t already know the answer to?

My father cupped his fists to the edge of the table and pushed his chair back. He gave me one of those looks. “Now you look at your mother,” he said, pointing a finger at my mom across the table, “and you tell her you stayed in school all day.”

I looked at my mother. Her blue eyes were sad. “I *did*,” I said. “I was at school all day.” He could never have known I had left with Henry at the beginning of sixth hour. I even had my Home Economics teacher agree to say that I was helping in her room if anyone asked.

My father pounded a fist on the table, still holding his fork. He looked at me and then turned to my mother. “Beverly, your daughter just lied right to your face.”

I don’t remember feeling remorse at the time, only surprise. What else did he know? What else hadn’t I been concealing well enough? As my sisters exchanged indignant looks with each other and everyone took turns shaking their heads at me, I remember feeling a sharp disconnect from my family, and especially from my dad. If he had ever cared to spend any time with me or talk with me, maybe I wouldn’t have turned to Henry. For another thing, he never wanted to be involved in my personal life before, so why now? My father never made it to even one of my basketball games or plays or track meets. Never did he tap on my bedroom door after a fight and work things out. Never did

he pull up a chair so we could chitchat. Unless you count the times when he'd come sit outside by me on chilly April evenings while I monitored the boiling maple sap. He would hold his hands above the fire, settle into his chair, and tenderly ask if I'd been skimming the foam often enough. This was the person who was "always there" for me?

Who, really, was my father? It seems sometimes that until our parents gave birth to us, they didn't really exist. After they had us, they sprang into being. Then, somewhere around our twenties, we realize that our parents had lives before we were born. My father grew up in Hermansville, a tiny Upper Peninsula town with a population of about sixteen, including his family of nine. Being the cold weather lover that he was, though, he used to say he "should've been born in Alaska." Because his ancestors came from Ontario, the family spoke mostly Canadian French in the home. So much, in fact, that one day my dad's schoolteacher gripped her ruler and warned my grandmother that those kids had better start speaking more English at home. After completing high school, my father joined the Air Force where, after basic training in Florida and one year of service in Texas, he served for three years in England as an Airman First Class. While stationed in England from 1954 to 1957, he worked as a mechanic on small engine planes. He was almost promoted to Sergeant at one point, but was denied that promotion when at an important conference, he saluted the wrong officer.

My father left the service after his time in England and began working in Milwaukee, which happened to be the same year that my mother, also living in

Milwaukee, changed her mind about becoming a nun and left the convent. Within months of his moving to Milwaukee, my father and mother both ended up at “The Eagles” dance club one muggy Saturday night and began dating. Six months later they got married, moved to Upper Michigan, built a house near Hermansville, and started a family.

My mother says that during his time in England, my father rode a motorcycle, wore a leather jacket, almost got stabbed at a tavern one night during an altercation, and dated a woman named Grace, which I discovered sounds like “race” when my mom’s teeth are clenched. After he returned to the states, my dad acquired the nickname “Dreamboat” and, according to my mom, “chased around with all the girls from Powers.” Personally, I can imagine my dad much easier in his black and silver pickup truck wearing a plaid, flannel shirt and smelling like wood shavings. I picture him reading “the funnies” after church in his easy chair with his mug of tomato juice and beer with a little pepper sprinkled over the top. I see him strapping up his suspenders and plodding down to the basement to retrieve his muzzleloader and bullets from the gun cabinet before he heads up north to the Poquette hunting camp.

But the startling truth is that he was a person well before he was my dad. And I realize now that it’s important to recognize this point. Without humanizing him, how can I hope to understand him as a father or make sense of the dynamics of our relationship? How else can I work towards an understanding of who I am as a person, a daughter, a mother, because of him? Was it because he’d “chased around with all the girls,” for

instance, that he became so fiercely protective of me? Was it because of his military background that he was able to teach me so much about discipline and resilience, and why, by extension, I propagate those same attributes in my own children? I have to now admit that my dad had emotions, shortcomings, dreams, even a backstory, that not only identified him as a human being, but also defined him in relation to his children.

I never thought of my family as “traditional” until I grew up and learned what that meant. But I suppose it was. Two parents, never divorced, living in the same house with all of their children. We ate our cornflake-coated pork chops, spaghetti, or chop suey together every night, and after supper, we girls did the dishes. Except on the annual occasion that my dad said, “You girls sing, and I’ll do the dishes.” We had thin, crispy pancakes every Saturday (“Pancakes are ready!” my father would bellow at seven-thirty in the morning, flipper in hand.), and eggs, bacon, and coffee cake on Sunday mornings after church. There were nightly prayers on our knees, games of Hope-I-don’t-meet-the-ghost after dark, bike rides to the bay, parades and gunny sack races in Hermansville on the Fourth of July with Grandma and Grandpa Poquette, Christmas Eve’s with the McKenney’s and Dick’s accordion, batch after batch of kittens, smelt fishing up near Cedar River, and campgrounds with no running water. There was either country-western or bluegrass on the radio, homemade chokecherry wine in the basement, and cords of hand-stacked wood in the backyard. I remember that we were always together, that there was always a strong sense of family, and that it was always spearheaded by my dad. My

mom was there too, of course, but she tended to defer to her husband for major decisions and discipline.

If I were to pinpoint the time when trouble started, it would probably be when my older sisters began to have children out of wedlock, one nearly every year, it seemed. My father's face became more creased and his eyes seemed more tired. Curiously, I must have seen this as a reasonable opportunity for me to misbehave. With him distracted, I could more effectively sneak Strawberry Schnapps before going to the Rollerdom, or bike ride into Marinette to meet a boy three years older than I. What I did not realize, of course, was that what my father lacked in youthful energy, he made up for in untiring determination. Once he realized I wasn't *really* going out at night to observe Haley's Comet or that I wasn't actually attending a friend's birthday party, it was war.

My dad was unusually quiet one afternoon after he drove me home in his Subaru from the police station. By this time, twelve months or so after I had begun lying relentlessly to my parents, my boyfriend Henry was eighteen years old--a legal adult. My dad, undoubtedly from sheer exhaustion and desperation, brought me to see Officer Mike, who warned me that Henry was "contributing to the delinquency of a minor." If Henry were ever caught with me, he would be arrested. On the way home from the station, my father did not speak at all. I was used to not talking cordially with my dad, but I was not accustomed to absolute silence.

As we left the city limits of Menominee and my dad shifted into fifth, he finally spoke. "I don't even consider you my daughter," he said in a weary voice.

The engine relaxed. I gaped at him. He was looking straight ahead, above the road. I didn't say anything, only sat there in disbelief. I remember gripping the silver handle on the car door and feeling so stunned and so angry that I considered pulling it. Would he even give a damn?

I don't remember when I stopped caring what he said or when I stopped feeling the sting of his words when he admonished me. But that day I didn't even feel hurt. I felt empty. I had lost friends before, like when I moved from our private Catholic school into the public high school. The only people I knew at my new school were Trina and Trudy, and they ditched me before second hour. And once I lost my white cat that had patches of black around his head. I slogged through our woods every day for about six weeks calling his name, but to no avail. These things made me feel depressed, but not hopeless. But when my father disowned me, it was as though something became irretrievably broken. It was like the final curtain call. The drama was over, the actors had taken their bows and left the stage, the curtain had been closed, and the stage lighting had been switched off. *Not* his daughter? This man did not want to be related to me anymore. These thoughts kept echoing in my head.

We continued to drive in silence, past the Martin's where I sometimes babysat, and past Willow Road where the bus turned every morning to pick up Gina, who always

smelled like hard salami. We passed many trees that had already dropped their dead, dry leaves, and fields of corn stalks that looked exhausted. But still we sat silently. We didn't speak when we got home, either. He got out of the car, threw a pair of gloves in the wheel barrow, and pushed it out to the garden. I went to my bedroom and locked the door.

“I will *never* do this to my own kids,” I remember raging as I lay face down on my bed and cried. “I will *never* make them feel so unwanted and so alone.” *I* was going to be the kind of parent who cared what her kids thought and what they were going through--a parent with compassion. Why couldn't I have that kind of father, I seethed. How could my own father do what he just did?

Fine. I'm sure he had pressures to deal with, like work. Often our clunky olive green phone would ring and after a few seconds of “mhmm's” my dad would hang up and say to my mother, “That was Skip. Laid off again.” And there must have been the pressure of having an incessant stream of hardheaded teenage girls--girls who forced him to contend with underage drinking, boyfriends of all strains, illegitimate pregnancies. But what about *my* pressures?

Looking back, I think this is why that tribute to my dad at his funeral unsettled and hurt me so much. Why didn't he take the time to be with me and really get to know me while I was growing up? Why did it take my dad until he was a grandfather to be patient and loving and funny? He used to love to take his grandkids' chunky little hands and smooth them down each side of his face, from forehead to chin, and chant “nice

grandpa” in a low baritone voice. And he would try to get them to imitate him as he threw his head back and laughed a hearty laugh. Why did he save this warmth for them? What if *I* needed that affection and attention from him? Why, when I was growing up, did he have to hide his laughs and his smiles until he was with his buddies, his “ma” and “pa,” or his brothers and sisters?

The New Year’s Eve after I turned fifteen was just such a time. On that night, I found myself parked on my grandpa and grandma’s stiff powdery yellow couch listening to my mom, my dad, his “folks,” and his siblings teasing and cackling in the kitchen. I’d been grounded--again--and forced to go along. My parents didn’t trust me to be at home in Menominee unsupervised. Ordinarily, I would have loved to see Grandma and Grandpa Poquette and the others who had gone there to drink brandy old-fashioned sweets, play rotating Smear where the losers have to walk to the next table, and count down to the New Year. But on that day I was livid. Every other teenager in America was, I was convinced, at some party or sleepover. Not me. I was taking turns between staring out the picture window at an old schoolhouse with a winding metal slide and glowering at a fuzzy black and white tv with a two foot antenna poking out of it.

Hours later, I gave in and finally walked into the kitchen, which always smelled like a combination of pipe tobacco and raisin cookies. My dad didn’t notice that I came in. He sat there at one of the card tables my grandmother had set up, handful of cards in

his left hand, caramel-colored drink in the other. He was laughing, and probably “all shined up,” as my mother would say.

“Pa, you go on now and play that johnnie,” he said, leaning forward. “Don’t you mind Harriet.”

Grandpa looked slowly over at my dad with a humorless face and then thumped his fist on the table, revealing the winning Jack of Spades that he still had squeezed between his thumb and index finger. He moved his eyes to his daughter-in-law Harriet. “There!” he growled.

Everyone erupted in laughter. Finally, Aunt Harriet threw her last card on the table. “Well!” she hollered. “If I’d a known I’d be moving so much, I’d a worn my walking shoes!”

More hysterical laughter as the losers pushed their squeaky chairs back so they could freshen their drinks and shuffle to the next table.

The scene was merry and even comical, I admit, but also sad. As I stood there watching my dad clapping my Uncle Bernard on the back and shaking his fists in the air in victory, I remember thinking, how can this man be so joyful with them yet be so severe with me? Why did he have to be two people--one with me, one with someone else? Did I have to be someone else? Who was I supposed to be for him? Why couldn’t I know that

happy, friendly side--the side that wasn't always trying to come up with fresh, creative ideas to fix me.

I am a mother of four daughters now, the eldest of whom is sixteen years old--about the age I was when I truly believed that my dad took pleasure in watching my high school with binoculars, that he relished "catching" me, and that he delighted in deliberating my next punishment. Autumn is now the age I was when I could not comprehend why a parent cannot be a friend, and when I thought that rules and high behavioral standards were wholly meaningless and, really, an affront to a teenager's sense of independence and overall well-being. Well now I'm on the other side of the binoculars, and things look a tiny bit different. I am the one experiencing the heartache, disappointment, frustration, and bewilderment associated with having an obstinate, defiant daughter. Somehow it is easier to sympathize with my dad's disciplinary rationale.

I wish I could say that what finally inspired me to "walk the line" was some profound message my father imparted during a lecture on a crisp autumn afternoon. Or that one day, I was so moved by his pained expression that I finally informed him that I had challenged and tormented him quite enough. But the fact is that I decided to make a change in my life simply because I was finally ready to. I was tired of the punishments, disenchanted with Henry, and saddened by my broken relationships with my family. So I began re-prioritizing. And small things did improve almost right away. But a lot of

damage had been done. It took several years--and moving away to college--for my dad and me to have relaxed conversations where my throat didn't feel constricted and the walls around us didn't seem to be pulsing. Both of us had been badly burned. And both of us had blisters.

Finding out during my second year of college that my dad had colon cancer did not lead to spontaneous feelings of warmth and forgiveness either. What I think it did, however, was deepen my sense of accountability and, eventually, remorse. Each look on his face of defeat or suffering was a fresh reminder of how he had looked years earlier when I caused him pain. I remember one such incident that happened after my dad came home after being out of town for work. My mother and I had been cleaning up after supper.

“Now, you *know* everyone else in the world has dishwashers, right mom?” I was saying as I rinsed a plate, jiggled it over the sink, and set it in the drainer. Now that I was the only one left at home, that meant I had dishes every night.

My mom continued to wash the table. “Oh, who needs a dishwasher,” she said. “You just have more work to do later when it's done. Better to just get the job over with right away.”

The sound of the door handle startled me this late at night. It was my dad, coming through the door lugging his old travel bag. He was wearing his dark blue uniform with a white patch on the shirt that said “Lester.” His face was smudged and the whitish-gray

hair he had around the bottom and sides of his balding head was doing a standing ovation.

“Helloooo,” he said in a Midwestern sing-song. My mom and dad kissed quickly and lightly on the lips, as they always did whenever my dad came home from somewhere. He set his thermos and battered black lunch pail on the counter.

He looked over at me. I turned away and reached for the two milk glasses my mom and I had used and put them into the soapy water.

“Look ... at ... this,” he said. I heard his bag drop to the floor. “That does it.” Something, maybe his jacket, got flung across the floor. “Lyn, you get to your room!” he suddenly thundered.

I stared at him. He looked enraged, like a lion that’s been taunted one too many times. My knees literally started to quiver. I dropped my dish rag. He held out his arm and pointed to my room. “Get to your room!” I looked at my mother, but she stood frozen, deferring to her husband. Now I wasn’t scared anymore. I was mad. And humiliated. I was sixteen years old and about six years past being sent to my room. And for *what?* I was doing the dishes! I shook off the soap and water, dried them slowly on the dish towel, and walked with a stiff, straight back to my room and closed the door. My room was close to the kitchen, though, so I could still hear my dad’s loud voice.

“Gol dammit, I can be gone a whole week,” he roared. “And she don’t say a word when I get home.” I heard cupboard doors slam. “Well! She can go to her room then.”

Years later, when I witnessed him in so much physical pain from the cancer, it reminded me of the hurt I never recognized in his face or his voice before. The hurt that I saw and heard that night he’d sent me to my room. I never saw the pain behind the anger. He actually *did* care if I paid attention to him. He *wanted* me to notice him and be with him. I thought it was the other way around.

As his cancer cells began to metastasize and initiate secondary tumors in his liver, lungs and brain, I watched him weaken. My dad, formerly a robust, self-sufficient person, became a fragile, reliant man. Dad had been muscular from many years of pipefitting, sawing trees, hauling jugs of maple sap, and hanging drywall. He’d built three of our houses, labored for a living, and parked a half-mile away from the door of any establishment. (“It’s good exercise.”) But in his last months, walking out to his hunting blind to scatter apples for the deer forced him to lean against a tree halfway to catch his breath.

Before his cancer, he’d been tireless. Sleeping in meant burning daylight, as he often reminded us if we slept past seven a.m. on a Saturday morning: “Do you need some salve for your bedsores?” On any given day you could find him sanding his walking stick, stoking the woodstove and tossing in chunks of seasoned wood, or changing the timing belt on my mom’s Cutlass Ciera. He often did not sit down until noon, when it

was time for a bowl of soup, a “tiger sandwich,” and Paul Harvey. Then he’d swipe at his nose with his hanky, put on his Lions cap and head back outdoors to begin the next project. And, especially after the house thinned of children, he busied himself with recreational activities, as well. When the chores were complete, he loved riding the moped along the dirt path that circled the house, turning around to laugh at our dog Ripper who panted to keep up. He enjoyed taking rides on Sunday afternoons to visit his ma and pa and his siblings, liked fishing for trout in his tall green wading boots, and loved tracking a partridge that began waddling around the property that he eventually named Pat.

But by the end, he often did not have the energy to move from the kitchen to the living room. And when I would come from Lower Michigan for visits, I would often breeze through the door to see my dad sitting in his easy chair again, green eyes vacant.

I recall one trip I made to the house not long after he had undergone another round of chemotherapy. My mother had left earlier in the morning to pick up some groceries and fill a prescription, so it was just my dad and me at the breakfast table. The kitchen was a light shade of purple at the time and the floor was a warm shade of brown with seven darker tiles accenting the middle. One year earlier, my dad had retiled the floor himself, and insisted on placing those tiles in a methodical, diamond-shaped pattern--one for each of his daughters.

My dad sat slumped on his chair, looking at nothing. It was warm on this day, but still he wore slippers, gray jogging pants that my mother had sewn in for him, and a loose blue cardigan sweater over a white tee-shirt. There was a dish towel tucked into the collar of his shirt.

“Aren’t you hungry, dad?” I asked in a high voice.

He gave me a deadpan look, then stared into his plastic bowls of unsweetened applesauce and pureed sweet potatoes.

My dad used to like venison, ice cream drizzled with our homemade maple syrup, pineapple upside-down cake, and dry-roasted peanuts. He loved Doritos and bean dip during the Lions games, and bean-hole beans that he would cook underground in a cast-iron pot. He enjoyed fish fries or sirloin steak on Friday nights when he and my mom went out for the evening, and liked endive, onions, and radishes straight out of the garden.

“Isn’t it a beautiful morning?” I said, gesturing toward the window. Ripper was outside wrestling with a toy one of the grandkids had left behind.

He turned toward the window and then bowed his head toward the bowls. “Yah. It sure is,” he said in a gravelly voice. He looked up again and cleared his throat. “Maybe I’ll call up one of the guys. See if Bernard or Loren want to do a little fishing today. Pack up our gear and a little lunch. Take the boat out to the lake.”

I lowered my head. Never had I wanted to console him as much as I did right then, to put my hand on his back, to say something that sounded right. Why couldn't I, *even now*, summon the courage to make contact with him? It was that damned barricade again, that excruciating barricade that was still so thick between us. I couldn't say or do anything. I was completely powerless. And besides, I was unworthy. How could I, the person who had lied to him, affronted him, stolen so much of his happiness, deserve to comfort him--especially now? He was so small and frail, like a child. It would be patronizing somehow. How had *I* earned the right to care for him?

Usually my dad didn't ask for anything at all except to pray for him. Once, in the late hours of the night, I heard his weakened voice yelling from his bedroom, "Pray! Pray!" over and over. He looked so wretched, so distraught. I remember saying to him the next day how awed I was that he was able to stay so devout through all of this. "Oh no," I recall him saying. "There are plenty of times I ask the Lord, 'Why me?'"

On another occasion, my dad asked me to pray with him and hold a rosary on his right shoulder, the place where he ached the most that day. This time, as he sat in his wheelchair and I stood over him with the rosary and we said our Hail Mary's and Glory Be's and Our Father's, something felt different. I realized he had asked *me*, needed *me*, to do something for him. I remember feeling so thankful for the opportunity. Later that day my mom confided, "He always asks for you girls. He just wants his girls."

It was around this time, near the end, that he began calling my sisters and me “Dolly.” Before this he had never called any of us by a term of endearment. But now, we were his dollies. I still remember that as we ended our very last phone conversation, my dad said, “Bye, Dolly.”

The mass has been said, the last verse has been sung, and the incense has been released. I stagger down the center aisle with my sisters and my mom, who is following the casket slowly. The process seems to be in slow-motion, or rehearsed. It is like the plays I was in during junior high and high school where I read the script and memorized my lines. Now I was expected to execute them. It isn't real, I say to myself. It isn't real because it *can't* be. Parents are supposed to be there no matter what. No matter what. Why wasn't my dad listening the other day in his hospital room when I said I was scared? Why didn't he respond when I needed him? Why isn't he here now--now, when I am finally ready to reconcile. Why wasn't he ever going to be there for me again?

Autumn walks snugly against my right leg, not knowing most of the people who look at us sympathetically and shake their heads. She has had enough and wants to be picked up. She had her first birthday one month and six days earlier and will have no memories of Grandpa Poquette, though she was the last of the grandchildren to be with him.

The casket is closed now and rests on a gurney off to the side at the back of church. There are sprays of flowers and pictures on tripods. I see a picture of my dad and his pa grinning, as together they hold up a record-breaking rainbow trout. The muscles of the arm that grips the fish are bulging. He is so healthy and vigorous.

Grandma Poquette is distraught. She is wearing a filmy kerchief, a dark, pleated dress, and sensible white shoes. She leans into my Uncle Bernard, who stands sturdy and silent, looking so like my dad with his stocky build and gruff white beard. “Not my son, not my boy,” she cries into her spotted hands. Her voice is choked. “This isn’t right, this just isn’t right,” grandma keeps repeating. Uncle Jerry, my godfather, stands next to a tripod that holds a floral cross of red and ivory carnations. He swipes quickly under his eye. “He was my best friend,” he says to Aunt Evelyn.

Autumn is perched on my hip, legs swinging, red curls bouncing. A moment later, she wiggles to get down and suddenly decides to lurch toward the stairs that lead to the basement. I grasp at her arm and tell her to wait for mommy. I see her studying everyone and wonder what her memories will be of these events, of me as a mother. I wonder how I will raise her. What kind of parent will I be? Will I be authoritative, gentle, a combination? Will I be like him? Is it okay if I’m not? I think about what our relationship will be like. Will it suffer for the mistakes I am bound to make? Will it take my own death for her to forgive me, for our relationship to begin to heal?

I deliberate even now, fifteen years later, how I am affecting who Autumn and my other children will become. I contemplate how my father affected *me*, and recognize the connection between my response to our relationship and who I am now because of it.

What has it prompted me to regret or absorb or accomplish?

I think about my mother's story from when I was a baby. And I realize that just like on those Sunday evenings when I didn't want my dad to leave, I was not ready to let him go when he died--not when we'd just begun to relate to each other again, and when we had so many possibilities. But I guess I also realize that just as we managed to reconnect over the weekend many years ago, we *were* able to reconcile and reconnect in some ways in the years before his death. There must have been something strong enough between us to have made that possible, and something significant enough in our relationship for me to be able to feel the impact so many years later. So who knows. Maybe I didn't completely let him go after all.

Homecoming

In the lobby area of the Buck Inn restaurant, Kaye paced back and forth along the matted red carpeting and waited for her sixteen-year-old daughter Brienne to come out of the restroom. They were on their way from St. Louis to Kaye's parents' home in Upper Michigan and had been driving for ten straight hours, with the exception of a brief shopping spree and a couple of stops for protein bars and sparkling water. The Buck Inn was less than an hour from Negaunee, but Kaye was hungry, blurry-eyed, and most of all, desperate for a larger perimeter around herself and Brienne. The trip had been tense since before they even pulled out of their driveway.

"What do you have in here, your boulder collection?" Kaye had yelled to Brienne as she heaved a gigantic pink duffel bag into the trunk.

Brienne stepped off the porch and pulled a smaller black suitcase down the walk toward the back of the Volvo.

"Another one?" Kaye asked credulously. "We're only going for three days!"

"Why are you freaking out about a bag," Brienne said, dropping her other suitcase at her mother's feet. "I'm pretty sure I know how to pack."

"Apparently you don't."

“Apparently you don’t know anything,” Brianne muttered.

“What?”

Brianne went to the house one more time and returned with her comforter, her pillow, and a handbag stuffed with framed pictures. Kaye shook her head but said nothing.

The trip was spent mostly in silence, except for the occasional “Where is dad? Why won’t he answer?” remark from Brianne.

Kaye moved to the side in the lobby to let a middle-aged couple pass, and almost hit her head on a low-hanging antler chandelier. The man leaned his head toward the window, fastened the top button on his flannel shirt, and pushed the door open to allow his wife to walk through. “Thank you, dear,” she said, and ducked through, carrying a styrofoam container, likely filled with a scoopful of garlic mashed potatoes, a few strands of floppy asparagus and a small slab of t-bone steak. As they walked to their car, Kaye watched the woman shiver and slip her thin arm around her husband’s. And she wondered if she would ever have a husband whose idea of courtesy was opening doors for their wives, not walking intoxicated women out to their cars after last call.

Her own marriage ended four years earlier after Kaye finally realized that her husband had been having and holding *someone else*. She was awarded full physical custody of Brianne, but refused to stay in Marquette, where she and her husband moved

after they'd gotten married. Instead, she decided to take Brianne and start a new life in St. Louis, where she got a job as a paralegal at a downtown law firm. With the exception of meeting her ex-husband halfway for visitations with Brianne, she hadn't been back up north at all during that time, including going home to Negaunee. Though she couldn't have admitted it at first, the fallout from her divorce had left her too ashamed to face her parents, who no doubt had laminated their Happy 50th banner and duct taped it to the wall of their bedroom. But when her father called last week to say she'd better high tail it home, that her ma's Alzheimer's was getting worse, Kaye finally decided to put in for two day's leave, overfed her lizard Joanna, and bribed Brianne with a stop at an outlet mall.

Kaye moved to the lobby window and pressed her fingers down on the creamy vinyl blinds. They were cool to the touch but the window behind them was perspiring. The parking lot was dimly lit but still full. Stars were just beginning to peek through the night sky and the sign advertising the restaurant was glowing, with the exception of a flickering "k." But though it was getting late, Kaye knew that as long as bottles of Jose Cuervo, Jack Daniels, and Johnny Walker were in stock behind the bar, there would be customers lumbering in for several hours to come.

Finally, a coffee-colored door with a gold plaque that said "Gals" opened and Brianne appeared, pulling manicured fingers through her snarled hair.

"Remind me again why I'm doing this," Brianne said.

“You’d think you’d be happy to make this trip,” Kaye said.

“Yeah you would, wouldn’t you.”

“What a way to talk about your own grandparents!”

“Yeah, my grandparents, who I barely remember,” Brianne said.

“All the more reason to go.”

Brianne narrowed her eyes into slits and exhaled loudly. Kaye was very familiar with this particular look that seemed to be a combination of disgust and exasperation.

At that moment a hostess appeared who was so pregnant that Kaye sincerely hoped there were clean towels and a cord clamp somewhere within yelling distance. The waitress looked from one to the other and said to come with her if they wanted to eat.

The Buck Inn, as its name implied, did homage to the great majority of men in the Upper Peninsula whose second job every November was to dig out their thermal underwear, pull on blaze orange overalls, and do some hunting and gathering. From the outside, the restaurant might have been a truck stop on Route 66. But on the inside, it was a dark, low-ceilinged log cabin with so many deer heads bulging out of the walls that if the deer had been alive and heard a rifle, there would be a stampede. There was a blackened wood-burning fireplace just beyond the bar to the right, and an open grill further ahead onto which customers could grill their own slabs of beef. As the hostess led them to a corner booth, Kaye heard the crunch of peanut shells under her feet, and in the

background, Johnny Cash singing about a boy named Sue. As she walked, Kaye exchanged looks with a glassy-eyed 10-pointer and wondered vaguely how many women and children would run, arms flailing, from a restaurant like this if it were in downtown St. Louis.

“Not from around here, eh?” the hostess said, scanning Kaye and Brianne as they took their places opposite each other in the vinyl booth. She set two menus on the table and scraped a dab of crusted ketchup off the top of one with a red fingernail.

Kaye saw Brianne raise an eyebrow at the hostess. “*I am*, actually,” Kaye corrected. “I grew up in Negaunee. Hey could I get a martini? Extra dry.”

“No kidding,” she said, shifting the natural line of her mouth. She glanced under the table. “Well you’ll want to change out of them there high top boots if you want to convince *me* you’re a yooper,” she said.

No thanks, Kaye thought. That was probably the *last* thing she wanted to prove. She smiled a fake smile. “So, when are you due?” she asked in a sing-song voice.

“Last Wednesday,” the hostess answered, pushing aside a few wisps of hair from a creased forehead.

“Aww, good for you,” Kaye said, shaking her head. “Most pregnant women I know would be on their sofas, making people wait on them.”

“Well you sure can’t know too many decent pregnant women,” the hostess said. She smoothed a hand across her belly. “I tell you what. I been wanting my little Sara here for near to 15 years, so I sure as hell ain’t gonna use her as my crutch.”

She turned her head then in the direction of the front entrance, where a giggling trio of girls in swishing formal gowns were now entering the restaurant. They were followed by three young men tugging at their starchy white shirt collars.

“Oh what fresh hell is this,” the hostess said, slowly shaking her curly head. She looked back at Kaye and Brianne and then tilted her head once more to look under the table. “You’ll remember what I said about them boots.” She gave a quick nod to each of them and waddled to the group of teenagers, grabbing a stack of menus on the way.

Kaye looked at Brianne, who was texting on her phone. She could almost feel the cool eyes of the school counselor boring into her neck, urging her to say something pleasant and casual. But she couldn’t think of a single subject to discuss. The weather seemed trite, books and movies seemed forced, and friends were off-limits. At the next table, where the group of teenagers had just been seated, one of the homecoming girls who had little curly tendrils cascading from a ribbon was explaining that she had to order her dress from a designer in Chicago because there were no decent shops here. The other girls nodded sympathetically. The guys squirmed in their padded chairs, worrying, it seemed, that their fathers hadn’t forked over enough cash to cover this.

A waiter came with Kaye’s martini, took their orders, and left.

Kaye took a sip and returned her glass to the table. “Brianne, what is the matter with you?”

Brianne was pushing her finger around the screen of her phone. “How come dad won’t answer my texts?”

“Brianne.”

She looked up.

“Can we just stop with the whole silent treatment thing,” Kaye said dryly. “It’s getting old.”

Brianne closed her phone and slit her eyes so that the whites were barely visible. “What are you *talking* about?”

“If you would just talk to me for a change maybe I could help you.”

“Help me with *what*?” Brianne spit out. “I don’t need help, especially from you.”

Kaye gulped from her glass and motioned to the waiter for another.

“Fine,” Kaye said, smiling. “You know what, I don’t even care.” She swirled what remained in her glass and some splashed over the top.

Brianne looked at Kaye with eyes lined heavily in black. Kaye was always telling her it made her look like a football player before the game and she thought so now.

“Whoa. Shocker. All you ever care about is your stupid job,” she said. “Oh, and your *boyfriend*,” she said, using air quotes.

The waiter came with salads and another martini for Kaye.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Kaye said after he left. “I’ve tried. Heaven knows I’ve tried.” She looked away from Brianne and scanned the restaurant. Dinnertime was over for most of the patrons. One man with a big belly and white Santa Claus beard stood at a nearby table and hurriedly signed his receipt. A few tables over, a group of four men in suits slid out of an oversized booth. One of them was returning a leather wallet to his back pocket.

“Well don’t worry,” Brianne said. “You won’t have to be bothered by me much longer.” She picked up her phone again and moved her thumb around the screen.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Kaye said.

“Just nevermind.”

Kaye gulped from her fresh martini. She closed her eyes and wished for her mind to go numb.

The rest of dinner passed wordlessly. Immediately after she was finished, Brianne stomped out of the restaurant, leaving Kaye alone in the booth. The steady drone of conversation seemed to stop as Kaye signed the slip, slung a beaded purse over her shoulder and strode past the other tables. As she clicked past the bar, a hunched man

clutching a glass tumbler swiveled slightly to look at her. Kaye stopped. She leaned close enough so that she was within inches of his face. He was missing several teeth and smelled like a combination of firewood and rotten brandy. “This is none of your damn business,” she said coolly. She straightened, gave the man a biting appraisal with her eyes, and left the restaurant.

An hour later, Highway 41 deposited Kaye and Brianne in Negaunee, a small pioneer community tucked into the central portion of Upper Michigan. The city, situated a few miles west of Marquette, was the place where Kaye grew up and where her parents still lived. It was big enough to have a four-screen movie theatre and two or three blinking traffic lights, but small enough to have a man who would walk to the end of his driveway each day to smile and wave a trembling hand at passersby. Locals knew him as Freddy the Waver, but visitors usually waved back awkwardly or ignored him altogether. Locals like Kaye, who had moved away years earlier to places like St. Louis, saw Freddy as a joke when they were teenagers, but usually found themselves years later telling their children about him as though he were a national landmark.

When they pulled into the gravel driveway, Kaye was surprised to see that the porch light was not on and that her mother was not peering from behind the heavy red curtains as she always did. She turned to look at Brianne. She was still curled on the back seat, covered almost completely with the comforter she’d taken along. The cord coming from her ipod dripped from the seat.

Kaye suddenly thought with alarm that Brianne would surely be as hostile to her mother and dad as she was to her. She wondered if her daughter would act in her usual snobbish way, or if perhaps she would ignore them altogether. Brianne shifted in the back seat. How was Kaye going to explain and defend her abrasive behavior? How was this going to make her look as a parent?

Brianne slowly sat up then and wrapped herself tightly in the comforter. “Are we going in or what?”

Kaye glared at Brianne but said nothing. She stepped out of the car and opened the trunk so they could remove their bags.

“Grab your stuff,” she said as Brianne got out of the car.

“Yes ma’am.”

They each pulled their suitcases to the front door, where Kaye tapped lightly and then let herself in.

“Where’s mom?” Kaye asked her father, who stood up from his recliner. She and Brianne wiped their feet on the mat and entered the mustard-colored living room. Usually the house would be tidy and would smell like pipe tobacco and homemade pasta sauce, but tonight there were newspapers and ripped-open envelopes scattered around the furniture and it smelled like the inside of a storage trunk. The chatter of football commentators came from the television.

“Hullo there, Brianne,” her father said as though he had not heard Kaye. He hugged his granddaughter generously and she patted his arms. “Why don’t I show you which room is yours and you can get yourself settled in.” Brianne followed him, pulling her bulging black suitcase.

Her father returned to the living room a moment later scratching the back of his neck. “Them kids sure grow up fast,” he said.

“Yeah,” Kaye said absently. “So do you have mom in hiding or something? Where is she?” Kaye thought about how her mother would have certainly been out here by now, no matter the time of night, and would have been scurrying around the kitchen getting everyone cocoa and slices of homemade bread after their long drive.

“She’s in her room resting,” her father said. He plopped onto a stool by the island in the kitchen and motioned for Kaye to sit down. “We might as well talk first before you go in there.”

“Okay, dad, you’re scaring me,” Kaye said, perching on the cushioned stool next to her father and kicking off her boots.

“Well, your ma, you know she ain’t getting any younger,” he began, swiping the back of his weathered hand across one corner of his mouth. He pushed his stool back and plodded to the fridge. He pulled out a plate with a pasty on it and offered it to Kaye but

she shook her head. “She always froze so many of these. We got enough for the next two years.”

“Mom’s getting older, yes, I know,” Kaye said impatiently. “And we’ve known she has some Alzheimer’s symptoms. What else? What’s been going on?”

Her dad was rubbing the back of his unshaven neck again. “Well I reckon it’s getting worse.” He sat again and set his elbows down hard on the countertop.

“Okay,” Kaye said, in a softer voice now. “Tell me what’s been happening.”

“She’ll lose her car at the store,” he said. “Hell, I do, too. But last month she was gone damn near three hours. Said she got scared and just walked around the lot awhile til she found it, and then didn’t even remember why she was at the store. So she drove around town, I guess. Old Wendell on the next road there call me up and said she kept driving back and forth past his house.” He adjusted himself in his chair and looked at Kaye. “I don’t think she knew how to get home.”

“What?” Kaye said, staring at him. “How long has this been going on? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“She’ll go in the bathroom and brush her teeth. Then she’ll come out and ask why she’s in there. Say she don’t know,” her dad said. He was looking at the toaster while he spoke, finally shrugging his shoulders and letting them drop heavily. “Couple a weeks ago, I come in from the pole barn and your ma look at me like she don’t know me at all.”

“Have you guys been talking to your doctor about this?” she asked.

“Now it’s something different every day,” he said. “Some days she don’t want to talk at all. I say something and she don’t answer.”

Kaye studied her father’s face. The lines around the sides of his mouth and across his forehead were longer and more pronounced. She thought of how though these things had changed in the years since she’d seen him, there were a few things about him that she knew would never change. He believed that women ought to be the ones wearing the jewelry, thought cell phones made a good paperweight, and felt that if you lived in America, you’d damn well better learn the language. Her dad never drove anything that didn’t have four-wheel drive, assumed sushi was fish bait, and thought any dog lower than the top of his boot might as well be a cat. The other thing Kaye knew for sure was that her father would not survive long without his wife. As she looked at him sitting on his bar stool right then, bent over a plate of pasty crumbs and resting his hands around it with loose fists, he looked tired.

“I want to see her,” Kaye said, standing. Her dad was moving a shaking finger around the grooves in the countertop. She rubbed his back for a moment and turned to go up the stairs to her mother’s room. She needed to see her mother for herself. On the way, she passed Brianne’s room and stopped. She was talking on her phone.

“I won’t go back there, dad,” she was saying. “If you don’t want me to live with you, then, I don’t know, I’ll find somewhere else.” There was a pause. “I don’t care how it *works*, I’m not going back with her.”

Kaye stood frozen. It was as though she couldn’t comprehend or absorb the words Brianne was saying. How could she be saying this?

“You don’t know what she’s like, dad,” she continued. “I can’t live there anymore. I won’t.”

Kaye’s hand went to her chest. It felt as if someone had placed a searing rod against it. What was happening here? Her own daughter was begging to get away from her? How did this happen?

When Brianne spoke again, Kaye could tell she was crying. “I’m always getting yelled at and I’m sick of it. Everything’s my fault.” Another pause. “Yeah, I know you’ve been seeing her. What? She’s *living* with you now?” She spoke so softly now that Kaye had to strain to hear. “So what about *me*?” she practically whispered.

Kaye leaned against the wall in the hallway. It felt hard and gritty against her arm. She had to admit there’d been several times over the last two years or so when she’d thought herself that maybe Brianne should live with her dad. It seemed that all she and her daughter did was provoke and attack each other. Most days, it was easier to just stay at work or else let Brianne do what she wanted with her friends. At least by avoiding each

other, she could have some peace. Whenever they were together, it didn't take long for Brianne to start challenging the rules and arguing with her. How long was Kaye supposed to tolerate her daughter's defiance?

Kaye wasn't sure how things had gone so wrong. She used to be the kind of mom who made animal-shaped pancakes on Saturday mornings and who stuffed herself into laundry hampers when they played hide-and-seek. She used to be the type to save every stick-person drawing and volunteer for all of the field trips to farms and fire stations. Now here she was, leaning on the wall opposite her daughter and listening to her cry and plead with her dad to take her away.

Kaye slumped to the hardwood floor. She slid her finger lazily along the smooth grain of the wood and didn't care that it collected a film of dust. She just dabbed the dust off onto her pants and slid her finger again along the floor to gather more powdery dust. And as she sat there, Kaye thought of how, seventeen years earlier, she had wanted Brianne so desperately. She'd gotten pregnant with her against her doctor's advice and without her husband's consent, and was determined to carry her to term even after her doctor told her it would be "statistically impossible" due to the shape of her uterus. Brianne was born four weeks early, but still was healthier and more perfect than Kaye could have ever imagined.

So how had it come to this – to the point where Kaye was as prepared to give up Brianne as much as Brianne wanted to go? Kaye recognized that much of the trouble

started after the divorce. She'd been so eager to begin her new life that perhaps she hadn't considered her daughter as much as she should have. Had she been so preoccupied with trying to get that damned job and with trying to show everyone how successfully she'd moved on that instead she bungled what should have been the priority?

Kaye heard Brianne click her phone closed and soon the glow coming from under the door disappeared. She wanted so much to go in by her daughter and somehow make things right between them. She wanted to soothe her, to apologize for whatever it was she'd done to mess up their relationship. But she knew for certain that Brianne would never respond to her now. It was too late. Too much time had gone by and too much damage had been done. Brianne was ready to run away--to go anywhere but back home to St. Louis with her.

Kaye stood on shaking legs and felt her way along the shadowy hall to her parents' bedroom. She needed to see her mother. She would tell Kaye what she should do and she would tell her that everything would somehow work out. The door was slightly open. She tapped lightly with the tips of her fingers. "Mom?" she said, tentatively pushing the door open.

Her mother was reclining on her bed against several pillows. When Kaye entered, she looked up and smiled vaguely. She set a sparkling pink rosary she'd been holding on the nightstand, next to a vase of droopy pink carnations. Kaye saw a card poking out of the vase that said "Happy Birthday to my dear Elizabeth" in shaky writing.

“Mom?” Kaye repeated, more loudly this time, moving to the side of her mother’s bed and taking her hand. Her hands were usually so warm and soft, but today they felt as though she’d just come in from shoveling snow. Kaye pulled a crumpled quilt from the bottom of the bed over her mother’s legs. “Why are you in a summer nightgown? Where’s your sweater?” she asked, tucking the quilt around the sides of her mother’s legs.

“Thank you,” she said in a soft voice, clutching the top of quilt.

Kaye sat on the edge of the bed and looked into her mother’s eyes. They seemed vacant. “Mom, you know who I am, right?”

Her mother smiled. “Have you seen the beautiful flowers my husband bought for me?” she said, lightly touching the wrinkling petal of a carnation with her fingertips. “I got them for my birthday. It was yesterday, you know.”

Kaye’s hands started trembling and her ears began to feel hot. “No, no, no, no, no,” she said quickly, moving closer still. She tightly squeezed both of her mother’s hands in her own. “Mom! It’s me, Kaye. Your daughter!”

Her mother tilted her head and looked toward the hallway. Kaye glanced at the door. Her dad stood there with his long hand on the door frame.

Kaye spun back to her mother. “No, mom, not now,” she said in a frantic voice. “You don’t understand. I need you to listen to me. I need to talk to you. Please, Mom.”

Her mother frowned slightly.

Kaye heard a rustling coming from the hall. She turned and saw Brianne at the doorway next to her father. Her eyes looked red and slightly swollen. She wore an oversized tee-shirt and pajama pants and her hair was twisted into a gigantic bun on top of her head. “What’s going on in here?” she said, looking at Kaye. Before her mother could answer, Brianne turned to her grandmother. “Gram, are you okay?” She put the cell phone she’d been holding into the pocket of her pants.

Her grandma withdrew her left hand from Kaye’s grip and stretched it out to Brianne.

“Oh, Brianne,” she said, with a broad smile Kaye had seen so many times before. “Look at you!”

Kaye put a hand to her mouth.

Brianne went to her grandmother, took her hand, and lowered herself onto the bed, tucking a foot under one leg. Her grandmother lightly touched the side of Brianne’s head. “What a pretty hairdo,” she said softly. “Is it beautiful ever?”

“Are you alright, Gram?” Brianne said in a soft voice. “You’re not getting sick on me or anything, are you?”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t do that,” she answered, smiling.

Kaye watched as her mother gently smoothed strands of hair around Brianne's head and saw her daughter lean closer so her grandmother could reach the back. As Kaye observed them, she thought with incredulity how easy her mother made the interaction look.

When she was finally finished smoothing Brianne's hair, she brought her fingers around a long piece that dangled by her right ear and twisted it into a long curl.

"I remember how curly your hair used to be when you were little. But you were always trying to pull it straight," she said to Brianne. "Isn't that the way it is, though. The ones with curls want their hair straight, and the ones with straight hair want curls."

Kaye heard Brianne's cell phone buzz from her pocket but Brianne seemed not to notice.

"You must love fixing her hair," her mother said, still working on the curl but moving her eyes in Kaye's direction. Kaye and Brianne glanced at each other. "You certainly have a beautiful daughter."

Brianne raised her eyebrows slightly and then turned again toward her grandmother. She curved her back and stretched her arms out, something she often did when she seemed to be embarrassed or self-conscious.

"You're right," Kaye said. "I do."

Kaye turned to look at her father. He'd been silent during this exchange, but she could tell he'd been watching the scene closely. His arms were folded now and he stood with his feet shoulder-width apart. He seemed to Kaye to look so much taller than when she'd seen him just a short while earlier.

The grandfather clock in the next room chimed the half-hour and her father leaned back to look at it. Then he smiled almost imperceptibly at Kate and winked. And after a moment, he moved to the hall table to prepare his pipe.

Strings Attached

Kate did not want to go to the baptism. For one thing, it would be at a church, their church, and their priest would be there. He would recognize Kate and ask how she was getting along and remark that he had not seen her in many moons. Others would be there, too. Her grandmother, probably, who would twirl her shaking fingers around Kate's hair and remind her of the times she used to make pretty ringlets all around her head. But here she was, at home, because her mother had been so damned persistent on the phone. Kate hadn't been home since Christmas, not even for spring break! Had she been sick, her mother wanted to know. Was she doctoring up? If she could just come for her little nephew's baptism, everyone would sure be happy. And that boy was just the cutest little thing! Kate had sighed and at last agreed, especially after she remembered she needed to make an appointment with her hairdresser anyway. So it was finally settled that after her last class on Friday she would make the drive to Ludington.

Ludington was a city that looked forward to its winter weekends. No one could deny that the summer tourism industry powered this sleepy little city, but that didn't mean its residents couldn't secretly long for the cold days of autumn and winter. This was when tourists would finally stop scampering from shop to shop, start folding up their beach blankets and umbrellas that had littered the spectacular shoreline of Lake Michigan all summer long, and just go home already. The locals sighed contentedly when the SS

Badger, the ferry that lugged camera-toters back and forth between Manitowoc and Ludington during the summer months, finally plunged its anchor into the lake for the winter. And they raised their mugs of homebrewed beer when the campground offices and ice cream parlors turned their window signs to “Closed” and twisted the vinyl blinds downward until the following season. The Bed and Breakfasts would stay open for business of course, but at least those guests had the courtesy and good sense to stay inside and huddle around the lobby fireplaces.

During the early hours of that first morning in Ludington, before the sun had officially come up, Kate threw off her quilt and sat upright. She rummaged through her travel bag for aspirin and swallowed two pills dry. And as she perched on the edge of her old, squeaky bed, feeling the chalky tablets in the back of her throat and the pulsing of her temples, she looked around her room. How empty it seemed. What was once a friendly, comfy room with a canopy bed, abstract art, and a dresser splayed with lotions, sprays, and hair accessories was now bare space with the exception of a few homecoming dresses that hung in plastic bags in the closet, forgotten nails in the wall, and a prayer card and dish of potpourri on the dresser. She checked her phone on the night stand. No calls or messages.

Thunder grumbled from several miles away. Kate went to the window and pressed a few of the blinds down with her fingers. The sky looked mean. Yukon, the family’s Alaskan malamute, stood from where he’d been sleeping next to Kate’s bed,

stretched, and then walked lazily to where Kate was leaning into the window. The family had gotten Yukon from the same breeder where they'd gotten Feynman, another malamute who was just a baby when he was hung by a chain four years earlier. Feynman had been no different than any other growing malamute. Instinctively and regularly, he would hurdle the backyard fence, only to be escorted back home again by rotating neighbors who would good-naturedly complain that he was panting at their sliding glass doors again. So Kate's dad finally had to buy a chain for Feynman when he was outdoors. It was short enough to restrict access to the fence, but long enough to provide generous movement around the deck. The deck stretched to the fence, too, but was one that Feynman could never scale, not at seven months old. How could the family have anticipated that this baby malamute would stretch his chain to a deck box and attempt a jump anyway?

On the night Kate found Feynman dangling from his chain, she had just pulled into the driveway after a long night of cheerleading practice. Her mother had left the porch light on for her, as she always did. The light illuminated the stone walkway that led from the garage to the house, as well as the dog that sagged against the deck fence. Kate's father appeared on the porch the instant Kate's sharp screams reached the house. His head jerked sharply from side to side, until his gaze finally rested on the same spot as Kate's. She ran to Feynman and wrapped her arms around his middle and lifted his weight awkwardly, trying to create slack in the chain.

“Get it off! Get his collar off! Unhook him!” she’d screamed at her father. He clumped to the spot in his house slippers and fumbled with the collar until Feynman’s full bulk caused Kate to collapse onto the ground which was lightly frosted with fresh snow.

“Breathe! Breathe, Feynman!” she pleaded with him again and again. His head drooped over the side of her shaking hands and a red welt could now be seen on the lower part of his neck. Kate spun on her father. “Why aren’t you doing anything? Help him! Help Feynman!”

He stood fixed, and deep creases formed between his eyebrows. He put a hand on her shoulder. “Kate.”

She shook him off and turned again to her dog. “Come on, Feynman.” By now her voice was faint and gravelly. “Breathe, Buddy.” Kate gently lifted his head and lowered her own into his red and gray matted fur.

The wintery evening had faded into black silence again. There was a soft din coming from the light overhead. Snowflakes fell delicately, and cold puffs of air formed and disappeared as Kate’s breathing slowed and evened. Headlights appeared in the distance, and soon a pickup truck rolled leisurely by. She brushed off Feynman’s cold, stiff fur, which had accumulated a fine layer of snow.

“You go on in,” her dad had said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Head on up to bed. I’ll take care of Feynman.”

For what seemed like weeks afterward, neighbors and friends came to console and grieve with their family. They brought tuna noodle casserole and chocolate chip banana bread. They sat on the sofa, stared into the fireplace, and reminisced about how Feynman used to pull Kate's brother down the street on his rollerblades. Mr. Vandebroek and his older boy Chip came to help dig the hole in the backyard, though it was a damned shame this had to happen during the coldest month of the year. Even Mrs. Diny, who'd often hinted that their little howler ought to be brought in at night, arrived on their front porch one Sunday morning after church with her head hung low.

"Here," she'd said in a small voice, holding up Feynman's cloth bone with a saggy arm.

One spring afternoon, after the frozen pipes had thawed and the icicles had finally become puddles, Kate's mother burst through the door cradling a fresh new malamute puppy which she handed hopefully to her daughter. Kate had pinched her face and ran to her room. By the end of the third day, however, Kate allowed him to trail after her and sleep next to her bed.

Now Kate wiggled her fingers mechanically over Yukon's furry head and then shooed him to the side. She pulled on a sweatshirt and pajama pants and went to the kitchen, where she found her mother sitting on one of the wooden kitchen chairs, circling her finger around the rim of a thick mug.

"Oh," Kate said, stopping at the edge of the kitchen. "Morning."

Her mother cleared her throat. “I’ve been getting up earlier lately,” she said, as if she’d been asked a question. She pushed on the lower leg of a chair with her foot. Kate sat. “Coffee?”

“No. Thanks.” Kate looked up and noticed a new painting next to the kitchen hutch. It was an oil painting of a tiny country church, narrow with a high steeple, and a large maple tree off to the left in the forefront. The church’s front lawn was scattered with brilliant red and yellow leaves and deep brown acorns. Milling about along the front steps and under the shade of the tree were little girls in bouncy dresses and flowery bonnets and little boys in trousers. There were women with large-brimmed hats and vintage dresses holding their shawls tightly together and men in dark tailored suits laughing and talking. Kate imagined they were commenting on the chilly autumn air or the length of the pastor’s homily.

“Wow, mom,” Kate said. “You’re really good.”

Her mother smiled.

Yukon, who had clicked along the hardwood floor behind Kate, now slumped beside the table and rested his head heavily on his front legs. His eyes looked up at Kate, then her mother.

“Okay, Katie,” her mother said, peering over her glasses. “I’m no good at small talk and neither are you. So why don’t you tell me what’s going on.”

Kate raised an eyebrow at her mother and thought how she used to use this trick when Kate was in high school. Straightforward, no warning. And it almost always worked. Before she knew it, she'd be telling her mom the drama of the day. But Kate was not a kid anymore. She stood and went to the cupboard, looking for her favorite oversized mug. She poured herself a full cup of coffee and sat again next to her mother.

“How is Ty?” her mom asked.

“Fine, I’m guessing.” Kate rested a hand on her stomach for a moment and then loosened her sweatshirt.

Ty had been Kate’s boyfriend since the previous summer, since the weekend she met him at Summerfest in nearby Muskegon. He had performed there with a few friends in a Battle of the Bands competition, which was organized as a way to raise money for various charities. That year the fundraiser was for cystic fibrosis. When she saw Ty for the first time, he was sitting on a peeling red picnic table, tuning his guitar.

Kate had been walking by the bandshell with a friend but stopped in mid-stride. “I need to meet that man,” she’d said, looking at Ty.

“Who?”

Kate motioned with her head to the dark-haired guitar player and then quickly scanned the sign next to them that advertised the lineup.

“I have no idea what cystic fibrosis is,” she said, noticing mothers with strollers and hand-holding couples begin to seat themselves on metal folding chairs. “But I’m thinking I want to support the cause.”

Twenty minutes later the four guys took their places on stage and performed two songs to wild applause. As they stepped off-stage, three men and a woman wearing a cowboy hat began carrying up drums and an amplifier. Kate pretended to watch the next band set up while a few people who looked like his family rushed over to hug him. First, a plump woman carrying an enormous plaid purse on her arm, then a petite, delicate-looking girl with big almond eyes, and a tall, slender man who shook his hand and clapped him on the back.

Kate quickly approached then and they all turned to look at her. “I’m going to sound like a groupie,” Kate said, breathless. “But you guys were amazing.”

“Thanks,” he said, reaching over to a picnic table for his guitar case. “I give autographs.” His voice was smooth and low.

Kate smiled.

“What’s your name,” he asked, looking over at Kate. His eyes reminded her of melted chocolate. “For the autograph.”

“Kate.”

He smiled. "I like it," he said. "I'm Ty." He set his guitar carefully inside the case, threaded the pick into the strings and snapped the lid closed. Straightening, he turned to his family. "Mom and dad, meet Kate," he said, putting a hand on her back. He turned to the young girl. "And this here is my sister Grace. My reason for getting up on that stage today." He leaned over to Kate conspiratorially. He smelled like leather. "I'm usually just a shower singer."

His father put his hand out to Kate and said it was good to meet her. Grace smiled at Kate with her whole face. "Thanks for coming," she said.

Ty's mother smiled at Kate and then gave her son a quick hug. "We have to head home. Time for Grace's meds."

Grace went to Ty and lightly hugged him on tiptoes. "Thank you."

After they left, Kate glanced quickly at her friend, who was sitting cross-legged on a folding chair examining her nails.

Ty cleared his throat. "Guess I still owe you my autograph," he said. He walked to a pickup truck and when he came back, he handed Kate a Summerfest brochure with his name and cell number scribbled in the margin. "I'm not busy next Saturday," he'd said before he smiled and walked over to his friends.

Ty drove to see Kate either at school in Kalamazoo or at home in Ludington every weekend, except during three weeks in October when Grace had pneumonia and he

needed to stay closer to home. She remembered being struck by the tenderness in his voice when he talked about “Gracie” and guessed that he must be even more protective of her than most older brothers because of her fragile health.

About a week into Western Michigan University’s second academic semester, after the Christmas lights in Kate’s residence hall had been taken down and wound up into tangled globs, and the university bookstore had become jammed with confused students, a test stick showed that Kate was pregnant.

“You’re absolutely sure,” Kate said flatly to the nurse at the campus health center where she’d scheduled an appointment the next day.

“Honey,” she’d said with breath that smelled like cherry cough drops. “Baby’s heart’s been beating for a few weeks now.” She rolled to a nearby table on her round, backless stool and rifled through some brochures in a pull-out drawer. When she wheeled back she was holding a crisp brochure. She unfolded it in front of Kate and pointed to a picture that said “Fetus at eight weeks” next to it. It looked like an actual baby, but with a disproportionately big head, transparent skin, and a string-like cord coming from its middle. Kate felt faint.

She had backed out of the office a few moments later, refusing to make another appointment against the advice of the nurse. With the exception of her roommate Regan, who’d consoled and advised her almost all of that night, Kate didn’t tell anyone about the

pregnancy. It was only after a week had gone by and she had settled on her decision to end the pregnancy that she was ready to talk to Ty.

“Let’s walk,” she’d said when she met him at the door to her residence hall that weekend. She took his hand and pulled him to the sidewalk.

“You hate being outside when it’s cold,” Ty said.

“I feel like fresh air.”

A girl carrying a bundle of books and notebooks rushed past them to the door.

“What is it, Katie?” Ty said when they got to the corner.

“Well you know our ... *protection* ... has been hit and miss,” Kate said.

“Yeah, I know,” Ty said. “Not too smart.”

“No,” she said. She took a breath like she was about to speak, but let frosty air come out instead.

Ty stayed silent.

“Okay, so turns out I’m ...” she began. She breathed deeply. “I took a pregnancy test. And it was positive.”

He stopped walking and faced her. “What? Seriously, you’re pregnant?”

“Yes,” she said in a quiet voice. “Seems that way.” She re-wrapped her scarf tightly around her neck and sniffed air in. “Fucking cold out here.” Kate started to walk again but he held her back.

“And you’re sure?” he said, leaving a hand on her arm. She breathed in his cologne.

“Yeah,” she said. “Pretty sure.”

“Holy shit.” He put his hands to his head.

“I know.”

“Who all knows?” he asked. “Did you tell your folks?”

“Like I would tell them,” Kate said. “What am I going to say? They still think I’m singing in the choir.” She pulled the sides of her jacket closer together and stomped snow off the heels of her dress boots. “I’m nineteen years old, Ty, I’m not married, and I live in a shoebox.”

Ty looked up as a snowplow passed by on the opposite side of the road. Snow sprayed over sidewalks, driveways, and mailboxes.

“Yeah, they’ll be pissed,” Ty said. “Then they’ll relax and be cool about it.”

“Are we talking about the same people?” she said harshly.

Ty turned from Kate. He zipped up his leather jacket and breathed air into his hands.

“I can’t tell them,” she said firmly. She shook her head. “I can’t.”

They walked in silence for several minutes. There were more cars now as they neared the boulevard just south of downtown Kalamazoo. A light blue minivan heading northbound slid in a smooth circle into the intersection and stopped just short of a white pickup truck.

Kate abruptly stopped and hugged her arms tightly around herself. She gazed out at St. Augustine Cathedral which stood proudly in front of them. From the front, the church looked like a massive schoolhouse, but with two high towers on each side and a stone cross at the tip. There were four marble pillars in the front which stood protectively around and between three oak doors.

She finally spoke, but continued to look at the cathedral, which was lit up with floodlights. “When I was a little girl, my mom always used to tell me flashlight stories. We’d turn out the lights and lie in my bed under the quilt my grandma made for me, and she’d shine the flashlight at the ceiling. Then she’d put one of her hands in front of the light and make these shadow people and make up stories.”

Kate wiggled her fingers around for a moment and finally threw them up in the air. “I don’t know how she did it,” she said in exasperation. Ty smiled.

“Anyway,” Kate continued, “Her favorite story to tell was this one about a pretty little girl with curly brown hair named Katie who wanted desperately to be a ballerina dancer. So my mom would move her shadow girl around like a dancer and I would be mesmerized by the twirling and spinning on my ceiling.”

Kate’s nose started to drip as it always did in cold air and she swiped at it with her mitten. “Well Katie did become a professional ballerina in New York and she met a ballet dancer during a production of *The Nutcracker* and they fell in love, blah, blah, blah. Eventually they got married and had four enchanting girls, who all grew up to be ballerinas, of course. Except the youngest, who wanted to be a farmer.”

Ty laughed quietly but said nothing.

“Yeah,” Kate said, “except it’s not even funny. Because I think that’s what my mom still thinks my life is about. Happily ever after.” She looked at him. “You don’t know my parents, Ty. This cannot happen.”

He was still a moment. “Okay,” he finally said. “Well what then? They’ll find out eventually.”

Kate kicked at snow. “Not necessarily.”

“What?”

She took a deep breath. “I don’t want this right now, Ty,” she said. “And you can’t tell me you do.”

Ty's brown eyes met Kate's. "You don't know what I want."

"Okay, what do you want," she said, putting her hands on her hips.

"I want to take some time with this," he said. "I want you to see a doctor. I want to make sure you're okay and the baby's okay." He looked away for just a second and then back at Kate. "Healthy."

She shook her head slowly. "I can't do that," Kate said. "If I go to any doctor, it's going to be ..."

Ty's face looked pained as he absorbed this. "How can you say that?" he finally said.

"How can you *not* see this?" she said, exasperated. She closed her eyes. She pressed her palms down straight to the frozen sidewalk and breathed deeply as though she were physically trying to calm herself. Kate opened her eyes and looked at Ty. "Try to understand."

Ty stared at her for a long moment and almost imperceptibly shook his head. Kate shivered.

"I want to go in," she said, turning to go back toward her building. "Freezing my ass off out here."

He held her arm back a moment and she turned to face him. Her cheeks were flushed and her chin was shaking. “We need to talk about this some more,” he said.

“Fine,” she said, walking fast. “But not now. I can’t even move my mouth.”

Ty had to leave town early the next day. He got a call from his mother saying that Grace had been admitted to DeVos Children’s Hospital in Grand Rapids with a Pseudomonas infection. Kate and Ty spoke only by phone over the next two weeks because Grace was not responding to antibiotics and was getting worse. By Monday afternoon of the second week, Kate decided to make a trip to DeVos.

Upon arriving, she grabbed a card and ballerina teddy bear in the hospital gift shop for Grace. When she reached Grace’s room she tapped lightly on the open door and walked in. “Hello?” she said in a stage whisper.

“Kate!” Grace said from her bed. She pointed to Ty, who was sleeping on an olive green chair in the corner of the room. His head was bent over the top of the chair and his arms were folded. “I didn’t know you were coming!”

Kate thought Grace’s face was thinner than when she’d last seen her. The bones in her face were more defined and there were shadows around her eyes that looked like sunglass lenses. When Kate leaned down to hug her she noticed a plastic tube coming from the side of her hospital gown near her stomach.

Grace smiled lightly. “Feeding tube,” she said.

Kate's smile faded.

"Don't worry," Grace said, as though she were an adult trying to soothe a child.
"It doesn't hurt at all."

Kate thought to herself how incredible it was that Grace was able to be so cheerful, so optimistic. "Here," she said, handing her the bear. "I hope you like it."

Grace's face lit up. "I love it."

"It's always been my dream to be a professional dancer. Did you know that?"

"No. I didn't," she said, straightening the tiny lace tutu. She set the bear down on the rollaway table and slowly propped herself up against her pillows one arm at a time.
"So do you think you'll get there? Will you be a professional dancer some day?"

"Oh, I don't know," Kate said. "I've been in dance all my life. Even trained in New York City a couple of summers." She turned her face toward the window. "But, life happens. Plans change. And you start to wonder if all that time you were even being realistic." Kate breathed heavily and dropped her shoulders. "What are the chances you'll really be able to do all the things you planned on doing, you know?"

Grace coughed several long coughs and seemed unable to get air between the coughs. Kate quickly turned to her. Grace was hunched forward with her head bent into her hands. Her upper body was quivering. Just as Kate was about to press the nurse's call button, Ty sat up from his bed and went to Grace.

“Press it,” Ty instructed Kate without looking at her. He sat on the edge of Grace’s bed and rubbed her back in a circular motion. “Take it easy, Gracie. Just take it easy.” He swiftly put a yellow, banana-shaped basin into her hands and then moved her hair behind her ears on each side of her face.

A nurse rushed into the room and asked Kate and Ty to wait outside. Ty walked quickly down the hall to find his parents. A few minutes later, they were all assembled outside Grace’s room, waiting for the doctor. At last, a thickset man in a long white lab coat came around the corner in long strides, stepped into her room, and closed the door. When he emerged a short while later, Kate moved to the side so he could speak to Ty and his parents. He explained while paging through a chart that the next step was a bronchodilator and, if necessary, chest physiotherapy to drain her lungs.

After several minutes of answering questions, the doctor returned Grace’s chart to the holder on the door and strode down the hall, gripping his pager. Ty’s parents walked quickly into Grace’s room, but Ty stayed behind.

Kate moved closer to where he stood. “I’m sure this is the worst possible time,” she said.

Ty had his hands loosely on his hips and was looking at the tiles in the floor. He checked his watch and then glanced up at Grace’s door. Finally he met Kate’s eyes. “Worst time for what,” he said in a low voice.

“Look,” Kate began. “I’m sorry about all of this, Ty. Really I am.” She looked up into his eyes. They were darker than ever and there was a shadow around them. Kate wondered for the first time if he’d been sleeping at all. “But I ... ”

Ty took her hands and pulled her to him. He wrapped his arms around her and put his face into her hair. She felt his body heave. Kate had never seen him like this. He was always so strong, so in control. What was she supposed to say? She felt bad for what he was going through, of course, but what about what *she* was going through?

Kate leaned her head back so she could see him and rubbed the sides of his arms. “I guess I’m just wondering when we’ll have a chance to talk about our ... predicament.”

Ty loosened his grip on Kate. “Our *predicament*?” he said, taking a step backward. “Is that what we’re calling it?” He quickly wiped under his nose with the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

“Well ... that’s what it is, isn’t it?” Kate said, suddenly defensive. “I don’t know how you see it, but personally, I don’t see this as happy news. I’m not busting out any champagne or anything. Are you?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Kate looked away from Ty. Why couldn’t he see what this was doing to her?

“You know, Kate,” he said. “You’re right about one thing. This is a really shitty time to talk about this.” He nodded in the direction of Grace’s room. “If she’s doing better this weekend, I’ll try to get away so we can talk.”

She looked at Ty and raised her eyebrows. “Sure,” she said.

A moment later, they returned to Grace’s room and Kate lightly hugged her goodbye. Soon she was back in her car, driving home to Kalamazoo. Tuesday afternoon Ty called to tell her that he was sorry but he wouldn’t be home by the weekend, that test results showed that Grace’s *Pseudomonas* was a strain that might not be treatable. His voice was deep, gravelly.

“I’m sorry too,” she’d replied, fingering some brochures she’d picked up from the campus clinic the week before.

That Friday afternoon, during the time Kate was leafing through a fashion magazine at a clinic, waiting for the appointment she’d made a few days earlier, Grace went into respiratory failure.

So how was Ty, her mother now wanted to know? Kate could not say. She didn’t know because she had stopped trying to call him. So much had happened in the last three weeks that she didn’t even know how *she* was.

“You don’t want to go to this baptism, do you,” her mother said pointedly.

Kate looked at her mother without speaking. She loudly pushed her chair away from the table, seized her mug, still brimming with black coffee, and poured it down the kitchen sink.

“Sorry, mom, but no, I do not want to go to the baptism.” She promptly held up a manicured hand in the direction of her mother. “And no, I don’t want to talk about it.”

Her mother was silent.

Kate started to walk toward her room and on the way squatted down to pet Yukon. “But I’ll still go.”

Baptisms were always held immediately after the mass, so the priest began to make preparations at the front of the church as soon as he had shaken hands with the last parishioner. Kate and her parents stood in the church vestibule to meet those who were just arriving. Her sister-in-law walked in first, lugging a car seat covered with a blue elephant blanket. Her brother, who had been holding the door, came in next and gave everyone a brief hug. Kate grinned at him and told him he looked nervous. “Not at all, kid,” he laughed. His wife set down the baby seat and pulled off her hat, shaking snow onto the carpet. When she pulled the blanket back to check on the baby, Kate announced to everyone that she would see them up front, and walked away.

The ceremony began as soon as everyone arrived. Kate's brother and sister-in-law had chosen her mother and father to be the baby's godparents, so they took their places on the left side of the baptismal font. Everyone watched as her sister-in-law unbuckled the baby from his seat and delicately lifted him out. His arms and fists were clenched tightly against his body and his eyes were closed. Now removed from where he'd been cozily tucked in his seat, he stretched his tiny back into an arch and pushed his head far enough back to smooth the abundant folds in his neck and chin. The baby made this stretch as if in slow motion, and all the while, his mother held him under his arms and calmly waited for his body to relax and, finally, begin to curl into its natural fetal position. She then cradled him in her left arm as Kate's brother placed a long white gown over him. Then they took their own places next to the font.

The priest cleared his throat and began the general baptismal introductions and intentions. "What name have you given this child?" he asked, turning his head toward her brother.

"Adam Lester," he said proudly. Kate's father and brother exchange grins. She noticed how they both stood the same, with their feet shoulder-width apart and hands gripped behind their backs.

The priest produced several small jars of oil and, after immersing his thumb in them, traced the sign of the cross on Adam's forehead and chest and then invited his godparents to do the same. The baby's eyes were wide open by this time and he watched

her parents' faces raptly as they traced the crosses. Immediately the strong scent of the chrism oils filled the small church. Next, the baptismal candle was offered to Kate's dad, and he lit it from the tall candle next to the altar. Afterwards, the tall, portly priest sauntered to the center of the church and, removing his glasses and wiping them clean with his vestment, explained that it was the responsibility of the whole congregation to see to Adam's spiritual formation, even those presently nodding off in the pews. Finally, it was time to baptize the baby. With one hand supporting his head and neck and the other holding his body, her sister-in-law positioned him over the font.

The priest dipped a cup into the water and poured it liberally over the baby's head. "Adam Lester, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Kate clutched her camera and moved her head to the side to get a better view of Adam, who began to cry. She looked at her sister-in-law, who had thick tears in her eyes that started to come down when she tried to blink them away. Her brother dabbed the baby's head with an immaculate white towel and then held his arms out. His wife stepped close to her husband and placed Adam in his arms so gently that the baby might have been made of the finest crystal. She glanced at her grandmother, who was sitting closely next to her, gripping an embroidered handkerchief over her nose and mouth. Her eyes were fixed on the baptism. Kate lowered the camera onto her lap and looked at her sister-

in-law, whose face was now against Adam's tiny cheek as she kept repeating a soft hushing sound next to his ear.

Kate swallowed hard. "Am I beautiful?" she said in a soft whisper, still watching her sister-in-law.

"What? Of course you are, sweetheart," her grandma said, patting Kate's knee with her handkerchief.

Kate handed the camera to her grandmother and quickly edged out of the wooden pew. The church was mostly dim, with the exception of recessed lighting around the altar and the sun trying to slink through the stained glass. It was not until she had reached the last pew at the back of church that Kate noticed a tall, slender man partially in shadow, leaning against the wall of the sacristy. He wore a brown leather jacket and dark pants and held a pair of sunglasses in one hand. It was Ty. His hair was somewhat longer now and he had a five o'clock shadow. His gaze was set on the proceedings at the front of church.

Kate stopped her stride on the side aisle of the church and leaned her hand against a piece of cool translucent red glass. Her breaths instantly became shallow and her mouth became dry. Why would he be here? How did he even know about the baptism? She followed his gaze to the front of the church. "I now present to you the newest member of our church, Adam Lester Matthews," the priest was saying in a loud voice with a robed arm outstretched toward the baby. There was clapping.

She looked back at Ty. From the outside, he looked so strong and invincible, with his leather jacket and his cool posture. Still, he seemed so vulnerable as he stood there in the shadows, so silent and alone. She wanted to go to him. Would he respond to her? He must have seen her sitting in the pew earlier. Kate wondered what he thought when he'd seen her. She thought of that day outside of Grace's hospital room and of how he had held her so tightly. How hopeless and powerless he must have felt. She couldn't believe how insensible she'd been to his pain. Her words of comfort had been so trite. She'd been so fixated on her own concerns.

Finally Kate walked to where Ty stood. He straightened when he saw her and put the sunglasses he'd been holding in the inside pocket of his jacket.

"I didn't know you were coming," she said quietly. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It's really nice to see you."

He gave her a small smile. "It was nice of your mom to invite me."

There was much shuffling and talking at the front of the church now as the ceremony ended.

Kate motioned to the back pew. "Do you want to sit?"

Ty held out his arm to let her go first. As she passed him, she breathed in the familiar scent of his cologne. It made her think of sunsets, motorcycles, and Saturday nights. They sat beside each other near the end of the pew, quietly at first, watching

everyone assemble for pictures. Several were taken of Adam with his parents, then a few with the godparents, and some with the grandparents on each side of the family. The priest even tried to sneak into one or two. Once or twice someone motioned for Kate to come to the front.

Kate looked at Ty. His profile reminded her of Grace and she wondered why she had never noticed the resemblance before now.

“I’m sorry,” she finally said.

Fans whirred sluggishly high over their heads.

“I’m not going to say I know what it’s been like for you,” she said in a soft voice. “I don’t.”

He wiped a hand quickly over his face. “It hurt,” he whispered. He glanced quickly at Kate and then returned his gaze to the front of the church. “Still does.”

“I know there’s nothing I can do,” she said quietly.

He gripped the edge of the seat and leaned forward. She wanted to take his hand and put it to her face and feel his breath and beg him to tell her everything would be alright somehow.

Kate’s brother was helping their grandmother into a coat that was almost as long as she was. Her father was talking to her Aunt Ruth, probably inviting her over to the

house for a little lunch. Her mother was mouthing the word “grandma” to the baby’s face as her sister-in-law secured him in the car seat.

Kate felt Ty’s hand move across her face. The touch was curious, cautious. She turned to him. His eyes, still that same creamy chocolate color, were red around the edges. Kate put her hand over his, just as she had imagined doing just a short while earlier, and his eyes closed.

A moment later, they both stood and edged out of the pew to the center of the aisle. Ty removed a blue envelope from his jacket pocket that said “Adam” in the middle and handed it to Kate. She smiled and held the envelope against her chest. Then she kissed her fingers, pressed them to Ty’s lips, and walked to the front of the church.

Annabelle

Annabelle was seven weeks premature. The nurse with the pointed nose kept muttering and shooting me looks like I just ate the last sticky bun at the nurse's station; so I know she blamed me for it. My parents came in the morning and after my mother saw Annabelle she grabbed the phone and called Father Consani to come give her Last Rites. Dave showed up in his black sweats and Red Wings jersey a couple hours later and asked if this meant we didn't have to get married.

After one of her visits to the Bronson NICU, my mother shook me awake to tell me Annabelle was off the ventilator and breathing on her own. When I went back to sleep I dreamed that I got stood up for my prom.

I didn't really start to panic until the lady in pink scrubs pointed to a glider rocker and said, "Have a seat, mommy. I'll go get your baby." Then she set it in my arms and I looked over at my mom behind the glass. Her face was all crumpled, like she forgot to put the sugar in her sweet tea. Well *she* was the one who shooed me in there.

The doctor whose title I could never remember called one Friday morning to tell me I'd be happy to know that Annabelle was ready to be discharged. I asked if he was absolutely sure and he told me to put my father on the phone.

Annabelle was baptized at St. Peter's Cathedral three days after her discharge even though I wanted to wait until I lost my baby fat. But if we were going to be living under my father's roof then dammit, that baby was going to be baptized that weekend and there were no two ways about it.

I picked Uncle Keith and Aunt Bridget, who I call Aunt Bea, to be Annabelle's godparents because they used to let me stay with them at their farm in Indiana for a week every summer. Me and Aunt Bea always ate homemade shortcake with fresh strawberries out by the barn and talked about kissing boys and hating the preps, and all the other things I could *never* talk to my mother about.

Dave stopped by after school one day and said he couldn't stay long because Josh was waiting for him at the skateboard park. He didn't want to hold Annabelle but said she was cute and took after her pop. He pulled cigarettes out of his jeans pocket and when he

started knocking the pack against the palm of his hand I told him you can't smoke around kids, you idiot.

Some nights I'd just let Annabelle cry when I was too tired to get up. I knew my mom would eventually get her. But the next morning while he poured his coffee, my dad would always give me the look I used to get when I'd leave his Volkswagen on empty.

Annabelle would always be moving her mouth – rooting, the parenting class lady called it – and I'd shove the pacifier in if I could find it.

When I got to be around nine or ten, my mother used to let me set up our porcelain village set every Christmas. We had a Deck the Halls Christmas Shop, Gingerbread Bakery, a barber shop with a swirly red, white and blue barber's pole by the window, and an ice cream parlor with a tiny sign in the window that advertised chocolate malts and penny candy. I loved designing the village around clumps of cotton every year, and arranging the tiny figurines: the snowmobile rider with the black helmet and fogged-up shield, the mail carrier in his earflap hat, the rosy-cheeked kids having snowball fights, the father and daughter pulling a Christmas tree on a red toboggan. My favorite

piece was an old two-story house that lit up inside. It was brown with pine green lattice over the windows and had a dog with a Santa cap sprawled on the porch. A red bow hung on the front door and a tall porch light twirled with red garland stood beside the front walk. I liked it because when you clicked the switch on the cord, the living room lit up and you could see a cozy little scene – mom and dad, two children, woodstove, stream train circling the Christmas tree. One year the bulb burnt out when I forgot to click the light off one night and it never got replaced.

Once when I was pregnant, after I couldn't hide it anymore, a woman with stringy gray hair and red lipstick on her teeth stopped her cart and stared at my middle as if it were polluting her air supply. I instinctively sucked in and straightened my shirt to hide it and she said, "I'd cover that up, too, if I were your age." After she wheeled away, the checkout girl rolled her eyes in a big circle and then scanned my gum and hair coloring kit.

The kids at school didn't really care that I was pregnant, or at least tried not to notice, once they got used to it. I usually acted kind of proud, like I was trying to show off or something. Maybe I just enjoyed not being invisible anymore.

What if it didn't matter anyway? All my bravado, I mean. I wanted it to seem like I knew what I was doing. Like I was trying to prove I was a certain kind of person. But I was never going to be enough for my parents anyway, now was I. How *could* I be?

“Shhh,” Dave used to say. “Stop thinking so much.”

Annabelle was screaming in her crib one day when Mateo from work stopped by. I turned off the tv and pulled my fingers through my hair when I saw him get out of his car. He still had his smudged blue uniform on and a white tag that said “Ask me. I can help!” I opened the door, but not too early. He stomped his feet on the mat and cleared his throat three times before he finally came in. His black hair smelled like fish sticks and his fingers looked raw. He handed me a small pink gift bag and apologized for not remembering tissue paper. We sat down and I started to look inside but he said, “Don't you want to get Annabelle?” When I brought her downstairs, she stopped crying and looked at Mateo with her big dark blue eyes which still had tears in them. She clutched his finger when he put it by her hand and he smiled. He said, “She looks like you, Alexandra.” My name sounded pretty when he said it.

My friend Louisa didn't come by as much after the baby, of course, but at least she lasted longer than the others.

It's sort of like homework. You know you're supposed to do it, and you don't really have a choice anyway. Well, you do, but it's a choice that feels wrong and so you don't make it. And so of course you go ahead and do your homework, but how can you ever, ever enjoy it?

Someone called the police just because I left Annabelle in the car when I went in to the drugstore. The cops pulled into the spot next to mine just as I was getting back there with my bags. A lady with cat food breath started hollering and shaking her finger at me. Didn't I know anything? It's eighty degrees in the shade! Didn't I have enough sense to know that's just how babies die? My hands shook trying to find the unlock button on my keys and before I knew it, they were on the pavement behind the back tire. The cop scooped them up, pressed the right button, and yanked the door open all in about two seconds. Annabelle's face was red and dripping wet and she was shrieking like I never heard before. She reached out for me, but the police officer pushed me back with one arm and unbuckled her himself. Someone must have called my mother because she came rushing at us about five minutes later and begged the cop not to press charges.

Hillary couldn't have been a lot older than Annabelle when she was hit by a car, but I guess she must have been able to walk. I don't remember too much about her, but a long, long time after the accident my mother started telling me stories about her and about how I called myself her “*nother* mommy.” She told me that when Hill was a baby, I'd want her to come in my bed every night to lie with me. My mother would wrap her up tight in her “kiki” and tuck her right next to me. When she came to check on us a few minutes later, I'd be sleeping and Hillary would be slurping on her fist and staring out with wide eyes. She says I made up a song about her called “Super Hillary,” but I don't remember that. What I *do* remember is that day when the grown-ups were all over our house in black, black, black, and they were holding each other up and crying.

Then there were the nights afterwards when the house lost all its sound. Days were quiet, too, of course, without Hillary. But nights were different. After the front door would slam and my father would leave, and after my mother's cries died down, I would hold the covers up to my chin and think how quiet it was. I never knew you could be scared of quiet.

Maybe I was supposed to be watching Hillary. We'd been playing with a red ball, the kind you use for four-square. And the sun made our black driveway hot even in our summer dresses, so I told Hillary to go tell mommy she wanted a popsicle. "Say 'popsicle,' Hillary." And then she went away. I remember there was a rubberband sound coming from the little creek. I found out it was a bullfrog. Next a loud, loud car sound. And then sharp screams coming from every direction. My parents never said the words, "It was your fault." But for a long time afterwards, my dad didn't look at me.

One thing they never tell you is parents can be pretty smooth.

The parenting lady told our group one day to think of a role model. "Write about why you would like to be that kind of mother," she said in her high kindergarten teacher voice. She sat so dainty on her wooden chair and smoothed her long skirt, pretending not to watch us write. I couldn't think of anybody except Aunt Bea. But she wasn't a mother.

Louisa's mom won't buy her clothes bigger than a size seven. Her mom says to trust her, she knows how the world works.

I never met Emme's mom, but I've heard her at Em's track meets, even though I'm way on the other side of the field picking up the gear. She always starts out in the bleachers but somehow gets to the finish line before Emme and waits with her hands on her hips.

Whenever I'm at Kayla's, her mom nods at us from the computer and says there should be food in the pantry if we want a little something. We snuck blackberry brandy to Kayla's room one time and refilled what we drank with water from the bathroom tap. She never even looked up when we put it back a couple hours later. Which was lucky because it almost fell right off the shelf because we were so out of it.

Dave's mom always smells like cigarette smoke, but I like her. She never cares if we're in Dave's room as long as the tv's on. I've never heard her yell or get upset, except for after I got pregnant and she went on about how my mother should never have let me leave the house without being on the pill.

I saw on the news how this one mother drowned all three of her kids in the bathtub. She had the toughest time with the oldest, her six-year-old boy. I guess the mother felt "tied down."

Another thing people don't tell you is that parents aren't always right.

It is almost a full moon tonight. Again, the quiet. I pull up my covers. "That's just how babies die, that's just how babies die, that's just how babies die ..."

I look at Annabelle on my way to the kitchen. She is sitting and wobbling on a fuzzy pink blanket and sucking on the stubby antenna of a plastic red and white phone. She watches me walk by and smiles broadly with one tooth. Her legs stiffen so forcefully that she falls backward. She cries and I go to her. "Shhh," I say, massaging the back of her head.

Dave is supposed to meet us at the park but an hour later, it is still just Annabelle and me and we swing together on one swing. My feet push off from the hollowed out ground beneath the swing and I grip her body more tightly with my left arm. After we slow down, I follow her eyes to a small tree that has just one leaf left. The leaf is shaking but the stem doesn't budge. I lower my face into her light brown curls, the ones that strangers are always coming up to touch. She smells like fresh, cold air and baby shampoo. And I think about how I never, ever loved Dave.

Annabelle's eyes used to be the color of blue sapphires but now they're the color of cocoa. She watches me as I mash the clumps in her sweet potatoes, as I look for her favorite jingly bear at bedtime, and as I try to hold up her slippery body in the bathtub with one arm. She follows me with her eyes, watching me from my mom's hip, while I look under school books and sweatshirts for my keys and then run out the door for work. I don't think I've *ever* been invisible to my Baby-Belle.

One day you wake up and things just feel different.

Maybe my parents had some of their plans change, too. Things they thought would happen one way, but turned out completely different.

Then there was the night I thought it would take forever for Annabelle to wake up. When I finally heard her, I ran to heat up her bottle before my mom could wake up. I got back to Annabelle's room and I thought how the night light made it look cozy in there. She wasn't even awake anymore. I looked at her for a while and liked how she pushed her lips out a few times like she was dreaming about eating. My mom coughed on the other side of the wall, so I picked Annabelle up anyway and sat in the rocker and put

the bottle in before she even started to cry or open her eyes. I sat with her on the rocker and this time I just rocked and watched her cheeks suck in, and I listened to her gulp the milk. And I cupped my hand over hers and let her grip my thumb the way I saw my mom do so many times.

Home Sweet Home

Virginia traced the round shape of her son Cole's high school ring from the outside of her pants pocket. Someone in white had handed it to her within minutes of his arrival at Mercy Medical three days earlier. He had been shot in the frontal lobe of his brain by a startled drug dealer and lay now in a narrow bed that she was instructed not to elevate.

She stretched the sides of his blanket apart to remove wrinkles and then pulled the top inch over to make a crisp fold. As she moved from one side of the bed to the other to complete the task, Virginia spoke to her son about his chocolate lab Casey and explained in a firm voice that she expected Cole to walk that dog the very moment he got back home. "Plus, he's been chewing on the strap of your father's robe again and you know how he hates that."

Her son's eyelids were not fully closed so at the times when she was close enough to hear his thin breaths, she could see the bottoms of his brown eyes. Virginia sat down in her chair, then rose again quickly. She turned to the roll-away table and seized his styrofoam cup.

"You know your whole school has shown up here," she said, striding to the sink to empty and rinse out his cup. "But that child doctor who won't even let you wear your ring says daddy and I are it for visitors right now."

Virginia walked quickly to the table to refill Cole's cup with water from the pitcher and prepare a fresh straw. She then turned back to Cole and carefully pushed brown wisps of hair away from his face. And she thought of how she'd done that simple little motion so many times before when he was a boy. It was part of her nightly ritual just before she went to bed herself. She would toss his clothes into the hamper, kick his baseball gear under the bed so he wouldn't trip if he had to get up during the night, and then go to where he slept and softly move pieces of his hair to the side and kiss him on his forehead.

As Virginia looked at her son, lying motionless in his hospital bed, it occurred to her that he might never have a son of his own. What if Cole never had the chance to teach anyone his four-seam fastball or his slider? Or how to treat a girl? Or how to be a good man?

She closed her eyes and felt a sharp sting that took a moment to subside. When she opened them again, she took the cup of water she'd been holding and lifted it so that it was next to his mouth. She bent the straw and brought it to his open lips. They were a pale pink and creased with dryness. She slowly traced the tip of the straw around the swells and slopes of his lips as if this might rouse and at last induce him. His eyes fluttered almost imperceptibly but his mouth was unchanged. Virginia returned the cup to the table, moistened her finger in the icy water, and dabbed it around the inner edges of his lips. She looked hopefully around his mouth, his cheeks, his eyes. After a moment,

she reached for the pleated napkin on the table and softly patted a droplet of water that rested on a new beard.

Later that day, after a fresh batch of snow had settled onto the cars and onto the “Emergency Vehicles Only” sign in the parking lot below, the doctor entered the room, removed his glasses, and informed Virginia and her husband that there was nothing more they could do for Cole. He spoke of irreversible unconsciousness, electrical and muscular activity, organ donations, and other things that Virginia understood but would not process until much later. She asked if her son was in any pain.

Virginia was sitting on her chair next to the bed when Cole’s friend and teammate Brett stood at the door to her son’s room and tapped quietly with swollen knuckles. He was the second baseman as well as his buddy, and he’d been coming by the house on Saturday mornings with his ball and glove for as long as she could remember,

“Mrs. Chandler...” he said, as though she was almost asleep and he didn’t want to disturb her. She looked up. Brett lowered his head and dropped his bulging arms against the sides of his tee-shirt. It was the shirt the coach had given to the team when they’d won state the year before. It read “Home Sweet Home” in oversized, shaded lettering over the backdrop of a baseball diamond.

Virginia closed her eyes for a moment and then looked up slowly at this strong, slumped man. She used the steel arms of the chair to raise herself and then looked into his face. He dropped his eyes to the linoleum floor.

She wanted to tell him she heard by now that he was the one who'd wanted to buy the crack, so he didn't have to explain. She wanted to tell him she already knew that he never, ever meant for any of this to happen. Virginia saw him glance quickly at her son's muscular, limp body and then cover his eyes with the back of his gigantic hand. Most of all, she wanted to tell him how much Cole cared about him.

She lifted her arm, palm up, in his direction. Brett turned his head and lifted his hand against his face, as though he were trying to protect himself from blistering sunlight. He turned quickly and stumbled down the hallway.

Cole's room that night was dark and quiet except for the sounds coming from the many machines. Each had a rhythmic tic, tone, or whoosh sound of its own. The rhythms were interrupted occasionally by rotating nurses who would quickly and expertly attend to Cole, ask Virginia if she was sure she didn't want another blanket or pillow, and then disappear.

Hours later, after the moon had settled in horizontal lines across the bottom of Cole's bed, Virginia allowed her eyelids to close. And as she listened to the tic, tone, and

whoosh sounds, she perceived that they created a palliative, organized rhythm. She reached for Cole's hand, which still lay loosely clenched next to the bed rail. Her breathing evened. How extraordinary, she thought, that it was now her son who comforted *her*.

Virginia's head was resting on Cole's pitching arm when the doctor quietly pushed open the door to her son's room the next morning, but she was awake. Her husband rose from the roll-away bed, slowly walked to his wife, and placed a steady hand on her shoulder. She sat upright. She took her son's sagging hands into her own, bowed her head, and nodded one time.

She looked up when a moment later she heard the doctor at the machines, and then saw Cole's chest puff, hold, and finally collapse. She let out a long breath, and noticed that it was at the exact time Cole had released his own breath for the final time. Her head dropped and she squeezed his hand tightly. And she remembered the many times she had taken the same breaths as Cole when at an appointment the doctor would say to him, "Now take a deep breath. Another," as he moved a stethoscope around his back and chest.

Several minutes passed while her husband and the doctor conferred in deep, quiet voices. Her husband's voice cracked when he spoke, and each time he finished speaking

he put a fist to his mouth and cleared his throat. Virginia stood, looked at each of the men in turn, and asked if she might be allowed a moment with her son.

Voices were absent now and the machines were still and settled. It was just as quiet as it was long ago when she would check on her son at bedtime. This time, of course, things would be different.

Virginia drew Cole's class ring from her pocket. It was made of yellow metal and contained a diamond-shaped, midnight blue stone, around which his name and impending year of graduation stood out proudly. She placed it on her right ring finger and slowly rotated it, taking comfort in its warmth and constancy. After a moment, she removed the ring, held it snugly in her palm, and then wound it onto Cole's own ring finger. She carefully moved some pieces of hair off of his forehead, placed her hands on both sides of his face, and lightly kissed his forehead. Then she went out of the room, eager to find and console Brett.

On the Dignity of Women

And, without partiality, a woman of sense and manners is the finest and most delicate part of God's creation, the glory of Her Maker, and the great instance of His singular regard to man, His darling creature: to whom He gave the best gift either God could bestow or man receive.

Daniel Defoe, "The Education of Women"

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, 'Most blessed are you among women.'

Luke 1:41-42

I once had an English professor with a British accent. He was already the most distinguished and intelligent professor I'd had up to that point, capable of ruminating about antifeminism in the Wife of Bath's tale one moment, and of deliberating the use of dashes in Emily Dickinson's poetry the next. But then he had this elegant English accent besides. It was like having a football coach who looked like Barry Sanders. Or like being taught religion by a man wearing a long brown robe and a rope belt. But my professor was also austere. This towering, silver-haired gent slashed our essay grades in half if we used a comma splice, peered at us over his spectacles during our poetry recitations, and always used the phrase "To be sure," heavy on the "u," just before he was about to say something lofty.

Well one day he was involved in a debate with a student, who insisted that a certain scene from a Shakespeare play was not convincing. The heroine was not

appropriately hysterical, the student argued, and therefore, she compromised the scene's authenticity. To this, my professor raised his bushy eyebrows, cleared his throat, and replied, "Young man. Hysterics are not a prerequisite for authenticity. What about Jacqueline Kennedy at her husband's funeral? Do you not recall her elegance, her composure? Is it not possible that she made more of an impression by showing restraint? To be sure, one need not sacrifice dignity to show emotion."

I remember the hush following this remark in our stuffy, windowless classroom that day that reminded me of a movie scene where there is some sort of spectacular revelation and the characters become instantly quiet as they absorb the intelligence. Now in retrospect, maybe I should not have been so struck by the connection my professor made between restraint and dignity, especially as I think now on the image of Jacqueline Kennedy at the funeral. The woman was so elegant, so composed, sheathed in that filmy black veil and standing so erect. And certainly, on the day of her husband's funeral, she was at no loss for emotion. So shouldn't the connection between self-possession and dignity have been more obvious? Perhaps. But then, dignity can often be a slippery concept for us women.

Its definition seems at first to be remarkably stretchy. Maybe because the concept is so broad, or because dignity is so shy by nature. How--other than by means of stuffy verbiage--might we conceive of it? Perhaps if we liken it to a Baccarat crystal vase. A sparkling, exquisitely cut vase that twinkles with a spectrum of auburn, lavender, and

golden hues when the sun strikes it on a grand mahogany table. It appears to be almost a prism in this light, with its diamond-shaped swellings and its glass properties so fine that the slightest tap from a sharp fingernail elicits a delicate soprano ringing that resonates for six or seven seconds about the room.

Or possibly it is like the elegant Festiva Maxima peony that has burst from its glossy emerald foliage at the end of a rainy May. Its texture is so velvety and so supple that we cannot help but plunge our cheeks into the luxurious white petals and move back and forth so that we can get the full effect of its softness. Then, at last, we bury our nose into its center and experience an explosion of perfumed fragrance that causes us to inhale successively deeper with each breath. Even droplets of water want to linger on this peony, dawdling and tottering in oval-shaped capsules until either a breeze or their own weight finally causes them to plummet to the mulch below.

Dignity is one of those words that we inherently know exists, one that implies something good and attractive. Maybe we hear it within a moral platitude, such as the one delivered by my stodgy undergraduate professor, or else within an expression such as “preserving the dignity of marriage” or “protecting the dignity of life.” Its definition becomes narrower in this context as it makes reference to traditionally held beliefs and values. We may then correctly associate it with virtue or propriety, and soon an image develops in our minds of someone who we might describe as “dignified.” That image varies, of course, from one person to another. For one, it may be Lady Diana in her red

silk dress suit, wide-brimmed hat, and high stilettos. For another, it may be Rosa Parks or Clare Boothe Luce. For my undergraduate professor, it was Jacqueline Kennedy. In any case, the word seems to suggest strength, self-possession, class.

Sounds appealing, right? Then how come the word and all of its pretty allusions evaporate from our brains, usually within a few seconds, like cotton candy the minute we put it in our mouths? Dignity seems attractive and worthwhile, but just a tiny bit out of our grasp. It is, I think, much like any other virtue or aspiration that takes too much energy, discipline, or resilience to attain. Like the exercise program we were so passionate about--at first. We had the alarm ready to go, a new microfiber running suit on the chair next to the bed, and a pantry full of protein bars. And we had impressive goals, of course. We realized it would be challenging, but we also knew it was time to finally knuckle down and get off the couch. It was necessary for our physical and mental well-being, not to mention that it would free us from having to tug our jeans up over our hips without breaking three fingernails.

But all of that was before the push-ups began to place a strain on our wrists, and before the air became too sticky or too breezy or too nippy to jog in. So we started to hit the snooze on the alarm and eventually stopped setting it altogether, because we managed to convince ourselves that our jeans weren't really *that* tight in the first place. They were just attractively snug. Besides, who needs to keep pace with those supermodels anyhow? We will never look like them even after six years of daily exercise, so what's the point?

And anyway, wasn't someone just telling us that we looked pretty darn good for having so many children?

And so, far too soon, before any real change can take place, we abandon the program. We justify, and justify quite skillfully, why exercising was not worth all the effort and sacrifice, when the truth is that it was just *too damn hard*. This type of commitment takes a massive amount of physical and psychological discipline. Simply knowing that it's good for us, that it is something we ought to do for our own well-being, is not quite enough of an inducement. Not when it's eighteen below wind chill in the morning and we're cuddled under our electric blankets. And certainly not when Rose from Accounting has brought in a heaping plate of gooey chocolate caramel bars and we have to pass them every time we need something from the printer.

Why is self-discipline so difficult for us? Why are we so often the emotional, unrestrained people that the student from my English class had come to expect? Fyodor Dostoevsky went to complicated literary lengths to demonstrate that human beings are essentially irrational creatures--that when it comes to getting what we want, we choose emotion and flesh-based reasoning over logic almost every time. Dmitri from *The Brothers Karamazov* is just one example. As the character with the greatest raw emotion, he represents the ideological "Everyman." This means, according to Dostoevsky, that like the character of Dmitri, we human beings are intrinsically wired to behave emotionally and immoderately.

Shakespeare had a propensity (and flair) for pointing out flaws and absurdities in man, as well. Take *Measure for Measure*, for instance. Near the beginning of the play, Claudio explains to Lucio that “our natures do pursue, / Like rats that ravin down their proper bane, / A thirsty evil, and when we drink we die.” In other words, just as rats devour the poison that will certainly kill them, so too are we human beings drawn to what will likely harm or eventually kill us. Think cigarettes, cell phones while driving, and illicit sex.

Let’s assume for the present that Dostoevsky and Shakespeare had something worthwhile to impart on the subject of humanity: that human beings basically know right from wrong, good from evil. But because we are intrinsically flawed, or are “common souls,” as Michel de Montaigne once put it, we will usually behave irrationally. Behaving with more restraint, more dignity, takes more discipline than we are usually willing to employ. Where does that leave us? And, more to the point, where does that leave women? If dignity requires a discipline that we don’t naturally have oozing out of our pores, is it more likely to have the properties of cotton candy than of a crystal vase? Does it mean that it is beyond our reach?

It seems to me, in my mental meanderings of late, that the absence of dignity is proportionate to the absence of self-abnegation. Well, let’s face it. Selflessness, self-denial--these qualities are about as difficult to comprehend and accomplish as umbral calculus (for most of us, at least). Still, they are attributes that some women knew all

about. Saint Joan of Arc, Saint Eudocia, and Saint Perpetua come to mind, to name just a few women who understood a little something about self-sacrifice. Or what about Mary, whose response to her calling was simply, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word.” How about St. Gianna Beretta Molla, a pediatrician and mother, who refused to abort her baby even though it meant she would most likely die, which she did, seven days after giving birth. Or consider Mother Theresa, who tended to the most desperate, most forgotten, and most rejected individuals. Not that all noble or altruistic women are from the early church or are saints. What about Maya Angelou? Or, might we even consider some women celebrities who have sacrificed instant wealth and even their careers because they refused to accept certain offers?

It is a sad fact that this last example is the anomaly. A disproportionate number of women are quite content to surrender their dignity to achieve wealth and celebrity. I think of the millions of women who, in contrast to the above women, *choose* to exploit themselves on websites, in television and film, and throughout the adult entertainment industry (magazines, calendars, gentlemen’s clubs, for instance). Have the stirrings of self-respect, integrity, and selflessness been quieted by other priorities?

Now it is neither my place nor my intention to evaluate the ethics of these behaviors. But what seems essential to respond to are the implications of them. Because all of this is fine and dandy, so long as the women who participate in or sanction these behaviors are not the same ones who insist on respect and de-objectification. So long as

they are not the same ones who demand protection from disease and physical abuse. So long as they are not the ones who expect fidelity and reverence from men.

Of course there are many other ways we women allow other priorities or enticements to stand in our way, thereby perpetuating the violation of our integrity and renunciation of our dignity. Years ago, I had a friend in Lower Michigan named Diane. She was a masculine-looking lady whose profession was choir director and pianist for our church. Well I came across Diane and her teenage daughter one summery afternoon in a Meijer parking lot, where they both began to talk at once about how they couldn't believe they had gotten away without paying for a case of soda which still sat on the bottom of their cart.

“No one even noticed!” Diane’s daughter said with wide blue eyes.

“Yeah,” Diane said, glancing at her daughter. “We kind of looked at each other when we got to the bagger and wondered if he’d notice the twelve-packs, but he didn’t!”

Immediately I recalled a similar incident from my own past. I had been pulling my mother from store to store at the Pine Tree Mall, trying to find just the right polo shirt and jeans for the first day of high school. At one point, we popped into a card shop that sold posters and I inadvertently walked out of the store holding a poster that we hadn’t paid for. Several jewelry stores and an arcade later, I noticed it in my hand and stopped instantly, holding it up and staring at my mom. Her eyes bulged.

“What! You still have that poster? We never paid for that!”

Now my mother does not rush. For any reason. Unless you count that day we were out on the boat and got caught in an unexpected downpour. When we arrived at the pier, she scrambled out of the boat so fast she almost fell in the water anyway. But on that day in the mall, my mother marched me back to the card shop with so much alacrity, she almost dislocated my arm. If it is true that “we learn what we live,” then I absorbed something from my mother that day at the mall just as surely as Heidi’s daughter absorbed something from hers in the Meijer parking lot.

It becomes easier, through continued exposure, to accept what we formerly might have considered offensive, especially from those in a unique position to influence us. Notions of propriety and femininity often become subverted as a result. For instance, we might decide that since so many other mothers allow their children to dress immodestly or to speak disrespectfully, it must now be acceptable. Or, maybe because we have become so accustomed to seeing women online and in film stoop to unprecedented manners of behavior, we decide, resignedly, to sanction or at least tolerate them. It must be our own problem if we’re squirming in our movie theatre seats next to our husbands while a woman undresses. We’re probably being too sensitive or priggish. Maybe we aspire to resemble those least worthy of being role models. We decide to dress like them, physically alter our bodies to look like them, or allow our children to emulate them.

Other ways we undermine or subvert the concept of dignity is by permitting grossly unqualified people to shift our most instinctual, personal attitudes toward such matters as staying at home with our children, deciding how many children to have, marriage, contraception, self-image, and spirituality, to name just a few. We become offended, not by feminists, who want us to espouse their social, cultural, political, economic, reproductive, and moral ideologies, but by those who would suggest that when we are pregnant, it is a baby in our wombs and that as mothers, we are responsible for his or her protection. We consider this notion an attack on our independence and on our fundamental right to choose.

To the extent that dignified behaviors are more respectable and more worthwhile, they are also more involved and more challenging. I adapted the arrangement and idea of this line, of course, from Montaigne, who began his essay "On Some Verses of Virgil" in nearly the same way. What he wrote was this: "To the extent that useful thoughts are fuller and more solid, they are also more absorbing and more burdensome. Vice, death, poverty, disease, are grave subjects and grieve us. We should have our soul instructed in the means to sustain and combat evils, and in the rules for right living and right belief, and should often arouse it and exercise it in this fine study." Who really knows why the most valuable things are often the toughest to attain.

I have no pretensions about even coming close to such women as Mother Theresa or Joan of Arc. There are many days in my life, I confess, that probably the only thing I

have in common with them is our gender. But what I am suggesting is that dignity is something that women should aspire to, and the fact that it is so difficult to attain is not reason enough to abandon its pursuit. If we do abandon the pursuit, if we cannot see past the pretexts and rationales for our acquiescence of behaviors that defile our very femininity, then we are not protecting the dignity of women. We are contaminating it. It's as though we have decided to arrange poison ivy into our Baccarat crystal vase, or to apply an herbicide to the petals and roots of our fully-bloomed peony. But there is more at risk than a vase or a flower, of course. At stake are our families, our children, our self-worth.

Joan Didion once wrote an essay entitled "On Self-Respect," in which she reflects on the properties of self-respect and the implications of living without it. They are suggestive, I think, of living without dignity:

To live without self-respect is to lie awake some night, beyond the reach of warm milk, phenobarbital, and the sleeping hand on the coverlet, counting up the sins of commission and omission, the trusts betrayed, the promises subtly broken, the gifts irrevocably wasted through sloth or cowardice or carelessness. However long we postpone it, we eventually lie down alone in that notoriously uncomfortable bed, the one we make ourselves. Whether or not we sleep in it depends, of course, on whether or not we respect ourselves.

But to live with dignity, if I may imitate once more an elegant template, is to lie in bed some night with a humble yet distinct awareness of serenity, expressing gratitude for attempts failed and accomplished, the opportunities received and bequeathed, the sins rejected, committed and repented, the gifts eternally treasured through sacrifice, obedience, and tenacity. We eventually lie down alone in our bed, the one we make ourselves. We sleep, of course, because we respect ourselves.

In the end, it does not really matter whether others approve or disapprove of our beliefs and our behaviors. Dignity is never about ostentation or deception. I think that dignity, like self-respect, is about what we think when we see ourselves – when we study our reflection, or look at our children, or wonder about our future. It is about believing in our value and our worth, and comprehending, once and for all, what we women are made of.

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