HALF A DREAM

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by

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Prologue:

Columbus, Ohio 1992

“Hey, I know that guy,” I tell my friend who is sitting outdoors with me at a café in late August. In the past week, the temperatures have dropped so that it feels more like September, autumn, and the warmth of the sun is welcome. My friend and I are taking a break from writing our theses, which are due by month’s end.

“What’s his name? What is it?” I ask mostly of myself.

“Hey! Hey, Chris!” I yell when I remember. He turns to see who’s calling him. I wave him over and he joins us.

“How’s Lori?” I ask, referring to Chris’s girlfriend, when he sits down with his paper cup of coffee. He’s wearing a thin wool cardigan over a white dress shirt and it reminds me in a good way of the sweaters my grandpa wore. In a nostalgic, yet hip way.

“She’s good. She flew back to New York yesterday.”

“What’s she doing in New York?” I ask.

“She moved there about two months ago.”

“Why?”

“Well, she never could find work here. I mean, you know, in our field,” he says. Like Chris, Lori is an architect. I met her last December when she was working at the café at Border’s Bookstore.

“That’s too bad. So when are you moving?” I ask.
“That’s too bad. So when are you moving?” I ask.

“Uh, no, maybe you didn’t hear? We split up,” he says and in that instant, I know. It’s not that I wish it, or even think about it. I just know. I know we will be together.

The next few weeks, Chris and I run into each other several times. Walking past the School of Architecture on my way home from work one afternoon, he comes out with project supplies in hand, dressed in an old t-shirt and shorts splattered with paint. For more than two hours, we stand there and talk in the early evening sunlight. A few days later, I spy his ’62 Ford Falcon parked on my street and tuck a friendly note under his windshield wiper. And after nearly a month of random get-togethers, I decide to make the first move and call to invite him to a Greek Festival in the Short North neighborhood. My heart pounds when his phone begins ringing. After five rings, his answering machine picks up and I exhale. I leave a message and am relieved not to hear his rejection. He can just choose not to return my call. But he does call. And by mere coincidence, our first date is on his thirty-first birthday, Labor Day, 1992.

The days during our first weeks together do not provide enough time for us to explore each other and I fall asleep only when I’m exhausted. I awaken when simply tired, eager to find next to me this man I believe is the love of my life. It is what I had always heard about love, real love, that if ever I were so lucky as to find it, I would know it when I felt it. And feel it I do.

It makes sense for him to move in since he’s there all the time anyways, even though we have only been together several weeks. Later, it makes sense to try and get pregnant even though we’ve only been together several months. Just ten months after our
first date, when I am two months pregnant, we get married at the county courthouse because it just makes sense.
Chapter One:

Heading Out, 24 July 2007

I closed the pop-top, a black plastic bin attached to the rooftop of my 5-speed Matrix, and hopped off of the back bumper. My oldest son, Claude, was thirteen and sitting in the front passenger seat with his right leg hanging out on the ground. He was going through the audio books I had set on the floor on his side of the car. His younger brothers, ten-year-old Hugo and Jules, who had just turned seven, were organizing the things--travel games, sketch books and pencils, comic books--they had chosen to bring on our cross country road trip. We were just waiting to say goodbye to their father who was in the house looking for his camera.

“I found it!” said Christopher as he came out the back door of our yellow brick house and descended the stone steps to our crumbling concrete driveway. “Come on, everybody, let’s get a photo before your big trip!”

“Hey, guys,” I said, leaning my head into the back window of the car, my arm on the roof, “Let’s quick get a photo so we can get going.” Groaning, they got out of the car and stood with me under the Buddhist prayer flags that hung across our driveway just behind the parked car. Hollyhocks grew in the flowerbed next to us, overshadowing young sunflowers that had yet to bud. In the photo, the boys cluster around me, a spiral of blonde heads and faces tan from two months of summer. They’d already spent three weeks in Northern Michigan with their grandparents, one week camping in Vermont with
weeks in Northern Michigan with their grandparents, one week camping in Vermont with their father and now we would be gone for a month, returning just in time for the beginning of the school year. What they knew was that we were finally driving all the way to California, a trip the boys and I had discussed taking for the past few years. They knew we would be staying with friends and family along the way and that they would visit for the first time iconic places like the Grand Canyon and Mount Rushmore. They knew their father would join us in the middle of the trip, flying out to travel with us for a few days before flying back. They knew they’d have adventures unlike any they’d had before, even though I had taken them on innumerable road trips since each of them were babies.

What they didn’t know was that I was leaving their father.

Nearly a year before, I had developed a sensation in my right side, a chronic pulsing. At first it was not painful, just unusual. Through the fall the sensation increased in intensity and frequency. By December, I often found myself grabbing my side, sinking my fingers into the area, trying to massage out the throbbing. In January, my doctor ordered an MRI and it revealed nothing. But the pain increased until May, when it pounded with the insistence of a cop at the door of an emergency call. I woke up in the middle of a night and heard what it was trying to tell me. It was time to leave my husband, Christopher. Without knowing how, after years as a stay-home mom, I told Christopher I had to separate, get a job and an apartment. Immediately, my right side began vibrating as though it were humming. A day later, it went silent.
The two months since I had told Christopher I had to leave him had been exhausting for both of us. But I insisted on taking this trip and catching Christopher in a rare conciliatory moment, he had agreed. I immediately told the boys that we would leave when they came back from Vermont. Once our three sons were on board and planning the trip with me, it was a fait accompli. Christopher, whether he wanted us to or not, would not try to keep us from going.

I was always most comfortable when it was just the boys and me. Before I had any children I questioned how couples with multiple children could ever divorce. How was it they didn’t figure out their incompatibility after having their first baby together? How could a couple continue to have children who had enough wrong in their relationship to end up divorced after all the commitment that went into having multiple children? Life is most predictable when she is showing you how easy things you once questioned can come to pass in your own life.

When Claude was two and Christopher and I had managed to survive the first harsh years of our marriage, years filled with job losses, multiple moves and an emotional distancing between the two of us that was never fully bridged, we decided to have a second child. But the issues that had made the first years so sad, so incompatible, had not been resolved. They were just ignored more easily after he found steady work making decent money and I was fully involved starting a non-profit advocacy group supporting lay midwifery in our state. For a few months, without money worries gnawing at us like a plague of rats with teeth that won’t stop growing, things felt easier and that’s when we
thought it was reasonable to want another baby. But the problems quickly resurfaced. Christopher fretted about his career and I fretted about everything else. We argued more, he stayed away and at work so often and so late that other women told me I was naïve. When I believed they might be right, I’d call the phone at his desk at two or three in the morning. He always answered.

When we decided that no, it wasn’t time to have a baby, we really weren’t that into each other anymore, it was too late. I was already pregnant and found out a week after we decided to quit trying. With that pregnancy, I learned another way that Christopher and I are very different. I was excited to have children by the same parents. I told him so saying, “Isn’t it great that our children will have the same parents?” Looking at his face, I could see he was confused. From his upbringing, his worldview, everyone had siblings whose parents were the same as one’s own, whereas I was my mother’s only child and the oldest of my father’s three daughters. But I did not see my half-sisters for most of my childhood and, as a result, never felt a full sibling to them. It delighted me to know that my own children would never feel this form of estrangement from each other.

I was always upfront with Christopher that I would only birth two children because I believed in zero-population growth, meaning that I would only reproduce our “replacements” as it were in the earth’s population, i.e. two children. If we wanted more, we could adopt. But Christopher, who himself is the youngest of three children, advocated for a third child once Hugo was two years old. At the time, Christopher was teaching at a university in Pennsylvania and promised that if we had the baby in late spring or early summer, he would be able to take the time to stay home and help me for
nearly three months. I do not remember why I finally agreed to have a third baby, though I have always found in retrospect that when Christopher went balls to the wall with something he wanted, I inevitably fell in line. When I was four months pregnant with Jules, Christopher went back to corporate practice and we move to Cleveland. He was not able to stay home for more than the weekend after Jules was born.

But then Jules came to us seemingly rolled in pixie dust. There was something otherly about him, there still is. Though hale and hearty, he has a delicate body with long, thin limbs. His eyes are very large and blue, his nose curves up just so and his mouth is a rosebud. He’s a cliché for the perfect baby doll. When he was two, his hair grew in soft blonde ringlets down to his shoulders and I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a more beautiful child. Always mistaken for a girl, he was the child I was hyper cautious not to let stray from me in public places. His etheric nature stayed with him. In kindergarten, Jules ended a friendship with a child who had been in his class for three years and with whom he was very close. He did so because the other little boy refused to stop killing ants on the playground after Jules had asked him repeatedly not to do so. An easy child, Jules is our Beth from *Little Women* and I want the comparison to remain strictly in their sweet natures and not in their destinies.

And so it was I found myself the mother of three boys I loved more than I had ever known I could love anyone. And I no longer wanted to live with their father. More than once in the weeks since I had decided to separate, Christopher had told me we should have gotten divorced when Claude was little, before Hugo, when we already knew that what we had was not enough. It’s one of those things, how can I regret my children?
I don’t, in fact regret them at all. But I regret staying for more than a decade in a relationship that was like one of those trees that suddenly falls over. It looked so healthy on the outside, but was completely hollow inside.

“Hug your papa and let’s go, guys!” I told the boys as soon as Christopher had taken our picture. The younger two, Hugo and Jules, let go of my waist and wrapped their arms around the waist of their father. Hugo’s arms, as if spring loaded, squeezed, then released Christopher before he skipped to the car with Jules following behind him. Claude mutely received an embrace, his face pressed into his father’s chest as Christopher wrapped his arms around Claude’s shoulders.

“Be careful and call me along the way,” Christopher said to me over Claude’s shoulder.

“’Kay, well, we really need to get going,” I said, getting irritated at the drawn out goodbye. There was little different about this trip from the many others I had taken with the boys. Specifically, the only difference was the time and distance we would be away and the fact that Christopher was actually at home to see us off.

Then it was my turn. Taking me in his arms, he bent his head down to kiss me. As he was more than half a foot taller, I prevented him from managing little more than grazing his lower lip on my mouth by keeping my chin down.

“I need to get on the road, it’s already after ten and I wanted to leave at seven,” I said quietly, gently pushing my husband away from me. He squeezed me hard before letting go and without looking at him, I walked to the driver’s side of the car and got in.
“Ready to rock and roll, guys?”

“Yeah!” they all said, Hugo adding a “WooHoo!” for emphasis. I backed out of our driveway, put the car in first and beeped the horn twice before releasing the clutch.

The boys waved to their father.

“I have a plan for our food, guys, listen up,” I told them when we were on the freeway. “There’s a Costco, just outside of Columbus. We should be there in about an hour and a half.” They all looked at me, Claude from the seat next to me, the little boys leaning towards the middle of the back seat. “We’ll be gone a long time and can’t eat all our meals in restaurants, right?”

“That’d be fun though,” said Hugo.

“Hugo,” chided Claude, “think about it, we’ll be gone a month, that’d be expensive.”

“Well, not only can’t I afford us to eat all our meals in restaurants, which I can’t, it’d slow us down. So here’s my plan. Let’s try to spend less than $20 each day on food.”

“How’re we going to do that?” asked Claude, “It’s more than $12 for all of us at Chipotle.”

“Exactly. So let’s figure out what we want to get at Costco, stuff we can carry in the car and eat on the road, like apples, bread, peanut butter for sandwiches. We can’t get jelly because it would spoil.”

“Can we get Nutella to put on the sandwiches?” asked Hugo and much to his surprise I agreed. A little more than two hours later, we filled our Playmate cooler with mozzarella cheese sticks and a five-pound bag of baby carrots. We were loading a case of
water bottles for all of us in the back hatch and for me, a case of Red Bull. We had also picked up apples, clementines and snack bars.

“Does all this stuff count towards our $20 a day?” asked Hugo. We were standing in the Costco parking lot in the noonday sun making sure everything was reachable from the backseat.

“No, this doesn’t count but here’s the deal, are you all listening? Julesy?” While his older brothers were helping me organize the food, Jules had gotten back in the car and was drawing in his sketchbook.

“Yes, Mama?”

“I want to tell you that this stuff doesn’t count for our $20 a day goal. And if we use less than $20, we can save what’s left over and treat ourselves at the end of each week to a special dinner, maybe someplace like Macaroni Grill.”

“All right!” said Hugo, “I’m only eating the stuff in the car because I want to eat at Macaroni Grill on Friday.” I didn’t suggest to him he might feel differently in a few days. They had accepted my challenge and once the car was loaded, it felt like we were really on our way.

“Next stop, Cincinnati!” I said and we headed south on I-71.
Chapter Two:

Found and Lost

The weekend before we left, I tried to call my stepfather in Cincinnati to see if we could stop and see him on our way out of Ohio. None of the numbers I had for him worked; they were either disconnected or had already been given to a new subscriber who, when I asked to speak to Berry, Berry Slusher, told me I had the wrong number. I didn’t often talk with Berry, it was true. He and my mother had divorced when I was nineteen and over the years, he had largely faded out of my life. My boys had only met him two or three times in their entire lives. But whenever we did visit, it was always comfortable, like every now and then seeing a favorite uncle who lived far away. I had last spoken with him when he called around New Year’s that year. He hadn’t called for any particular reason and we got caught up on what we were doing. Before hanging up, he paused and told me he loved me. Something in the way he said it, perhaps that he said it at all, was sad. Seven months later he seemed to have vanished.

The last address I had for him, the last place I had seen him, was in Cincinnati. I pulled Google up on my computer and typed “Berry Slusher Cincinnati Ohio.” The first link on the list the search engine pulled up is titled, “Ohio Burials.” I clicked the link and found the following:

ADAMS COUNTY
Copas cemetery, RR West Union, Ohio
Berry Howard SLUSHER 15 Dec 1908 - 21 Aug 1962
I had never known the year his parents died, had never thought to ask, and here it was. I quick did the math. In August of 1962, Berry would have been thirteen years and nine months old when he found his parents’ bodies. Claude’s age. Somehow, I had thought Berry was much younger when his parents died.

When I was a girl, one of my weekly chores was dusting the furniture. And every week I took down a framed 5 x 8 color print so yellowed it gave an otherworldly cast to the couple it captured. Berry’s dad with a graying crew cut and his mom with her hair set in curls around her head and glasses belonging to the mid-twentieth century, not quite cat glasses, but almost. I would gaze intently at them and think, *but they look so normal.* Was his father’s anger hidden somewhere in his eyes? Did his mother’s partial smile, tilting and frozen, hold back the words of what she knew would happen? She did know, didn’t she?

It must be made clear that my mother is a liar in all ways that one can be a liar. She lies because she wants to look good. She lies to prevent herself from getting in trouble. She lies to gain an advantage in a situation, once telling a service station mechanic that she was four months pregnant and diabetic when we had broken down in Indiana and she was in a hurry to get to a party in Chicago. She lies to win arguments like a four-star general. And she’s damned good at it. Have her tell you what happened five minutes earlier and you might just think you saw something entirely different than what your eyes reported to your brain. It’s truly impressive to watch. But she also lies just for the sport of it. Not having her driver’s license until she was in her mid-twenties, my
mother regularly told people on the buses in Chicago that she was European royalty visiting the country for a spell, seeing how average Americans lived. On top of it all, she quickly comes to fully believe her own lies, unless they are too outlandish to be sustained, in which case she’ll deny she ever said any such thing.

Berry, on the other hand, is a salesman both in practice and in personality. When I was growing up, he sold everything imaginable: high-tech laser surveying equipment, construction cranes, farm machinery, Encyclopedia Britannica sets (on weekends my senior year in high school, I stood in the mall with him, enticing shoppers to stop and look at the books), Thermo-Sentinel Cookware (the only cookware with a brain, a button on the lid that tells you when your food is done, guaranteed to last one hundred years!) barbeque meat smokers (set up in grocery store parking lots on summer weekends for two consecutive summers). And he always had a scheme. When I was seven, he wanted to invent pre-dunked donuts. But that would have taken too much time to develop when there was money to be made out there. For the past few years, he had owned his own company, Buckeye Laser Equipment. When I had last seen Berry, his current wife had told me they were going to file for bankruptcy.

Shortly after Berry and my mother divorced, my mother told me that Berry had been arrested for making obscene phone calls in the first year of their marriage. Sitting in a restaurant in the same mall where I’d helped him sell encyclopedias two years earlier, she whispered details over the mirrored shine of the booth’s table, her long finger nails punctuating her points on the table’s hard surface while the smoke from her cigarettes filled the air between us.
“You remember when we lived in Detroit he was still working for Marathon Oil, right?”

“Yeah, of course,” I told her remembering the drab two bedroom apartment in suburban Westland where we’d moved to the fall I began the first grade just a few months after they had married.

“Okay, well, it was a felony,” she said.

“What was?” I asked.

“The calls he made!”

“Making obscene phone calls is a felony?” I asked.

“He called across the state lines you see, and that’s why it was a felony.”

“Oh, that’s strange,” I said, not really understanding. My mother pulled her face away from mine and sat back in the booth. It was clear she didn’t want to discuss the legal nuances of making obscene phone calls. On the table next to her cup of coffee was her leather cigarette case. In the side pocket of the case was a Camel’s cigarette Zippo lighter.

“Look, he was calling an old girlfriend of his in Ohio from Michigan, so it was a felony, all right?”

“Okay, okay!” I said, but the steam she was building on her story had dissipated. She crushed out the cigarette in the black plastic ashtray where it had sat burning and promptly pulled a new cigarette out the pack in her leather case. Taking her time, she opened the Zippo lighter, its distinctive click is embedded in the soundtrack of my
childhood, light her cigarette and inhaled deeply. When she exhaled, she turned her lips away from the table so as not to blow the smoke straight into my face.

“So look, because it was a felony it was the FBI that arrested him. They showed up at Marathon in the middle of the day and took him to jail right then. Now all his friends from college worked for Marathon, remember?” she leaned back on the table and we were again conspiratorial.

“In Detroit?” I asked

“No, in Ohio. Findlay, remember? It was his one buddy, Denny Speicher, who got him his job at Speicher Brothers a couple of years later when we moved to Moline. Anyways, my point is Holly, everyone knew he’d been arrested.”

“So what happened?” I asked truly curious about what was a major episode in the lives of our family that I had known nothing about then or in the more than ten years since. Perhaps most children hear, “I’ll tell you when you are older,” or “You’re too young to understand.” I was uncomfortable with what my mother was telling me yet at the same time felt that implicit in being drawn into my mother’s confidence was the recognition that I was an adult and could handle the information. I liked the feeling.

“Well, they called and told me he’d been arrested. So I went downstairs to Naomi, who lived in the apartment below us, remember them, Hol?” I nodded that I did. “Did you know her husband was an ex-con?”

“No, for what? I mean what crime?” I asked, my eyes wide.

“Oh, I don’t remember. Drugs I think. Anyways, Naomi told me it would be bad for Berry and you know,” and here she paused and stretched her head further over the
table and began speaking in a loud whisper, “it really was because the next day I had to
go with him to the hospital because he’d been raped.” She sat back and sucked deeply on
her cigarette before turning her head to blow out another chest-full of smoke.

“Raped?” I rasped back across the table, which I was now leaning over as far as I
could.

“Yes!” my mother hissed, turning her face towards mine, looking me
momentarily in the eye. Before I could ask any questions, which I was struggling to
formulate, she crushed out her cigarette and light another one. Uninterested in discussing
the details of his purported rape she shifted back to the story she wanted to tell. With only
a few weeks left to the school year, we had suddenly moved to a small apartment Toledo
where I finished the first grade. Over the summer Berry and my mother bought their first
house together and I began second grade in yet another school.

“After he found work in Toledo,” she continued, “he was arrested in Grand
Rapids for saying something obscene to a woman on the street, but his parole officer, that
nice Mr. French, I don’t think you ever met him, did you?”

“No, I did,” I told her, “the three of us went to his office a few times, but I didn’t
know he was Berry’s parole officer!”

“Well, Mr. French intervened with the court in Michigan and got Berry off on that
second charge, thank God, because he’d just gotten work again at Shaw Walker, you
know that file cabinet place. You know what Mr. French told me?” she asked and I shook
my head. “He said that even if Berry had said those things, he probably didn’t even know
he had because when they made him take a lie detector test, he came out clear every
time because it just didn’t register in his mind!”

I didn’t know what to say. At nineteen, I was both intrigued and repelled by what
she was telling me, as though a velvet curtain had been drawn around us. I was too
intrigued to ask her why she was divulging but also too repelled to ever corroborate the
story with Berry or anyone else. As if providing the explanation I needed, my mother
finished by telling me she should have left Berry then, back in their first year of marriage,
but that her own mother had told her to stay with him and make it work.

“I shouldn’t have listened to her, what did she know? Instead I spent the next
twelve years of my life with that creep.”

Berry never told my mother how his parents died. Nor did he tell his next wife. I was the
one who told her. The one woman Berry told was named Mitzi. She was a middle-aged
woman who worked with my mother and Berry at Marathon Oil in the Chicago office
and with whom they socialized with during their courtship. After she won custody of me,
my mother found secretarial work at Marathon, which is where she met Berry. At a New
Year’s Eve party at Mitzi’s house in 1970 I saw my last Marlboro Man on television.

“Look! Those commercials will be gone tomorrow!” said Mitzi with her loud
voice. “Can you believe it? Like taking smoking cowboy commercials off the air will
stop anyone from smoking, it sure won’t stop me!”

Evenings always wore on at Mitzi’s, at least from my perspective as a
kindergartner. I would sit sideways in my mother’s lap, smelling her Estée Lauder Youth
Dew perfume mixed with tobacco and scotch. I not so much heard but rather felt the vibrations of her voice through her chest—my left ear pressed against it as I remained in limbo, asleep yet listening to the adults carry on long after I had begun drifting off.

Just before their wedding, Mitzi told my mother about Berry’s parents. When my mother was twenty-four, Berry twenty-two and I was five, they were married in the same Lutheran church and by the same minister who had previously married my mother and father. Berry’s auburn hair was parted on the far side of his head and swept over so that it fell across his forehead and he had waxed his mustache into handlebars. My mother wore her hair, a darker brown than his, pinned up in the back and teased on top with little ringlets in front of her ears. Her lace dress was a mini that barely covered the creases where her legs met her behind. Over a simple white frock, I wore my favorite sweater. Hand knit, it was pale yellow with shoulders of white angora upon which I rubbed my cheeks throughout the ceremony.

I don’t know when my mother first told me how Berry’s parents had died. It seems I always knew, perhaps because she brought it up every so often, especially if we were in the car on a long drive in the night. She discussed it with me many times, but only when we were alone. Each time she brought the subject up I listened closely, hoping there would be more information than before, something to help explain what had gone so terribly wrong. There never was. The story was always the same:

Berry grew up in an Appalachian village in south central Ohio near the Ohio River. A small clapboard house without an indoor toilet, Berry’s parents had raised three
children to adulthood and had, in 1962, just the two younger ones who had come later, Berry and Billy.

Playing in a back bedroom with his little brother Billy and their little nephew, the boys heard the shots from a gun. Berry told the little boys he would go and see what had happened and he had them lock the bedroom door behind him and crawl under the bed. ‘Don’t open the door for anyone,’ he told them, ‘not anyone!’ he made them promise.

He went out the front door and found his parents the bodies of his parents. His father had shot his mother and then himself. My mother said she believed Berry’s mother must have known what his father was going to do and had gone out of the house to keep the children safe. Berry ran to the house of a neighbor who had a phone and told them to call the police. Then he ran back to his own outhouse where he locked himself in and went into shock. The police had to break the door down to get him out.

The first I had ever heard of shock was when my mother first told me about Berry’s parents. She didn’t take much time explaining the medical side of shock. Berry’s dad had left a note on the kitchen table that said the boys were to be raised by their older sister Ginny and her husband Floyd. My mother bizarrely gave Berry’s father some credit for his insight in this matter saying he must have known what he was doing because look at what a mess Berry’s other sister Bobbie made of her son, even letting him start smoking when he was in the fifth grade.

As a child, I accepted my mother’s version of the murder-suicide as canonical if for no other reason than she was my only source for the story and each retelling was consistently told. As an adult, however, it seems that the story creates more questions
than it gives answers. Questions like: Was there an argument first? Did Berry’s mother go quietly, a resigned penitent or did she put up a fight and was dragged out of the house or home from a bar? Did she plead for mercy for herself and the boys in the back of the small house? Or was it something entirely different? Perhaps a double suicide that his parents had discussed together at length for days and weeks beforehand? Did the boys hear anything before the shots? If not, would they really be so afraid of the sound of gunshots in a rural town where people would just as soon shoot a raccoon out of the yard as be bothered to chase it? How could Berry have known it was a murder-suicide when he came out? Wouldn’t his first thought be they were both murdered and where is the murderer? What else did the father’s letter say? Did it give any explanation as to why? Did the boys get any professional help afterwards when they moved to Dayton and lived with his childless sister and her husband, a man who was always forebodingly referred to as, “very strict?” What is known, what has been told, is so much less than what remains unknown, unspoken.

Two days after I found these dates, while I was still preparing for our road trip, I had an anxiety attack while driving by myself in the valley of the national park near our home. My heart pounded so hard it seemed to reside in hollow of my throat. My cheeks burned and my hands trembled. My hair felt as if it was being pulled strand by strand through a mesh strainer. I had to pull the car over and park. The attack did not subside easily. Seeing for the first time how old Berry was made me see the murder anew not from the perspective of the child who found his parents, the perspective I’d always considered, but rather from the perspective of the mother. What had she done that had set
his father off so terribly? Something akin to what I was doing? There were no other stories I had heard of Berry’s father that suggested he was a violent man or even alcoholic, nothing that indicated there was something predictable in the crime he committed. Nobody ever said they saw it coming or that the telltale signs had been there.

I wasn’t able to find a phone number for Berry using the Internet and decided that we would just drive to his house. In the flurry of getting us packed for a month long trip, I forgot to MapQuest Berry’s house. We’d only been to Berry and his wife’s house maybe three or four times and our last visit had been easily two years earlier. Still, without any trouble I found the right exit off of the freeway and saw his street as I drove past it too quickly to turn. I backtracked to his street and when we pulled into his driveway the garage door was open. Berry was standing inside the garage with a cigar in his mouth and painting a piece of trim held in a vise on his workbench. Lanky as he had been when he’d married my mother, Berry’s hair had become evenly mixed with gray, while the auburn strands had washed out to a pale rust.

“Well, looky here!” Berry said as he walked towards us after my brood and I had poured from the small car. I walked up and gave him a hug.

“I tried calling you but none of your numbers worked. I wasn’t sure if you still lived here anymore,” I told him.

“Well, it’s good you came now because we won’t be living here in a week!” he answered.

“What? Where are you going?” I asked.
“Well, Deb’s already in Indy selling homes in a new development and the neighbor in the house over there,” he pointed across the street and down a house, “they bought our house when the wife came to sell us granite countertops,” he chuckled.

“What? I don’t get it.”

“We remodeled the kitchen and had called to have a salesperson come give us quotes on countertops. The woman they sent was that neighbor and when she learned we were selling, she talked to her husband and they put in an offer, it never even went on the market.”

“Unbelievable,” I said mostly because that wasn’t typical of Berry’s luck.

“Yep, we’d spent more than two years fixing it up to put on the market and then never even had to.”

We headed into the house through the door in the back of the garage and made sandwiches for lunch. Berry told me he had closed his business and would soon work for a collection agency using his sales voice, both purring and folksy, to call corporations with substantial debt. It was a job Berry could do anywhere so they’d decided to move back to Indianapolis where he and his wife had lived for many years after they had married in the eighties. It was also where her family lived.

Berry’s kitchen opened up onto a great room with a home theater sized television. Years earlier and for a variety of reasons, I decided not to keep a TV in our home, but I also was not opposed to the boys watching television elsewhere, especially at a time like this, on a trip in the summer. The boys were seduced by the grand screen and after asking if they could, quickly found cartoons and settled down on the floor in front of Berry’s
home theater. Though just a dozen feet away from us, they no more heard our conversation than if they’d been in the house next door. Berry and I talked for a few minutes about the trip the boys and I were taking before I dove into the topic we had never discussed.

“You know, when I discovered I didn’t have a working phone number for you, I Googled you,” I told him looking straight into his face. “What came up was the birth and death dates of your parents. I realized that when they died you were exactly the same age as Claude is now.” Then I quickly added, “It made me really sad to learn.”

Berry’s gray-green eyes, more gray than I remember them being, stared over my left shoulder at the wall behind me. His almost smile was fixed on his mouth and nothing moved, it felt as though a second hand on Time’s clock held its pulse for perhaps three beats, the moment held like a soap bubble in my opened palm. It burst when Berry spoke and blood rushed to my temples making a whirring sound behind my eyes, much as it does when I get a migraine headache.

“You know, I remember when Deb’s granddaughter was three, she’d come and Deb would take her shopping and out to lunch like she was a big girl. And you know that little girl’s thirteen now too. Hard to believe how fast they grow,” Berry said, still looking over my shoulder. I moved along with him in conversation for few more minutes. I merely hinted that I was looking forward to time away from Christopher but did not tell Berry that I was trying separate from my husband. Then it was time to collect the boys and get back into the car. Soon Berry would move and again I wouldn’t have his numbers and I knew we wouldn’t speak to each other for a long time, perhaps not for years,
perhaps forever. Not due to any malice at my inquiry, but rather because of the inertia of a relationship that doesn’t live in the present and no longer has any function in our lives, save for memory.

Before leaving the boys and I went down the hallway of Berry’s ranch house towards the bedrooms and bathrooms. Leaving the boys to use the main bathroom off the hallway, I continued on through the master bedroom to the other bathroom. Like everything in the house, the master bedroom was tidy and dust free. I stopped at Berry’s dresser and picked up the only framed picture found there. Perhaps ten or eleven and in a homemade flannel nightgown, I stare up at the camera from the floor where I am surrounded by all the Christmas presents I had just opened.
Chapter Three:

Going Back to Knoxville

It was nearly four o’clock when the boys waved at Berry as we pulled out of his driveway and I punched a final toot! toot! on my car horn. If we drove straight through, I figured we could get to Knoxville as early as six p.m. The entrance ramp to I-71 from Berry’s house is just inside the I-275 outer belt from which point the freeway slopes and wends down to the heart of the Queen City, as she was nicknamed more than a century ago by poet Longfellow. I had lived forty miles north in her little sister city, Dayton, longer than anywhere else in my childhood, from the fifth through the ninth grades. Dayton doesn’t have major sports teams, nor a zoo, and Daytonians continue to look to Cincinnati for those big city amenities, and others, just as they did three decades ago.

The freeway, whose width seems to grow as it descends straight for the Ohio River, banks ninety degrees to the west when it can go no further south, holding downtown as if in the crook of an arm. We passed the Reds’ Stadium where I went once in the late eighties to see a game that was unmemorable. They were no longer Reds of the seventies when the honest Johnny Bench and the gambling Pete Rose gave us all Reds fever. However, just as I was blessed as a baby in my grandmother’s Mormon church, as a Christensen I was born a Chicago Cubs fan, something that was accepted without questioning. So fundamental is the family commitment to this underdog team my
grandparents have the Cubbies’ logo on their tombstone. Like going to Sunday mass after a sleep over with a Catholic friend, the pomp and success of the Reds in the seventies captured my attention and, secretly, my loyalty.

Also set on the river park between the interstate and the banks of the Ohio is the brand new National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. Given how the Ohio River was for many slaves the frontier to freedom, the museum is ideally located. When I read Beloved, Toni Morrison’s slave narrative set on the shores of the Ohio River, I was continually struck by details that were familiar to me, such as Shillito’s Department Store. Still independent in my childhood, Shillito’s was absorbed by a larger conglomerate in the eighties, a trend that continued until now, or so it seems, all we have is Macy’s. The seventies were the twilight years of department stores and you knew what city you were in if you drove by the local department store. Dayton had Rike’s, Pittsburgh had Kaufman’s, Columbus had Lazarus.’ Cleveland had Higbee’s and the May Company. In Cincinnati it was Shillito’s.

I would have stopped and spent an afternoon at the new museum, but we were already pressed to get to my mother’s for dinner. This trip, the boys and I would soon come to recognize, was not a trip of depth. We didn’t stay anywhere for more than a few days and could only indulge in a few things at each destination, though, granted, in some places there are only a few things worth seeing. This trip unfolded as a journey of breadth. Our schedule was plotted out from the endpoint, getting home for the beginning of the new school year. From there, I loosely determined when we needed to be at various points along the way. Particularly important was reaching Sedona, Arizona in little more
than a week to meet my aunt and her daughters. Only seven years older than me, Debbie is more like my sister than my aunt, her children more like my nieces than my cousins. When learning of our plans for the summer, Debbie, who lives in a suburb of Chicago, agreed that she and her two daughters would fly to Arizona and join us for the Grand Canyon.

After following the Ohio River for a mile, the interstate takes another hard turn back south and we crossed the river. By the time the Ohio passes Cincinnati, it has accomplished about two thirds of its journey from its origin in Pittsburgh to where it joins the Mississippi River in Cairo, Illinois. Though the Ohio Valley is narrow, the river is wide, and contributes more water to the Mississippi than any of its other tributaries. We crossed over the Brent Spence Bridge, a double-decker that merges traffic from I-71 and I-75, momentarily tying the two arteries into what is often a thrombosis. But it was still early enough in the afternoon that the cars flowed steadily over the border to Kentucky. The boys peered down at the barges, as big and as flat as football fields, coursing through the mud brown water. As soon as we spilled off the bridge and onto land, they all flopped back in their seats settled in to snooze. It had been an early start that morning for though we hadn’t left until ten we had been up since six, getting everything read. As veteran road trippers, my boys all enjoy napping in a car moving fast on a freeway with no stop lights or hard turns, just the hum of the engine and soft curves in the roads designed for speeds upwards of 70 miles per hour.

At first, there’s not much to see except the dozen lanes of the freeway meant to accommodate the Queen City commuters. But just twenty miles over the bridge is a water
tower painted with the words, “Florence, Y’all,” making it clear that this is the South. I love driving through Kentucky because the earth just rolls and the land seems to stretch sideways, surely the effects of ancient mountains being worn down over millions or more years, and it relaxes me. The land from Columbus to Cincinnati was long ago rolled flat by glaciers and the wide openness unnerves me. I feel so exposed when there’s nothing but barns and silos interrupting the flat line of view. But neither do I like mountain driving because I cannot see what is up ahead when the roads inevitably begin twisting and turning. Even if there were another driver in the car, this would be the section of driving that I would ask to do. But it’s just me, so no arm wrestling was required. I just put my iPod earphones in and cruised through the Bluegrass State listening to the soundtrack from the movie Garden State.

More than two hours after we had crossed the Ohio River, I stopped for gas. Hugo had been awake for a while and quietly gazing out of his window in the seat behind Claude. Boys One and Three swam back up to consciousness only when I turned off on the exit ramp, the slowing of the car and the shifting of the gears pulled them out of their lulling.

“Where are we?” Claude asked, looking at me from the passenger’s seat with pupils still dilated from sleep.

“I don’t know exactly, but I think we’re about two hours from your grandma’s house. I need to stop and get gas. Hey, guys?” I say loudly enough for all of them. “I’m going to get gas but then I’ll drive over to that Taco Bell so we can all go pee.”

“Oh, good, I’m hungry,” said Hugo.
“Well, we aren’t buying anything from Taco Bell.”

“I know, I know! I just wanted a P. B. and Nutella sandwich.”

“Your grandma will have a have a big dinner ready when we get to her house.”

“How long ‘til we get there?” Hugo asked.

“About two hours, I think.”

“Oh, man, I’m starved now though.” This is one of the challenges of being

Hugo’s mother. He is always starving long enough before dinner that it seems reasonable

to let him eat, but then at mealtime, he’s never hungry. Whether consciously or not, this

seems a ploy on his part to maintain in good stead his high carbohydrate, low vegetable

diet. Second born children, particularly if they become a middle child, are notoriously

spirited. So it is with my Hugo. A passionate boy, he hugs and kisses with greater

frequency and enthusiasm than my other two sons. But he is always strategizing for

something, be it piano lessons or a diet rich in processed food, all white in color. Or he’s

alternatively angling to get out of doing something like his chores or brushing his teeth.

Not only is his temperament in the family unique, Hugo looks different than his brothers.

Claude and Jules are both long willowy boys and who are dreamy and cautious. Hugo is

compact and sturdy and while I tell him he’s shorter because he doesn’t eat his

vegetables, I suspect it has more to do with genetics. His physiognomy is so very much

like his cousins on his father’s side—a big, round head and fleshy limbs. But his mouth

and eyes are those of my mother’s. Born exactly a week before my birthday, I was sure

Hugo was going to be a girl. My mother’s birthday is the day before mine, her mother’s

four days before hers. After the midwives handed me all ten pounds of Hugo they cleared
their throats when I cooed, “Isn’t she beautiful?” I peeked under his blankets we began considering boy names. Of the three boys, Hugo’s name suits him the best. Everything he does, he does big.

I made half sandwiches in the opened hatch of the Matrix and we got back on the freeway. I went to call my mother so she’d know when we’d be arriving, but I couldn’t find my Bluetooth earpiece. I don’t wear it unless I’m using it and I had placed it in my lap before we’d stopped for gas. I turned off at the next exit and went back to the gas station where I assumed it fell out of my lap, but didn’t find it. It was almost five o’clock when I got back on I-75 and called my mother.

“Are you almost here?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m not sure, we haven’t gotten to Jellico yet.”

“You haven’t gotten to Jellico yet? Where are you?”

“I don’t know, somewhere in Kentucky. We’ve passed Lexington.”

“What’s taking you so long?” she asked.

“Well, there was a lot to do to get on the road this morning. How about I call you when we go past Jellico, okay?”

“All right, but I can’t wait to eat dinner with this esophageal shit, you know. I’m gonna eat now.”

“That’s fine, I don’t want you to wait for us. We’ll get there as soon as we can, I shouldn’t have to stop again.”
I don’t suppose I’ve ever gotten to my mother’s house when she’s expected me. But then she’s never traveled with three children and doesn’t understand how rare is the trip in which I only stop when the gas tank is empty.

Southern Kentucky rises with soft mountains and just before falling into Tennessee, the Appalachian town of Jellico holds the summit. I have probably visited my mother in Knoxville half a dozen times in the twenty years she’s lived there and whenever I pass Jellico, I think of Jellystone Park. Jellystone Park is where the Hanna-Barbera cartoon bears, Yogi and Boo-Boo, lived and plotted for the “pick-a-nick” baskets of unwary tourists. When I was a girl, we would pass Jellystone campground pass in Northern Indiana on our way to visit family in LaPorte. They used images of Yogi and Boo-Boo on their billboards and I always wondered if people dressed up in bear suits walked around greeting guests at this campground. We never stopped there, the idea of my mother camping is as difficult to imagine as my mother in a museum or at an opera. Such excursions require a sort of curiosity and flexibility that she makes no attempt to pretend she has.

When we passed Jellico, I made the promised call to my mother as the car descended the mountain towards Knoxville.

How I Met My Mother: August 1969

“Come on, we have to hurry,” the woman said, grabbing my hand to pull me along. We were running down the street I’d lived on for over three years, my whole life,
in fact. To our right, we passed red brick apartment buildings, all like the one I lived in on the corner with my father. On our left was trunk after trunk of mature elm trees whose arms stretched high above the street to hold hands with their mates on the other side.

“I can’t run anymore. I don’t want to run,” I told her, and she swooped me up onto her hip and ran past five more apartment buildings before putting me down. She was slim and wearing a skirt and heels. “Come on, Holly, or we’ll miss the bus. We’re almost there.” The busy street, one I only went to with older kids, was Lawrence Avenue in Chicago, and we were about a block away.

She had come up to me in the side yard of our building where I was playing with my friend Jill. Jill lived on the third floor and I lived in the basement, or garden, apartment. I could climb on my dresser in my bedroom and crawl out of my window to play with my friends, as I often did on sunny days like this August one was.

“Are you Holly?” she asked me and Jill and I turned our heads up to her face, masked largely behind sunglasses. Her hair was not long and straight like so many of the women who came to visit daddy and me, but short and teased on top like a balloon of hair. She clutched the strap of her leather handbag that crossed over her chest as she bent to speak to me.

“Your grandma sent me to come pick you up and take you to her house for a visit.”

“But I was just at Grama’s this morning.” I said, referring to my father’s mother, with whom, in the two and a half years since my mother had left us, I stayed with almost as much as my father. A schoolteacher, Grama picked me up from the babysitter’s after
work during the school year and kept me most days and many evenings in the summer. Today was Saturday and after having breakfast with his parents at their home in suburban Morton Grove, my father had taken me back to our apartment in the city.

“No, your other grandma, your Grandma Gladys.”

“You mean the one who lives with Debbie?” Only seven years older than me, Debbie was my aunt. But she didn’t like it when I came over and undressed her Madame Alexander dolls and she often told me, “Stay out of my room, you pill!” I didn’t see Debbie and that grandma very often. Once Daddy packed a suitcase for me and my other grandma took me to visit her mother in the country. I liked that trip because I rode on a tractor and my great-grandma baked cookies and pies.

“Yes, the one where Debbie lives!” the strange woman said eagerly.

“I don’t like Debbie, she’s mean and won’t let me play with her toys.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll be there too and I’ll make sure she lets you. Besides, your grandma has a surprise for you when you get there.”

“What?”

“Oh, I can’t tell you because it’s a surprise. In fact, we can’t tell anyone until we get there, not even your dad.”

“Is it a present?”

“Maybe.”

Jill stood next to me, taking it all in. The woman turned to her.

“Now what’s your name?”

“Jill,” we both said as I answered for my friend.
“Well, Jill, here’s a nickel to help you keep our little surprise a secret. You wouldn’t want to ruin Holly’s surprise, would you? And I’m sure she’ll be bringing something back for you too.” A nickel could buy a lot of things from the ice cream truck and the ice cream truck was the highlight of our summer days. Earlier that week, when I didn’t have any change, I had folded up the silver lining from a piece of Wrigley’s Spearmint Gum and tried to pass it off as a coin in order to get a frozen treat. Jill looked up at the woman, her eyes saying what her mouth wasn’t. A nickel for nothing?

“You can keep this a secret, right?” asked the woman. Jill nodded.

“Come on then, Holly, we have to hurry to catch the next bus.”

I didn’t ask her name, I didn’t worry about telling my father. I didn’t think about much of anything except what the surprise might be.

Once we had turned onto the front sidewalk, I couldn’t keep up with her because although she was slight, she was also tall and her stride long. She was in such a hurry. Not like when Daddy and I walked somewhere and I ran ahead to chase the pigeons, always knowing he was behind me. If I got to a street corner before he did, I stopped and waited for him to sidle up to me in his jeans and leather vest, his long hair pulled back in a ponytail. When cop cars drove past, I yelled, “Pigs!”

“Come on, you’ll have to go faster,” said the woman and then she grabbed me under my arms and place me on her left hip.

With daddy, when I was tired, he’d swing me up on his shoulders and sometimes, especially if it was at night, I’d fall asleep draped on his head, his hands holding my
arms, my legs tucked under his biceps. People smiled at us, this young man with a little girl.

“You’re so heavy, you’ll have to run,” the woman said as she put me down, her voice strained. I didn’t like it. She was pulling my arm and going so fast I tripped over my feet and she pulled my arm up even higher so my knees didn’t scrape the concrete.

“Stop!” I said. “I don’t want to go with you. I want to go home.”

“Shush, there, there. I’m sorry, I just don’t want to miss the bus or we’ll have to wait a long time for the next one and we might miss your surprise.” She had stopped and was bent over so our faces were close. She looked in my eyes and then back in the direction of my home. “Come on, I’ll carry you a little further, we only have to get up there to Lawrence Avenue, see? It’s not far.” She picked me back up, this time holding me to her chest with my legs on each of her hips, my arms wrapped around her neck. She smelled soft, a powdery scent of perfume mixed with tobacco. My head bounced on her shoulder as she crossed the busy four-lane avenue. It was a boundary. We were no longer in my neighborhood, the one where the older girls used to push me around in a big pram when I was littler. Just this summer, they let me walk with them to the store with the candy counter on the corner of Lawrence at the edge, but still in our neighborhood because it was on our side of the street.

The bus stop was visible, but easily three blocks ahead. The sun screamed light and heat on this street lined only with telephone poles and signs. All the buildings, cars and trucks were exposed. She set me back down and said, “There’s the bus, now we really have to run, Holly, come on you can do it.” I ran not because I wanted to, not
because I cared anymore about what excitement awaited me. I ran because I had no choice, she had my arm and there was nobody on Lawrence Avenue who knew me, nobody I could ask to make her stop, to take me home. Sweat made my bangs stick to my face. It rolled into my eyes, greasy, thicker than tears. She had me in her left hand as she waved to the bus with her right so that the driver would wait for us.

Still clutching my right wrist, she went up the steps and dropped in our fare while I stood on the step behind her. The door whooshed closed just behind me and before we could find a seat, the driver stepped on the gas. The bus sped out of the city towards the northern suburbs, ground zero of the next twelve years of life with this strange woman.

I parked the Matrix in the Knoxville suburbs at eight o’clock that night, later than my mother had expected us. She’s a sticky-wicket, my mother, which is why we hadn’t been to see her in nearly four years. I am her only child, which means, therefore, my boys are her only grandchildren. But she’s not a kid person, she never was, and so our visits with her have been short and infrequent. She and her husband, Larry, live in a sprawling ranch at the end of a cul-de-sac in a neighborhood of modest one-story homes. They bought their home from the builder twenty some years earlier, moving from Ohio when Larry took a job down there. At the time, it was my mother’s dream home and she brought back to Ohio samples of the wall colors and carpet swatches telling me how remarkably well-built her home was and that the builder and his wife, who lived just across the cul-de-sac, were lovely, just lovely, people. Five years later, she sued the builder, claiming the fill he used under the foundation of her home was cow pond sludge and unstable. The case went
on for years, giving purpose and focus to my mother’s life. It was not the first, nor presumably the last, lawsuit she has initiated.

For many years, she fantasized about building a home using floor plans she had fallen in love with sometime in the 70s. At one point she asked Christopher to draw the blueprints for her. Either perpetually too busy or fearful of litigation, he never drew them up. Eventually my mother stopped talking about building her dream home and instead refashioned her Knoxville house so completely that it may as well be a new home. She pulled up all the carpeting and subflooring and had hardwood floors put in every room except the kitchen, where she had ceramic tile installed. She told me when I lived in Cleveland a few years back that I should paint my walls white because all the various colors were just too much. Now all her rooms are various shades of green.

But the biggest change to her home was converting the attached garage to an office and digging out the ground below the garage to make a new, basement level garage. This lets her easily load the goods from her home bakery, also located in the basement, into delivery vans. Before the renovation, she had to carry the merchandise up a long flight of stairs and through her kitchen to reach her garage. She had recently limited her line of baked goods—breads, tea rings, coffee cakes, biscuits, large cookies, and fruit & grain bars—to a few high end grocery stores. But for several years she ran a brisk business, employing two people to help her both bake and deliver. Her basement runs the full length of her large ranch home and the room with the bakery is just a few feet from the stairs leading to the kitchen. A 25-gallon Hobart mixer stands sentry just inside the bakery as though it could ward off the tools and building supplies from Larry’s
side of the basement. On the far wall is a Blodgett stainless steel oven and in between these two industrial behemoths the space is filled with four stainless steel tables, a combined 12’x6’ of stainless work surface. There is, of course, a stainless sink and two commercial sized refrigerators to hold all the oversized units of butter, flour, oil and a few cases of wine. Out of place among the giants and looking a bit tired is the normal refrigerator she and Berry bought in 1971, in a color cheerfully known as “golden harvest.” I must have pulled on the handle of that fridge thousands of times, reaching in to grab milk for my cereal, dinners to be re-heated, margarine for my bread.

Taught by her mother and her mother’s mother, my mother’s baked goods are consistent in their light sweetness, delicate pastry and tender fillings. It’s where she puts her love. All of it.

The boys were asleep when I pulled the car around the circular dead end and parked at the curved curb. “We’re here!” I told them.

“Which grandma is it again?” asked Hugo.

“Grandma Kelleigh.” I told him. That’s her legal, but not her given, name. It’s one of several she’s had over the years, and it is easy to tell at what point in her life people met her based on what they call her. Her sister Debbie and cousins in Indiana call her Judy, as she was born Judith Lynn Morse. My father and my godmother call her Peaches, her nickname through high school and college, and though it sounds pretty, she came by it when a boy at school sullied her dress with the fruit. When she left my father and me two years after their wedding, she became a Playboy Bunny and lived in Hugh Hefner’s Chicago Mansion. Wanting to emphasize her Irish heritage, she told her patrons
her name was Kelly. Finally, when I was in junior high and she was working in a somewhat upscale cocktail lounge, she had a customer from South Africa who extended the syllables of her name when he called for her. Kelly became Kelleigh. Along with Morse, she’s carried the surnames Christensen, Slusher and, now, Nelson. Though never to her face, Christopher and I had for years referred to her in conversation as PJK.

Her front door was open, only the heavy glass storm door was keeping the bugs and the heavy summer heat out. We let ourselves in, stepping on the towels spread over the doormat to keep it clean. Lacking a foyer, the door opens into her unused living room and affords a view into the kitchen. The living room furniture, never warmed by human hips, was also covered with towels. I could see my mother at her computer at the far end of her kitchen. Her greeting to us was cool.

“Have you eaten?” she asked and I told her we hadn’t even though we did have sandwiches a couple of hours earlier. She’d be less offended by picky eaters than if she thought we’d eaten before arriving. “Well come in and start heating things up, there’s eggplant the way you like them, salmon and green beans. I ate two hours ago, I was just too hungry to wait.” It was clear I had disappointed her, presumably for not getting there earlier, but I always disappoint her. She never likes what I give her for her birthday or Christmas, yet somehow these gifts she doesn’t like are too few. “Why didn’t you…” is how she begins many sentences at the end of the year. I could tell when I began dishing up plates of food for the boys that she wasn’t going to tell me why she was disappointed unless I asked her what was wrong. I ignored her.
My mother went back to her computer in the corner of her kitchen across from the table while plate by plate I microwaved the lukewarm leftovers for each boy and finally for myself. When we had finished eating, and as the boys loaded the dishwasher, she said, “Holly, I need you to come do something for me. Larry usually does it.”

“What time is Larry getting home?”

“He isn’t. He’s in Brazil and won’t be back until Saturday.” Larry, who is a plastics engineer, is my mother’s third husband and the one she’s been with the longest. Six years younger than her, they began dating my junior year in high school just a few months after I had run away to live with my father. My mother was thirty-five then and still married to Berry, who by that time had long been seeing the woman who became his next wife. When I moved back in with my mother and Berry my senior year, nothing was as it seemed. They were both so preoccupied in their clandestine lives that I rarely saw or spoke with either of them.

The fall after I’d graduated from high school I flew back to Dayton from Arizona for Thanksgiving with my mother and Berry who, in spite of both of them being with other partners for years, still lived together. It was on Thanksgiving, after dinner, that my mother told me she and Larry, whom she’d introduced to me earlier that year as a co-worker of hers, were in love. On Black Friday, she took me to secretly meet Larry at the Dayton Mall.

“Lar wants to tell you how much he loves me and to let you know that we will be married as soon as this divorce with Berry is over,” she told me as I silently pieced together that in all the times I’d seen Larry my senior year, Berry had never been present.
Larry never said anything to me that day, or ever, about their relationship. Instead, he talked my mother and me into having a photo taken with the mall Santa who sat in the middle of a plywood sleigh. Now framed and perpetually resting on a shelf in her TV room in Tennessee, I am shocked anew each visit at how young we look, her hair chestnut dark and pixie short, my own hair, so many shades of blonde, was so long I had to move it to the side to avoid sitting on it. I once heard writer Fran Lebowitz say in a radio interview that it is nonsense to dislike photos of ourselves because in a few years we will be older and fatter and think we looked great in the pictures taken today. I always hear Lebowitz’s no-nonsense voice whenever I hold the fading mall Santa Polaroid in my hands. I turned eighteen the weekend after that photo was taken. Each time I visit the house in Knoxville, as I pause over the photo, I see a young woman who didn’t know she was beautiful at all, let alone as beautiful as she’d ever be.

“Follow me,” said my mother and we left the boys in the kitchen as I followed behind her to the uncomfortably large office in what once was the two and a half car garage. In the very middle of the room sat a massive desk made of dark wood, the kind you might see in a bank in a period film, like Mr. Potter’s in It’s a Wonderful Life. It’s easily as big as a Smart Car, maybe even a Mini-Cooper. On the floor in front of the beastly desk was spread a mat made of oversized foam puzzle pieces. When my boys were little they had a similar set except in ours each puzzle piece had a different letter of the alphabet on it. My mother laid back on the foam mat and folded her hands up between her breasts, reminding me of the pharaohs in their sarcophagi. Her streaked hair, one of the few things she hasn’t fiddled with, has several shades of browns and grays and its
great length splayed out behind her. She wore her hair short, as in Mia Farrow in *Rosemary’s Baby* short, from the time I was in the first grade until I was in my mid-twenties. My mother and I didn’t speak for several years in the late eighties and early nineties and during that time she grew her hair down to her waist.

“Now stand over me with your legs at my hips, bend over and push down on my shoulders.” She explained that this helped her with shoulder pain. Our torsos lined up and I looked directly into her face, into her eyes—so dark blue they border on violet.

“You know, Mom, when you lie down, all your wrinkles fall back and you look twenty.”

“Yeah?” she answered, “Well when you lean over, just the opposite happens.”

“Hmm, so I guess I don’t look so great right now.”

“Nope,” she said and I had to laugh, though she didn’t even smile. Smart and mean, she has always been able to make me laugh with her wicked sense of humor, even when I am on the receiving end of it.

The bedrooms and bathrooms in my mother’s house might be staged sets ready for *Country Living Magazine* to swoop in for a photo shoot. Since moving to the South, her tastes have changed and the woman who once eschewed all ruffles and extraneous frippery as gaudy, now owns three brass beds, each more ornate than the previous. In the first bedroom, where Claude and Hugo would sleep, was a queen sized brass bed with porcelain knobs covered with three layers of machine-made quilts. The next, which Jules and I would share, had a king sized bed with brass head and foot boards that wrapped the
corners of the bed, like an oversized nursery bed, and fitted with eyelet lace sheets and
two machine made quilts—the first spread over the mattress and under a pile of
decorative pillows while the second quilt was folded along the bottom of the bed. Across
the hall from this bedroom, the master suite contained a king bed with a personality
disorder. The headboard had sections of stained wood that looked like paneled doors
shackled together with pieces of brass and wrought iron. It loomed four feet above the
mattress, though it was hard to tell at first because of the mountain of pillows ensconced
in navy blue and red plaid decorator shams that gave way to foothills of square throw
pillows, including a special one for their Schnauzer, Jennie.

On all of the dressers in each of the rooms were photographs of my mother in
which she’s never older than twelve. Professional baby photos, a snap shot of her in a
bubble bath when she was a toddler, another taken as a girl visiting her grandparents on
their farm in LaPorte, Indiana. They are charming photos and as I tucked Claude and
Hugo into bed, I brought the farm photo over to them and pointed out their great-great
grandpa standing next to the girl their grandma was. I find it remarkable how my mother
has always looked like her. Some people are unrecognizable in their early photos, but not
PJG. She is, and has always been, who she is. In her house, there are no childhood photos
of me framed and set out. In fact, I suspect that our Christmas Polaroid would not have
made the cut were she not seated next to me. But she did display, and regularly requested,
photos of my boys.

As always in her house, I found it hard to sleep in such a controlled environment.
After breakfast the following morning, Claude whispered to me in the bathroom where
we’d been brushing our teeth, “I had a hard time sleeping, the room was both cold and stuffy, it’s really weird.” I agreed with him and told him so while privately thinking he just as easily could have been describing his grandmother.

An hour after breakfast I got the boys situated at their grandma’s house, helping them find channels on her satellite television. My mother had a doctor’s appointment late in the morning and so did I.

True Confession: I am vain. Sure, I didn't shave my armpits or legs for much of the 1990s (nor do I now in the winter). And no, I don’t have much use for hair products or nail polish (save for my toes in the summer), but I am vain nonetheless. Of the many insidious reminders of getting older, broken veins on my legs is one I really hate. The last time I visited my mother, nearly four years earlier, to retrieve my childhood bedroom suite before she made good on her threat to sell it, she made an appointment for me to visit her dermatologist to have my broken capillary veins collapsed. She had done it herself and convinced me it was worth the $400. And I did find that the money spent and the months of bruises were well worth the eradication of broken veins, evil reminders of my mortality that they are. I mean, let's face it, the bruises are more obvious and quite ugly too, but children get bruises, active adults get bruises. It is old ladies who get veiny legs.

Once I turned 40, my body felt like it had received an invitation--no, more like marching orders, to old age and started making observable jumps, seemingly overnight. When I was 39, I had a face as smooth as when I was 25. One morning, just weeks after my birthday, I woke up with a horizontal crease at the top of my nose, like a bridge from
one tear duct to the other. Six months later, a second line joined the first making something like an equals sign between my eyes.

The truth is I’ve always been a skin freak, long before wrinkles and broken veins plagued me. While I’ve never had a weight issue (one thing I can thank my mother and her slim genetics for), my skin has always broken out. I have searched my face many a night for renegade pimples, big and small, occasionally going overboard into a pimple popping fest, which I have to admit is somewhat therapeutic in times of stress. Never mind the blotchy mess it makes of my face.

I learned much of my vanity as a girl seated to my mother’s right hand side. For many years, I would get off of the school bus, head upstairs to her bathroom, sit on the closed toilet seat and visit with her while she got ready for work at the sink next to me. I received careful and repeated instruction, starting with a trick about using lotion immediately after toweling off from the shower so as to seal in the moisture. “And always pay special attention to your hands, Holly. A man can tell a lot about a woman by what condition she keeps her hands in.” I still don’t know what that means, but I lotion my hands frequently and will wear cream and cotton gloves on them on the driest nights of winter.

After styling her hair and applying her make-up, we would go into her bedroom where she dressed in a full-length jade green gown she wore as a cocktail waitress at Stouffer’s restaurant on the top floor of the hotel in downtown Dayton. Once I had zipped up her gown, she would choose her jewelry for the evening. “Wearing more than one ring on each hand is tacky, don’t forget that. So once you have a wedding ring, you’ll have to
pick which ring you want to wear on your right hand. And don’t mix your gold jewelry with your silver. Only wear one at a time” She had several rings with two to three carat, semi-precious gems, such as topaz. She claimed the rings were gifts from men at an earlier time in her life, but no matter how often I asked, she never told me the stories of the rings and how they came to be hers.

Having spider veins removed is not like having your fingers removed—the veins can come back. On the outer side of my left thigh, I think as a result of unconscious leg crossing, no matter how I try to stick to lady-like ankle crossing, I had something that looked like a squadron of snakes all swimming in the direction of my knee. They had been evicted by saline four years previous, but like creatures returning to spawn, they had come back to their original nesting ground. This time I had them banished not with saline but instead a detergent the nurse at the Vein Clinic told me would seal my veins like super glue.

Because I was visiting from out of town, the staff at the Vein Clinic agreed to do both my legs on the same day. This meant I was on an exam table in a small room for nearly two hours while the nurse injected the detergent into my veins. It was one of those situations (some other examples are long plane trips, waiting in line at an amusement park, sharing a hotel room at a conference) when a discussion quickly becomes deeply personal, more personal than may often be the case with good friends. Soon after she closed the door and had started injecting my legs over and over with a tiny-gauged needle, the nurse began telling me about her divorce from her husband of 12 years, something that was finalized two years earlier.
“I hadn’t realized,” she told me with her soft southern accent, “how abusive my husband was until I read the book Emotional Blackmail by Susan Forwere, it’s a real easy book to find.”

“Forwere? How do you spell that?” I asked.

She laughed, “Not forwere, but forwere, like moving ahead, you know, going forwere.”

“Oh, you mean Forward?”

“Yes, that’s it.” She laughed and continued, mocking my Yankee accent when she said the author’s name, “Anyway, she says emotional blackmail traps people in the FOG of a relationship. She means it as mental fog, not being able to see the dysfunctional dynamic of the relationship, but also as an acronym for what keeps people in an unfulfilling relationship: Fear, Obligation, Guilt.

A tall, lithe woman a few years younger than me, she had spent over ten years as an Army nurse. She was both feminine and confident, a combination that shouldn’t be unusual but sadly still is. As she told me about her marriage, I was silent except to ask her questions encouraging her to tell me more.

“My husband would make me feel like I didn’t know what I was doing, like I was stupid. I woke up from my fog when one day my son, who was only six at the time, told his father he shouldn’t talk to me the way he did. It shocked me and I didn’t want my children to grow up thinking it was okay the way their father treated me.”

Her words, not her needle, gave me goose bumps as she pricked me while speaking of this subtle abuse. In my last therapy session before leaving on our trip I had
bemoaned how clear I was, had always been, on what I wanted to do in my life until I talked with Christopher. Over the years, I had come to resist telling him much of anything that was important to me because I feared the confusion that would inevitably follow. My therapist counseled me not to fight, but to grab Christopher’s words like a professional baseball player who can reach over and catch a fly ball with barely a glance in its direction, and then set it gently on the ground. Don’t take it in. In a way, it’s another variation of Eleanor Roosevelt’s aphorism that no one can make you feel inferior without your consent. Somehow I had given Christopher this permission at least as far back as when Claude was born, if not earlier. Perhaps my hormones hijacked my discernment in order to reproduce. But most often I’m sure I was sentenced to marry him because I’d not learned the lessons my relationship with my mother had afforded me, perhaps even being drawn to him precisely because of what was comfortably familiar. I lived with each of them for exactly fifteen years. And then, like a Butterball turkey whose thermometer popped, I was done.

Okay, I know that in life, most of us think we are the stars of our own shows, because we are, really. We are here, I believe, to learn and grow as beings as much as we are able to. And that requires some inward focus. Often, however, we get lost on just making ourselves feel good and avoid reflecting because we might see things that aren’t so flattering about ourselves. Or so that has been true for me. Here’s the other thing: time and again, I think something is uniquely happening to me only to find that I fit very neatly into a larger pattern or trend. That there’s nothing unique about my personal
drama, except that it’s happening to me, but otherwise, I’m really just a part of an expansive herd of humans undergoing similar realities.

An easy example is the names of the boys: Claude, Hugo and Jules. I have often asked if they are family names, because they were not common. But hold your horses—just two years after Claude was born, I learned there was a trend among parents to give kids names that were popular at the turn of the previous century. After we finally named Hugo, I read that short names ending in “o” were all the rage with hip parents in London and NYC. Jules was a name I’d only grown comfortable with around the time he turned five. I wanted to name him Theo, but like so many things, including all three names chosen for our sons, Christopher picked what he wanted and then wore me down, which was easier than ever when I was laid up with post-partum weakness. Talking with the leg vein nurse confirmed yet again what I was feeling was not only not original, but had been studied by people with PhDs who had then written books on it for the mass market. I bought a copy of *Emotional Blackmail* that afternoon.

Once my session at the Vein Clinic ended, I swooped into my mother’s house to pick up the boys and run some errands. We had forgotten our swimsuits and were planning to stay at a hotel with a pool on our next stop.

“When did your grandma leave?” I asked Claude when I walked into the house.

“We don’t know,” said Claude, “she didn’t say anything when she left, we just noticed that she wasn’t here anymore.”

“No, really?” I asked as it surprised even me.
“Really,” said Hugo, “Jules called out to her to ask a question and when she didn’t answer, we began looking for her.”

“Yep, it’s true,” said Claude when I looked at him.

“ Weird!” I told them, “Well, let’s go run our errands. Have you guys even had lunch?”

First order of business was to find us swimsuits, something we didn’t realize we had forgotten until after we’d left Cincinnati the day before. Swimsuits are one of those items that are queerly hard to find in the middle of summer, when you most need them. It's no different trying to find mittens in January. At an Old Navy in a shopping strip plaza we found a pair of swim trunks for my little guy, Jules, but nothing else. Further on down the shopping strip plaza was a Target that had plenty of suits on the clearance rack that fit the other two boys. But neither of those stores, nor several others, had a thing for me. We ended up across the street in another plaza at an Ann Taylor store and sure enough, they had deeply discounted swimwear. Well, that’s a bit misleading as swimwear implies selection when the Ann Taylor had nothing but bikinis. Furthermore, they were all plaid bikinis, like Daisy Mae from the comic strip “L’il Abner” might wear. I hadn’t worn a bikini since I was a child. I’m not particularly comfortable being just that naked in public, or at least not in front of people I know. And that was how I talked myself into it: I wasn’t going to wear it anywhere I knew anyone. I was going to wear it in hotels and parks in parts of the country where I don’t know anyone. Who cares if my belly, three times stretched by big babies, looks like a saggy balloon that’s been filled and drained of
air over and over again? Mercifully, the bikini top had an under-wire, so at least my breasts would look perky.

After we all had new swimsuits, we went to AT&T to replace my Bluetooth device. While my new Bluetooth charged up at the AT&T store, something it had to do before I could program it, I dropped the boys in a Border’s Bookstore where they happily read comic books. I went to a Panera Bread because at the time, Panera’s had the best free wi-fi in the country. I managed to do some work, writing down notes of our trip so far. I also checked out my horoscope on several websites, something I had become a bit addicted to in the weeks since I’d declared to Christopher my need to separate. Once I collected the boys, we went back to the phone store for my earpiece. It was nearly 7 o’clock when we returned to my mother’s and, yet again, I could tell the moment we opened the door she was not pleased. As with the previous evening, she was seated at her computer in the far corner of her kitchen. I ushered the boys to the bathroom to wash their hands for dinner, following them down the hallway.

“Well we found swimsuits and everything else we needed,” I called out to her. She had gotten up and was coming down the hallway behind us.

“I hope you had dinner while you were out.”

“Oh, did you want us to eat dinner out tonight? That’s fine,” I said. Turning to the boys, I told them “Dry your hands and go get your shoes back on. We need to go out and get dinner.” Realizing her first tactic had failed, it took my mother a second to regroup. She launched back in on us at the door where the boys were putting their shoes back on.

“I just put everything away! I made a nice chicken dinner, where were you?”
“We were out running errands like I told you.” I will not take the bait, I told myself while facing my mother where her living room opened into her kitchen. Jules quickly slipped on his Crocs and went outside. But Claude and Hugo were both kneeling down and lacing up their sneakers as slowly as five year olds who’d just learned the skill.

“I thought you’d be here for dinner,” she said with a shrill whine.

“And we are here for dinner.”

“I had dinner on the table at 5:30 and it all went to waste.”

“Mom, I didn’t know you were planning on having dinner at 5:30. We wanted to have dinner with you, but I’m not psychic.”

“You know I can’t eat late, I get hungry and my stomach gets upset.”

“It’s not late!” I said.

“It’s almost seven o’clock! What time do you feed these children?”

“Not at 5:30. Why didn’t you call me? We would have come right away.”

“I don’t think to call you because I don’t have a cell phone!” True enough, she didn’t have a cell phone but she’d called me on my cell phone the day before at least two times while we were driving down from Ohio.

Claude and Hugo got up and stood on the towel-covered doormat with laced shoes and huge eyes. As calmly as I could, I kept grabbing the grenades she lobbed my way. They were watching my mother, yes, but more importantly, they were watching how I handled the situation with her. I walked over to them and turned so as to face her while pulling my own shoes on. My big boys, Claude was only half an inch shorter than me that summer, peered out from behind either side of my body where they’d
instinctively tucked themselves when I came over. I glanced outside and watched Jules waiting by the car, seemingly oblivious to his grandmother’s drama.

Pulling out her last trick, my mother assumed a victim’s posture, pulling her shoulders down and forward, making her chest concave. She started to cry saying, “I just can’t take it anymore, I just can’t…”

“Look,” I cut her off and my anger revealing itself, as it often does, with anachronistic language spoken in a staccato rhythm, “we want to partake in this meal you made, but only if you want us to stay.” She looked up, and in a voice free of tears she said, “It’s too late, I threw it all away.”

“You threw it all away? Why would you do that?” I said louder than I had meant to. The idea that she’d done something not just passive-aggressive, which it was, but also so childish scored a bull’s eye. Some corner of my brain whispered, “Do not take the bait, don’t go with her on this head trip, you are fine and can be civil,” but it was hard to hear.

“Well, Larry won’t be home until Friday,” said my mother, “and you’re leaving tomorrow. I can’t eat all that chicken, it would have just gone bad and there was nothing else I could do since I didn’t know when you’d be back because you didn’t call me!”

“Look, I didn’t know you had a special dinner at a set time, you have to tell me these things if you expect me to know.”

“Well I told him,” she said as she carelessly flung her arm toward Claude.

Okay, here’s the deal: Be weird with me, fine. I’m a grown woman and I can try to remain calm, maybe even gracious. But be weird with my kids and I’m out of there. That is, if you are lucky and I don’t take you down before I go.
“Boys, let’s get in the car.” I say without taking my eyes away from my mother’s. Claude and Hugo slipped quickly and silently out the glass storm door and when I heard it shut, I turned and walked to the door and out of the house. We joined Jules who was sitting in the car with the door open, drawing in his sketchbook. We piled in and I drove just one block down the street and parked the car. Turning in my seat, I could easily see Claude, who was seated next to me, and Hugo who was seated behind Claude. I had Jules move to the middle of the back seat, up close to Hugo, so that I could see his face too.

“Okay, are you guys okay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” they nodded.

“But man, she’s crazy!” said Hugo.

“Actually, I think she really is, honey.”

“I’d say,” said Hugo.

“She’s been that way as long as I can remember, Hugo, even worse if you can imagine.”

“No way!” he said.

“Way. But listen, I need you all to know that we’re okay and she’s the one with the problem.”

“I’d say,” said Hugo again. Claude and Jules were noticeably quiet.

“Now here’s what we need to decide,” I tell the boys, “Do we go back, suck it up and apologize so we can stay the night and leave first thing in the morning? Or should we
have dinner in a restaurant while she cools down and then come back, pack up and leave tonight?”

“Let’s eat and go! She’s scary, like how were we supposed to know about her dinner?” asked Hugo. Claude, as is often typical of a firstborn, felt terribly responsible.

“She did ask me about the chicken,” he said, “and besides, if we just leave, it will make things worse.”

“Did she tell you what time we were supposed to be there for dinner?”

“No.”

“What exactly did she say?”

“She asked if all of us liked chicken, if we’d all eat it and I told her we did.”

Why did I ever bring them here? Four years ago when we last visited, Jules was only three and still had long, curly locks of blonde hair. Sitting with him at her kitchen table, she started speaking to him with a sickeningly friendly voice, “Are you a girl? You’re a girl, aren’t you? You are, aren’t you, a girl? Yes, you’re a girl. Such a pretty, pretty little girl you are.” I was down the hall in the bathroom. I raced out zipping up my jeans as I ran.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked in a deep voice when I stopped behind the chair Jules was sitting in. He was facing my mother who was in a chair across from him.

“He told me he was a girl,” she replied, “I mean he looks like one too and he thinks he’s one.” Apparently it was her way of telling me she thought I should have his hair cut.
I could see I had made a mistake in bringing them back to Knoxville on this trip, but this time it was a mistake I had learned from. Just because she’s related doesn’t mean my children need to know her.

“Okay, Claude, honey,” I said grabbing his left hand from his lap in the seat next to me, “that’s not the same as telling you what time dinner was going to be and besides, she’s the adult and should have made her plans clear to me not you.”

Suddenly, my mother’s white Chevy minivan zoomed by, accelerating upwards of 45 mpg in just one block. I had already been leaning towards Hugo’s position of dine and dash and now our decision was made for us. We went to a nearby shopping plaza and over chili dinners continued discussing how weird their Grandma Kelleigh was. They couldn’t imagine how I’d lived with her most of my childhood. Frankly, neither could I. My relationship with my mother had been on and off my entire life. She left my father and me and then came back. I ran away and then went back. Many times after I had left for good we went years without speaking after she’d done something reprehensible, only to reconnect with her when she’d reached out and sent me a letter or called to tell me something and would initially sound normal. Time and again I had willed myself to believe she had gotten better or perhaps mellowed out with age and in so doing would get close enough for her to strike again, as she had that evening.

That summer’s night I saw that the cyclical patterns of my relationship with my mother were echoed in my marriage. For just as frequently, in fact more so, had I not believed time and again that there was something that would change the dynamic of the marriage once we had obtained it? Things like new jobs for Christopher, bigger houses,
better pay. The difference was that with my mother I delusionally believed she had already changed during periods of estrangement. With Christopher, I was always seeking what could be made different going forward to accommodate his needs in order for him to finally be able to turn towards us, his family. When that didn’t happen, I just went to the next thing I thought might make a difference. Nothing had and it seemed nothing ever would.

Even though she openly disliked Christopher, I was glad I had not told my mother I was leaving him. While she was never someone I turned to in difficult situations, I didn’t need her nipping at my heels to learn what was going on. I knew that, given the opportunity, she would use my situation to create drama in her own life. I knew it as much as I knew to question the veracity of everything she said. And I wondered, as I listened to the boys talk while we finished our meal, if the chicken dinner she claimed to have thrown away had ever existed.

We returned to my mother’s house an hour after we had left, ready to pack and go. And as with every time we entered her house, she was seated at her computer in her kitchen. “Mom,” I said walking towards her, “I’m sorry we weren’t here for dinner.” Before I could finish and tell her we thought it best we just leave that evening, she stood up and came running over to us. Like a clutch of chicks, the boys stepped behind my body.

“No, I’m the one that’s sorry. I love you all so much and I was just a big dummy. I forgot to call your cell phone because I don’t have one, I don’t think of it. I’m so glad
you are here.” She put her hands on my cheeks and, looking me in the eyes, she began to cry.

“I could have communicated better when we’d be home. I’m sorry.” We hugged and she felt small and brittle in my arms. “I need to hold a traveler’s meeting with the boys, Mom, okay?”

“Sure thing, baby girl, why don’t you all go into the TV room,” she said and blowing her nose she went back to her computer. In PJK’s TV room, the big boys sat on the edge of the couch while I pulled over a large ottoman close enough that our legs knit together. Julsey climbed sideways onto my lap and nestled into my chest. Though seven years old and tall, his limbs were delicately thin, like those of a wren, and he weighed only 40 pounds.

“I think we should sleep here but pack our bags tonight and leave really early in the morning, what do you think?”

“Well, we’re here already, we might as well sleep here,” said Claude.

“It’ll save me a night’s hotel bill and I don’t really know how far I could drive tonight anyway. We have a long way to go tomorrow.”

“How long?” asked Hugo.

“Shreveport is about twelve hours away,” I told them. “If we get up at five and leave at six that would put us at the hotel at six in the evening. Or we could get up at six and leave at seven, what do you think?” To my surprise, they unanimously and eagerly agreed to get up at five, even Hugo, who was born a night owl and hates rising before
nine in the morning. None of us, it seemed, were interested in staying in Knoxville any longer than necessary.

It was after nine o’clock when I told my mother our plans. “Okay, that’s smart,” she said, “I’ll make you sandwiches in the morning so you won’t have to stop and buy anything.” I told her that wasn’t necessary, but she insisted. She was now in the honeymoon phase that always came after one of her explosions. We had gone from being unable to do anything right to unable to do anything wrong. While I printed out the directions to our next night’s hotel from MapQuest, the boys packed their bags, got ready for bed and called their father to say goodnight. I didn’t tell Christopher about our evening because he would just have laughed and said, “I told you not to go there, what made you think she’d be any different?”

True to her word, my mother got up with us at five. Dressed in her pink bathrobe and wearing her rose tinted glasses, she made us ham and cheese sandwiches on slices of bread she had baked. She wrapped them in foil, as they were far too thick to squeeze into Ziploc baggies. When I came in from loading our luggage into the pop-top, she had a grocery bag filled with the sandwiches, several apples and half a dozen of her saucer-sized chocolate chip cookies. As before, Jules was in the car without anyone seeing him whisp his way out.

“Give your grandma a hug,” she ordered Claude and Hugo. Claude tepidly placed his arms around her and stood there, tall and limp while she squeezed him.

“Such a big, handsome boy. You take care of your Mama on this trip now, you hear?” And so she tasked him to be the man as so many generations have before,
disregarding entirely that the woman, me, his mother, was the adult here. I said nothing, eager to exit as cleanly as possible. Hugo threw his arms around her waist and aggressively gripped her waist before quickly releasing and running out the door.

“Bye, Mom, thanks for everything,” I said before giving her a quick hug.

“Bye-bye, baby girl. I’m sorry for yesterday. I love you all, please be safe and call me when you get to the hotel.”

I promised I would and walked out in the pre-dawn coolness. As I crossed through her lawn, the dew wetted the tips of my toes’. I opened the car door, turned and waved to my mother, as she stood framed in her glass storm door. I sat down and shut the car door.

“Thank God that is over,” I said to no one in particular as I started the car and put the clutch into first gear. “Let’s go.”
Chapter Four:

All in One Day

TN, GA, AL, MS, LA
Five states in one day.
Woke up @ 5 & left @ 6
Drove all day to a hotel
In the car so long a spell.

~Hugo, 27 July 2007
Shreveport Holiday Inn

The land from Tennessee to Louisiana is flat and scrubby. Driving near Meridian, Alabama I put Emmylou Harris on my iPod and listened to her sing the depressingly lovely song, “Red Dirt Girl.” The dirt was indeed red, but it doesn’t do anything dramatic like rise up into hills. It just lies there under the tires and feet of those passing through. The Mississippi River was the highlight of the day. Given how far south we were, the river that splits the country was widening into her delta, her legs spreading open to birth all that was in and on her water out to the Gulf of Mexico. The bridge that spans the muddy water seemed twice as long as the one I had gone over countless times when I was a girl and lived in a town on the river’s banks in Illinois.

I had convinced the boys to listen to an audio book on Davy Crockett, since we would be in San Antonio over the weekend. We got through three of the five discs before deciding we knew as much as we wanted about the frontiersman, even though we had only learned about Crockett’s hardscrabble upbringing, his early failed attempts at love
and marriage and knew little about his political career or, significant to our visit to San Antonio, his role in at the battle at the Alamo. My own knowledge of Davy Crockett is mostly derived from the five episode miniseries produced by Disney in the 1950s, “Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier,” which aired regularly on Disney’s Sunday night television show, *The Wonderful World of Disney* in the 1970s, when I was a girl. I hummed the theme song of the Davy Crockett series for days after we’d listened to the first several CDs of his biography, in which he is described as scrappy, dark-haired and small. Other than the dark hair there was little resemblance between the historical Crockett and Fess Parker, the actor who played him in the Disney show. Parker was handsome in the standard 1950s leading character way—tall, thin and very respectable. Further confusing the story, at least in my mind, was that Fess Parker also played the lead character of the Daniel Boone television series, which lasted for six years.

“Do you want to switch to Harry Potter?” I asked the boys once we were west of the Mississippi?

“Yes!” the three of them cried back in a chorus. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the last book in the phenomenally popular series, had just been released earlier that month. It had been hard to keep Claude and Hugo from reading the book during the two weeks between the release of the book and setting out on our road trip. That they had let me subject them to an audio book on Davy Crockett at all was remarkable. Frankly, I was just as eager to drop the non-fiction story of the frontiersman for the fantastical kid novel as they were. The first book of the series had been published at the end of the previous decade, long before my children could read or Jules was even born. But as each
installment was published in the succeeding years, I found that I enjoyed reading them with my boys, perhaps more than is reasonable. A.S. Byatt wrote an essay, in fact, excoriating adults who indulgently enjoyed reading J.K. Rowling’s series, which does pull heavily from its predecessors, but what genre fiction doesn’t? The fact that the boys liked it was good enough for me and the actor who read the audio series was top-notch. Frankly, if ever I could give the audio book publishing folks advice I would tell the to always hire actors to read the books. It has been our experience, the boys and me, that authors are rarely competent at reading their own works.

Claude put the first CD into the car stereo, and we were all quickly engrossed, making the rest of the drive go smoothly, even speedily. It was six o’clock, exactly twelve hours since we’d left Knoxville, when we pulled into a Holiday Inn in Shreveport. While the boys ran around the main floor of the atrium hotel, finding the pool, the gift shop, the restaurant and anything else they might find exciting, I stood in line at the front desk to check in. Even though it was a Monday, the place was packed and the line long. Seemingly, all other guests were black. I asked a man waiting in line with me if there was an event at the hotel that evening. Indeed there was, he told me, it was a convention of female masons, the Amaranth Freemasons. Apparently it wasn’t gender exclusionary though, because most of the women seemed to have brought their husbands or boyfriends with them, such as the one who told me about the convention. Later, I learned that members of the Amaranth Freemasons are mostly wives of masons, which made sense. Not because women can’t lay bricks, but because most construction jobs are given to men
no matter how many organizations like Hard Hatted Women teach mothers how to use tools and equipment.

As soon as I located the boys, they were ready to go to our room and change into our swimsuits. We all wanted to swim, oh yes we did after all those hours in the car. I opened our duffel bags on the beds and pulled out our new suits. I went into the bathroom to put on the Daisy Mae bikini I’d purchased the day before and once I had it on, I looked at myself in the wall-to-wall mirror above the sink. God in heaven! To hell with a squishy belly, my legs were bruised greenish and purple up and down, front and back from the vein injections. Not only did I look like an addict who’d stopped using her arms to hide the track marks, I looked like I shot up every hour on the hour.

“You don’t know a blessed soul in Shreveport, Louisiana,” I said out loud to my reflection. I pulled on my white zip-up cardigan sweater and flip-flops. The effect accentuated my legs, it’s true, but I wasn’t marching through the lobby without a covering of some sort and the cardi was all I had.

The boys didn’t seem to notice anything unusual when I came out of the bathroom and as they were ready, we went down the hallway and took the elevator to the main floor. To get to the pool, we first had to walk past the front desk, which was no longer crowded, across the open atrium to the other side of the building. The pool was both indoors and outdoors, the two sections connected by a channel. The indoor side was in the open atrium next to the rooms where the Amaranth Freemasons were holding their convention. A low concrete wall separated the pool area from the rest of the atrium and a row of chaffing dishes for the Amaranth Freemason’s buffet dinner was set up on their
side of the wall. While piling their plates with food, the women could look at the pool, just four feet from them. More importantly, they could look at the only guests swimming in the pool—my boys and me.

We weren’t the only ones who had quickly changed after checking in, the lady masons had also shed their travel wear for elegant gowns of many variations except one: each and every gown was as white as the whitest wedding dress. And their shoes, hose and, for more than a few, hats were all sparkingly white. Many of the dresses were satin, causing the light to reflect on the absolute whiteness and I found myself blinking repeatedly at the pageantry. It was more like a convention of black virgin brides while I was paddling around the pool on my back (I hate to have my face underwater) in a bikini with my squishy belly pointing up at them and my legs, good Lord my legs, overpopulated with punctures.

I felt sure they were all worried to death about my children and I could imagine them talking over their dinner in their white finery: Did you see her just parading her addiction in that suit? Mmm, mmm I wouldn’t even let my twenty-year-old out of the house in a suit like that. Does she have no shame? Perhaps she’s so drugged up she doesn’t even know what she’s doing, those poor, poor little boys. And they looked so fine and well cared for too, do you think someone else is with them and is caring for the children?

I swam through the channel to the outdoor pool to avoid further observation, momentarily going deep under water to swim through the narrow passageway. Outside, the sky was gray and raindrops were pelting the surface of the water. The air was hot and
heavy with humidity but the rain that fell was colder than the water in the pool. The boys followed me out and while Claude and Hugo tossed a beach ball they had found back and forth from opposite sides of the pool, I held Jules who was not yet a good swimmer. He wrapped his legs around my waist, his arms around my neck and was lighter than ever in the buoyancy of the water. I bounced up and down with him, careful to keep his head from going underwater.

“What was that?” asked Hugo who, having witnessed what can best be described as a “weather event” the summer before that included several damaging downdrafts and funnel clouds, is terribly afraid of storms.

“Sounds like thunder, we should get back inside,” I told him and then called over to Claude, “Swim back inside, there’s a storm coming.” The Amaranth Freemasons were still milling about, though most were seated at their tables eating their dinner.

“I’m going up to the room to shower, boys,” I told them. I agreed to let them stay and play in the pool as long as they wanted. Perhaps the women told the staff about my poor children because the boys were at the door of our hotel room less than five minutes after I’d let myself in.

“They told us we couldn’t swim without someone with us who was at least twenty-one,” reported Claude.

“Fine,” I said, “come in and change and we’ll go eat.” While they all put their shorts and t-shirts back on, I wore my blue jeans.
Chapter Five:

Bats

After we finished an unmemorable meal in the Holiday Inn dining room, the boys and I returned to our room, eager to flop in our hotel beds and junk out on cable television. The small room had a king-sized bed and a hide-a-bed couch. The folded bed, tucked like a love note under a pillow, always ready to glide out with the pull of a finger. I took the cushions off of the couch and pulled with all my might. The bed refused to unfold. “Claude, come here and help me with this.” The two of us yanked, again with all our might, and a corner of the bed poked up like a steel wave and remained stuck in that spot, neither coming out nor going back in. I called the front desk and asked they send someone from maintenance. Forty-five minutes later, I opened the door to a large man in a gray uniform befitting an auto mechanic, with the oval stitched patch on his shoulder reading, “Mel.”

“Oh, those don’t work, we bolted ‘em down ages ago,” he said when I told him the problem with the hide-a-bed.

“We’ll need a different room then,” I told him.

“I’m ‘fraid, ma’am, we all filled up tonight. But I kin git you a cot.”

An hour later, a different employee rolled a cot through our door. Folded in the middle, it stood as high as me and looked like a giant steel trap lined with a monster maxi pad. The boys and I rolled it into the sliver of space between the bed and the couch.
pad. The boys and I rolled it into the sliver of space between the bed and the couch. When opened, the cot acted as an extension to the king bed—as if only a butter knife could fit between the two mattresses. Hugo took the cot, I was next to him in the bed, Claude stretched out on the far side of the bed and Jules, in the middle, spooned up next to me.

We found Pretty Woman on cable, and because the film was more than half over when we found it, I needn’t explain prostitution to the boys or that Roberts had told Gere early in the film that she never kissed her clients. Hooker sex. Just the act, no emotional connection. And suddenly, I knew that I knew it well. Hooker sex, that is. Christopher, who kisses all female acquaintances when he greets them, only kissed me in bed when I asked him to. During sex, he never held me close and would only enter me not just from a missionary position, but with his body upright and far from mine, which he need to remain supine. If I asked him to kiss me, Christopher would bend towards me, give a perfunctory pause on my mouth, before resuming his upright position. If I didn’t ask, there was never a connection of lips. This seemingly unconscious avoidance of tongue, teeth, and moist warmth elevated kissing to the seat of the heart, of passion. This had been the case for so long, I couldn’t remember when it had begun. Sex was in the category, along with money, of subjects Christopher refused to discuss, somewhere along the years we were together I had accepted that great sex—what I imagined as being intellectually, emotionally and, lastly, physically connected sex—was just not going to be a part of my life.
Just before the second commercial break in *Pretty Woman*, Roberts began languorously kissing a sleeping Gere. Instantly, the boys rolled over and moaned, hiding their faces in their pillows and under their sheets, Jules surprisingly able to breathe with his head so far under my arm he was making me sweat.

“Is she still kissing him?” Hugo screeched before coming out from under his covers to peek.

“No, she’s stopped,” I told him. Yet for all their feigned horror, the boys didn’t want me to turn off the movie and we watched it to the romantic, sexist ending of Capitalist Prince Charming sweeping Cinderella-the-Whore off to a life of wealth and leisure. Do these paternalistic themes not die because women are still largely culpable in perpetuating them? An ardent student of French Feminism when I met Christopher, I never expected to wake up one day living like Harriet Nelson during the day and Hooker Sex Wife in bed at night. Yet, somehow, I did. And, honestly, at least in the daytime, it only partially repulsed me.

The next morning, I did not hustle us back into the car given our twelve-hour drive the day before. Instead, I sat reading that summer’s runaway bestseller, *Eat, Pray, Love*, at the pool’s edge while the boys burned off their energy. It was close to the noon when we checked out of the hotel and got back into the car.

Shreveport is on the western edge of Louisiana, not far from the Texas border. The first leg of our drive was 320 miles to Austin, where my cousin Adam would meet us so we could see the largest U.S. urban bat colony fly out from under the bridge next to the offices of The Statesman, Austin’s newspaper. As we headed to Texas, we put *Harry*
Potter back on the stereo, Claude managing the CDs when they needed changed, and as it had the day before, the story absorbed our attention.

The terrain of East Texas was as flat, if not flatter, than the land we had driven through the day before. I had hoped we would see something of Dallas as, according to the map, we were driving right by it, but when we got there, the interstate acted like a moat around the metropolitan region, keeping us from spying the skyline, if Dallas even has one. I was trying to mature my opinion of Texas. Then president George W. Bush, whose private residence was in the state, had much to do with my disdain. But it went further back than Bush. When an undergrad at Miami of Ohio, Christopher had spent his summers near Dallas at the home of his girlfriend, the woman who became his first wife. He felt that nowhere else on earth were people ignorant and arrogant in equal measure. Given the fact that Texas executes nearly twice as many death row inmates than any other state in any given year, along with the regular news cycle about groups of Texans working to secede the state from the union, I believed Christopher’s opinion held weight.

As with most bias, my opinions were formed by indirect perception, not personal experience. A few weeks before our trip I had read A Woman of Independent Means by Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey, an epistolary novel based upon the life of the author’s Texan grandmother. The people in the book were certainly western—independent and brashly confidant, something I am comfortable with, even like. They did not behave like silver spooned snobs who might care more about cutting brush than the diplomatic needs of our nation. Also, I had recently learned that the airport in Austin is named after Barbara Jordan, the first black woman to serve in the U.S. Senate. And I loved the critiques of
president Bush as given by unapologetic Texan Molly Ivins. Ivins had died earlier that year of the same disease that had taken her friend, another plucky Texan, former governor Ann Richards, a few years earlier. No, I was rethinking my stand on Texas, moving toward seeing those colorful few in the state calling for secession as fringe Texans, and I had stopped wishing them success.

I liked Austin about sixty miles before we got there when the radio stations went from all Christian all the time to everything musically hip. Listening to the White Stripes, we made our way to the Texas State Capitol building, marked like a bull’s-eye on the map of Austin. Running from its south side is Congress Avenue, a street made relevant with galleries and museums, restaurants and cafés, perhaps due in part to the bats whose address is also Congress Avenue, about seven blocks from the Capitol. These flying mammals draw enormous crowds on most summer nights. The Congress Avenue Bridge spans Lady Bird Lake, which, as it extrudes itself lengthwise along the city’s edge, appears more like a river than a lake.

“Grab your cameras boys, let’s go look at the Capitol.” I said as I parked the car at a meter just a block off of Congress Avenue. We were only three blocks from the Capitol Building, which resembles the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. with a prominent dome visible all along the length of the several streets that originate at the edge of the esplanade surrounding the white building. When we got out of the car the early evening air was warm, but not too warm. Certainly not as hot as I had expected central Texas to be in late July. Texas was getting record rainfall that year, almost like a monsoon season
with daily afternoon showers, and it was helping to keep things a bit cooler. It was also refilling the water table in several urban areas, including Austin and San Antonio.

“Stay close until we get to the grass!” I told the boys who, free from the confines of the car, raced ahead and leapt on bus stop benches and park walls. We crossed the street in front of the esplanade and the boys tore away for the nearest fountain where other children were already playing. The walkway leading to the doors of the Capitol is paved in two tones of square pavers in a path as wide as a two-lane highway. Besides fountains, several statues and formal gardens decorated the esplanade. As the boys yelled and splashed each other at the fountain, I walked over to an enormous Civil War Monument. It had been erected in 1903, when many of that war’s veterans would still have been living. On a square base as big as a minivan and perhaps ten feet high, life-sized brass statues stand in each corner representing the soldiers of the Navy, Cavalry, Infantry, and Artillery. In the center, looking down from his own block of gray stone is the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis. The Texan Civil War dead are listed on one side of the massive base. When I turned the corner and read the next inscription, I quickly called the boys over.

“Claude, Hugo, Jules, come here! You have to see this! Look,” I said, pointing to the inscription, “history isn’t just facts, it’s how people see things.”

DIED
FOR STATES RIGHTS
GUARANTEED UNDER THE CONSTITUTION
THE PEOPLE OF THE SOUTH, ANIMATED BY THE SPIRIT OF 1776, TO PRESERVE THEIR RIGHTS, WITHDREW FROM THE FEDERAL COMPACT IN 1861. THE NORTH RESORTED TO COERCION.
THE SOUTH, AGAINST OVERWHELMING NUMBERS AND RESOURCES,
Fought until exhausted.
During the war there were twenty two hundred and fifty seven engagements.
In eighteen hundred and eighty two of these, at least one regiment took part.
Number of men enlisted:
Confederate armies 600,000; Federal armies 2,859,132
Losses from all causes:
Confederate, 437,000; Federal, 485,216

Not convinced they’d read the entire inscription, I read it out loud to the boys but
it didn’t impact on them as it did me. I knew from traveling, not only in the South, but
also in France the legacy defeat and occupation can have on a population. It leaves a
lasting effect long after those who lived through the defeat have reclaimed, rebuilt and
resumed their lives. It lives on long after those survivors and their children have all gone
to their graves. It lives on and on.

“Can we go inside the building?” asked Hugo as soon as I had finished reading.

“Sure, I don’t know if it’s open, but let’s go see.”

Even though it was nearly seven o’clock, the building was open. This is
something different in the West than the East—fewer places, both built or natural, are
restricted from public access. There’s just so much expanse in the West that containment
is rarely a consideration. We wandered through the congressional chambers, corridors of
offices, but mostly we climbed floor after floor in the circular atrium under the dome.
The stairs are on the North and South sides and Claude raced up one set of stairs while
the little boys and I raced up the other side. When they were younger, I always let the
boys win contests of strength and speed. But that summer Claude was not only the same
height as me, he and Hugo both routinely outlasted me. At the Texas Statehouse, I used
my longer legs to take the stairs three at a time. At each landing, I ran, with Hugo and Jules just behind me, across the marble floor to the stone fence around the circular atrium and would see on the other side of the vaulted space Claude’s face and shoulders as he came up the stairs, his blonde hair flapping on the sides of his head with each stride.

We left the Capitol, stopping to look near the exit at large paintings of the Alamo and a portrait of Davy Crockett, when my cousin Adam called to say he was close. The boys had last seen Adam three years earlier at a small family gathering in Nauvoo, Illinois, a town important in Mormon history.

My father’s family is all Mormon and, if there were such a thing, they would be something like Mormon royalty. All of my great-great-grandparents, except one couple, converted in Europe in the 1850s and ‘60s and pioneered to Utah. The excepted great-great-grandparents converted in the 1840s before the Church’s founder, Joseph Smith, had been murdered, and effectively martyred, by a mob outside of Nauvoo. It is from that Illinois town on the Mississippi River that the Mormons migrated en masse, seeking freedom from persecution, to Utah under the leadership of Brigham Young. My cousin, Adam, my sisters, and I are the only cousins of our generation not to consider ourselves Mormon.

It hadn’t been three years since I had seen Adam. He had been at Grama’s burial earlier that year, the date memorable because it was Cinco de Mayo. Having flown alone to Salt Lake City the day before, I drove 80 miles south the morning of the ceremony to the mountain town of Nephi. In Nephi, swirling snow gusted, tossing open my wrap-around skirt of black wool crêpe.
In May of 1983, just before I graduated from high school, my mother told me that she expected me to pay her $200 a month in rent the following month. Grama, needing help caring for Grandpa sent me the bus fare to move out to Tucson. I left the same week that I graduated. August of that summer, when Grama and I buried Grandpa in his family’s section of the cemetery, was the last time that I had been in Nephi. It was the last trip the three of us took together. Grama and I took turns driving while Grandpa’s ashes, in a cardboard box wrapped in gold foil gift paper, rested between the feet of the passenger. We wended our way from Tucson through the Arizona desert, the four corners region, and the canyon-riddled Mormon state. It was a festive trip, we were drinking caffeine-free diet Cokes and giddily laughing at nothing, anything. The hard work of the previous months had ended. Grandpa no longer working on his painful death; cancer having spent more than a decade working its way through his body, beginning in his kidneys and continuing on a relentless march, leaving little of his body unconquered. Grama, with her palsied hands, no longer changing the hospice catheter that attached to Grandpa’s penis with a condom. I no longer grinding his morphine tablets before putting the powder in a watery mixture of Cream-O-Wheat, drawing the mess up into a syringe, hoping all the while I might get enough of it down his throat to diminish his pain. No longer did Grama and I have to worry what we would do if Grandpa fell out of bed, his body seemingly made of lead once it no longer cooperated in his movement. It took a year after Grandpa’s death for Grama’s grief to arrive.

Grama arrived at her own burial in a blue floral casket, riding up to Nephi in a U-haul trailer attached to a borrowed pick-up truck driven by her youngest son. They made
nearly the same trip Grama and I had made with Grandpa’s remains, except this time she came from Phoenix where she had lived the last decade of her life. Under the open tent at the graveside were relatives from both Grama and Grandpa’s family, and I felt like the child of an immigrant who had returned to my ancestral village. People I had never met knew me immediately as a Christensen. “Whose child are you?” they asked, my blonde hair, almond-shaped blue eyes and height identifying me as readily as a name tag might. Huddled next to me in the blowing spring snow, Adam was asked by the same relatives if he was my husband. Adopted and likely part Native American, he has dark features, a hooked nose and, even at 28, had little reason to shave. Eleven years my junior, his incorrigible teasing has always made him more like a kid brother whom I have often wanted to smack.

“Yes, we were married five years ago,” said Adam, tightening his arm around my shoulder and quickly responding to the inquiries when I didn’t bother answering. I wandered in my thoughts, staring at the photo my funny little Grama had taken of herself easily twenty years earlier, saying at the time, “I’m giving everyone this picture of me to use at my funeral.” Placed in front of her decorator casket, she looked back at me from the photo not as she did those last years while she withered under the insidious effects of diabetes, but as I always knew her, or at least see her when I remember her—small and wrinkled, her own blue eyes bright and undeniably clever.

When the graveside ceremony ended, Adam kept his arm around me as we left Grama all by herself in her blue casket, completely exposed. Rarely anymore do they lower caskets into the ground while the family stands by and I had to fight the urge to
stay and wait for the sextons to tuck her safely into the earth. I drove alone in my rental car to a nearby restaurant where the family reconvened for a banquet luncheon. Before leaving the cemetery, I looked over my shoulder and through the passenger window back to my grandparent’s gravesite. Everyone had left and Grama’s casket was abandoned under the white plastic canopy. It was wrong, I felt, just to leave her like that.

At the restaurant, I was forced to make polite conversation with relatives I didn’t know and will likely never see again. Just after we ordered our lunches, Adam slipped out. He returned when the food was served and confirmed for me that Grama was in the ground, he had gone back to the cemetery and checked.

Not lingering after the plates were cleared, the family scattered as though they were made of the same fluff of the day’s windblown snowflakes. Adam and I were the only ones catching planes in Salt Lake City. We followed each other back north in our rented cars.

“I can’t make you a martini exactly,” our waiter, Juvé, told me later that night in Salt Lake. “You see, in Utah, a cocktail can have only one shot of alcohol. However, if you order a shot of vodka with a side of Grey Goose and a splash of vermouth, I can put it in one glass for you.”

“Okay,” I said, “I think I have it, Juvé, I want a shot of vodka with a side of Grey Goose and a splash of vermouth and would you mind bringing it to me all in one glass?” The waiter smiled widely, “Very good, I’ll be right back.” Cripes, what do you have to do to get a drink in Utah? Adam and I had gone to a brewpub, which are ironically plentiful in the state because before the liquor laws were “relaxed,” it was one way to get around
the prohibitions. Mormons are overwhelmingly as capitalistic as they are teetotalers and they would not have wanted to hinder free enterprise in their state.

“When I was nine, Mary went back to school for her PhD in Social Work and I was told not to come home until nine o’clock each night so she could study.” My uncle Steven and his first wife, Mary, had adopted Adam from a distant cousin of Mary’s when he was five. They had wanted to adopt him as an infant, but his birth mother had changed her mind after he was born, deciding to keep him. Later, when the authorities took Adam from his birth mother after she’d been charged with child abuse, Steven and Mary were contacted and asked if they were still interested.

“But what about your dad, Adam? Steven should’ve been taking care of you while Mary studied.” Steven and my dad are the two middle brothers in their family of four boys. Adam defended Steven.

“What could he do? She was in charge.”

“He could’ve taken you somewhere, he could’ve, you know, fathered you!”

“Well, it didn’t matter.” Adam changed the subject, “because when she got her PhD, she moved out. I haven’t seen her since.”

“How old were you then?”

“Fourteen.”

“So for five years you ran the streets until nine at night?”

“Well, in the summers I stayed with Grama.”

“Yeah, I remember.” When I was eighteen, I lived with Grama and waitressed the graveyard shift at the Village Inn 24-hour Restaurant on Miracle Mile. Little Adam
followed behind Grama’s heels the summer after Grandpa died, talking non-stop while she hitched her 17’ Aristocrat camper to her Ford pick-up and, as she and Grandpa had done with me, took him camping in the Chirachaua Mountains in Cochise County. They were gone for weeks and I blissfully had the house all to myself.

“But the summer after Mary left, I stayed with Mary’s mother out here in Utah and you see, I was a bit of a pyro.”

“What kid isn’t a pyro at one point?” I asked.

“Yeah, but I set her kitchen throw rug on fire. She convinced my dad I was a delinquent and had him send me to this reform school in Provo.”

“Just for setting the rug on fire?”

“Well, I was ADD and a handful. But I wasn’t, you know, a delinquent,” he said and I remembered he did keep Grama busy whenever he came to stay with her, but she never thought him incorrigible. Or, at least, never told me he was.

“Your dad believed her, Mary’s mother?”

“Yep, my dad drove me all the way from Peoria to the reform school and just dropped me off. He never told me why I was going there. Then, when I got there, I had to go to these group sessions where they asked why we were there. One guy had raped his sister, another kid shot a kid at school, and a lot of them had multiple records for all kinds of things.”

“Whoah, that’s serious stuff!”

“No kidding. Then the group leader asked me, ‘Adam, why are you here?’ and I told him it’s because my grades where bad. Which was all I could figure. But the
counselors told me I wasn’t cooperating. That I was lying. That I was in denial. That I showed no remorse. And that’s when I decided to hell with the Church.”

“How long were you there?”

“Six months and then my dad came and got me. He told me he was sorry, he shouldn’t have listened to Mary’s mother.”

“Oh, that’s little consolation.”

“Hey, please don’t tell your dad,” he asked. “It would hurt my dad if the family knew.”

Unlike Adam, who grew up and was confirmed in the Church, my drug and sex addicted hippy dad just didn’t bother to take us. To this day, he claims he himself loved growing up in the extended community of Mormons when he was a boy. But as an adult, he once told me, he never thought of the Church. As a result, the experience my sisters and I have had with our family religion is limited to our visits with Grama, which felt for me voyeuristic in nature. For Adam, the Church is part of what defines him and his angry rejection of it reveals an attachment to it.

“Whatever happened to Mary?”

“Who knows? When her mother was sick a few years ago, we had a hard time finding her. Finally, we were able to track her down through the Church. Even then, she wouldn’t talk to her mother and communicated only through her Bishop.”

After high school, Adam joined the Army Rangers and jumped out of planes all over the globe. When he came to Nauvoo, he had been discharged and was living in Savannah, Georgia where he was a fire fighter. He had recently moved to San Antonio
where the week prior to Grama’s burial, he had completed his first week of training at the police academy.

“For someone who’s been through so much, you seem to have turned out pretty balanced.” I told him, the words echoing tinnily in my ear. It’s what I often hear when I list the events of my childhood out like items on a résumé. If and when I am asked how I pulled together a seemingly normal life, I credit Grama.

* * *

In Austin, Adam pulled up to the corner we were waiting at in his truly Texan truck, big enough to seat five in the cab and chase a renegade herd of cattle. The biggins didn’t even greet him before assaulting him with questions in such rapid fire it was hard to hear who said what when:

“When do you get a gun?” asked Hugo. “Do you get to keep it at home? Do they make you learn how to shoot it?”

“My friend tells me you have to get tasered and pepper sprayed to know what it feels like since you’ll get to do it as a cop,” said Claude, “Is that true? Doesn’t that hurt? Can’t it make you blind?”

“Whoa, hold on! One at a time,” laughed Adam before answering them, “I get a gun just before I graduate but only after I’ve taken safety courses, and then, yes, I get to keep it at home. In some states they do taser cadets, but not in Texas. I do get pepper sprayed in a few months though.”

If he did nothing else all weekend, Adam was officially cool. While I find noble Adam’s previous profession, fire fighting, one in which risks are taken to save lives, I am
dubious about what motivates someone to become a cop. The boys, however, found thrilling the uniform, badge, gun, car with lights that comes with being a cop. They would someday learn about ’69 riots in Chicago, ’92 ones L.A., horrific abuses in New York City where, in my lifetime, the police had brutally abused their power, events that gave me pause when I learned Adam had switched careers.

It was close to dusk, so instead of eating dinner and risk missing the bats, we walked down the avenue to their roost. A sizable crowd had gathered atop the bridge and down below in the parking lot of the Austin Statesman. Bat volunteers, wearing their Congress Avenue Bridge Bats t-shirts, mingled through the crowds, answering questions.

“Boys, let’s go find out about these bats,” I said and we walked up to a woman standing at a table with a jar labeled “Bat Donations.” Perhaps no more than 25, the volunteer was as ample as the bats are tiny. Her wavy hair was parted in the middle and pulled back in a ponytail at the nape of her neck. That along with the cargo pants and hiking boots she wore told me she was the bat geek for us. I asked her if she could tell us about them.

“Why, yes,” she said, “These bats are Mexican Free-tail bats and with one and a half million bats estimated, this is the largest urban bat colony in the United States. The bats arrive here each year in March and then fly back to Mexico in November.”

“Did Austin make the bridge to house a bat colony?” I asked. Adam and the boys were standing with me listening to the volunteer.

“Oh, no. The bridge was engineered to have concrete crevices to absorb impact from traffic, but it turns out that these crevices are perfect roosting places for the bats.”
Hugo piped in, “When will they start to come out already?”

“Well, usually they’d be flying now since the sun is mostly set. But because we have been having so much rain this year, we have more bugs than normal. This is good for the bats in two ways,”

“More to eat!” Hugo finished for her.

“Yes, that’s right,” said the volunteer and she smiled at Hugo, “But also, they don’t have to come out quite so early to catch as many bugs as they need for nutrition, so they can wait until it’s a little darker out and this protects them from their predators.”

“Predators? Who eats bats?” asked Hugo.

“Well, mostly owls, but also there are other nocturnal birds of prey and some who aren’t nocturnal but who briefly hunt for the bats in those few minutes before it’s too dark for them to see."

“Will we be able to see the bats, then?” I asked.

“It is harder in the dark, and Mexican Free-tails are especially tiny bats, but you’ll see them as there are so many. You want to watch the east side of the bridge, because that’s the direction they’ll fly in.”

I thanked the volunteer and put a couple dollars in her donation box. The boys ran ahead to stand under the bridge, leaving Adam and me to follow. The Bat Lady was correct, the bats waited well past dusk before creating a rippling ribbon in the air as they rose from their roost. Because they are so small, about three and a half inches long, and it was so dark, it was like viewing a cloud of gnats; you could kind of see them, but at just a few feet away, it was more their movement that registered dimly on our corneas.
Disappointed, we went up to the top of the bridge to see if the viewing was any better, but the bridge lights only made things worse as our eyes adjusted for seeing in the light and the bats flew above the spectrum shining down from the lamps. The city doesn’t shine lights on the bats because it confuses them and also highlights them for predators.

“I’m hungry,” said Jules and we all agreed we were more interested in dinner than trying in vain to see the Mexican Free-tails.

An hour later, Hugo and Jules went with Adam in his truck while Claude dozed next to me in the Matrix on the 70-mile trip to Adam’s townhouse in San Antonio. Once there, the boys were soon lined up on the floor in their sleeping bags, next to the bed I was to sleep in. I closed the door most of the way, leaving it open a few inches for the hall light to enter the room.

Downstairs I joined Adam on the couch with a glass of water.

“Where’s Charmaine?”

“At work. She gets off at 7:30 in the morning and will get here around nine, if she goes to the gym on her way home.”

Charmaine, a neonatal nurse, worked two shifts each week, each shift twenty-four hours long. How that is good for anyone, including the patients, baffles me. In Nauvoo, Adam told me his dad was upset with him because he and Charmaine were living together. In May when we’d gone out after Grama’s burial, Adam told me about a number of women he had seen since he and Charmaine had broken up more than a year earlier. Most of them, like Charmaine, were a good bit older than Adam. It was only when I called and talked with Adam about adding a stop in San Antonio to our road trip
that he told me he was renting a room from Charmaine. Until then, I was under the impression that he lived alone.

“Will she be okay with three boys staying in a two bedroom apartment?” I had asked.

“I pay half the rent, I can say who comes to visit me,” he had answered.

I don’t know what I was expecting Charmaine to look like. When I first heard her name, I asked Adam if she was black. Until recently, racism was an institutionalized part of the Mormon Church. If Charmaine were black, it would explain why I was the first person in the family to meet her.

“No!” Adam had answered somewhat defensively, “Why does everyone ask me that?”

“Her name,” I replied.

The following morning before the boys were up, I met Charmaine in the kitchen. Dark haired, she was tiny, both short and slip. Below her prominent clavicles, breasts grapefruitishly round and hard protruded from her scoop-collared blouse. On her face, unnaturally large eyes and full lips overwhelmed her tiny nose. Her skin was flawless, pale and, if such a thing is possible, luminescent. She looked like an elf from *Lord of the Rings*. I towered over her, big and clunky, something I hadn’t felt since living in France with all the petite Française, more than a decade and a half ago.

“Hi, I’m Adam’s cousin, Holly.” She looked up at me with her chin down, making her eyes all the more globe-like.
“I’m Charmaine,” she said softly as she put a hand seemingly devoid of muscle into my own. Dead fish handshake! Make my skin crawl! Every time! My boys all know the how to provide a firm, direct handshake while looking the other person in the eyes. Oh, yes, they most certainly do. (I noted to myself: go back over handshakes with the boys later in the day).

Little more than an hour later, after everyone had eaten and gotten dressed, I told Adam we were ready to go. We had planned a day in downtown San Antonio like the unabashed tourists we were. Telling me to wait, Adam ran upstairs.

“Charmaine needs more time to get ready,” he said when he came back down.

“Oh! I’m sorry, I thought after working for twenty-four hours, she’d want to collapse in bed.”

“No, she tries to get back on a regular schedule and stays up all day.”

“Fair enough, boys, can you play video games a bit longer?” I asked, clearly joking. I don’t allow video games in our home—without a television, it’s impossible to have whatever Nintendo, X-Box, or other such stuff is the current rage. No Gameboys or computer games either. Cruel though it may be, I have my children go outside, read books, draw or play games. Adam is convinced my parenting style is little less than child abuse and first thing that morning, before the boys rose, he pulled all his Star Wars video games out and set them up. I pulled out Eat, Pray, Love and read on the couch next to my Jedi warriors. I didn’t hear Charmaine’s feet on the stairs next to me when she came down them twenty minutes later. I looked up when she spoke.
“You might as well go on ahead without me, I’m going to be much longer,” she said. Charmaine was showered and fully dressed. I had heard her style her hair with the blow dryer and could see that she had theatrically applied shimmery green and gold eyeshadow. What more is expected of women visiting the Alamo?

“Oh, that’s okay,” said Claude, before anyone else could speak, “we can wait.” Charmaine gave Adam, who was in mortal combat with Hugo on the widescreen TV, a sharp look and he quickly handed Claude his control set and jumped up. The two of them disappeared upstairs. Five minutes later, Adam came down alone.

“Let’s go.”

“We can wait, really, it’s fine.”

“No, let’s go.” I had never seen Adam glare before.

After he moved his clutter to the bed of his truck we clambered into the cab, the boys squeezed in the back like fancy fruit in a Christmas package. Adam made the tires squeal as we pulled out of the parking lot, making the boys cheer. Because it was Saturday, downtown San Antonio was crowded with tourists. As there was no possibility of cheap parking, we parked on the top floor of a garage near the Alamo. At the elevator, Jules pushed the down button and we waited with a small group of people who had also just parked.

“I think it’d be faster if we just took the stairs,” I said.

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Claude answered.

“Wait, the elevator’s here!” said Hugo.

“I’m still going down the stairs,” I said.
“Me too,” said Claude who was then echoed by Jules.

“I bet I beat you guys, it’s five floors!” Hugo said in an emphatic shriek.

Along with Adam, the boys and I flung ourselves down the stairs just as Hugo stepped onto the elevator. At floor four, Adam dashed into the doorway leading to the garage and was back behind us before we’d rounded the landing between the floors. He did the same thing again at the third level.

“Where are you going?” I asked him after he did it on the second floor.

“I’m pushing the button for the elevator at each floor.”

We all hit the ground floor puffing from running, except for Adam, that is. In front of the elevator we waited. And chortled. And waited. By the time the doors opened, we had caught our breath, yet we were snorting.

“That was the slowest elevator I have ever been on in my entire life!” Hugo screamed at us as he stepped off of the elevator. “It even stopped at floors where there was nobody waiting! What? What’s so funny?!”

I told him what Adam had done and by his reaction, as hokey as it sounds, I knew my Hugo was growing up. Hugo, while he loves to be the center of attention (what middle child doesn’t?), hates to be on the receiving end of a joke. When he was turning five and demanding every outrageous present he could think of, including things I would never purchase, such as electric kid cars, I told him I was going to package him up a dead frozen squirrel. (You might understandably ask, “Where did that sick notion come from?”)

The truth is, I don’t remember, maybe I saw one on the side of the road as he was reciting his unrealistic wish list.) Perhaps harsh, it became a multi-year running joke in
the family; in fact, I doubt it will ever die because it consistently makes Hugo fume. “Stop it! It’s not funny!” he’ll say as we bite our lips to suppress giggles until the next person spouts a new way to present a dead frozen squirrel, such as having one set upright on the cake, holding the birthday candles. Hugo is by nature bombastic, a trait that makes even his mother, who loves him dearly, find a bit of wicked pleasure in setting him off with just a mention of those fluffy tailed varmints served, for instance, stiff on a stick. At the elevator trick, however, Hugo laughed and laughed. He laughed at the joke and he laughed at himself. He laughed about it spontaneously for months to come.

We walked to the crowded white stone cluster of buildings that comprise the Alamo and quickly found a room that showed on endless loop a short film on the famous battle that took place there. We squeezed ourselves onto one of the backless benches in the room and just as the movie began, Adam’s cell phone vibrated. He looked at his phone, stood up and left the room. While Adam took his call, we learned that the 1836 battle at the Alamo was part of the Texas Revolution, not the Mexican-American wars of the 1840s. Texas was part of Mexico and wanted to be independent. Looking like a bull’s pizzle that pokes our neighbor to the south, it’s hard to imagine why the two countries didn’t split the difference and draw the border from El Paso/Ciudad Juarez to Houston leaving all those extraneous parts to the south in Mexico.

When we came out of the edufilm, Adam told us Charmaine had called and was nearby at a Starbucks where there was an iPod store.

“Should we go meet her there?” I asked.
“No, she’s upset because she had a hard time finding parking and she wants to be alone while she downloads music onto her new iPod,” he said and I wondered why she’d even called then.

After walking the grounds of the Alamo, we crossed the street where two museums were doing a brisk business. These museums are not what you might expect—say, facilities run by the Texas Historical Society to complement the Alamo, but instead Madame Toussant’s, with her wax figures, and Ripley’s, with his *Believe It Or Not* items and photos. Tourists streamed around the adjoining entrances, many of them were lined up to pay the more than twenty dollars a ticket each museum charged to enter. Next to the ticket booths, Ripley’s had a video arcade with track lighting over the entrance, chasing round and round like comets beckoning the quarters out of our pants. The walls were painted a garish yellow and pink and from loudspeakers, replacing the carney, a voice bellowed, “Come See What Your Eyes Won’t Believe!” before hinting at the oddities inside. The word was pandemonium and if I were a pickpocket, I would work there.

While Claude and Hugo love to read *Ripley’s Believe It Or Not* books (unlike the pocket paper backs I read as a girl, Ripley’s are now 11x14 hardbacks containing color photos of bizarre ephemera), I wanted to get away as fast as I can. Besides, nearly $100 on tickets was a budget-buster. When I explained this, the boys gave me surprisingly little resistance and we moved away down a side street that seemed deafeningly quiet in sudden contrast to the mayhem behind us.

Turning the corner a couple of blocks later, we happened upon a street festival. At one end the road was blocked off by a stage for musicians to perform, whether by
schedule or open mic I was never able to tell, but there was a steady stream of local guitarists and small bands singing bluegrass, country and Tejano music. Near the stage was a rock climbing wall and both Claude and Hugo paid with their own money and then climbed to the top. Nearby, Jules won a stuffed bulldog in a wrestler’s uniform by popping balloons with darts. Adam got another call from Charmaine and headed off to find her and bring her back to us for lunch.

“We’re gonna go in there,” I told Adam before he left, pointing to a medium sized urban market that also had a deli. Once inside the market I could tell it had not been open long because the construction was new, the paint fresh and it was so very clean.

“We just opened a month ago, my fiancé and I, which is so crazy because next Saturday we’re getting married!” said Ruby, the young co-owner of the market. I stood there chatting with her for a few minutes after ordering a large pizza. Through the enormous storefront windows I could see an old theatre under renovation across the street, clearly a venue for live performance. Ruby told me that the work on the theatre had been start and stop for years, but recently a rich man had given enough money to finish the work and everyone hoped it would be done by the end of summer. I asked about her business.

“Yes, we’ve been pretty busy, but I’m not sure if it’s because the heat hasn’t been so bad this summer with all the rain. The festival is actually slowing business down, I don’t know if people are eating the food from the street vendors or if they just can’t see us because the street’s so full of booths. But we have so much to do before we leave for our wedding, it’s okay it’s quiet.” Listening to Ruby, I imagined living nearby, shopping
in her store regularly. Whenever I travel I find myself thinking about what it would be like living in the places I am visiting.

“Help yourself to some cheese pizza,” I told Charmaine and Adam when they returned a few minutes after our pizza was served. Charmaine was pouting, and I had never seen a grown up pout with the precise expression of a five-year-old. I was finding her both repellent and completely fascinating. She and Adam went to the counter, never addressing Ruby, just giving her their order.

“Is something the matter?” I asked when they sat back down.

“My brother expects us to come to Austin today.” I didn’t know she had a brother.

“Oh, is there something going on up there?”

“Yes, he is having a barbeque tonight for us because we were supposed to go and see the bats. Adam told me we would all go and see the bats on Saturday night, so my brother invited us to come to his place this afternoon.” Adam was silent as were my boys who were drinking it in.

“I’m sorry, I’m a little confused.” I said, “I didn’t know you were planning on us going to Austin, Adam didn’t tell me.”

“We’d made the plans earlier this week.”

“I’m sorry, Adam should’ve told me,” I said, looking at Adam who remained silent. Turning back to Charmaine, I said, “I was the one who suggested we watch the bats last night because we had to drive through Austin to get to San Antonio.”

“Yes, but Adam didn’t tell me until just now that you went to see the bats last night.”
What the hell was going on here? Clearly, they were not “just roommates” and I didn’t like how I suddenly felt I was supposed to arbitrate this dispute. Or, more likely, scold the silent Adam. His face was expressionless, though he looked me in the eyes when Charmaine spoke. He continued to look at me when I spoke.

“Well, is your brother’s barbeque something you want to go to? You don’t need to babysit us, if you two need to get up to Austin.” I wasn’t eager to involve us in a trip to Austin, in part because I wanted a day spent mostly out of the car and a round trip to Austin is 140 miles. But neither was I eager to find us trapped with Charmaine and her family.

“I don’t know,” she said, “I should’ve left two hours ago and if Adam doesn’t come with me, I can’t go because I’m too tired to drive myself.”

“How you function at all after working a 24 hour shift amazes me. But please, don’t worry about us, just do what you need.”

“Well, if I wait much longer,” she said, “it will take me an hour to get out of here, it’s so crowded and then I have to go and pack my stuff. I don’t know if I can even get there in time.” For a barbeque? Aren’t barbeques by definition “stop by when you can, we’ll be cooking all day?”

“Well, whatever you decide, we’ll understand,” I tell her.

The boys went outside, agreeing to stay in front of the store, just as Ruby walked up with Adam and Charmaine’s order.

“Thanks, Ruby,” I told her and she shot me a smile. To fill what had become an uncomfortable silence, I told them what I had learned from Ruby about the neighborhood
and her new life in business and marriage. I thought it all delightfully romantic. Adam and Charmaine said nothing. When they had finished eating, Adam walked Charmaine back to Starbucks, explaining that she was afraid she would get lost and end up in a bad section of downtown if he didn’t escort her. I joined the boys, unclear why our visit suddenly seemed so complicated.

Claude was the first to comment.

“What’s with her?”

“Who?” I asked him, knowing full well whom he meant.

“What’s her name, Adam’s girlfriend?”

“Charmaine. She’s not very happy I guess.”

“No, but if she wants to go to her brother’s, she should just go.”

“Yeah, really,” said Hugo.

“But, you know, Adam should’ve let her know yesterday that he was going to meet us up there last night to see the bats.” They only mildly agreed to this, as their opinions were set—they liked Adam and had found nothing compelling about his “roommate.”

We wandered back into the street festival and found Buffalo Bill’s Wild West museum and restaurant. It was touristy, but not like the museums across from the Alamo. The corner entrance opened up into a big barroom, like the ones (or was it the same one each time?) seen in every western movie and TV show since John Ford began making films. Inside, the crowd seemed mixed with locals who were watching sports on the big screen above the bar. At the back of the barroom the boys plugged a metal box with
quarters, picked up rifles, about the size of .22s, secured to a metal fence by a thin chain and shot at fake animals that moved on tracks behind the fence. Deer and ducks stammered and slid across the shooting range while old timey banjo music filled the room. All three boys asked if they could each cash into quarters $10 of their own money to play. Frankly, I was eager for a few moments to myself and so agreed.

Leaving them to their “authentic western experience,” I bellied up to the bar as only one can do in such a place, ordered a draft beer and pulled out my journal. I wrote about Christensen men, meaning my dad and his three brothers. Three of them clean cut Mormons who went on missions, one of them always told he looked like a guy from ZZTop. All of them married to harridans. Three of them repeatedly, each divorcing a bitter nag only to quickly replace her with another bitter nag. Both my dad and his older brother were on their third wives. Well, I haven’t met my uncle’s third wife, so I can’t say what she’s like, but his first two lived up to the title. And I wondered which I was more like, the cowered and cowardly Christensen men or their bitchy, “I’m such a martyr” wives? Which really boils down to this question: Am I more like my father or my mother? Or am I the worst of both? Had I complained about what I hadn’t been able to do because of my marriage to Christopher? Yes, I had. Had I also felt deep regret for giving up the life I had when I met him, one filled with intellectual and emotional connections? Yes, I did. When I was a good wifey, did I love the praise he poured on me for my wit and beauty, telling me he not only loved, but adored me? I ate it up. And at those times when I just couldn’t fake it, did I feel like the drooling, sniveling hunchback, riddled with mental illness, he told me I was. Yes, perhaps more fully than anything else, I believed in
my unlovable, hideous self. And so I controlled what I could. The parenting, the household, the finances. It was a silent agreement. He wanted to be a superstar architect and not bothered with the details of marriage and parenting. I wanted to be essential in the lives of each member of our family. It was a fucked up dance, but clearly worked on some level.

That summer, somehow because Grama was gone, pennies were dropping all over inside my head. The one question I direly needed to address was, “Who am I and what do I want?” To not safely answer, “His Wife,” or “Their Mother,” the answer that had allowed me for so long not to look closely at myself. That I wanted out of the marriage was clear, but that was not enough. Rejecting what I didn’t want was not the same as defining what I did want. Just as saying who I am not doesn’t clarify who I am, not really. And as long as I orchestrated my life by what I didn’t want, I would always live by that very definition. I didn’t want to be Adam or Charmaine, my father or my mother, but who was it I wanted to be?

Charmaine didn’t go to Austin that day and we stayed with them another insufferable day and night in which she began openly scolding Adam for absurdities, such as not leaving to buy her a sweater when her spaghetti strap top left her chilled in a restaurant. Adam went silent whenever she was around. On our last hour alone the afternoon before we left, while Charmaine was at the gym, I tried giving Adam a big sister talk.

“Think about your dad with Mary and even now with his second wife, from what you tell me. It’s just like my dad and all three of his wives. Don’t you see, Adam, you’re
living the same dynamic. I’m sure my dad never saw his marriages as anything like those of his brothers, but they all are! Nobody’s happy but apparently everybody’s comfortable because they keep making the same choices.”

Adam listened as though he’d never had anyone give him counsel before. He listened as though he wanted it, had been waiting for someone to talk to him about his personal life, something as far as I knew he never told anyone in the family about.

What was I, of all people, doing giving him advice on relationships?

It was the blind leading the naked.
Chapter Six:

Westward with Wizards

We left San Antonio early on Monday morning headed toward Carlsbad, New Mexico. Adam had to be at the Police Academy at seven a.m. and he helped me load the heavier bags into the pop-top on the car roof before saying goodbye.

“Thanks for the stay, good luck with everything,” I told him after I’d locked the pop-top and hopped down from the back bumper. Adam quickly looked over his shoulder toward the window on the second floor of his townhouse before giving me the quickest of hugs. Hugo flung his arms around Adam’s waist in his signature squeeze and release embrace. Jules followed with a gentle hug and Claude shook his hand.

“Keep practicing your Star Wars game!” Adam told the boys.

“Not likely. And Adam,” I said with mock sternness, “don’t you even think of sending it to them.”

“Ah, come on,” Hugo whined facetiously, knowing I would never let video games into our house.

In the Matrix the boys and I found our seats and buckled while Adam waited in his truck before peeling out of the parking lot ahead of us. We followed him to the freeway, which quickly spilled us out and away from the city, the landscape widening into the West Texas nothingness described in so much Western Music. The twangs of the Cowboy Junkies, Canadians who write music like they were born and raised in Lubbock,
Cowboy Junkies, Canadians who write music like they were born and raised in Lubbock, filled my head, forming a sound track to the drive. I was tempted to pull out my iPod and see if I could listen to Harry Potter in the foreground while Margo Timmins sang in the background, but it was somewhere in the pop-top and I didn’t want to go back up there until we were in New Mexico.

Twenty minutes out of town, I stopped at the last outpost, a new grocery store built for the western most exurb of San Antonio. Along with gas, we needed a new case of water bottles and some fresh apples. Happily, there was a Starbucks in the same plaza and I was able to get my morning favorite a tall red-eye in a grande cup. And then we were really off, San Antonio no longer holding our ankles.

“Put Harry Potter on!” Hugo called out.

“Are you sure you’re ready?”

“Yes!” The boys yelled in unison. Claude from his shotgun seat again managed the CDs. As usual, I made them wait until after we had fueled up and were on freeway for what would be several hours without stopping before putting the story on. The herky jerkiness of starting an audio book while running errands is like having commercial breaks in a good movie come every five minutes. Not only do I prefer settling into stories when we are on the road, once my head is in a good audio book, I’m likely to forget to look for an exit to fuel up the car with gas and provisions. Quite likely.

The land undulated with low hills pricked by equally low-lying cactus and scrubby bushes. On the car speakers, young wizard Potter made his way toward his ultimate confrontation with his nemesis. From sunny San Antonio, the car nosed quickly
towards dark skies. Soon everything took on a bluish cast. An hour after our last stop, the rain, steady, but not heavy, started pelting the road, our car, and the endless forests of waist-high bushes. The air coming in through the vents became pungent, the smell familiar. It took me several miles and more than ten minutes to place it because it was so out of context. I realized the bushes growing in the West Texas desert on either side of the interstate must be junipers, or at least some of them were and the rain was releasing the fragrant oil of these little evergreens. It was something I smelled almost every summer at Karmê Chöling Buddhist Meditation Center in Vermont. Midway up the Green Mountain State, we had attended Family Camp at Karmê Chöling in nine of the eleven previous summers. The first day of camp is ritually opened by a Tibetan Lhasang ceremony, purifying the participants before they spend more than a week together in crowded showers, humid dressing tents, various meditation rooms, at beaches and, at the end of most days, sharing wine and beers in the dining tent. In a Lhasang ceremony, a large fire is built in a pit on the side of the mountain upon which Karmê Chöling is situated, is covered with boughs of juniper, soaked first in water so as to make them burn with as much smoke as possible.

“Did you remember to bring something for the Lhasang?” I ask the boys each year after our first lunch with the other family campers. Children and adults are encouraged to bring a special item they wish to pass through the smoke, which is considered spiritually purifying, as we all circle around the pit. When they were little, Claude and Hugo brought teddy bears, eager to bless their beloved bed buddies. As they’ve gotten older, and their
magical thinking diminishes, they forget to bring a special item. Yet once there, they are eager to participate.

“Oh, crap!” said Hugo the year before when he obviously didn’t think of the Llasang until it was about to happen, but just as obviously regretted forgetting. “Do you think it’s okay if I put my pocket knife through?”

“I’m sure that’s fine,” I told him.

“How about my yin-yang necklace? Should I take it off and pass it through the smoke?” Claude asked that same year.

“I think that’s perfect.” And I did. What they now brought to the Llasang was perhaps less mindfully considered than the stuffed animals of their early childhood, picked out well in advance, but their choices as they became older resonated with what was important to them right then on the side of that mountain, a mountain covered with pines, bright prayer flags, shrines and a significant stupa, or reliquary structure. It is a place where the sacred meets the profane and there is nothing else like it in the boys’ lives. Or mine.

The smell of burning juniper is unforgettable, slightly acrid and very pungent. The association with purification is in part due to my understanding of the Llasang ceremony, but it also conjures up the potent, if not unnatural, odors of household cleaners such as Lestoil and Pine-Sol. After I hit grease spots in our clothes with Lestoil, the whole house fills with the piney scent while the washer agitates out the dirt and stains.

The boys and their father had returned from Family Camp only two days before the boys and I started out on this journey. I had wanted to forgo Family Camp this year
for many reasons, chief among them that life had become exhausting since late May when I first told Christopher I wanted to separate. In June, in one of his many responses to my declaration, Christopher insisted we go on a romantic weekend getaway, the first of our entire 15-year relationship.

“Let’s go somewhere for the weekend, Hol. Just you and me without the kids.”

“I don’t see how we can--Jules turns seven this weekend. Next week you leave for Family Camp and when you get back, the boys and I leave until school starts back up.”

“That’s why we have to go this weekend. Don’t you think it’s better to miss Jules’s birthday if it means we can save his parents’ marriage?”

“But how can we afford it when we are about to do all this other travel?”

“How can we not afford it? It’s like the therapists have been telling us for years, we have to make time for ourselves. Time to work on our relationship without the kids. If you want to try to work on things then it’s a no-brainer, we have to go,” he said.

And I went, not because I believed it would suddenly cure everything that more than six years of couples’ counseling had not, but because being the one ending the marriage, no matter what the circumstances, made me feel like the bad guy. I don’t think it felt as bad as being the one dumped, but it sucked nonetheless.

We went to the Shaw Festival in Canada and saw The Philanderer. Of all the plays we could have seen, it was the most appropriate because Christopher spent the entire weekend trolling for whom I must be having an affair with as if there could be no other reason for me to want out.
“You’d be perfect for Max, you know,” he said naming a friend who had suggested we go to Niagara-on-the-Lake, and then further helped plan the trip by recommending various shows, restaurants and accommodations.

“What?” I asked. Earlier that morning he had hinted that I might be sleeping with another man, Ken, who was arguably his only real friend, a person who had regularly taken him for beers the past few weeks to talk about how he was doing in light of the impending separation.

“Well, you both are well-read, the writing, the arts, all that in common,” Christopher said of Max as we were walking down a sunny street to our B & B, “I’m sure he wants someone just like you.” I ignored him. What was there to say? An imagination fueled by jealousy left little room for rational discussion. Later, from my supine position on the bed in our room, I looked up at his face inscribed with anger as he took me from his standard, upright position and I admitted what I had always known but never wanted to admit: *this is as good as it gets with Christopher, changing the location doesn’t change the sex*. I drifted off and out of my body no longer bothering to try and find what was never going to be there—emotional connectedness, desire fueled by some passion other than wrath. Some women have fantasies of being taken, but I longed to be seen and experienced, to be pulled into a feast of blending, tasting, playing and finding what else there was. To explore and whisper, guide and be guided, to feel my sex across every inch of my skin.

“I’m going to be menopausal within a decade,” I told Christopher in the weeks after voicing my need to leave, “and I want to experience really great sex before then.” I
didn’t say it had to be with someone else, but he assumed nothing else. And perhaps he was right, because we were no better at talking about, let alone having, sex than we were before. At a hotel room in Toronto on a business trip in June, Christopher had ordered a porn movie on the pay-per-view.

“I turned it off halfway through,” he told me when he got home. “I found myself asking over and over with each scene, Is that what she wants? What about that? Or that? What does she want?” Unlike the past, when I asked to be held and kissed and he would perfunctorily brushed his lips on mine and then promptly forget the next time we were together, he now listened to me. But what he heard only angered him.

“It feels like all you want me to do is lie there and then it’s all about you and it’s over before anything has begun for me. I feel like I’m just a receptacle. I don’t know,” I stammered as I continued, “maybe, maybe it’s your age and, you know, maybe we should talk to someone.” While I watched, his wide and unruly eyebrows pull together above his nose. We were seated in chairs next to each other on our porch and before he spoke, he stood up, bent over me and put his right forefinger in my face.

“That is so damn cruel, Holly,” he spat out in punctuated staccato, “You are cold, vicious and violent!” I stared in his face thinking he might slap me, but he just glowered at me for a moment before storming away.

Yeah, whatever, I thought, Your reaction says it all.

While I wanted nothing more than time away from Christopher, time by myself, night after night I agreed to go out on our enclosed front porch and share a bottle of wine. Each night, Christopher would first beg me to change my mind about moving out before
attacking me when I refused. After weeks of acting like a wounded animal that
wanted to bite and claw me, Christopher took the boys and left for Vermont without me. I
presumed he was in need of a break as much as I was. How could he not be? I stood on
the front stoop waving to them as they drove down the street. Three days later, the calls
began.

“Holly, why don’t you fly out for the end of Family Camp and drive back with
us?”

“Because the writer’s conference I’m attending starts next week.”

“We could work something out, don’t you think, so you can do both?” he asked.

“I need this week to work and I can’t write at Karmê Chöling, you know how
hard it is.” Christopher brought his computer with him to Family Camp each year and
each year found it difficult to work in the de facto communal setting. “And I certainly
can’t write in the car on the drive home.”

“I know. But it would mean so much to the boys if you’re here, if even for part of
the week.”

“I’m sure they’re fine without me, they always tell everyone how they love the
freedom to roam at Family Camp where they don’t have to check in with us all the time.”

“It’s harder for them at night,” he said and I wondered if it were true, if they were
missing me at bedtime, all piled into their sleeping bags in tents. And if it was, was it a
problem I created by always being the one who was with them the other fifty-one weeks
of the year when we were at home where Christopher dropped in and touched base
whenever he felt his career was calm enough to let him come home for dinner?
In the next day’s call, he tried a new plan:

“I checked online and you can fly out on Skybus to Manchester on Thursday.”

“But I need to get ready for my conference and I also need the time to write. We won’t get back until Tuesday and if we stop on the way home, we won’t be back until Wednesday and the conference starts on Wednesday!”

“That’s why I checked the flights out of Albany. We can drop you off on Monday and you can fly back on Southwest.”

“But that only gives me two more days alone, this is exactly what I told you I needed: time alone, a break!” In the thirteen and a half years since Claude was born, it was rare that I was ever alone. I had grown up alone, my mother leaving for work an hour after I got home from school and Berry traveling all week selling farm equipment across the Midwest. As for my dad, I went from kindergarten to the tenth grade without ever seeing him. Perhaps that’s why I had accepted an absentee father for my own children—it was all I’d known growing up. But I myself could not leave my children, not for long. I had spent nearly the past decade and a half taking them to places my parents had never taken me—parks, zoos, museums, aquariums, play groups, oceans, mountains.

But it was also my Achilles heel, wasn’t it? How could I get on with my adult life if I was the only adult available for the children? Other couples came up with solutions, but we couldn’t get creative on how to be a two-career household and meet the needs of our children. I complained from time to time and he shrugged it off telling me, “I have no choice, Hol, I have to be at work, I can’t come home.” He was always blunt about it. When we lived in Cleveland and I found the perfect school for our children forty-five
minutes away in Akron, he told me up front, “You are right, this is the perfect school for the boys, but if they come here, I can’t help you with any of it.” For three years I drove them each school day and waited with my baby (who became a toddler, and then young child), until it was time to pick them up and transport them back home. Being a so-called soccer mom sounded cush in comparison.

In a perfect world, I would have found a way to meet my own needs and those of the children without the nuclear bomb of separation and, in all likelihood, divorce. But you don’t suddenly get all enlightened and then fix your problems, now do you? You get to try your best with what you know and when you fuck up, hope you got something out of it so as to do better the next time. There’s no big “Tah-Dah!” finish line where life all comes together and makes sense and decisions are suddenly crystal clear. I had blown things apart and now Christopher wanted, it seemed more than anything, to put them back just the way they were.

“Please think about flying out, we all really miss you.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

That was all he needed to hear. The next day when Christopher called he said, “It’s really hard being here without you. This single parent thing is exhausting. Jules was really sad last night but when I told him you’d be coming on Thursday, he cheered up.”

“I didn’t say I’d be coming on Thursday, for God’s sake, that’s tomorrow!”

“I really wish you would. I need to book the tickets today if you are going to come.”

“I don’t want to come.”
“The boys really want you to come. We all really miss you, it’s not the same here without you, is it Jules? Do you want to tell Mama how much we miss her? We want her to fly to us tomorrow, don’t we?”

“Uh-huh,” I heard Jules say in the background.

“Look, Hol, I have Jules going with one of his friends to Boulder Beach tomorrow afternoon and the older boys can go to Harvey’s Lake with other families. I’ve switched my kitchen duties with another guy in my group so I can drive down to Manchester, pick you up and we’d be here in time for dinner.”

It all sounded so reasonable. It always had. It always did. Whenever I carved out my needs, declared what I had to do—whether it was meet friends for a glass of wine in the evening, or go back to work full-time—each discussion with Christopher resulted in my choices appearing less and less reasonable. Three months before telling him I wanted to separate my frustration broke past my throat, the stricture dissecting my heart from my head, my passions from my intellect.

On a cold winter’s night, I sat in a hot bathtub and shouted, “Why is it we can never send me to the things I want to do but we always manage to find ways to send you?” Christopher stared at me from the mirror above the sink, pausing with his toothbrush in his mouth while I began slapping the water around me. Slapping it like a table, slapping it like a tired child told she wasn’t allowed to watch anymore television that night.

“I just sent you to meet with colleagues in Atlanta to talk about starting your own architecture firm! It was my fucking idea even. And now there’s no way for me to go to
Atlanta for a writer’s conference?” I could feel snot mixing with my angry tears and
the water on my face and I taste the briny solution as I drew in breath with my mouth. My
head was tilted up to look at his eyes in the mirror. My own eyes felt swollen and I knew
they had become red and beady. I was acting irrational, I knew I was, but I couldn’t stop.

“Look, I’m sorry, babe, I really am, but I can’t miss the kick-off meeting for the
project in Chicago. Can you get Liane to fly down and stay with the boys?”

“We can’t afford to fly me to Atlanta and her to Cleveland. If you’re so important,
let them reschedule the kick-off.”

“I can’t. Catherine’s flying in from Switzerland that week and it’s the only time
we can get her there too.”

“Oh, so we will move heaven and earth because Muffy is flying in from Europe,
what a shock.” A landscape architect, Catherine Murray came from a family with
money—just like Christopher. Hers was the kind of family that used nicknames like
“Muffy,” the kind that had the money for prep schools and private colleges—just like
Christopher’s family. But unlike Christopher, who grew up in a county seat in
Appalachia, Catherine was from Chicago, from big city big money. Since she and
Christopher first began working together in 1999 she out-ranked and displaced me every
time.

“I never, ever rate with you do I? I’m just the fucking help!” He tried to respond,
but rather than shout, “Just go the hell away!” I bent my knees and slid under the water,
submerging my entire head, save for my nostrils.
When the nurse at the vein clinic in Knoxville recommended the book *Emotional Blackmail*, she kept referring to the abuse of emotional blackmailers, how they fogged their victims’ thinking, using threats, promises, or lies—whatever worked in each situation. The more I read, and I was reading the book long after the boys went to sleep each night, the more I cringed at how the book seemed to be describing my marriage. I didn’t want to view myself as abused, but who does? Libraries are full of memoirs about men who are pillars in their communities but monsters in their families. Christopher and I had often been told we had the relationship people most admired. He was tall, albeit a little portly the last few years. He had a successful career, always winning awards, quoted in the papers. And he had us: a wife he could count on to contribute conversation at the right parties and three remarkable boys—healthy, beautiful and creative. The sex wasn’t so great, but that seemed a small thing when compared to all we had.

So why had I found myself, year after year, lying in bed, staring out the window of whatever house we were living in. Each view a still-cut Kodachrome frame in my brain—a house two feet from our apartment in Boston, the windows of the sleeping porch in Columbus, pine trees in Pennsylvania, a neighbor’s poorly patched roof in Cleveland, 80 foot oak trees in Akron. *Is this it?* I’d lie there wondering. Over and over, day after day, the days stacking up like folded paper grocery bags in teetering towers, while I just passed through them, *how do I even know I’m really here?* I’d get up and resume the endless activity of home, boys, money, marriage. I could just as easily be an example in a book by Kierkegaard—I kept busy, busy, busy, too busy to mind the years, decades now, passed, lost, done without remembering something, something, something important.
Our marriage looked to everyone as perfect as we had pretended it was. That is, to everyone except for a few close friends. Close friends who would ask every so often how things were between Christopher and me and when I said, “Oh, fine, you know, really good!” They would calmly question, “Really?”

“Really, no, I mean they’re much better now,” I would say before quickly changing the subject and pushing away a feeling that lay somewhere between naughty and phony.

I agreed to go to Family Camp that year, had gone never wanting to go, but went because in the end, it seemed easier than not going. In the Albany airport I called one such old friend, someone who had known both Christopher and me for our entire relationship. When I told her I was leaving Christopher, she asked me, “What do you want? Do you want to work it out with him?”

With my forehead pressed on the full-length window, the wall of glass all that kept me from falling out onto the tarmac of jet planes, I held my breath as long as I could, my cell phone pushing on one ear, a finger in the other.

“I want to live on my own, I want to divorce him, I want my life back,” I exhaled.

“I always knew this day would come, Holly. Always,” she replied.

* * *

I snapped the CD off and asked, “Hey, what happened in the story, guys? I spaced out for a while!”

“Well, you know about Voldemort’s soul, right?” Hugo asked.

“You mean that he’s hidden pieces of it for protection?”
“Right.”

“So Harry, Ron and Hermione…” Claude began.

“Claude! Shut up, you’re always interrupting!” Hugo said.

“I can tell the story too, Hugo!”

“But I was already talking, Claude!”

“Hey, both of you, one at a time. Claude, let Hugo continue.”

“Fine,” said Claude.

“So Harry left without his friends, right? And he has this medal thingy on that’s making him kind of evil and--”

“It’s because it has part of Voldemort’s soul in it, it’s not the medal, it’s--”

“Claude, Shut Up!”

“Well, you’re explaining it wrong.”

“No, I’m not, Claude, you jerk.”

“Enough, Hugo! No name calling. Guys, I know about the medallion—that happened way back. Claude, do stop interrupting, let him talk. When he finishes you can tell me what other things happened.”

“Well, he just gets it wrong, so what’s the point?” asked Claude

“No I don’t, Claude! I’m not the one who can’t remember anyone’s birthday,” said Hugo.

“What’s that got to do with anything? Who cares when the dates are, I can write them on a calendar.”

“But you don’t.”
“Okay, enough! Both of you! Hugo, turn around and grab me a Red Bull, two cheese sticks and the bag of carrots and anything anyone else wants.”

“Fine, but I’m not getting anything for Claude.”

“I don’t want anything anyways,” said Claude.

“Good, because you’d have to ask Jules to get it for you.”

“Jules,” I said, turning around in my seat to get a quick look at his face, “what are we going to do with these two?”

“Throw them out the window?” he smiled at me. Like so many things, Jules silently observed the clashes of his brothers, often appearing to space out, but always able to later recall the incident and, therefore, remain available when an eyewitness account was called for.

“I tell ya’, it sounds like a good idea sometimes.”

“Fine, now you are against me too and you want me to get you food,” said Hugo.

“Oh, Hugo, I’m just teasing. How on earth would I ever manage to both drive the car and throw you out the window at the same time? Especially since you are in the back seat? I just can’t reach, so don’t be silly.”

“Never mind it’s a horrible thing to say!”

“Is it? Hmm, I guess you’re right. My bad.” I turned again to the back seat and grinned at Hugo. He was smiling as he stuck his tongue out at me.

The two big boys were six and three years old when we bought them bunk beds. At night, I would tuck Claude in the top bunk and Hugo in the lower. Later, when I came in to turn off their night light, I always found them together on the lower bunk, entwined
like littermates. Eventually, I just tucked them both in the lower bunk and the next year, when they were too big to both fit on a twin mattress, they moved to the guest bed, which was full-sized.

Inseparable when they were small, I wanted Claude and Hugo to remain close. Close enough so that when they were thirty, they would still seek each other out, call each other regularly. My secret fantasy was, and still is, that they would grow up and go into business together. Like Harvey and Bob Weinstein, the brothers who named their film company after their parents, Miriam and Max. Claude is so methodical and serious while Hugo has the energy needed to think big, start things and not worry about success because he never doubts he will succeed. Claude tempers Hugo and Hugo inspires Claude.

Around the time Claude began staying with his brothers in lieu of a babysitter, the same time that puberty began slugging away at his pituitary gland, things changed. As Claude became bossier, Hugo became commensurately defiant and “You’re not my parent, Claude!” became Hugo’s mantra, which was always shouted, never spoken. When we were in the car, however, things were usually peaceful. No doubt aided by the fact that Claude was always up in the front while Hugo and Jules enjoyed the stretch of backseat by themselves. On longer trips, including the one we were on, I always borrowed more books on CD from the library than we could ever listen to, just in case one was damaged or not as enjoyable as the cover promised. While a story was on, except when they hooted and cheered at the exciting parts, the three of them remained silent.
“Keep a look out for a gas station, we’re getting low on gas and I haven’t seen a station in a long time,” I told them after I heard the full update on the adventures of the Harry Potter and his magical comrades. The fact was, not only had I not seen a gas station in many miles, I hadn’t seen much of anything in the last hour of driving.

“Hey, what’s that?” asked Claude a few minutes later, sticking his left hand in front of my face as he pointed. We had driven out of the rain and the sun was bouncing on the water in the tire rumble strips on the sides of the highway. In the sky, popcorn shaped clouds moved happily around the sun. Off in the distance on a lone knoll sat a structure.

“It looks like a gas station!” I said and we were soon able to read the TEXACO sign since each letter had its own roughly 4x3 foot rectangle, presumably illuminated at night. In less than five minutes, we pulled up to the pump and Hugo jumped out as I handed him my credit card. He’d become my pump jockey on the trip, asking me in Alabama if I would teach him how to fill the car. I was fully seven years older than Hugo when Grama showed me how to fill her car with gas, but then self-service stations were still somewhat new in 1983. I don’t know that anyone pumped their own gas when I was ten.

The other boys and I headed for the bathrooms. Another family was at the station and they were all inside speaking in Spanish with the man behind the counter. Their old Ford, a dun red color, all the shine in the paint gone years earlier, waited patiently at the pump; full of gas, empty of passengers, its nose warming in the midday sun while the body remained cool under the shade of the awning. I checked my cell phone for service.
It had been spotty all day, which was fine with me. It was Monday and on Friday, Christopher would board a plane in Cleveland and fly to Phoenix. From there he would take a shuttle bus to Sedona, where we had agreed to meet.

I saw I had enough bars to make a call. “Christopher,” he answered on the first ring. I was walking back out to the car so I could hand the phone to Hugo.

“Hey, we stopped for gas at a station on the only hill we’ve seen for two hundred miles and it’s the first time we’ve had reception all day. You want to talk to the boys?”

“Sure, but tell me, how’re you doing?”

“Fine. We left early this morning and we’re making good time.”

“I booked my Friday shuttle, I’ll email you the details.”

“Great. Here’s Hugo.” Hugo took the phone first and tried to tell his father all about Harry Potter.

“Can I just tell you this one part, Papa? Oh, come on! It won’t give anything away.”

Claude and Jules came out of the station and after he passed the phone to Claude, I went back in with Hugo to buy a diet Coke while he went to the bathroom. When we came out, boy one and three were done on the phone, neither of them ever having been big phone talkers. In fact, they never answer the phone when it rings at home, they just don’t seem to hear it. I made sandwiches and off we went, heading for El Paso, following the Google map directions Adam had printed out for us the night before.

As we were more than halfway through Harry Potter, the next two hours of the trip went by quickly and suddenly El Paso rolled out her tongue and licked us up into her
mouth. El Paso, like so many western cities, goes on and on without ever seeming to have a central point. Just freeways and exit ramps with national chains-gas stations, big box stores, fast food. How is El Paso different from San Antonio or Phoenix? Other than the mountains that surround Phoenix, it’s impossible to say. Yet don’t get me wrong, I was thrilled to see a sign on the side of the freeway that alerted me to a Starbucks at the next exit. Aaahhh, predictably good coffee. No surprises, no disappointments. I love the ubiquity of these chains as much as I hate them.

“I’ll have a venti latte and can you tell me the easiest way to find Route 285?”

“Venti latte!” shouted my barista over his shoulder. He was a sturdy guy about my height with dark hair, a strong nose and pockmarks on his cheeks. He then turned back to me and asked with a slight Spanish accent, “What did you say you were looking for?”

“Route 285”

“Hey, Eddie, you know where Route 285 is?”

Eddie didn’t know. Nor did the other two employees working with my barista and Eddie. They asked the three customers sitting at tables where Route 285 was. Nobody knew.

“That’s alright, thanks anyway, I’ll look it up on the map.” Out in the parking lot, the boys had the hatch open at the back of the car when I came out. Hugo was eating what looked like an all Nutella sandwich while Claude and Jules each held an apple in one hand and a cheese stick in the other, taking alternating bites of the two.
“I need to reconnoiter, guys, but man does it feel good to stop. We’ve made really good time, you know.”

“The story helps,” said Claude as I opened the atlas, and we all agreed.

When I looked at the map of Texas, I could not find the state route the Google directions said to take, it just wasn’t there. I flipped back through the atlas to New Mexico and found Carlsbad.

“Wait a minute,” I said as much to myself as to the boys. I found Route 285 in New Mexico and followed it south into Texas. I watched my finger trace the road, it can’t be right, I thought because it went due southeast from the Caverns in a straight line and connected with the freeway we’d just spent six hours on, but back east--way, way back, easily two hundred miles back. I look again at the Google directions. They said to take I-10, which we had, towards El Paso, not to El Paso.

“Son of a bitch!” I whisper, but the boys heard me.

“What’s the matter?” Claude asked and Jules, who had leaned his head into my side and draped his left arm around my waist, looked up at my face.

“Boys, we missed our turn off back at Fort Stockton, more than three hours ago!”

I felt like Bugs Bunny in the cartoon where he realizes he should have taken a left in Poughkeepsie when he finds himself in the tundra instead of a tropical beach.

“Well at least we have Harry Potter to listen to,” said Hugo and the other two agreed. We were getting very close to the exciting climax and all of us were eager to hear how not just this book, but the entire series ended. Still, we had expected our drive time that day to be six hours. By my calculations, since we had to back track on the
hypotenuse of our Bermuda triangle, our total drive time for the day now looked to be ten or eleven hours. Time had shifted on this long journey. On a typical day trip, say from our home in Akron to Chicago, if we were stymied for an hour by construction, I would have to endure the ages old kid-commentary such as, *Man, it’ll be dark when we get there!* *What time is it now?* And every parent’s perennial favorite, *How much longer to get there?* But on this trip, one in which we’d already had three days of more than ten hour’s driving time, our sense of time expanded and I didn’t get any real complaints about screwing up the navigation so badly.

“Well, let’s load back up, get gas and get going,” I told my crew.

“Put the story back on,” ordered Hugo.

“Not until I’m sure we’re on the right highway. I don’t want any distractions this time,” I said and laughing, they all agreed.
Chapter Seven:

Everybody’s Got Something to Hide

My father moved to Tucson in 1990. Years earlier, he and my step mom Liane had told Grama that when the time came and she could no longer live on her own, she was always welcome to come and live with them. In Charlevoix, Michigan. When Grama decided she no longer wanted to live alone in her three-bedroom ranch, she told Dad and Liane that it was time for them to live together. In Tucson, Arizona. Dad used Tucson as a convenient avoidance of marital difficulties. He moved out west. Two years later they each rode well over 1,000 miles on their motorcycles--Dad from Arizona, Liane from Michigan--met in Butte, Montana and agreed to divorce.

“Why’d your dad move to Arizona?” an old friend of the family asked me when I ran into her in the local thrift store in Charlevoix. It was about six months after he had left and I was home from college for Thanksgiving. “If God himself were going to come down here and put together the perfect couple, it would be Alan and Liane! What’s going on?”

“Well, I don’t know, really,” I told the friend, “You see, our grama needed some help. I’m not sure how long Dad’ll be there.” That was a lie. I knew he was never coming back, but I was as fond as anyone else, perhaps more than anyone else, of the notion that Alan and Liane were the perfect loving couple.
How I Met My Stepmother: February 1969

Old snow eroded in dirty mounds along the sidewalks on Foster Avenue that day, while the dark sky promised to freshen things up in a bit. Winter moist air pinched our noses as our cheeks flushed from the walk. Splattered up the back of my tights was melted muck, while crescent moons of wet leather darkened the toes of my shoes. Daddy pushed open the door at the head shop, curious to see who was on the other side of the fogged glass of the storefront.

I dashed in and the air, even more humid than outside, was warm. Smoke hugged the ceiling, curling to connect at several places in the room with its sources—fire smoldering on the tips of cigarettes and incense sticks. The smoky smells mixed with the odor of sweat and leather, jacket fringe flicking my waist high face as I walked by.

A skinny woman with sallow skin moved quickly, purposefully towards us. Liane had seen us at the head shop before. She was eighteen and struggling with the life she had assembled in the six months since her parents had given her a one-way bus ticket from her home in Butte, Montana as her high school graduation present.

“Can I talk to you?” she asked my dad, a 23-year-old acidhead with long blond hair and round wire-framed glasses. She told him he seemed safe to approach because whenever she’d seen him there, he always had me, a chatty three-year-old, with him. She pulled us to a couch at the back of the shop where she had been sitting when we had walked in. Daddy sat down next to her, bringing his head to my height. He turned
sideways on the couch to face the woman while I leaned against his arm, watching them. Our roommate, Steven, who had come in with us but lingered at the front, suddenly joined us.

“Holly, why don’t you and Steven go look at the things up front?” asked Daddy as he looked up at Steven from the couch. In our apartment, Steven’s room was in the front, on the other side of the living room. In our living room, we had the biggest fish tank in the world and the three of us loved to watch the fish while Daddy and Steven smoked.

Liane came home with us that night and never left. Nine months later, four months after my mother had snatched me out of the yard, my sister Becky was born.

*   *   *

Long before Dad left Liane, their marriage wasn’t as perfect as it appeared to their friends and neighbors. I had come to live with them in the fall of 1981 when I was a junior in high school. A few weeks later, Dad was unemployed.

“What the hell are we gonna do, Alan? You just walked out on your job because the boss is an asshole? How’re we going to pay the bills on my salary?” Becky, then twelve, and I listened to Liane yell at Dad in the kitchen while we sat just below them on my bed in the basement. The door to the bathroom was next to the kitchen table. A couple of feet from the doorway was a three-inch C-shaped hole in the floor around the plumbing that ran from the bathtub to the hot water heater near my bed in the basement. If someone upstairs wanted to talk to me when I was in my room, they went to the bathroom and spoke in the direction of the tub. A loud fight carried as clearly as if Becky and I were sitting right in front of them at the kitchen table.
Fifty miles away in Traverse City, Dad had worked for the local newspaper running a machine that transferred photographic images into clusters of dots that could be printed by the news presses. He had taken me to the press late in summer when my mother had let me visit him for the first time in a decade. I watched the condescension of Dad’s middle-aged, preppy manager spread through his conversation with us like molasses at room temperature. Already balding, Dad wore his blond hair in two braids running down the middle of his back, one braid on top of the other, while his red beard grew down to the middle of his chest and was also braided. The boss had on a country club blazer—navy blue with two brass buttons, over plaid pants of pink, yellow and blue madras patches that somehow grown men don’t think look ridiculous if worn on a golf course. Dad got his first pair of glasses when he was two years old. In his early twenties he was fitted for his first pair of trifocals. Dad’s boss also wore glasses, though his had a strap to catch them should they fall off when he was on his sailboat. The sunburn on his nose and forehead, along with the strapped glasses, were all I needed to know he owned a boat. After just a week in the coastal communities of Northern Michigan coastal, I recognized the caste distinctions.

On a school night a few weeks after Dad left the newspaper, a biker friend, Bill on the Hill, plunked bricks of marijuana down on the kitchen table. The bricks were divided and sold as a solution to the insolvency caused by Dad leaving his three-day a week job.

Even though I hadn’t seen my dad since 1971, I began talking on the phone with him in the summer of 1977 when I was staying with my grandparents in Tucson. My Grama was nervous, fearful my mother would learn I was talking with my father, and
would no longer send me to spend summers with them. My mother never did find out.

After talking again during my second summer in Tucson, I began calling my dad collect
about once a month during the school year when I was back with my mother and Berry,
who were rarely home. From the time I had last seen my dad in the spring of my
kindergarten year, I had fantasized about him coming and rescuing me, taking me with
him to his home with Liane where I would be safe from my mother’s volatile temper.

Because I didn’t have any photos of my dad I imagined him to look something
like John Lennon. When I had last seen him, he bore a vague resemblance to the then-
Beatle. Daddy wore round glasses, had a straight, rather British looking nose. Both men
were skinny and as pale as the underbellies of fish. Most of the photos my grandparents
had of their hippie son were either when he was a boy in the 1950s with thick-rimmed
glasses or when I still lived with him in the late sixties. It turned out Dad himself
identified with the iconic Lennon.

“I’d be driving in the car and hear some new, far out song like “Rocky Raccoon”
and then they’d announce it was from the Beatles new album,” he told me that summer in
1981 on our drive to Traverse City. “We always called you my ‘funky monkey’ because
you climbed all over me, hung on my arms wherever we went.” I couldn’t stop smiling
from the passenger’s seat as he talked non-stop about our life before my mother had
kidnapped me. “Then they came out with the song, ‘Everybody’s Got Something to Hide
Except Me and My Monkey,’ and I thought, whoa! Right on! That’s me and Hol!”

Lennon’s relationship with Yoko Ono--they became lovers just the year before
Alan and Liane did--also reverberated. “Everyone kept telling me Liane was no good for
That she’d have me doing harder drugs, more drugs. They were all wrong, she was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“I’m sure. You guys seem really, you know, good together.” I wanted him to keep talking, to tell me more about me and us and our life before the album was ripped from the turntable.

When my dad and I first laid eyes on each other after ten long years, I was no longer his funky monkey, a clambering waif, but instead only an inch shorter than his 5’9.” I also had fully formed breasts and hips and wore make up, a lot of make up. He no longer resembled John Lennon who, when he’d been murdered just eight months earlier, looked much as he did in the sixties, at least when he was shaven. Dad was paunchy and the top of his head was bald. I couldn’t see his face for all the hair growing on it and the part I could see, his eyes, were shielded by ¼ inch thick pilot shaped glasses, which were polarized and darkened in the sun. While I was processing this man who didn’t quite fit my image of him, I could see he and my mother nervously eying each other, these two people who once copulated and begat me. A decade and a half later, they didn’t know how to look at each other on a wide open driveway in suburban Park Ridge.

Two months after I’d returned from that first short visit in Michigan, I boarded a Greyhound bus in downtown Bloomington, Indiana. My mother was more frightening than ever. Enough so that, for the first time in my life, outsiders were willing to get involved. Not only did I get the likely help from teenaged friends, but also the parents of friends, adult neighbors, even teachers openly conspired to get me safely away. When the day came, three friends skipped their first classes to drive me to the bus terminal, hugging
me and, because they didn’t know what else to give a runaway, handing me whatever cash they had.

I wore under my clothes that morning, as I had since the week I had returned from Michigan, a scoliosis back brace. Even though the orthopedic surgeon had told us it was too late to correct my curved spine because I was fully grown, my mother insisted one be made for me. Each night for two months, my mother tightened the two-inch thick Velcro straps that laced through metal rings on my back. The second week I wore the brace, my ribs bruised, a pulsing ache just under my breasts where the brace ended and dug the deepest into my skeleton. It was impossible to buy clothes that fit over my prosthetically expanded torso without the arms and legs of the garments ballooning around my skinny limbs. Maternity clothes might have been the answer, but at 15, the idea never occurred to me. My mother refused to buy any clothes to go over my brace and, to insure I didn’t borrow her garments when she was not home, she had Berry screw an eye and hasp into her closet door and frame so it could be padlocked. Earlier that summer I used my babysitting money to buy a gold chain necklace at Sears. After I was put in the brace, I returned the necklace and used the cash to buy the only thing that would fit me: a fat girl jumper. On the bus in my brace and jumper, I felt safe. No man would try to bother me looking like that.

Twelve hours after my friends had dropped me at the Bloomington, Indiana depot, I stepped off the bus in Petosky, Michigan and was arrested by the police. Which simply meant that the officer, a tall man with a dark mustache, asked who I was and told me I needed to come with him to the police station. He held open the door as I slid into the
back seat of his patrol car and, once situated in the driver’s seat, he radioed in, “She was on the bus. We’re coming in.” My dad, who had been waiting at the depot in his Dodge Ramcharger, followed us to the station. The police called my mother. She had originally said she would leave for Michigan the moment the police let her know if I had been on the bus. But once I was in police custody, my mother told them she couldn’t make it for a few days, could they please just keep me in a cell until she got there? Instead, they gave me a hot breakfast at the front of the station where I sat next to my dad. His hands folded in his lap, his jeans streaked with ink and grime.

Later that morning, the authorities put me in a foster home with an elderly couple. During my month in foster care, the old man taught me how to shoot a .22-caliber rifle. I was a good shot. The old lady took me for walks and, when we were deep in the woods, she tested my ability to reconnoiter by telling me the house was in a different direction of where it sat. I never got lost. By late October, I was placed with my dad and Liane and enrolled in Charlevoix High School.

When my grades arrived from my previous school in Indiana, the guidance counselor expressed shock that a runaway had such good grades. Weeks later, the drama teacher, Mrs. Ford, told the other kids to watch and make sure I wasn’t smoking pot or using drugs because of who my parents were. I told the guidance counselor Mrs. Ford was a malicious gossip. The guidance counselor told me to confront the teacher myself. I did, but I also switched guidance counselors.

While the adults at the high school were judging me by my parents’ appearance, my dad and Liane were questioning me in other ways. I felt as though being good was
bad. They said my Christian beliefs were limiting, I was too uptight and, therefore, anal retentive, a phrase they used often and interchangeably with asshole, particularly when speaking of employers.

Meanwhile, my sister Becky and the family dog slept every night in my room and Becky wouldn’t leave for middle school each morning until checking with me to see if I liked her outfit. The dog, a Border Collie mix named Amanda, loped beside my legs wherever I went. And I went. I walked for miles most days. I walked to the beach even in the deep of winter climbing mountains of ice at the water’s edge, both afraid and thrilled with the notion that the icy water was said to cause instant frost bite when splashed on bare skin.

In the spring, Dad and Liane left with their friend Bob Weed to return a car to someone in Springfield, Illinois. For two weeks, I was left in charge of the house and my two younger sisters. After they hitchhiked back, I was grounded for a month because I had cut bangs in the long hair of my youngest sister, nine-year-old Kate, at her request. In the summer, Liane began painting the exterior of the house and we were all expected to participate. Dad never did, complaining his back hurt too much. Bob Weed worked on the house everyday. Standing up on a ladder, his hand swiping brown latex back and forth, Bob told me my dad’s back was fine. Bob said Dad was just lazy. Another time Bob Weed told me he would take me to Los Angeles and make me a movie star if I wanted. Bob Weed knew the women in our house loved yellow roses.

And yet, on weekends when Dad and Liane didn’t party, on those weekends when they instead stayed home with us, nothing was better. They didn’t own a television and
we would play backgammon tournaments in the living room next to the potbellied stove that heated the home or Euchre at the kitchen table. On those nights they talked with us, as though they enjoyed our company. Dad, often making popcorn on the stove with an orange pot made just for the job, a stirring wire on the lid kept the kernels moving in the oil. He filled a large metal mixing bowl over and over as the popcorn reached a pitch and seemingly poured out of the pan like liquid. The mixing bowl was the same one Liane used to make our bread for the week, baking seven loaves on most Sundays. My friends loved baking day, when we ate warm slices of bread slathered with butter.

No matter how late they had partied the night before, Dad was always the first one up, even before us. After turning on the classical radio station, he fed the fish, the dogs, the finches and parrots, watered the house plants if they needed it, all while humming and whistling merrily, even if he had begun the morning by vomiting in the toilet, something I could also hear through the hole in the bathroom floor. He would cook, especially on the weekends when we were all home and if one of us asked, “Dad, can you make me a grilled cheese sandwich?” He’d pull his arms back and hold them high before wiggling his fingers at the child who had made the request, saying, “Zap, you’re a grilled cheese sandwich!” To which we each always replied, “Oh, Dad, come on, you know what I mean.” His cooking followed the rule of more is better. When making pancakes, add sunflower seeds and raisins. When making miso soup, use every vegetable in the fridge, his omelets were so stuffed that the eggs inevitably ruptured resulting in something more along the lines of a frittata.
Two months after they had hitchhiked back from Springfield, Illinois, Becky and I were allowed to skip school for a week and take a Greyhound bus to Dayton, Ohio, so I could see a friend graduate from high school. On our ride back, we had a layover in the Detroit depot in the middle of the night. On the row of bolted plastic chairs, Becky lay with her head in my lap while I stayed awake to keep vigil, though I had no idea what I would do if someone harassed us.

* * *

**How My Father Lost Me, August 1981**

Peter Funck appears on the doorway as Dad and Liane’s friends often do, unannounced and intending to stay for days. I just finished lunch and am heading down to the beach to sunbathe. My tan is better than ever in my life, what with a sandy beach half a block from the house. Like most days, today I will unfurl my towel away from the crowded part of the beach where the lifeguards hold court high in their two chairs—one chair painted rose and the other a teal blue, as if this were Miami, Florida. Keeping my eye on my watch, I flip every fifteen minutes. After an hour, I walk along the shore in my black bikini, knowing, as I head towards the snack shack, that men are looking at me. Sometimes I meet friends at my end of the beach, but I prefer to be alone. If I’m talking, I forget to flip when I should.

Peter became friends with my dad and his wife, Liane, years ago when they first moved to Michigan. “I was just this kid and your parents seemed so cool,” he once told me. “I’d go out and stay with them in that little cabin they first lived in over in Gaylord. I
was just a Michigan boy and here they’d come from the city and would talk about anything while rolling cigarettes and playing music, drinking and getting high.”

Actually Peter is the same age as Liane, fifteen years older than me. Of all the people who have come and stayed in the months since I’ve lived with Dad and Liane, I like Peter the best. He works as a community counselor and when we talk, it doesn’t seem so much like he is trying to think of what to say to me. Back in the fall, when I was dating a 21-year-old but wouldn’t put out, I told Peter about him. Michael was tall, dark and French. He loved getting high with Dad and Liane whenever he came over, but that was not enough to make up for the fact that I wouldn’t sleep with him. Peter was staying with us, quietly stretching his back out on the living room floor when ten feet away, Michael and I broke up in the kitchen. After Michael stormed out, Peter listened to me. “You know, Holly, I don’t know Michael, but he seems young for his age. I can see you really like him, but I suspect you can and will do better. That doesn’t mean this isn’t hurtful, I see that it is, I’m just saying it doesn’t seem like something you two will be able to work out, not just the sex, but how different you both are.” Peter was right and I didn’t really miss Michael.

I come back from the beach a couple of hours after Peter arrived. He and Dad are still at the table in the kitchen, drinking beer, talking and, from the looks of the ashtray on the table, getting high. We talk about why Peter showed up today, he asks whether I have a summer job, a boyfriend, the usual stuff. Sand stuck by sweat and coconut oil covers my body. I need a bath and I say so.
“You know, I don’t think there’s anything in the world more beautiful than a young woman taking a bath, especially a sixteen year old,” says Peter, who grins at me. I laugh but he continues. “Think of all the great works of art that are of young women bathing.” I really don’t know of any, but I believe him. I walk away from the table to the sink in the corner and pour myself a glass of water. I turn to face them as I drink, leaning against the sink’s edge. I look at my dad and his eyes are squinting behind his trifocals. He is grinning too, it’s the grin he grins when stoned, his cheeks frozen up high under his eyes, pushing them into slits, and he’s quiet, but he’s always quiet when stoned. “I would love it if you’d let me watch you bathe, Holly, would you?” asks Peter. My neck prickles as scalding blood surges up into my scalp, smacks my eardrums thud, thud, thud. Turning from me to Dad, “Would that be alright with you, Alan?” asks Peter and Dad nods. Peter turns back to me, “Holly?”

Is it? Is it? Am I uptight? Anal retentive? Prissy, even? It’s not like we’d be doing anything, just visiting, but in the bathroom, just like when I go in and sit on the closed commode and talk to Dad when he soaks in the tub for half an hour or more. We have great talks, and with his glasses off his eyes look so familiar, so blue. Like Grama’s.

“Um, well, I guess. But can I just go in first and run the water?” I ask. The table in the small kitchen is along the wall between the doorway to the living room and the doorway to the bathroom. Peter’s chair blocks the way to the bathroom.

“Sure,” he says and stands up to let me pass. I pour in bubble bath as I run the hot water. A ½” gauge rubber hose is attached to the spigot on the old claw foot tub and I hold my thumb over the end, making the water spray forcefully like friends and I do try
with the garden hose in order to squirt each other while washing cars. Now I am using
the harsh spray to make the bubbles to grow mountainously high, higher than they would
if the water poured into the tub at the normal rate.

Before I take my suit off, I brush my hair in front of the mirror. As blonde as my
skin is tan, it is all well past my waist. I stare into my face in the glass as I’ve often done
since I was seven and finally tall enough to look into a bathroom mirror. *Who are you?
Are you me? Is this real? Are you real? I see your eyes looking in mine. What is there?
Who is there?* My eyes freeze with the eyes in the mirror. I want to tear them away, but I
cannot, for an extended moment, my eyes are stuck. *What are you doing? What are you
doing? Do you know what you are doing? It’s nothing, it’s nothing, it is nothing!*

I take my top off first, they’re just breasts, but as soon as I drop my bikini
bottoms, I quickly step into the tub. I don’t know if Peter is watching through the crack in
the door because I don’t look, but the door is never completely shut because there is a set
of hooks that, instead of being drilled into the wood, hang over the top of the door so the
latch cannot meet the doorframe. Painted on the wall next to the mirror over the sink is
the Cheshire cat who teased Alice. From his dinner plate sized head, he leers at me with
his gargantuan smile while the glowworm painted on the opposite corner is interested
only in his hookah pipe and never looks my way.

“You can come in,” I say after I’ve reclined on the slanted back of the tub and
Peter enters. Dad, I imagine, is still in his chair in the middle of the table, staring off at
nothing in particular, just enjoying his buzz. Peter sits on the closed lid of the toilet, only
a couple of feet away from the front of the tub and on axis with the narrow space between
the tub and the sink. As any child who loves bubble baths knows, once you begin washing yourself, the bubbles die, killed by the cleansing soap. I will need to go under the water to get my hair wet, then shampoo, but when I rinse, the bubbles will break up like ice melting on a lake. I am thinking through the steps of bathing when Peter abruptly stands up. His curly brown hair, cut short, is thick and his dense beard is trimmed close to his face, and he looks like a French Canadian lumberjack. He is only a few inches taller than Dad but, unlike Dad, Peter is fit. All he has on is a pair of cut off denim shorts. His chest has hair, but not so much as to be gross like some old guys.

“Fair is fair, I always say!” says Peter brightly as he stands up and drops his shorts. Now he too is completely naked. I don’t look at his crotch. I don’t want to see him there. In fact, I stop looking at him altogether. I slide my head under the bubbles, my ropey thick hair absorbing what seems like gallons of water, my closed eyes feeling the wet heat. Are my boobs poking up out of the water? I can’t tell and neither can I look. I’ll have to shampoo next and I slide up the back of the tub, keeping my body submerged below my neck. As if he’s not there, I never look at Peter. I don’t know if he is talking, I don’t listen as I rub my scalp with a small amount of shampoo before I slide back under the water’s surface. Where am I? Where will I be later? That’s where I will go now, just like when I had to sit and eat all the food on my plate when I was little, I can make myself go forward in time and leave this moment right here, without me.

I sit up, my breasts no longer under water, squeeze the water out of my hair and put on conditioner before lathering up a washcloth with the bar soap. Tonight I’ll walk downtown with my dog, Amanda, and we will get an ice cream cone. As my mother
showed me when I was four, I first wash my arms, then my ears and my neck. I skip my breasts and even though my back is still gritty with sand, I skip it too. I pull up one foot, washed between each of my toes, then the other foot. *I don't care who sees me, I'll share it with her and after we finish, we will walk out to the end of the lighthouse pier and watch the sun set over the lake.* Normally, I would now stand and wash my crotch and my ass, but I could clean myself under water. It wouldn’t be as soapy, but good enough. Slide back under to rinse the conditioner, slide back up and squeeze my hair. I am done. I need to stand and dry off. *I'll order strawberry cheesecake ice cream, maybe two scoops, Amanda and I love that flavor.*

I stand up, bend at the waist so my hair falls forward. I wrap the wet mass in a towel, twisting the towel turban-like on top of my head. As I straighten, I grab another towel and wrap it around my body under my arms. I don’t bother to wipe off the water running down my arms and legs as I step from the tub. Instead of rubbing lotion on my body as usual, I grab the lotion bottle, pick my bikini off of the floor. I glide out of the bathroom, turning sideways to slip through the slit of the door, my back to Peter, Peter still sitting on the closed toilet, the words he speaks sliding around my head. My throbbing eardrums vibrate his sounds, shake them apart, pull the soft vowels from the hard consonants, his dissected words mutate, made mute. In the kitchen, I am in the kitchen. Dad’s no longer in the kitchen. I can’t see him but hear the rocking chair in the living room, creaking a slow rhythm, dissonant with my sweaty pulse. I dash across the kitchen to the basement stairs. Taking them in leaps, I am soon in my room. Stone foundation seeps sand, cold light dark, clothes layer skin layer clothes.
I moved back in with my mother and Berry in late August for my senior year of high school. Amanda the dog walked the streets looking for me, Olsen’s grocery calling Liane regularly to say *Mrs. Christensen, we have your dog here again*. Becky wrote to me every day that year, sometimes sending her letters in weekly bundles, others one at a time. My dad barely spoke to me for more than two years.

It was no big deal. It was no big deal. It was a bath and nobody touched me. It was no big deal. It was no big deal. The wonder of sex, promised in teenage make out sessions, never happened. It was no big deal. Every man I ever slept with was somehow sexually repressed. It was no big deal. It was no big deal. Grama, who would have been devastated for me, had she known, and unable to reconcile what my dad, her son, had allowed, encouraged even. She hadn’t known because it had been no big deal, but now she was dead. Suddenly I saw what a big deal it really was. I couldn’t say no in my marriage to sex I didn’t like. It was a big deal. I disassociated from my body, floating elsewhere and away, during sex because it was such a big fucking deal.

Suddenly that summer, after 25 years, I looked at that half hour of my life at sixteen with a suddenness that smacked me hard with immediacy because of Grama but also because of Claude. I had not known until she died that I was protecting Grama from knowing what her son had allowed. And now that Claude was no longer a little boy, when I looked over at him in the seat next to me I saw his jaw squaring up, his shoulders filling the seat, his head as high as mine. As he was becoming a young man, friends regularly told me how handsome he was. If one of them ever asked me if they could...
watch him bathe I would, without a moment’s hesitation, report them to the police and children’s services.

* * *

We drove into Tucson on the slicks of a monsoon, sheets of water pushing sideways on the roads as if to uplift them. The same water straining my windshield wipers as they shoved the liquid mass off the glass, heavy like molten lava rather than cooling desert rain. When I lived in Tucson in the early eighties after moving there to help Grama take care of Grandpa, I witnessed a century flood. In the ensuing decades, the monsoons began to act fickle—maybe they’d come, maybe they wouldn’t. If they arrived, it was anyone’s guess how long they might stay. But this summer in Tucson, as in San Antonio, the weather was making up for lost rainfall, and the water tables were filling almost as quickly as the arroyos, dry riverbeds that in flash floods filled so quickly anything in their wake, from small animals to large cars, was in danger of being swept under and away.

The drive from Carlsbad was roughly six hours, which felt like a jaunt to a neighboring town compared to the previous day’s adventure. We had gotten to Carlsbad the night before in time to watch the bats exit the caverns. The Carlsbad bats, Brazilian Free-tail bats, were larger than their cousins we had seen in Texas and they came out before the sun had completely set. Thus, they were spectacularly visible, nearly half a million of them moving as one pulsing organism out of the mouth of the caverns and into the desert dusk. In the morning, we returned to the caverns and walked through the guano infused air of the bat roost just inside the main entrance and then beyond, following two
miles of trails to the bottom of the caverns before taking an elevator back to the surface, where we piled into the car and headed west to Tucson.

Nearing Dad’s house, the boys remembered the dips in the road, necessary to accommodate the smaller arroyos when the water ran. We had last been there two years earlier, over the 2005 holidays.

“Hey, drive fast, like you did last time we were here!” said Hugo.

“Yeah!” said Jules.

“I don’t know,” said Claude, “look at the water.”

“If I went fast now, Hugo, I’d stall the car out, it’s so deep. I’m not even sure I won’t going slowly.” I thought of people who foolishly crossed flooded arroyos in the early eighties and drowned when their cars became stuck, the power of the water holding them in their seats, pushing their closed car doors with the might of a speeding freight train. I didn’t tell the boys about this as I slowly made my way across the U-dip of the deepest riverbed. It was only drizzling now, the water had crested not long before we forded through like the family in Little House on the Prairie when they moved west. The same part when Pa left Jack, the family’s dog, on the river’s edge, telling the girls Jack would find his way over. Something my dad would never, ever have done to a family pet.

I called and let Dad know we were close. He and Catherine, the woman he had married a few years after divorcing Liane, had a collection of large dogs, mixes of rottweiler, mastiff and blood hound. Only a dog named Ziggy was a manageable size, perhaps 40 pounds. A skittish mutt who was so afraid that her back always curved in submission, her tail tucked tightly between her legs. Of all of the dogs, it was this little
one that made me nervous. Too much fear made her the dog most liable to bite a child. Because of the pack of dogs, an eight-foot high fence with a locked gate surrounded the yard. Navarre, the boyfriend of Catherine’s youngest daughter, held the gate open for us and signaled for me to roll down my window.

“You want to park on this side of the arroyo,” he told me. The driveway wasn’t paved and the arroyo cut diagonally along the rectangular property, the doublewide trailer sitting like the short arm of a lower case “y” alongside the riverbed. After I parked, we got out of the Matrix and walked across a makeshift bridge, a jumble of planks and plywood, where Dad stood next to his large, blonde wife and her pale daughter. His hair and beard were as long as ever, but Fu Manchu thin. Along with the pack of dogs, Moriah and Navarre lived in the trailer with Dad and Catherine. So did several cats and two yellow-napped Amazon parrots. Out back under a wire cage, large enough to stand in and covered with tarps to protect them from the desert sun, was a flock of chickens, mostly Araucanas, who lay lovely eggs pale blue-green in color. Catherine wanted me to see the chickens before the sun, which was at the horizon, had completely set.

“They’re lovely, do you get many eggs?” I asked Catherine.

“Oh, we get more than we can use. But with four adults and every other weekend Navarre’s little boys coming over, we go through most of them.”

“I can’t believe it’s July in Tucson, Catherine, it feels so great out!” I said. “It feels like a summer evening in Ohio, maybe even cooler.” But the air smelled only as it does after a rain in the desert, pulling up the sweetness of the creosote bushes while pushing down the odor of the dry heat, a singed, almost smoky smell all mixed with the
cleanness of the fleeing moisture that, in the perpetual dusty dryness of the desert, refreshes more than a chilly swim in one of the Great Lakes.

“Oh, it’s been like this all summer, there’s been more rain this month than, say, in the last, oh, I’d say, how many years? Hey, Alan! Alan!” she called across the yard to my dad. He and my boys were starting a fire in a low metal fire pit placed only feet from the sliding glass doors that served as the front door to the trailer. Under the fire pit was a large remnant of carpet, an instant patio and so less expensive and labor-intensive to install than concrete or stone or, well, anything else.

He called back in our direction, but I didn’t hear him. All of my attention was suddenly given to a golden orb the size of a half dollar that was trucking across the moistened desert floor. The sun had set and, was it not such a bright yellow, the moving sphere would have been cloaked by the dusk. I bent over and, putting my face near my knees, shuffled after it.

“Oh, my God, look! It’s a totally yellow tarantula, come and look!” I cried. I had to yell a second time to get their attention, “Boys! Come here, quick!” Hugo bounced over, his gait a combination of jogging and skipping.

“Where is it?” he asked.

“Oh, man, it’s gone.” It disappeared in the time it took for me to turn my head and call to the boys a second time. “In all the years I lived in and visited this desert,” I told Hugo, “I’ve never seen a tarantula other than in zoos and museums.”
“They’re everywhere here on this side of the Tucson Mountains,” Catherine said. Grama’s house had been on the other side, in a middle-class housing development near the foothills of the larger, Catalina Mountains.

“Do you have any beer?” I asked Catherine as we walked back with Hugo to my dad and the other boys who were by the fire they had just built. Claude was standing with his arms folded across his chest staring at the flames. Hugo picked up a stick from the pile of kindling and began poking at the burning wood. Jules was trying to pet a dog whose face came right up to his.

“No, I was going to run to the Circle K and get some. You want to come with me or stay and visit with your dad?” The boys were talking comfortably with Dad and I wanted to let them be.

“Yeah, let me grab my purse. I’m buying.” We crossed back over the arroyo to Catherine’s Reliant K and drove to the gate, which she had to get out and unlock. Out on the street, she put the car in park and got out to relock the gate. While she did, I pulled out my cloves, lit one and leaned back.

“I didn’t know you smoked!” Catherine said when she got back in the car.

“Oh, I have on and off my whole life, you know, socially, but also picking it up when I’m stressed.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to smoke in the car with you; your father hates it when I smoke. But I will now.”

“Go ahead,” I said.
“Alan can be so judgmental about some things. Like yesterday, he threw away a can of sausages saying they weren’t healthy and I said, ‘Look, Alan, you didn’t buy them and you don’t have to eat them, but you have no right to throw out other people’s food because you don’t approve.’”

“No, you’re right,” I agreed. Always willing to be up front with his own vices like smoking pot, my dad seemed to have little understanding when other people chose things he didn’t think healthy. “So I uh, told the boys I need to smoke them now and again to keep awake on the drive and it’s true, but also, and I want you to know, I uh, well—I’m leaving Christopher.”

“What?” she asked as she turned her car into another neighborhood that was a shortcut to the Circle K. She slowed down. “You guys? What happened?”

“Well, nothing. Not at once, it’s been, you know, all these years of stuff.” God, I hated going over it. I couldn’t tell people something that says it all quickly, like He hit me or He has a mistress where they then would say, Oh, I never knew, why didn’t you tell me? Some people haven’t needed much in the way of an explanation, but then, those were usually the people who were close to us. Dad doesn’t listen; phone conversations with him are pretty one-sided. So much so that Becky and I had confessed to each other years ago how hard it was to take Dad’s calls because he talked at length about the minutia of his workday and Catherine’s children. As for Catherine, I seemed to intimidate her. After our last visit in 2005, she’d written a letter asking me to please keep talking to your dad about back surgery like you did when you were here. Maybe if he got surgery
and his back hurt less, he’d be less depressed and he’d do more things with me. I
never replied to her. If had the power to fix my dad, I would have done so decades ago.

“Well, it’s hard for a man to have a, you know, big career and be home for his
family. It seems like he’s always been a good provider though.” Even though I rolled my
eyes in the dark car, I understood her focus on regular income. Like Liane before her,
Catherine was the primary income earner and ran the household. Dad worked afternoons
at the Circle K where pressing the cash register keys for so many years had worn out his
knuckles. His left index knuckle had been recently replaced with space aged-sounding
pyrolytic carbon. His right finger had an appointment for the same procedure later that
summer. When home, Dad was happy to care for the plants and animals and then lie
down and watch television.

“What about the boys?” asked Catherine as she parked the car, its nose touching
the strip of sidewalk separating the store from the parking lot. We walked from the car to
through the sliding doors of the Circle K, and she continued, “He’s good with them
whenever I’ve seen him with them.” The last time Dad made the trip back East to visit
me was two years before Claude was born and a few months before I met Christopher.
Since Jules was born, Dad and Catherine have seen Christopher with the boys all of three
times and never for long. And yet Catherine, in her own way, was voicing my fears,
things I’d struggled with many times throughout our long marriage when I had seriously
considered leaving. I mean, how could I walk away from a man whose career was finally
launched after all of those years of moving for better jobs, higher pay, more exciting
projects? Worse yet, in my opinion, was putting my children through a divorce when
their father, although often absent, was fine enough when there. And though
disengaged from the household, he nonetheless let me raise the boys as I saw fit.

Then there were other questions, such as: 1) By staying, wouldn’t I continue to
model for my boys a marriage I would never want them to accept for themselves? 2)
Wasn’t staying in the marriage and kvetching about things a way to avoid finding out
whether or not I could succeed in my own career? And 3) Wasn’t it true we had tried
everything I could think of to get this marriage off the damn rocks for the full fifteen
years we’d been married? Working to fix a relationship, even before we signed on the
dotted line in the Franklin County courthouse on that hot July day in 1993, which was
always like a used car made of salvaged parts, duct tape and spray paint?

What I really knew was that I was done. More months and years of marriage
counseling would only forestall what felt like the only two choices allowed: Stay and
become an automaton in order to keep the family intact, or blow it all to hell and take
these four other people on my ride because I’m done. What a fucking set of choices.
Martyr or Narcissist. Death or Destruction.

We walked under the overly bright lights of the Circle K mini-mart back to the
beer cooler where I grabbed a twelve pack of Corona, beer I used to drink back in the
early eighties on sunny afternoons in Tucson after waitressing the breakfast shift at the
Village Inn on Miracle Mile.

“Look, Catherine,” I after we’d paid and gotten back into the car, “Chris and I’ve
been in therapy since, well, before Claude was born. Not all the time, you know, but
whenever we could find someone wherever we lived. But nothing important has
changed.” Catherine didn’t speak so I continued, “We keep living the same miserable lives, just with a little more money. And it’s, well, the only life I can have in this relationship is taking care of his. His life and the boys’ lives, that’s my role. I’ll always take care of the boys, they’re kids, it’s what you do. But I can’t do it for him anymore.”

“Have you told your dad this yet?”

“No. I wanted to when I was here.”

Late that night, I lay awake on the bottom bunk bed kept for Navarre’s children when they came for weekend visits. I thought about how I never intended to talk with Dad. How I was never going pull him aside and say, “Hey, Dad, can we talk, ‘cause things have gotten kinda difficult and I want to talk with you alone, do you think we could step outside for a while and leave the boys with Catherine because I’m not really sure why I’m doing what I’m doing, I only know that I have to do it and it sounds crazy, so I hope you’ll talk with me here about all this shit, because I’m scared and feeling a little shaky like I’ve started something I can’t possibly stop and I don’t think I want to stop it either, I just want to be a good person, you know what I mean, Dad? I want the people I love to love me and I want to be good, do you think I’m good, Dad? Good enough to love? Or am I horrible and don’t deserve what I’ve got and that’s why I’m fucking it all up?”

Instead, I had sat that night in the kitchen with Catherine while she made burritos for dinner and Dad watched a movie with the boys. His shift at work started at six the next morning and we would leave before he came back home. I was going to let
Catherine told my dad I was leaving Christopher because I couldn’t talk to my dad about this. Or really anything anymore.

On the way out of town the boys and I stopped at Dad’s Circle K, newer and bigger than the one Catherine and I had gone to the night before on our beer run. The boys and I needed to leave before noon because my aunt had already flown in from Chicago and was waiting for us with her daughters in Sedona where we were supposed to meet before going to the Grand Canyon together.

“Look, oh, my God, look! A tarantula!” Hugo yelled as we pulled into the parking lot of Dad’s Circle K.

“Where?” the rest of us asked.

“Over there, behind the parked cars, it’s gonna get squished! Lemme out!” I stopped the car in the middle of the large paved lot between the gas pumps and the store. Hugo jumped out and went after the hairy spider, acting as its human pylon. I pulled into a parking spot, and Claude and Jules jumped out and raced over before I could shut the engine off. I joined them, and we all used our feet to guide the spider around the store where just beyond the pavement lay the seemingly endless desert, undeveloped because the convenience store sat at the edge of an Indian reservation.

Inside the store, Dad was too busy ringing up sales to come out from behind the platform counter to hug us.
“Grandpa!” Hugo said loudly, ignoring the customers Dad was cashing out, “we found a tarantula in the parking lot and it was this big!” Hugo held his hands near each other in two C shapes.

“We made it go to the desert so it wouldn’t get run over,” said Claude.

“Oh, yeah?” said Dad, briefly looking up from his podium high position. “I pick them up out there all the time and carry them back behind the store. I’m not sure if there’re lots of tarantulas around here or the same few keep coming back for another ride.” His customer and the boys laughed at this.

“You pick them up?” Hugo practically screamed while all three boys looked with open mouths at their grandfather.

“Oh, that’s just like you, Alan,” said the other employee, a small woman about my age, with thin blonde hair and almost as many earrings as Dad. “Always helping little critters.”
Chapter Eight:

Six Days

Day One
Sedona
3 August 2007

How I crave a cigarette. I smoked my last one this morning, standing at the turn on concrete landing of the stairs on the outside end of our hotel while the boys watched cartoons in our room. I stood there thinking about Emotional Blackmail, which I’ve been reading each night, and how unerringly and eerily it reads like a road map for my marriage. Every step of the way, starting at least as far back as when he moved into my house in Columbus in 1992, the year after we met. Christopher has known he could do as he wanted, because I trained him to know this, each capitulation a signal of what I would accept.

On a weekend only two months after we’d been together we made repeated trips to the small apartment he shared with two other architects, bringing his things to my home, a three bedroom house I had rented for over four years. Monday morning, I went to my 9 to 5 job at the College of Arts and Sciences while Christopher, an adjunct professor, stayed home to unpack. It was 5:30 when I opened the front door and walked into the living room. “Hello?” There was no answer, Christopher wasn’t home. My Romare Bearden print no longer hung on the wall opposite the door. I looked around the
room. Postcards I had gathered at museums in Cleveland, Philadelphia, and New York City of my favorite Indian paintings and sculptures, gone. Doodles Becky, then an art student at Michigan, had sent me, gone. Photos I had taken on trips with a previous lover, gone. Nothing on the living room walls was as it had been nine hours earlier. Instead hanging there were canvases Christopher’s mother had painted, sketches he had drawn, diagrams from his master’s thesis. I went to get a glass of water from the kitchen and stopped in the dining room. The table, an admittedly ugly oval of faux-woodgrained Formica, with the best surface I’d found for rolling out pie dough, was gone. In its place was an uglier rectangle of warped wood with peeling white paint that could euphemistically be described as “rustic.”

Room by room, I went through the house cataloguing what was gone. I had time to think because Christopher was not there. I changed into jeans and a turtleneck and waited on the steps of the front porch with a bottle of Molson Golden and watched the late autumn sun set as it took with it the day’s warmth. Christopher pulled up in his ’62 Ford Falcon, the car we’d first kissed in at a drive-in theater, and walked up to me.

“How was your day?” he asked.

“Fine,” I said flatly.

“What’s the matter?”

“I can’t believe you replaced my things with your own,” I said through lips barely parted.

“Don’t you like it?”
“That’s not the point,” I said, “the point is that you just removed my art and stuff without discussing it with me.

“Okay, well, I see your point.” I looked up at him and he quickly continued, “But how am I to feel like this is my home too if my things aren’t here?” he explained.

“They are here. We had all weekend to talk about where to put things. Why’d you wait until I was gone?”

“I’m sorry, I really thought you’d like it!” he said.

“It’s not your stuff, it’s that you did it this way!” my voice rose.

“Hey, it’s okay, no need to get mad, we can change things back.”

“I found where you stacked my stuff from the walls, but where’s the dining room table?” I asked.

“I gave it to the guys.”

“What guys?” I asked an he told me he’d given it to his roommates at his apartment since they had been using his, the peeling one that was now in what had been my dining room.

“Come on, Hol, you didn’t really want that thing did you?”

“Yes, yes I did.”

“You told me you picked it out of the trash on a tree lawn.”

“It doesn’t matter, I like that table. I want it back.”

“Okay, but first, can we just go look at the stuff together?” he asked before sitting down next to me. I wouldn’t look at him and finally he said, “Look, Hol, it’s been your
house for so long. I thought this move meant I was no longer a visitor; that we wanted to feel like now it’s our home.”

We walked through the house, Christopher describing how much nicer his professionally framed paintings looked than my posters hung with cheap plastic edges, post cards attached to the wall with little pieces of Scotch tape rolled on the backsides. My stuff seemed so juvenile, when he compared it to his, like the stuff in a teenager’s bedroom. My table never came back and after a few months, I stopped asking when it would.

Now he was coming to take possession of my road trip. All these years, since the boys were babies, I have been the one who caravanned with them, often leaving town to stay with friends and relatives in other states because it was better than staying home alone with small children and a husband who only dropped by to use the facilities. I am the road warrior, he is the workhorse.

Once upon a time, I would have wanted nothing more than for him to travel with us. Today, however, Mick Jagger sings a perpetually repeating soundtrack in my brain

*Hey! You! Get off of my cloud! Don’t hang around ‘cause two’s a crowd, come on!*

Instead of picking Christopher up, I wish I could skip town with the boys, hit the road. But that would only make things worse.

“Come on, guys, let’s load up,” I say when I get back to the room after smashing out my last cigarette and throwing away the half full pack. I hate smoking. It hurts my teeth, makes my breath foul, but the reason I throw the pack out is so I don’t have to deal with Christopher’s disapproval. What a chicken shit I still am, I know this, but I can only
deal with so much disapproval at a time and breaking up the marriage gives him plenty to work with.

“Is Papa here?” asks Hugo.

“He’s in the state, we have to go to another hotel to pick him up.”

“I’m hungry,” says Jules still watching TV.

“We’ll get lunch as soon as we get your father. Maybe the pizza we had yesterday?”

“Yeah!” they all respond.

“Can we eat first?” asks Claude.

“No, Papa’s supposed to be there in twenty minutes, let’s get a wiggle on it, guys, turn the TV off.”

We drive the winding road we’ve taken so many times the past two days to get to my aunt’s hotel. She and her girls left early this morning, driving their rental car to Phoenix where by now they should have caught their plane back to Chicago. During the two days they were just with us in Sedona, I hated how far away their hotel was from ours. Now I applaud each red light, congratulate thick traffic. We pull into the parking lot of the hotel where the shuttle bus from the Phoenix airport drops off its passengers and I see Christopher. At 31, Christopher had the looks and comportment of a 1950s French film star. His tall body bore the stocky manliness of Jean Gabin. His deeply handsome face and dark blond hair combed back from his forehead uncannily evoked Jean Marais, one of director Jean Cocteau’s favorite actors as well as, for a time, his lover. At 31, Christopher had recently returned from living in Spain where he worked for an architect
of international repute. He had continental flair, wore scarves with tailored jackets, antique dark glasses, and didn’t own a single pair of blue jeans. Now, fifteen years and forty pounds later, Christopher looks like his father, a man whose ill temper, rather than his good looks, was what followed him into middle age.

Sitting on a bench under the hotel porte-cochère looking down at what appears to be tourist fliers, Christopher looks up when the boys jump out of the parked car.

“Papa! Papa!” Jules and Hugo shout as they run towards their father.

“Slow down!” I yell, seeing them cross the parking lot without looking. Claude and I saunter up casually and when we get close Christopher smiles at me, clearly happy to be here. I don’t smile back, but stare densely into his eyes. His mouth drops and I see him as he’s looked not only all this summer but whenever he disapproves. It’s how Christopher looked when for six months of Claude’s first year I resisted joining him in Boston where he’d moved. It’s how he looked when, after I had capitulated, I was achingly miserable in Boston. It’s how he looked when he would call me to pick him up after work and on a few occasions, I refused to wait in the car like a good chauffer while he finished drinking with his colleagues.

“How are you?” he asks as he tries to hug me. I keep my arms at my sides.

“Fine. Are you hungry?”

“Starved.”

After lunch, he drove us back to the hotel room.

“I need to go do laundry this afternoon, perhaps you and the boys could go hiking?”
“I’d rather come do laundry with you,” he said.

“But what will the boys do?”

“They can stay at the hotel, it has a pool, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“It does, but there isn’t a lifeguard.”

“They’ll be fine,” he said.

The boys are quiet in the back seat of the car. The top of Claude’s head rests on the window, his neck leaning at an awkward angle, though he appears to be sleeping. Looking like two crooked teeth, Jules is tilted over and resting on Claude’s arm.

“Do you want to stay at the hotel, guys?” I ask them, “I have to go do laundry and Papa wants to come with me.”

“Sure, if we can watch Cartoon Network,” says Hugo and I sigh.

“That’s fine, I need some time with your mama,” says Christopher.

“Okay, cool,” says Hugo and my afternoon alone is decidedly gone. Fuck. I could just insist on going alone, yet I cannot locate the energy to be declarative. I collect the laundry and Christopher drives us back to the center of Sedona where, according to our hotel clerk, is the nearest Laundromat. I read Emotional Blackmail in the car ride over and I read it at the Laundromat in between loads of laundry, I read it while sitting on a cheap plastic patio chair on the sidewalk in front of the Laundromat.

Christopher never asks me what I am reading but instead sits next to me and pulls out his own book, Women and Desire, from his messenger bag. Written by a Buddhist, feminist therapist and recommended by a friend at Karmê Chöling, Christopher has been me telling about the book for the past week whenever he has called.
“This author says women invariably don’t know what they want, other than to be desired,” he told me a few days before he flew out to join us. Funny, I knew exactly what I wanted when I met Christopher. A PhD in Religious Studies. A career as an academic. Research trips to India. And that’s what I was doing when he moved to Boston. For the first four months of Claude’s life, after he’d been fired from his teaching position at OSU, we lived on my graduate assistantship stipend. It was tough, but was it worth derailing my entire career to take a poor paying job in high priced Boston?

“It also says in Women and Desire that for women to have sovereignty over their lives, they have to have paid work,” quoted the man who talked me out of every decent job offer I’d ever received, using the care of the children when they were little as reason to dissuade me from accepting positions that would have paid me as much as he was making, if not more. Even more recently, in the months before I told him I was leaving, he confessed to being afraid I would leave him if I ever had a real job. Ironically, I came to realize that if I waited to get a well paying job as a prerequisite to leaving Christopher, especially now that I had been out of the work force for so long, I might never go. No, part of the fog that had kept me in the marriage was economic fear. It worked for many years, no doubt in large part because the boys had been so small and needy. But now I’d rather face my fear of poverty than live any longer with the man who, regardless of his words, had no desire to see me succeed in my own career.

After two mostly silent hours, each keeping our noses in our books between loads, we finish folding the laundry and pack it in the car before heading back to the hotel. It is already four o’clock and if we don’t hike the red rocks of Sedona today, we won’t get to
on this trip. At the hotel, we drop off the clean clothes, pick up the boys and go eat a quick dinner at a Mexican cantina before parking at the Bell Mountain trailhead. Not more than a few hundred yards from the road, Bell Mountain rises up from the desert floor like a four tiered cake, erosion forming red cylinders that are progressively narrower as the mountain rises until, on the topmost layer, the curvilinear shapes resemble a plastic wedding party, all huddled together.

Piles of rocks jailed in chicken wire the size and shape of trashcans mark the trail. Because it’s the west, there are no signs telling us to stay on the trail or not to climb the mountain because it will cause erosion. There’s much of a muchness in the west, or much of a westness. So much so that protection has not much seemed a notion to consider beyond disallowing development in protected areas. At least not too much. We climb easily to the top of the second layer of this rock cake, Christopher helping Jules, lifting him up, swinging him over rocks before clambering up them himself. The big boys get ahead and I work to stay close to them in case they need help.

“Claude, slow down!” yells Hugo as he struggles to find his footing in the crevice Claude scaled moments ago like Spiderman. I stand behind Hugo, pushing him up by his bottom as I watch Claude round an outcropping above us and to our right. When Hugo’s up, I put my hands over on my forehead to watch him, keeping the setting sun from piercing my eyes.

“Claude,” I yell, “Come back, I can’t see you!” I wait a moment and when he doesn’t come back I yell his name again, much louder this time. I quickly scramble up after Hugo.
“Yeah?” Claude pokes his head out from around the rock he’d disappeared behind. Hugo and I are now both on the same level as Claude.

“Let’s stop and wait here for Jules and Papa,” I tell them, “it’s going to be dark soon and I don’t think we should go any further up.”

“Oh, man,” says Hugo. “Can we come back in the morning and hike to the top?”

“I’m afraid not,” I tell him, “we need to get back to the Grand Canyon tomorrow morning.” Christopher and Jules are now climbing up to us and I give Jules my hand and pull him up. Halfway up the small mountain, the five of us stand there and watch the sun setting behind other, distant mountains.

“We better head back,” says Christopher after a few minutes. “I’ll go first and help everyone down.” I watch him carefully slide down on his butt, brush off his shorts before turning and calling Jules to come to him. One by one, the boys go down on their stomachs as Christopher guides their hips until their feet are sure on the ground. Claude follows after his brothers, who are already hiking back down the mountain, as soon as his father releases him. Christopher turns to me. “Do you need a hand?”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, go on, don’t let the boys get too far ahead.”

“Okay,” he says while readjusting his GAP baseball cap. “Bruuuup!” he trills in the direction of the boys, “last one down has to sleep on the floor!” The boys shriek and begin to hustle dangerously down the sandy path while I watch from the side Bell Mountain.
Why can I no longer love this man who is playing with our children? It would be easier, wouldn’t it, if I just worked harder? Here in this red desert city, where psychics and healers are as plentiful as the geckos dashing around every rock, might I not try again and expect a miracle?

We park at the hotel and the boys race up the stairs, past the landing where I’d contemplatively smoked this morning, around the outer hallway to our room.

“Let’s send them to the pool and have a little time in the room, you know,” I say and Christopher looks at me, clearly confused. “We’ll be in a tent tomorrow night and who knows after that.”

“Okay, are you sure?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I tell him and I head up to tell the boys to put their suits on. “Go and swim for a little bit, it’ll rinse the dust off of your legs and get you clean for bed.”

“Ohhhh,” whines Jules, “I’m tired.”

“You can watch a little television in bed when you get back.”

“I’m tired too,” says Hugo, “can’t we just watch TV now?”

“No, you need to rinse off and your father needs to shower. Go on, you don’t need to stay there long. It’ll feel good.” They slowly change and after they leave the room, I chain the door behind them. Christopher and I undress from opposite sides of the bed, not looking at one another. Because he has hiking boots to unlace, I am first to climb naked under the covers. When he pulls the sheets down on his side of the bed, I see his thick chest hair, which was black when we first met and now has become almost entirely gray. We face each other and attempt to kiss. It’s not that it is awkward; there is just isn’t any
chemistry, as if both of us have had the air let out of our sexuality like the tires of an car abandoned on a desiccated stretch of open desert road. After a few minutes, it’s clear nothing will be consummated here. I roll onto my back.

“I have to get an apartment when I get back,” I tell him.

“I don’t want you to,” he says, pulling me over onto his right shoulder while with his left hand he begins to run his fingers through my hair, lightly rubbing my scalp with each pass.

“I know.”

“But if it’s what you need, you should do it,” he says.

“I have to.”

“Whose gonna rub your head for you if you leave?” he asks and I feel my eyes well up. Most nights Christopher would read before bed, holding his book in his right hand while reaching across the bed to rub my head with his left hand. It helped quiet my mind and better than anything, even better than Benadryl, it helped me to fall asleep. All my worries about money, children, schedules would go dark one by one like lights being turned off in a shop as it closed for the evening.

“I don’t know,” I say as I reach my arm across his chest to his far shoulder and hold him tightly. He returns my embrace, gripping me to his right side and both my legs entwine his right one. For a moment I feel we are being honest with each other, like we both agree that we’re over, that what little love there is or ever was just wasn’t enough and it’s sad. I’ve never known anything sadder.

Moments later, he dresses to collect the boys and I head to the shower.
Day Two

Grand Canyon
4 August 2007

We are up at six a.m. and on the road by seven. Instead of revisiting the congested end of the South Rim of the Grand Canyon where we had just been with Debbie and her girls, we head to Desert View Watchtower. Designed to resemble Ancestral Puebloan towers from previous centuries, it affords a view up the Colorado River and over to the Painted Desert, where we would soon be passing through. A park ranger tells another tourist that the canyon is filled with ancient Indian ruins and she points to one on a ridge at the bottom of the canyon. On the platform deck around the tower, Claude and I lean over the stone wall and look down into the canyon, our eyes following the finger of the park ranger. A minute later, Claude wanders off with his camera leaving me alone.

The first of many times I came here with Grama was the summer of 1977. We talked over the years about hiking the Kaibab Trail to the bottom of the canyon together, “You don’t want to take the mules,” she’d say, “they are uncomfortable and messy.” As it does to everyone, Time sneaked up on us and suddenly, or so it seemed, Grama was too old and I was too busy raising babies for us to make the journey down the Kaibab together. Now I have brought my own children here and I ache for her to be with us, not as she was the past few years leading to her death this spring, decimated by decades of diabetes. I long for the Grama who brought me here time and again—Grama the intrepid outdoorswoman whom, as an adult, I jokingly called “my little grama” because she stood not much more than five feet tall.
I miss you, Grama, I miss you. Do you see my boys? Like you I have so many boys and I wish you were here with the truck and camper. We’d stay in the campground and at night go to the lodge and listen to the ranger talks like we used to all over the parks in Arizona and Utah. You could tell the boys the story about the bear in your campground years ago when your boys were little, was that in the Great Smoky Mountains? Or up in Canada? Oh, why didn’t I write it all down?

Standing at the edge of the canyon, the mind cannot process what the eye delivers when looking across the vastness of the divide. Instead, my mind serves up memories. I feel the wind as it blew over a look out point on the South Rim when I last stood there with Grama in 1989. Though it is hot today, I remember the bitter wind that rushed forcefully up from the bottom of the canyon that December day. Grama took her glasses off for fear the wind would steal them from her face and toss them to the vacant Anasazi ruins down below.

“Hey, you ready?” asks Christopher.

“Yeah,” I answer, “I guess we better get going if we want to set up camp before dark.” I’m glad my sunglasses and wide brimmed hat cover my face because Christopher’s sympathy is an impatient one and never comforts me. My grief makes me feel maudlin and I pack it up until I have another private moment to pull it out.

Higher in elevation, colder, and more remote than the South Rim, the North Rim is closed for half the year due to the inclement weather, including an average of 144 inches of snow each season. Each year less than one third of the visitors to the Grand Canyon will visit the North Rim. In large part it is because there is no easy way to get
from the South Rim to the North Rim. Though it is little more than a twenty-mile hike on the Kaibab Trail from one rim to the other, the drive between the two rims is 212 miles on two lane highways. For all these reasons and more (more being a general lack of time), I have never been to the North Rim.

The Painted Desert occupies the better portion of the Northeast corner of Arizona. We pass colorful cliffs and strange rock formations oozed out of lava millennia ago. We stop at a cluster of volcanic rocks that were used by ancient natives to form boulder homes that resemble the neighborhood of the Flintstones and the Rubbles in the Hanna-Barbera cartoon. Several native women and their children have set up tables of jewelry in front of the ancient structures and Jules buys a necklace with a malachite turtle hanging on a strand of silver-plated beads.

It is four o’clock when we pitch our tents at Demott’s Campground just outside of the North Rim National Park. The road leading to the entrance of the park passes through lush meadowlands, so different from the desert pine growth on the other side of the canyon. Warnings of half-ton elk are printed on the park brochures. It is easy to imagine elk grazing in these remote fields, where for half the year a human beings are rarely found.

“Let’s go hike!” I say.

“I’m a little hungry,” says Claude.

“Me too, I’m starving, actually,” says Hugo.

“I’m still sleepy,” yawns Jules.
The problem with starting the day with a long drive is that it is draining not just for the drivers, but also for the passengers. What the boys need is to shake a leg, but the lethargy of sitting five hours squeezed three tight in the back of a small hatchback driving through 100° temperatures takes hold of them like a virus.

“Who wants a peanut butter and Nutella sandwich?” Christopher asks the boys. They all groan in response.

“I tell you what,” I say, “have a cheese stick or two and an apple and when we get to the lodge at the park, we can have ice cream before we hike, how’s that?”

It is just the ticket.

The road that leads to the park continues on into the park ending when it must, at a cliff named Bright Angel Point. Just in front of Bright Angel Point is the Grand Canyon Lodge. From afar, the lodge looks like something out of a 1930s movie with Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy, but up close it has the ground down look of an amusement park. People waiting in line for food, for bathrooms, for water fountains, for cash registers where they can purchase postcards of the place pictured free of tourists, of which we are but five of one and a half million who will come here this year. Most during the three months of summer.

The lodge has two wings with a courtyard of sorts in between. In one wing is a bar and across the courtyard in the other wing is a cafeteria. On the same side as the cafeteria is a window where we get our ice cream before hiking along the western edge of Bright Angel Point. With the altitude at 8000 feet above sea level, it takes effort to hike the little more than the level two-mile loop back to the lodge. All of us are quiet because
we are tired and eager to eat something other than our packed provisions. Even if it is the wrong thing to have at this altitude, I want a beer. Christopher does, too, and we get food from the cafeteria and take it to the bar. The bar attempts to look like a western saloon, but nothing in it is older than Jules except the walls.

“Shall we walk out to the end of Bright Angel Point?” I ask before washing down the last bite of a sub sandwich with the rest of my beer.

“How long will that take?” asks Hugo mildly whining.

“It’s only a few yards out, honey,” I tell him.

“I’m tired,” he says.

“Well, tough,” I say as Hugo launches into a full-fledged act of bonelessness, placing his right cheek on the table, his arms splaying out on either side of his head as if he had just been shot. “We’re going out to the end of the point, that’s all there is to it,” I say. I know Hugo really is tired, but we are here, we are at the North Rim and I’m only asking him to walk 500 feet. And so we go, Hugo walking like a zombie with his head hanging down, his arms swinging back and forth, until we reach the trailhead.

The trail behind the lodge heads south out into the main body of the canyon. The wide path descends a narrow promontory, with cliffs on either side. One stumble over an untied shoe lace and you could roll over rocks for hundreds of yards, maybe all the way to the bottom of the canyon if the rocks shifted just so under your weight.

“Boys, slow down, stay with me!” I yell as they run down the slope of the path, Hugo leading the way. I catch up to them while Christopher follows behind at his own
pace. The path is crowded with other visitors walking off their dinners and watching the sunset.

“Look,” says Hugo when we are about halfway down the path. He is pointing to two men and a woman who look to be about twenty years old and who are sitting about ten feet above us on top of an outcropping of rocks. “Can I climb up there?” asks a re-energized Hugo and without waiting for my answer he easily clambers up the eroded roundness of the rocks.

“Sure, why don’t we all go,” I say as I look back at Christopher who is coming down the path, but too far back for me to comfortably call to him. I get a giddy tickle in my chest, like when I was a girl and played hide and go seek at dusk with neighborhood children. I want us to hurry up the rocks before he sees us so we can watch him walk past us, down the path looking for us. And then I want to run back up the path before he turns around. Instead, after climbing the gently sloping rocks, the boys and I look out over the canyon and watch the setting sun. Suddenly, Christopher’s head, followed by his entire body, appears on the rocks near the stainless steel circle the US Geological Survey has stuck in the rock to mark the altitude: 8158 feet.

“Hey,” I say.

“What a view, huh?” he says.

“Mmmmm.”

“To the end! Onward, ho!” yells Hugo as he starts down the mini mountain.

“Wait for us!” I yell to him as I move to get down ahead of Jules so as to help him down the rocks. “Aren’t you coming?” I ask Christopher whose back is turned to us.
“No, I am going to stay here.”

“Okay,” I say and what strikes me is that we are no more together on this trip than we ever were in all the trips I’ve taken with the boys on my own while Christopher stayed home and worked.

My feet hit the path and I turn to follow the boys to the end of the point. The higher altitude on the North Rim means the view is even further pulled back than on the South Rim and, again, it is hard to know what to focus on. I stare at the layers of sedimentary rock across the way and it feels like I am looking at a photograph. In fact, a photograph might be an easier way to visually orient the immensity of the canyon. Standing at its edge, I think big, big, big, but my mind cannot locate a detail to clip out and place in a memory file. So instead I turn around and look at what is close—the rock pile which we just climbed. There I see Christopher sitting cross-legged with his hands resting gently on his knees, his eyes softly gazing six feet ahead of him. Good grief, he’s meditating for all to see. It’s never good enough to just be with us: his wife and children; he wants strangers to acknowledge him. He often speaks too loudly in a restaurant when he’s telling a story he thinks is funny, effectively intruding upon other guests because he wants them to laugh at his wit. Right now he wants the college kids on the rock to say, “Hey, man, that’s so cool, you sitting here meditating.”

The boys and I walk back to the car to get our bathroom bags. Because the facilities at McDermott’s campground are so rustic we decide to brush our teeth at the lodge facilities. The four of us meander through the cluster of rental cabins on the south side of the lodge.
“Aren’t these cabins cool?” asks Hugo.

“They really are,” I say.

“Wouldn’t it be cool to stay in one?” he asks.

“It would. Hey, you know what’d be a great idea?” I ask him.

“No what?”

“What if you and I come here the summer after you graduate from high school? You know, we could rent one of these cabins and hiked to the bottom of the canyon.”

“That’s a long time from now, I’m only going into the fifth grade, you know,” says Hugo.

“Yeah, I know, but I bet you have to make reservations for these cabins years in advance. I mean look at how few there are and imagine how many people want to stay here each year.” We talk about it more on our way to the restrooms. At ten, it’s hard for Hugo to imagine being eighteen. But it will come and the idea of taking each of my boys on a trip alone after they graduate from high school strikes me as great way to launch them into the next phase of their lives. In its own way, the trip Grama and I took to bury Grandpa in Utah the summer after I graduated from high school functioned as a similar rite of passage. She saw me from then on as an adult and expected me to act as one.

Teeth brushed, hands and faces washed, bladders voided, the boys and I sit in the car and wait for Christopher. Our cell phones are pointless here, there’s no service. I wait in the driver’s seat and we watch as the dark absorbs the view of the canyon, feel the temperature dropping rapidly. When I start the engine to warm us up the back hatch opens and Christopher rifles through our things to get his toothbrush.
“I’ll be right back,” he says and we wait another ten minutes for him to return.

Waiting in the car for Christopher is old hat for the boys and me. For many years, until we moved to Akron, he called most days and asked me to pick him up from work. When we arrived he was never ready. He would eventually join us with a handful of excuses he doled out with repetitive regularity: “I had an urgent phone call,” or “So-and-so grabbed me before I could duck out,” or “Several fires popped up after I called you—I had to attend to them.” We would wait ten, fifteen, twenty minutes or more in the car in front of his office, the boys hungry and tired. Only once did I drive off and let him walk home. He never let me forget it and his disapproval more effectively diminished me than hitting ever could and I never left without him again. He never hit me. Instead, he kept his disapproval like a machete looped in his belt. Always visible and ready to be pulled out to cut me to the quick. Wanting all my life to be worthy of attention, first that of my parents and then from Christopher, I had left myself powerless. Oh, sure I complained and fumed after being left to wait in the car in front of his office, wherever he was working a the time, waving politely to his colleagues as they all came out and walked to their cars long before Christopher. But I did not stop waiting, I was always waiting. Waiting with hope springing eternally that one day he would see how worthy I was, we were the boys and I, of his time and attention. He told us he loved us, he said it easily and frequently but implicit in the declaration was that we were getting all he could give and should not ask for more.

I would be lying if I said I didn’t believe that in separating from Christopher, I would save our marriage. I was committed to having what I needed in the relationship
and if it was not available, I was prepared to be done. But I wished for that which we are always told not to seek in a partner: for him to change. I wanted him to embrace us as the most important part of his life, to take joy, not jealousy or fear, in my personal successes. And to do so for its own merit, not because of how my accomplishments might reflect on him. But with a sinking feeling of defeat, I knew that it was not there, he was not going to change, only I could. It was the same question I’d silently asked of my mother all my life and more recently of my father: Why? Why can you not love me? What can I do to make you proud enough of me to want to be with me? What is wrong with me that you cannot love me? Oh, sure, I knew in my head that my mother was mentally ill and had been for years, perhaps my entire life. And I knew that my father was emotionally unavailable. But knowing these things did not change the aching desire for their love and to feel truly seen by them any more than it did knowing Christopher was first and foremost concerned with his public image as an architect. What I did feel, though was having a hard time understanding, was how much my husband, this man I chose to be with, felt so much like my mother whom I couldn’t wait to get away from most of my childhood. I remember discussing in great detail with childhood friends who had difficult parents of their own what life would be like when I was finally free of my mother. Had I really just recreated that which I had spent the first half of my life trying to get away from?

Christopher came back to the car and I move to the passenger’s seat so he can drive us back to our campsite. I stare out the window at the brilliant stars above us as I continue to think about how I had gotten to this place in my life.
Back at our two-tent camp, we decide not to build the fire and even though Hugo feels obliged to complain, he is asleep as quickly as Claude, with whom he shares the smaller tent. Jules crawls into our tent where he will sleep between Christopher and me. I walk to the rustic toilets for one last pee not because I need to, but as insurance against needing to get up in the cold night.

Dark at the North Rim is like black velvet. Shadowless, it eats the weak light of the other campsites like feeble fireflies. The stars do twinkle in the night when they don’t have to compete with electrified cities. They twinkle like someone sending Morse code with a mirror and candle from across a valley. Sparkling with intention, with messages. For whom? For all of us? For me? It would be comforting to imagine one of them was Grama and if only I knew how to, I could read the message she was flashing to me. If only I was a faithful person instead of a questioning one. I stare upward until my neck aches. Sighing, I go into the cinder block structure to pee.
Cold and gray and six o’clock in the morning. Christopher and I get up and leave Jules in the tent to sleep. I walk over to the boys’ tent and wake them up. Because we slept in our clothes, striking camp goes quickly. Jules emerges from our tent while we are folding the boys’ tent corner to corner like a large blanket. At seven o’clock we are on the road, heading north to the gas station at the corner of highways 67 and 89, 67 being the only road leading into the North Rim.

“I’m going to see if the diner is open,” I tell Christopher when he pulls up to the gas pumps. The price of gas is high, but this is likely the only station we will find for a long time, which is exactly why the price of gas is high. Christopher fills up the Matrix while the boys and I stumble toward the diner attached to the gas station. A brewed cup of coffee would help the morning, which is still chilly though the morning sun has already burned off the clouds. The sunshine warms my shoulders and neck as I walk towards the diner. I open a wooden-framed screen door and look inside. Not only open, the small diner is packed. I shout back to Christopher, telling him I’ll get a table and then I hold open the door wide for the boys to file in. Rather than wait for a table, however, we sit at the counter. Next to me is a young couple who are in the middle of moving from L.A. to Raleigh-Durham, N.C. I talk with them throughout our meal and before we leave, give them our seven-day, $25 pass to the park, which was given to me at a gas station two days ago by another family (who were, ironically enough, moving from Orange County,
California to a suburb of Cleveland). I feel a little guilty, preventing the park from earning more money, which I’ve read they need desperately, but not guilty enough not to do it.

Christopher comes in and sits down but never joins the conversation or even looks towards the young couple or me during the entire breakfast. He has never liked it when I strike up conversation with complete strangers, but I can’t help it. I try to keep my attention on him when I see the look on his face that he has right now, scowling without looking at me. But momentary encounters, like snapshots into unknown lives, delight me. Maybe for Christopher my talking so readily to strangers is the equivalent frustration as I have when he talks loudly to me in public places so people around us can hear what he’s saying. He wants an audience and I want to hear new stories.

It will be a long day’s drive if we are to get to the coast of California. I say goodbye to the couple, wishing them well, before paying the bill. We pile back into the Matrix, which is now warm from being parked in the sun with the windows up. Without discussing it, Christopher gets behind the wheel. I am all too happy to let him drive after the thousands of miles I’ve covered in the past two weeks. We follow the road along the border of Arizona and Utah towards St. George, where we will pick up Interstate-15.

“Let’s get back to the story!” says Hugo as soon as we are on our way. After finishing *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* on our way to Carlsbad, we started a new series, also about magical children, whose main character is named Charlie Bone. I had listened with the boys to the first book on our way to Tucson, but when we started the second book as we drove to Sedona, I found I was tired of children’s literature and could
listen to music on my iPod while they listened to their story. They are now on the third book, *Charlie Bone and the Invisible Boy*. I turn the story on and then pull out my iPod, stick the earbuds in my ears and find the Aimee Mann soundtrack to the movie *Magnolia*. The first track is a cover of “One,” as in, you know, the loneliest number. Christopher looks at me repeatedly while I get situated. Yep, he clearly disapproves, but he doesn’t say anything.

We pass by Zion National Park, one of the many things we don’t have time to stop and see. In St. George, the road cuts through the mountains. The past few days, we’ve stared at mountains and the Grand Canyon from distant vantages. Now we speed next to the grey limestone walls, the road plummeting out of the mountains onto the flatlands leading to Las Vegas. Christopher drives so fast around the corners and, because I am not used to sitting on the passenger’s side, the sheared rock makes me jumpy. If Christopher let the steering wheel slip from his grip for even a moment, none of us would survive; our bodies would be a mangled mélange of tissue, bone and blood inside a crinkled metal shell. A grotesque M&M, Toyota blue. I look back at the three boys. They are looking out the windows but not really seeing anything as their minds are off in England, listening to the story. It is only me who is feeling anxious.

As we hurtle down the mountains the temperature commensurately rises. By the time we cross the Nevada state line, it is over 100° outside.

In the suburban sprawl of Las Vegas, we stop at Costco and load up on provisions. We are out of everything except Nutella. Bread, apples, cheese sticks, carrots, water, energy drinks. Because they are sampling it, I buy a case of Zipfizz energy drinks
instead of Red Bull. We load up and head downtown. None of us has ever been to Las Vegas.

“Do you want to drive the strip?” I ask.

“Sure, let’s,” Christopher says and the boys agree. The thing is, we can’t figure out how. We circle the perimeter of the casinos for miles before finding a way in and I imagine mobsters deciding at a board meeting to only let people enter Sin City in a way that is controlled, maybe from shuttle buses from the airport. Once we are on the strip, Claude pulls out his camera and begins clicking. The traffic moves no faster than the pace of a power walker. I would say it feels like Disneyland because of the hyperbole of the themed casinos: Camelot, Rome, NYC, Paris, Egypt, Carnival, but I’ve never been to Disneyland either. A roller coaster jerks carloads of tourists around in the searing sun while a replica of the Statue of Liberty, enormous at one-third the size of the original, stands with her back to the metal ride.

“Look, look, it’s Pirates of the Caribbean!” yells Claude from the window seat behind me and soon all three boys are crushed onto the passenger side of the back seat trying to see the casino they would go to if we stopped.

It makes me think of something I read earlier that week in *Eat, Pray, Love*. Elizabeth Gilbert describes Americans as loving to work and, when done, wanting to indulge in entertainment. Whereas Italians, she explains, prefer to work only as much as they need to in order to pursue pleasure. The difference is subtle, but also significant in terms of how a life is lived. Are days filled with stimulation or sensuality? As a Midwesterner, where even the slackers work hard at what they do, I love the satisfaction
of a job well done. But I also love the sensuality of the French and Italians the way I
love cooking especially for groups of friends and then spending long hours eating,
drinking and talking. I want the boys to develop a love of pleasure, rather than
entertainment--a passive activity. I want them to enjoy their senses in all the simple, yet
profound, ways. To be truly living. Truly alive.

What does Christopher want? I look at him and I can tell he’s considering the
over-the-top design of the casinos, wondering what he would do if he ever won a casino
project. In the now two and a half months since telling Christopher I want to leave him,
he has scrambled, albeit in a herky-jerky way, to do things he thinks I want. Things like
the miserable “romantic” weekend getaway we took in June. He’s also suggested, more
than once, that he will get me an engagement ring if I stay with him, something I don’t
have, but never wanted. And like the proverbial plumber with the leaky pipes in his own
home, Christopher has long had brilliant ideas for remodeling our homes but somehow
never managed to make them happen. Now, he’s hired a contractor to refresh our
bathroom where we’ve been unable to shower for four years because when we did it
rained in our dining room because the grout around the tub tile had disintegrated in
several places. He promises that I will be amazed at what it looks like when I return
home. But like an imperialistic nation colonizing another, weaker country, Christopher
has never asked me what I want, what would make me want to stay not just in our
marriage, but in a relationship with him. And yet I feel like I’ve done nothing but tell him
for fifteen years exactly what it is I have wanted, and now insist upon, in order to be in a
relationship. I don’t want an engagement ring. I want a partner who views me as his equal and truly partners with me as we go through our lives.

Soon after leaving Las Vegas, we cross the border into California where the traffic becomes very congested. The young couple in the diner that morning had warned me that Los Angelenos go to Las Vegas on the weekends and the traffic back west on a Sunday is often bad. They were right. As soon as we hit Barstow, 150 miles west of Las Vegas, the interstate dips south towards L.A. We exit, deciding instead to take State Route 58, mostly a two-lane highway, due west through the Mojave Desert. While so much of California is notoriously breathtaking to see, the interior of the southern part of the state is flat and blanched. The needle of the temperature gauge on the Matrix rises up and past the optimal section. I cannot put my bare feet on the black dashboard nor let my toes touch the windshield glass when I am resting in the passenger seat between driving rotations. The glass is to the touch like a pot just taken off a stove.

The drive goes on, one Charlie Bone story ends and another begins, the sun slides down the sky and into our eyes. Coming upon slow semi trucks we find them difficult to pass because the traffic on this narrow highway is also heavy. We stop in agricultural towns comprised of four corners, two or more of them supporting gas stations. Finally, oh thank God, at seven o’clock we reach Bakersfield. The roads widen, the streets contain not only houses, but trees and grass and people going about their day, getting ready for the work week by tidying up their yards, washing their cars, driving to the grocery. We see a shopping center with all new buildings and stop at Chipotle. Yes, it’s Ohio familiar, but we are momentarily weary of adventure and eager for familiar.
“Do you think we should look for hotels now?” asks Christopher.

“I don’t know how far we will go,” I say as we look at the map together at the table. We want to get as close to the ocean as possible, but again, there are only state highways heading due west out of Bakersfield.

“If we take the I-5 north to highway 46, it puts us completely above the Southern California cities, see here?” I point to the map with my finger. A little more than two hours after leaving Bakersfield, we arrive in Paso Robles and pull into a Holiday Inn parking lot. I get my laptop out of the back, quickly find the free hotel Internet and begin searching for a room.

“Damn, they want $135 to stay here!” I say of the Holiday Inn on whose wi-fi I’m piggy backing. A minute later I tell him, “The Motel 8 looks better, $85 a night.” Christopher calls the Motel 8 and learns they are booked. “Okay, one more try or we’ll have to stay here.” I find a Best Western listed at $100 a night. He calls and we are in.

Our hotel is near the town center and as we get closer, the streets take on a festival atmosphere, the sidewalks are crowded, traffic moves slowly. “It’s nearly ten o’clock on a Sunday, what’s going on here?” I ask and the boys, who had been asleep before we stopped to look for a hotel, silently peer out the windows. When we get out of the car at the Best Western, we hear loud engines gunning over and over again. After nearly fifteen hours of driving, Christopher and I stiffly walk to the lobby while the boys wait in the car.

“It’s the last night of the Southern State Fair,” the receptionist tells us when we check in. “But don’t worry, the tractor pull and the whole fair will end at eleven o’clock.”
The fairway is across the street from the Best Western and I’m surprised we found a room. I’m also surprised the fair is so close to town. In Ohio, fairs are typically set out in the country, away from the cities and towns.

   Any room with a mattress would have been welcome, but our room is all that and more--spacious, the beds firm, a television with excellent reception. Christopher opens a bottle of wine and we all pile onto the two beds and watch a nature show until midnight.
I get up and dress. There’s a Starbucks in the shopping plaza next to the hotel. I grab my backpack and head towards the door hoping to write some notes about our trip over a quiet coffee.

“Wait, where’re you going?” whispers Christopher from the bed we shared near the window. In the other bed the boys sleep, a deep shadow covers them but I can hear their moist, steady breathing in the stillness of the room. When I tell Christopher I’m going Starbucks, he asks me to wait, gets up, quickly pulls on his clothes and meets me at the door where I stand caught, watching him. Opening the door, we find the morning overcast and surprisingly cold after yesterday’s hellish drive through the Mojave Desert. I can tell it will be too cold for the boys to swim in the outdoor pool situated in the middle of the parking lot behind a plastic fence wrought to look like black iron. That’s a bummer, I think.

We walk silently to the Starbucks and I know that, just as I knew without being told when I was a child, I am in trouble. Christopher’s silence is heavy, his face never turns towards mine as we walk across the parking lot past the small freestanding lobby next to the swimming pool and out onto the street. We round the corner and Starbucks is right there. As eager as I am to start the morning with a good cup of coffee, I dread sitting with Christopher. But that’s what we do. We go in, order—tall coffee in a grande cup for him, a tall red-eye in a grande cup for me—go back out and sit at a table in front of the
café. It’s so cold I cross my legs and hunch over the paper cup I am holding with both of my hands so as to warm them.

“I need to talk with you, Holly,” Christopher finally says after we each drink half of our coffees.

“Okay,” I say.

“I need to know if you’re gonna work on this marriage or not,” and before I can answer, he quickly continues, “I need all options to be open and you, well, your mind seems set on one course of action. I need you to tell me right now what you are going to do? Are going to do anything at all to work on this?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you listening to your iPod in the car all the way here yesterday.”

“What’s that got to do with the marriage?” I ask.

“Everything. You closed me out and didn’t talk to me. Why do think I’m here?”

“Hey, there was a story on! We weren’t going to talk in the car with the kids and a story!” He stares at me, knowing I’m right. I can tell because even though his mouth is open, he doesn’t speak. His body is leaning forward, his knees are down and all his weight is on the edge of his seat and the balls of his feet as if he is about to spring at me. I refuse to look away and hold his gaze with my own.

“Even so,” he says after a moment of tense silence, “you weren’t with me in the car. It was so aggressive, you listening to the iPod.”
“What the hell? I just didn’t want to listen to a Goddamned kids’ story one more day, I’ve listened to them all fucking month, you know!”

“Do not talk to me like that,” he says, punching each word out.

“Like what?”

“Look, if we are going to work this out, we have to be civil.”

“Anger’s a fucking normal emotion, Christopher!” I only knew this because I’d read it in Emotional Blackmail the other day. When we first met, I used to quote Simone de Beauvoir to him, say things like, “Marriage is legalized prostitution; I don’t ever want to get married!” How is it I now have a popular self-help book instead of Le Deuxieme Sexe as my quotable guide?

“No, not when you talk to me like that. You need to hear me out and you need stay calm.” I look at him and stop hearing his words. What would he do if I stood up and knocked over the round café table? He was leaning across it, lecturing me like a naughty, naughty girl. And then I remember what I had read in my little self-help book.

“I can’t have this conversation with you right now, Chris,” I say and he pauses and looks confused for a moment. “We’ll have to discuss this later,” I tell him.

“When, Holly, when are you going to listen to me?” he says in words bitten at the back of his throat except for my name, which he stretches out Hawl-Lee. No anger there, nope.

“When I can hear you. Right now, I can’t.” I stand up, feel my hands tremble as I pull on my backpack and grab my coffee. “Besides, the boys’re probably up. I’m gonna run a load a laundry before we go.”
It’s nearly 10 o’clock before we get on the road. We are just too tired from yesterday’s drive to push ourselves. The day has turned sunny, but still cool as we head due west to Route 1. We smell it first, the fishy saltiness. When we pop up onto Route 1 from a small road in Cambria, the town just west of Paso Robles, there it is: the Pacific Ocean, slate gray and choppy. Not more than half a mile on Route 1, we pull over to the first public beach we find.

The fickle ocean weather has in just moments gone from blue skies to overcast and our first beach walk is chilly. The boys pay no mind. They kick off their shoes and run to the edge of the water, shrieking as the waves hit their legs. All three of them wade out and run back when large waves roll in, screaming when chased to shore by the salt water. I look at the sand for shells and find few. Walking up the beach, my eyes graze back and forth for treasures. A mussel’s purple shell. A rock with orange and blue layers. Bits of rubbery seaweed. I turn around to watch the boys play while Christopher takes photos of them jumping in the spray. Claude and Jules run, drawing their knees up high on their stork like legs, while Hugo chugs through the water with his sturdy body. Christopher sees me return and comes up to me. We stand together for a moment, watching our children play like unfettered puppies.

“What’s that?” Christopher points. About fifty feet out are two dark heads.

“Swimmers?” I respond, thinking how cold the water must be. Wait, I think, those aren’t humans.

“No, they’re seals!” says Christopher as though answering my thought. The creatures have their heads facing the children and I imagine their large, tubular bodies
curved under them towards the coastline as they swim on their backs watching my boys play. How human they seem. Their eyes more frontal than those on, say, a dog. Their dark gray heads are smooth, shaped not unlike human skulls, and I realize that when I first glanced at them and thought they were people, I had assumed they were in scuba gear.

“Boys!” I yell while pointing, “Look at the seals!” The boys stop suddenly in their play and look out at the heads. Ghostly eyes, bigger than shooter marbles, turn from my boys and look right at me. The eerie, though not terrible, feeling reminds me of meeting the Dalai Lama and his monastic entourage in 1990. His monks looked me directly in the eyes and I felt completely exposed, that I had no secrets hidden from them, and it was okay, they were okay with what they saw in me. The seals look back at the boys for a moment before slipping under the water.

“That was so cool!” says Hugo.

“Yeah!” Claude and Jules agree.

“Did you see how close they were, Mama?” asks Claude as we walk back to the car.

“Crazy close,” I say, “I think they came because they heard you boys playing in the water.”

“It’s kinda creepy though and kinda cool too,” says Claude, “Like why did they want to watch us?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him.
Earlier that summer, after I had told Christopher I wanted to separate, my therapist asked me to think of a myth that resonated with what I was experiencing. What I thought, even as the therapist was speaking, were the stories of selkies. Mythical creatures found in the lore of the ocean countries of Europe. Places like Norway, Ireland, Scotland. Selkies are seals who can remove their seal skins, revealing a beautiful human woman. Most of the myths are variations of one story: A selkie takes off her sealskin and suns her human body on the beach. A man, often a fisherman, spies her, sneaks up and steals her sealskin. Without her sealskin, the selkie woman cannot return to the sea and is thus bound to the man. The man hides the skin and marries the selkie. All the versions I have heard describe her as a model wife who cooks, sews and bears the man several children. She’s an even better mother than wife. Yet she is never content and her children often observe her gazing at the sea with longing. Eventually, the selkie wife discovers where her husband has hidden her sealskin. In some stories, the husband gets drunk and taunts her with her sealskin before passing out. In other versions, one of her children innocently comes across it, asking her what it is. In all versions, once she has her skin, the selkie slips it on and returns to the sea without a moment’s hesitation, leaving behind everything, including her children, to resume living as the being she truly is, swimming back on occasion to gaze at her children from far enough out in the water to remain free. I will never abandon my children, but I can no longer live in a life that has become lifeless for me.

We get back in the car and head north on Route 1. I’ve wanted to drive up Route 1 for as long as I’ve known there’s such a road. The ocean views, the mountains, the
curves. Much of the land along the U.S. Pacific coast is protected and electricity isn’t available for long stretches of the highway at the edge of one of the largest modern countries. But at first, in Southern California, the land is low and the concrete of the road serves as an edge to the pastureland on our right, holding back the green grass from the ocean waves. Or maybe it’s the other way around—the road buffers the meadows from saltwater. Either way, it’s virtual surf and turf: gray sea on our left, brown cows grazing on green grass to our right.

About an hour north of Cambria, Route 1 begins to ascend the San Lucia Mountains. They are gentle as far as mountains go, but dramatic enough with the road perched above the ocean. Perfect for shooting automobile commercials. Christopher drives, insists on doing so, which is fine as it allows me to just enjoy the view, the Cowboy Junkies on my iPod and Charlie Bones on the car stereo. I imagine coming back and spending a whole week driving the road by myself, staying in the mid-twentieth century hotel cabins that dot the roadside at the rare places where the terrain is flat enough to allow for small buildings.

Not far south of Carmel, we stop at another public beach, this one large and connected to a state campground. It’s three o’clock and the day has warmed as we have driven north. We walk down a steep, winding staircase with beach grass growing from the sand on either side. The boys had put their swimsuits on in the car and at the bottom of the stairs they run straight towards the water. It is cold and as with this morning, the beach lacks seashells. I’ve heard it is because not far from shore the floor of the Pacific,
unlike that of the Atlantic, drops off precipitously. But no mind, the boys don’t notice a lack and soon pull from the ocean a piece of seaweed at least twelve feet long.

“Let’s jump rope!” says Hugo, and Claude joins him. Jules wants to stay with me and we walk down the beach together. Other children join Hugo and Claude as they take turns skipping the rubbery seaweed rope for each other. Jules slides his thin hand into my own and we head north along the shoreline, crossing small eddies of water created behind rocks that hold ocean water left from the last high tide. Jules and I pause over and again to look for any signs of life in the shallow pools. Christopher has stretched out on the sand south of the stairs near the cliff wall where the cool wind doesn’t blow so hard. The beach beckons us to stay, pack in a picnic dinner, sleep in a nearby campground. But we are expected for dinner in San Francisco.

Play at a Pacific Ocean beach as a family. Check. Back in the car. Head north. Drive, drive, drive. At eight o’clock, we arrive at a neighborhood right across from the San Francisco Police Academy. Libby and Pierre, a couple perhaps ten years older than Christopher and me, whom I’ve never met, greet us with beet soup and beef stew. Christopher met Libby and Pierre last summer when I sent him to Tassajara Buddhist monastery for a weekend workshop on careers. And now here they are putting up the five of us in their comfortable home and feeding us like family. They show the boys to a room at the back of the house on the lower level. Christopher and I are alone in a room next to the front door. Thankfully, we are so tired we fall asleep as soon as I turn the light out, our backs towards each other.
Today we are full-fledged San Francisco tourists. We catch the bus from Libby and Pierre’s house to downtown where we ride the cable cars to the wharf. We visit the historic ships, owned and operated by the national park system. We walk along the bay to the Golden Gate Bridge. And we are again visited by seals, this time one of them light gray with dark spots and so small it must be a pup. At rush hour, Pierre generously picks us up at the parking lot on the San Francisco side of the Golden Gate Bridge and drives us back to his house. We change for dinner and drive to a restaurant in San José to meet Mariko and her family for dinner. A year older than me, Mariko and I have been friends
since we were in high school together in Charlevoix, where she was class
valedictorian. Even though she was soon leaving for college, Mariko cried when I
boarded the Greyhound bus to move back to my mother and Berry’s home for my senior
year. In truth, we have never lived near each other since then but have remained life long
friends nonetheless.

The daughter of a Methodist minister and a Japanese immigrant, Mariko met her
husband, Craig, during her first week at the University of Michigan. Craig, whose dad
was a cop in a Detroit suburb, was finishing medical school when he and Mariko met at a
party. Mariko and I were both still teenagers at her wedding, nearly two years after she
met Craig and I drove from Tucson to Ann Arbor to be there, surprising my dear friend.
Twenty-three years later, Craig is a successful plastic surgeon, Mariko runs his busy
office and they’ve raised two sons who will soon be leaving for college themselves.
Tonight is her forty-third birthday and the first time we have gotten everyone in both our
families together. And while we eat it all seems so normal, Hugo showing off yo-yo
tricks and telling jokes, Mariko and I sitting near each other catching up, the men talking
about their careers.

I’m a little tipsy from the wine when Mariko and I go to the restaurant bathroom.
“I just can’t do it anymore, Mari,” I tell her and see her eyebrows rise up on her face in
the mirror as we wash our hands in the side-by-side sinks. But she listens as I tell her
what I’ve now told so many people. Mariko listens so well that I go on and on and tell her
far more than I mean to. When other women come in, I lower my voice, but neither
Mariko nor I move to leave the restroom.
“Does my mom know this?” Mariko asks. Hinako, who had come and cared for the boys and me when Jules was born, who had shown me how to sail and make sushi when I was a teenager, is like a favorite aunt to me. She adores Christopher and often compares Craig, not so favorably, to him.

“No, I’ve only started telling people,” I say.

I tell Mariko of being alone and lonely in what looks a close relationship, of trying not only to make it perfect but make it look perfect to all who saw us, no matter how close a view they had. I even tell her about the sex and all that it is not.

“You know my mom thinks the world of Christopher, right?” Mariko asks.

“I know, I know, it’s the hardest part about all this, telling people and knowing some just won’t get it,” I tell her.

“When you came and stayed with us last year, you were so complimentary to Christopher, do you remember? He was Mr. Wonderful.”

“I know. I remember. I wanted you to believe he was,” I say.

“I did! Then shortly thereafter, Christopher also stayed at our house, without you. Even though I’d never met him and worried it might be awkward, it wasn't, because he was so complimentary to you he won me over. He showed us his photos of you and talked about how wonderful you are, how much he loved you. Wait a minute, Craig’s texting me, he says they’re going to go to a café around the corner. I’m gonna tell them to go ahead without us.”

While Mariko types on her phone I think about what she has just said. It’s all true. The previous year, I had flown to California to go to Tassajara Buddhist Monastery in
Carmel. Both before and after I went to Tassajara, I stayed with Mariko for a few
days. It had been years since she and I had enjoyed the luxury of talking non-stop for
hours at a time. When she had dropped me at the airport for my return flight to Ohio, both
of us were hoarse. A few months later, I sent Christopher to Tassajara for a retreat on
careers. It’s where he met Pierre and Libby, our San Francisco hosts. Before coming
home, Christopher spent an evening with Mariko and Craig, leaving them convinced that
we were the fantasy couple we pretended to be. Unlike our oldest friends in Ohio, this is
only the second time Mariko has seen Christopher and me together and it’s the first time
for Craig. What I had told Mariko in the past was what she believed. Where the friends
near us often questioned my statements of happiness in between the times of great
difficulty, Mariko only knew what I had told her. California is a ways away from Ohio.
And yet, she stands by me, whether or not she understands the situation.

“I just want you to be happy, you know that, right?” she asks.

“I do know that.”

“So what are you going to do when you get back?”

“I don’t know. I just know I have to stop waiting until I have it all figured out—the
right job, house and so forth—before moving ahead.”

“Aren’t you worried about money?”

“Terribly! But it’s like, you know, waiting for the perfect time to have a baby.
There just never is one. And staying was making me sick.” I tell her about the pain I had
in my side for nine months. “I can’t wait any longer. He tells me I’m having a midlife
crisis, you know.”
“And?”

“I told him I damned well deserved one! I just can’t see myself living like this for the rest of my life,” I tell her.

“You know you can always talk to me, right?”

“I do.” Or at least, I think, I do now.

Day Six
The End
8 August 2010

I wake up on my left side and look at the outline of early light along the sides of the window shade. Christopher is awake and has the full length of his body against my back, his right hand sliding under my camisole until he holds my top breast for a brief moment before sliding his fingers and palm down my belly and under the elastic band of my green boxers printed with lady bugs. His middle finger stretches for the middle of my sex. I clear my throat. He jerks his hand up and lightly grips the side of my waist.

“Are you awake?” he asks.

“I guess so, I was asleep.”

“I’ve wanted you all night, I rubbed on you, but you didn’t wake up.”

I don’t respond. And the familiar quiet grows uncomfortable. His last day here, of course it would not be complete if he didn’t fuck me. Right. Otherwise, how can he leave and know I am still his? His to grope, his to fuck. He rolls me over and goes to work. Leaning over me, he tries to kiss me. God, how I hate his breath. Always bad from too much coffee and bad sinuses, his morning breath smells like dog shit. I kiss back without
widening my jaw and quickly turn my head. He sits up on his knees next to my hips and pulls my boxers down, tugging to get them over my ass, sliding them down my legs and feet before flinging them on the floor. Like a doctor in an exam room, he pulls my camisole up over my breasts and begins to squeeze them in each hand. Bending down, he puts my left nipple in his mouth. He lifts his ass up and for a moment looks like a dog on all fours, chewing on a corpse. Keeping my nipple between his lips and tongue, he puts his right knee between my legs, using it to push my left leg over creating a weir of beige sheeted mattress outlined by my legs. He swings his body over, his legs underneath him, both his knees pressing into my inner thighs, holding them in place. With his back arched over my body, he releases my tit and slides his mouth down my torso while his legs stretch out behind him.

“No,” I say when, between my legs, he tries to lick my lips. “No, I don’t want this.” He rises up, wipes off his lips and chin with his hand, pulling his fingers and thumb together across his lower face. Holding himself with his right hand, he begins to rub up and down my slit. Tears streak down my temples before disappearing in my hair. I wait, but he can’t get hard. Again. He closes his eyes and rubs himself furiously on me and I think of a cooked egg, peeled of its shell and wrapped in a square of kid leather flipping up and down in his hand, hitting his thumb and forefinger like a bodiless doll as he slides it up and down on me. He’s not hard, I’m not wet, please give up, please stop. I don’t say. And suddenly he’s in. Not hard, really, but hard enough. One. Two. Three.

“Ahhh…argh…uh.” And he’s done. He rolls over and with his back to me, seems to fall asleep. I grab a tissue from the table next to the bed and blow my nose before
taking more tissue to clean myself. Rolling on my side, back to back, as we were in the night, I keep rolling until I roll off the bed and on my feet. Pulling my cami down, I find my boxers, slip into them and go the bathroom where I lock the door before I shower.

His flight is early, 3 o’clock in the afternoon out of Oakland. He wants to go to the deYoung Museum, mostly to see the building, finished just two years earlier. Because activity makes time move more quickly, I rally the boys, help them pack, roll up their sleeping bags, wipe down the bathroom in their room and load up the pop-top. While Christopher visits in the house with Libby I am in the garage folding the small load of laundry I had washed and put in the dryer last night before going to bed.

“Can I help pack up your car?” says Pierre as he comes into the garage carrying the bags I’d left inside the door to the attached garage.

“You didn’t have to bring those out for me,” I tell him.

“Oh, that’s okay, I needed to come out here anyway.” Much of the renovations Pierre had done to their home had started in his tidy garage workshop. Pierre’s last name is Capeder and he told me it means what it sounds like, “carpenter.” I think, what if all people suited their surnames as well as Pierre Capeder does his? I would be the son of a Christian or, to take it to the root, anointed. Because Christopher’s last name is Diehl, phonetically speaking he would be a bargain. Maybe we do suit our surnames. I do feel like I am on a path that I was always intended to follow and Christopher doesn’t believe
it possible for a woman to walk away from him, none ever have, so why on earth would I?

It’s another cold day in San Francisco as we leave Libby and Pierre and sluice down the winding streets, Christopher driving the Matrix to Golden Gate Park where, much like University Circle in Cleveland, several museums placidly welcome visitors. Museums, especially when grouped together, bespeak civility. Unlike shopping malls and plazas, the cultural destination for many Americans with time and money to spare, museums are both happy and unconcerned with visitors. They seem to say, “Yes, you would do well to visit here, but if you do not, I shall not be too concerned.” Ticket sales are not what keep museums going, endowments are.

We park in a garage and while Claude and Christopher walk the grounds of the museum to look at the exterior of the building, I let Hugo and Jules climb on a white marble sphinx the size of a large bull. Hugo sits on the neck behind the serious face carved by a man named Arthur Putnam in the first part of the 20th century. Leaning forward, Hugo grabs the curls of hair on either side of the beast’s head. Jules has his entire body pressed against the side of the sphinx’s face while Hugo’s beaming face strikes quite a contrast to that of the sphinx who, like the cat that he is clearly disapproves of our behavior, tolerating it only because what else can he do? He’s made of stone.

Much of the de Young museum spreads lengthwise across the site no more than a couple stories high and is sheathed in sheets of punctured copper. The entrance is held in the crook of a courtyard, a light open space that leaves the gardens behind, transitioning visitors for the hushed quiet inside. Hugo and Jules whoop and race around me and I look
for guards, see none. Christopher and Claude follow behind us a short distance,
Christopher snapping photos of the building. After we buy our tickets, we head to the
elevator at the bottom of the museum tower. The body of the museum looks like bronze
shoulders, the tower an inverted triangle that resembles a dynamic head. Near the top of
the tower is an observation floor from which one can panoramically enjoy the view of the
city on the bay. It’s a cool mixed metaphor, Empire State building meets major art
museum.

“Let’s go to the galleries, I really want you to see the Sugimoto exhibit, Hol,”
Christopher says. He’d seen photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto’s traveling exhibit earlier in
the year when it was in Washington, D.C. On our refrigerator in Akron is a post card of a
Sugimoto photo of my favorite theater in our state, the Ohio Theater in Columbus where,
as a poor undergrad, I spent many summer afternoons watching classic movies in the
splendorous air conditioning. When Sugimoto shot the Ohio Theater, and many other
movie houses around the country, he kept his camera shutter open for the duration of an
entire film. What results is a screen that glows white, lit up as no studio photograph could
reproduce. Two hours of life rendered completely free of detail, radiating the fact that it
happened. The film was projected, the audience watched. A snapshot of passage, looking
back at a length of time spent on one thing full of many details, but when it’s over what is
left is a singular image, pulsating with what was just there.

Sugimoto has photographed enormous, four to five feet high, portraits of the very
famous. Everyone from Pope John Paul II, Fidel Castro to Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn.
All the portraits are of wax statues, but rendered in lighting and with the seriousness
given to a living subject of historical importance. I knew the subject matter, but when I turn into the dimly lit gallery and stand between the pictures of the infamous Tudor king and his wife on one side of the narrow room while on the wall across from them sits Emperor Hirohito, in a western tuxedo, his hands resting on top of his thighs I wonder: How to discern what is real from an image of reality falsely projected? As with my dad and Liane seventeen years earlier, I had heard in the past months, “Not you two, you are the perfect couple!” But that’s what we wanted to project, that it was great being us even though it always felt phony, at least to me.

The boys were done with Sugiomoto in less than five minutes. “Hang on, walk with me through the exhibit and show me what you liked best,” I say, hoping to keep them in the gallery a little longer, not wanting to check off the images like a punch list at a construction site, but actually spend time in front of my favorites. I linger in front of a photo taken in a Buddhist temple in Kyoto of one thousand statues of Avelokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. “The Dalai Lama is the incarnation of Avelokitesvara,” I explain to the boys. Jules leans on my side, using both his hands to hang onto my forearm that drapes across his chest. Hugo is on my other side, his head on my upper arm, his right hand holding my left.

“K, can we go now?” asks Hugo.

“Sure, but don’t run!” I say as they head up the ramp from the Sugiomoto gallery to the main galleries. We stay only a little while longer, the permanent collection, which is mostly indigenous art from Africa and Oceana, does not interest Christopher and he is anxious not to miss his flight.
“Why don’t we head out and if we are early to the airport, we can stop somewhere and get coffee?” he suggests.

“Fine by me,” I tell him. Inside the parking garage, we break out the sandwiches we had made at Pierre and Libby’s that morning and eat them in the car. Christopher wolfs his down and starts driving while the boys and I finish. To get to the Oakland Airport, we leave San Francisco by way of the Oakland Bridge, the one that collapsed in 1989. As a child, crossing bridges was a deep fear of mine, especially when we lived in Moline, Illinois and had to cross the Mississippi river to go shopping in Davenport, Iowa. Back then, I imagined the feeling of falling off of the bridge, entombed in our Vista Cruiser station wagon, hitting the surface of the water and watching the water rising first on the outside of the windows and then frigidly filling the inside the car until only inches of air remained under the rooftop. Now I could ride over a bridge I knew had collapsed and not feel my chest tighten nor by breath shorten, even while thinking of the day people died here.

We arrive at the airport with plenty of time, but not so much that we need to kill any over coffee. Christopher pulls up to the Southwest airlines curbside check-in and yanks up the parking break. “Let’s get out and you can hug Papa goodbye,” I tell the boys. Happy to be out of the back seat, packed three tight, Jules and Hugo hug their father at the same time, one on each side.

“I love you, Papa,” Hugo says before giving his trademark instant release hug.
“I love you too, Papa,” says Jules so quietly that only Christopher and I hear him. Claude stands stiffly in front of his father after his brothers move back. Christopher wraps both his arms around Claude’s shoulders in dramatic fashion.

“Keep helping Mama out, okay?” he says to Claude as he rocks his body side to side. I quickly step towards Christopher when he releases Claude to give him a perfunctory hug in front of the boys. Using his height to his advantage, Christopher swoops his arm down around my shoulders and pulls me to him, lifting my head towards his with his arm and I feel his tongue on my lips. I keep my mouth closed.

“Goodbye, have a good flight,” I say flatly when he finally releases me, my eyes locked with his, steadily radiating, or so I hope, what I feel. “Okay, let’s get in the car!” I turn and tell the boys. The little boys jump in the back seat and wave to Christopher while Claude and I resume our positions in the front—his shotgun to my pilot.

“Man, does that feel better,” says Claude as he fastens his seatbelt and I know he means sitting up front and not being shoehorned with his brothers in the back.

“No kidding,” I say and then drawing the words out a second time I repeat, “No kidding. Let’s get out of here.” I put the Matrix in first and we move forward through the bunched up traffic. I never look back.
Chapter Nine:

Tassajara

It was sunny the next morning when the boys and I headed south after spending the night with Mariko and Craig. We backtracked our drive from just a few days earlier, driving through eucalyptus forests near Gilroy and into the middle of the farmland near Salinas where Claude and I found ourselves to be the only ones awake in the car. I had put music on and without a story to keep their minds occupied, Hugo and Jules had slumped down in their seats and dozed off.

“Mama?” Claude asked me.

“Yeah, Claudie?”

“Are you and Papa getting divorced?” he asked. There it was. Christopher had insisted we not discuss things with the boys, presumably because he thought I would stop pursuing a separation and we would go back to the way we were. Foolishly, we hadn’t expected any of the boys to ask what was going on.

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, I’m a smart kid, you know,” he said smiling at me when I looked over at him.

“Yes, I know,” I told him smiling back. Highly intelligent, Claude is also severely dyslexic and an ideal poster child for the benefits of appropriate remediation. For several years, I took him to a specialized tutor, an occupational therapist and, for one year when
years, I took him to a specialized tutor, an occupational therapist and, for one year when he was in the fourth grade, a costly and effective school for learning disabled children. He worked hard at everything I found for him and when he was tested before school ended that past spring, he was reading at the level of a 23-year-old. Though we had already been close, the years of working together on his remediation had made Claude and me something of a team. For one so young, he was very observant and as much as a child can know a parent, Claude knew me.

“So things’ve been really tense,” he said, “I kinda forgot, you know, since we’ve been away from home so long.”

“Did you think things were tense before we left home?” I asked him.

“Oh, yeah,” he answered, drawing out the words.

“What about now?” I asked him.

“Well, now they’re fine, it was just when Papa was here. It was like when we were at home.” I heard him and took in a deep breath. I will not lie to him, but neither did I want to tell him more than he needed to know.

“Well, I don’t know if we’re getting divorced or not, Claude,” I told him, “I can’t promise we won’t, but right now, I want to move out and have a place of my own separate from Papa.”

“When?” he asked, which I found an interesting question. It was not the one I had expected.

“I don’t know, we’re working that out, but it’s really important that you know this has nothing to do with you and your brothers.”
“What do you mean? We’d move too, wouldn’t we?”

“Yes, you’d live with us both. I mean my wanting to live separate from Papa has to do with my relationship with him, right? Not my relationship with you…” I trail off.

“Oh, I know,” he said sharply.

“You do?” I asked him.

“Well, yeah, I mean things are really tense when you guys’re together. But it’s not that way when it’s just us…”

“Yeah,” I said and then I asked him, “Have your brothers said anything about it?”

“No, they’re too young, I don’t think they really notice this stuff,” he said.

“Hmmm, I don’t know about that,” I told him.

“Well they haven’t said anything to me,” he said and we’re quiet for a moment. Then he adds, “Should I tell them something if they do?”

“Just tell them to talk to me, okay?” I asked and Claude nodded. “And you too, you know you can talk to me anytime, okay?” he nodded again as I reached over and squeezed his hand. Claude sounded like he was taking it in stride, but I felt that was only because he had no idea what it would feel like if his parents went through a separation and divorce. How could he? Watching the parents of his friends get divorced, something he had seen a lot of lately, wasn’t the same as having his own parents divorce.

We came upon the ocean in Monterey and drove south to Carmel. Officially called Carmel-by-the-Sea, I think of Carmel as both the northernmost town on the rural stretch of Route 1 that runs alongside the Santa Lucia Mountains and the southernmost town in the greater San Francisco region. I love Carmel, its small size, its rugged
geography and intellectual and artistic community. If I could live anywhere in California, I would live in Carmel.

The day had become overcast and chilly in the time it had taken us to drive down from San José but the boys didn’t care. They were, as always, eager to swim in the ocean. I pulled off the road alongside a sandy public beach, the ocean no more than thirty feet from the road. Even though the previous night I had slept better than I had the entire time Christopher was with us, I was tired. Tired in a larger sense. I got out of the car and held a towel over the windows that were next to the road while inside the boys changed into their suits. The passenger side of the car tilted towards the beach, following the slope of the berm. As soon as they had their suits on, the boys seemed to spill out of the car and onto the beach. They ran straight into the water and began splashing each other when they weren’t jumping the waves that rolled in. On the small inlet beach, which was no more than 50 yards long, the only other people were a Latino family whose small children were more interested in digging in the sand than playing in the water. Fully dressed, I spread out the largest of our towels and reclined back on my elbows to watch the boys play.

I was not alone. Someone, or rather, something else was also watching the boys. Incredibly close to them, maybe twenty feet or less, was a seal. Not a baby like the one we had seen in the San Francisco Bay two days previous, this seal was gray with darker spots, its head so large, larger than any human head and still, so human like in shape. Those deep eyes, clearly thinking and like a wire coursing with rainwater, I felt a shiver in my spinal column. Was it assessing my children as edible? Seals are meat eaters and I
wondered if these visits were a curious investigation of the frolicsome sounds of the children, or something more sinister?

“Look, look!” the man with his family cried out. He had turned to me and was pointing at the seal.

“Yes, I see,” I said while nodding. The boys saw too and had stopped playing. They stood facing the dark head bobbing with the waves just beyond them and stared at it for less than a minute. Then, as soundlessly as the seal had appeared, it went under the water and was gone.

A few minutes later, my friend Nancy walked up. She and I had arranged to meet in Carmel and caravan to Tassajara. In her fifties, Nancy is a striking woman. Her long hair was dark when she was young, or so she tells me; but for as long as I’ve known her it has been predominantly white with a few darker strands blended evenly throughout. She had on white capris and a white blouse. On another woman, the effect of all white muslin would be patrician, Martha’s Vineyard. On Nancy, it was etheric.

“Hello, dear friend,” I said and we embraced. She felt tiny in my arms, too tiny. When we separated, I looked her over and saw her hips had lost their fullness. When she had moved from Akron to California two years earlier, I had given her clothes of mine as we were the same size all over: tops, bottoms and feet. Now, I felt large next to her even though I too had lost weight since we’d last seen each other in December when she’d come back to Akron for Christmas.

I met Nancy four or five years earlier through the Buddhist community in North East Ohio when we kept seeing each other at various lectures. When in 2003, Christopher
and I moved with the boys from Cleveland to Akron, Nancy and I began having lunch together once a week, sometimes more. Jules was three in 2003 and still home with me, making midday visits with Nancy lifelines of adult conversation. The director of an Akron food pantry for years, when she and her fiancé broke up, Nancy deliberated moving to Northern California and becoming a Zen monk. Monasticism is different in Buddhism than it is in Catholicism. Becoming a Buddhist monk does not imply a lifelong commitment, though for some it is. As much as I hated to lose my friend and our regular visits, I strongly encouraged her to go.

“Your only child is grown and married, you neither hate nor love your job, and you are no longer in a committed relationship. When else has there been a better time for you to do something like this?” I asked her while eating outside at a Lebanese restaurant near my house.

“I’m pretty sure I’ll do it,” she said, “I just have to figure everything out, what to do with my stuff, my car, my bills.” She figured it out and for three days in the fall of 2005, we talked on our cell phones for hours as she drove west, me a virtual passenger keeping her company along the way.

In the spring of 2006, I visited Nancy at Tassajara, the first Buddhist monastery established in North America. Suzuki Roshi, a Zen priest, was sent from Japan in 1959 to run a Zen temple in San Francisco. The congregation was primarily older Japanese immigrants; however, Suzuki Roshi soon began attracting westerners to his temple. Gary Snyder and Alan Watts had introduced Buddhism to the Beatniks and others through their writings. The year before Suzuki Roshi arrived in California, Jack Kerouac had published
Dharma Bums. As with many movements, both messenger and audience were ready to interact and Suzuki Roshi’s life’s work turned out to be bringing Zen Buddhism to the west.

In 1966, Suzuki Roshi acquired Tassajara. The hot sulfuric streams found at Tassajara were once used by Native Americans and Spanish settlers to cure meat, and that is what Tassajara purportedly means, “drying flesh.” In the nineteenth century, Tassajara became a health resort that, by the late sixties, had fallen into severe disrepair. Today, the monastery is open during the summer months for paying guests who come as much for the hot spring baths as for the opportunity to practice meditation at a Zen monastery. The funds generated in the less than six months that the facility is open to the outside world are enough to support not only Tassajara, but also two other Zen facilities in Northern California.

When I came and stayed at Tassajara the year before, for more than a week I cleaned cabins in the mornings and hiked the mountain trails around the monastery in the afternoons when Nancy worked. When she didn’t work, we went down river to a swimming hole known as the Narrows. That had been my first trip without either Christopher or my boys since before I had become a mother. Now I was eager to show the boys what I had discovered in the mountains of Northern California. I expected it to be both familiar and strange to them because they have gone almost every year of their lives to Family Camp at Karmê Cholîng. Buddhism and meditation were not unfamiliar to them, but the remote monastery in soft undulating mountains of Central California was.
“Nancy!” yelled Hugo, who was the first of the boys to see her. He ran up, wrapped a towel around his body and then threw his arms around her waist.

“Hi, Hugo,” Nancy laughed, “how are you?”

“You wouldn’t believe how close this seal came to us just now!”

“Yeah!” agreed Jules.

“It was pretty shocking, I have to say,” I added while bending over to pick up my towel and shake it off. Soon we were back in the car and headed to Carmel for a late lunch. We spent the afternoon in town, letting the boys swim at a larger public beach, before having dinner and heading over the mountain pass to Tassajara. Though the dirt road, which crosses a mountain ridge before dead ending at the parking lot, is only fifteen miles long, it takes two hours to drive it, sometimes longer. All summer, the road is continually graded, but with every rainfall, things shift. The pass is narrow with sharp curves, as one would expect of a mountain road. We’ve driven on many mountain roads throughout this trip, but they were all paved and we could glide seemingly weightless over peaks in Arizona and Nevada. Loose enough to feel like snow, the light red dirt on the path to Tassajara left a dust cloud half a mile behind any car, including Nancy’s, which we followed from a considerable distance. It was the only way to maintain visibility with the cloud trailing her red Honda Civic. Soon all three boys dozed as the sun slid behind mountain peaks.

It was nearly eight o’clock when I woke them up and told them the time, “You know guys,” I said, “the bath houses at Tassajara have a men’s side and a women’s side. But after eight at night, the men’s side allows women.” Claude looked at me, his blue
eyes sleepy but wide open as I explained. “So what I’m saying is you could go take showers on the men’s side, but you’ll have to take care of Jules, while I go to the women’s side.”

“That’s fine,” said Claude.

“Fine with me,” said Hugo.

“But there may be other women in there and everyone, both men and women will be naked,” I tell them.

“We don’t have to shower, do we?” asked Hugo.

“Look at your skin. Better yet, Hugo, look at each Julesy’s skin,” I told him. They were both leaning toward the middle of the back seat to talk to us up front, their heads almost touching. Hugo looked up and down Jules’s face and legs. All three of them had just tossed t-shirts on after playing in the ocean and were still in their swim trunks.

“Yeah, so?” Hugo asked, looking up at me.

“Do you see that white stuff?” I asked and all three said they did. “That’s salt from the ocean. Your skin will itch and get very dry if you don’t rinse it off. I can either come with you to the men’s side or go by myself to the women’s side when we shower.”

“That’s fine, come with us,” said Hugo and Jules agreed. But it’s not them I am most concerned about. Claude was thirteen and his awareness was different than that of his younger brothers. The irony of bathing nude with other adults, given my past, was not lost on me. While the baths at Tassajara would not have adults who leered or lusted after my children, I wanted to make sure that both then and later, when they though back on the trip, that each of the boys was comfortable with what had been decided. It is not as
though the boys hadn’t seen me naked. Though our home has one and a half bathrooms, everyone uses the full bathroom on the second floor to get ready in the mornings and for bed at night. But at home we don’t sit around naked with each other and we certainly don’t sit around naked with naked strangers.

“Claude what do you think?”

“I don’t know, it’s kinda weird, you know?”

“I do. So here’s how it is. Whether or not I’m with you, the people in there’ll be very polite, they won’t stare at you. It’ll also be very dark and quiet. Think about what you want to do and then let me know when we get there, okay?”

“Okay.”

After I parked the car in the small lot outside the Japanese entrance gate, we discovered that the pop-top key was broken off. It must have snapped when I locked it up in Carmel after getting the boys’ t-shirts out. Luckily, our bathroom bags and my small suitcase were down below in car. With no lights, save the stars in the sky, I gave up trying to get into the pop-top for the night.

“I had to have a locksmith break into the pop-top in Sedona because I locked my keys inside,” I told Nancy, “I wonder if it messed up the lock.”

“Well, come on,” she said, “you guys head down and shower and I’ll go check on your room. Meet me in the courtyard by the kitchen when you’re done.” We parted with Nancy at the back of the zendo, or main shrine building, and the boys and I headed to the right towards the bathhouses.

“Phew, what’s that smell?” asked Hugo a bit too loudly.
“Yeah! It’s really stinky!” said Jules.

“That’s the sulfur in the springs. I kinda like it,” I told them, “it makes me think of egg salad sandwiches.”

“Yuck, then I don’t like egg salad sandwiches!” said Hugo.

“Me either!” said Jules.

“Claude,” I turned to my biggest boy who was walking shoulder to shoulder with me. He was carrying the towels and the smaller bag with our toiletries.

“Yeah, Mama?”

“Do you want to go alone with your brothers or do you want me to come with you?”

“I’d feel better if you came with us.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I am. I don’t want to go in there alone.” He meant alone as the oldest, the almost adult in charge of his brothers. And so we all went together to the men’s side of the bathhouse.

Outside the bathhouse with two identical sides, like a bathhouse duplex, we stopped at the small shrine in the middle of the walkway, removed our shoes, and bowed before going inside. Like most buildings at Tassajara, the bathhouse has a Japanese aesthetic. Lit by kerosene lanterns, the interior of the bathhouse seemed filled as much with shadow as warm yellow light. I didn’t need to tell the boys to be quiet as we walked to a far wall with hooks and a bench and began to disrobe, the place, filled with only a
handful of people, elicited a hush from us as we moved slowly, thoughtfully sliding sleeves off arms, pants down legs.

“Try not to let your clothes fall to the floor, they might get wet and I don’t have anything dry for you to wear,” I whispered and soon the four of us were completely naked. “Follow me, first we have to shower,” I told them and when we had rinsed off, I lead them to a square tub of hot spring water called a plunge. Behind the plunge were sliding doors of bamboo and heavy paper that opened onto an enclosed patio with another, less hot plunge. The sliding doors were pulled back allowing the night air and twinkling stars to hold two sides of the room. “Stay on the ledge, Hugo, Jules, it’s very deep,” I said, having learned the last time I was here that in the middle of the plunge the very hot water comes up to my chin. A man and woman sat side by side on the ledge, the water up to their shoulders. They smiled politely as we lined ourselves up on the ledge across from them and next to the opened wall. Hugo and Jules sat on either side of me while Claude sat in the corner just on the other side of Jules.

“Look up at the stars,” I quietly told them.

“Wow, there’s so many stars,” whispered Hugo.

“It’s like Karmê Chöling,” said Claude.

“Yes, it is,” I said but better I think to myself. Better because we can’t just dash into town for a trip to the drug store, ice cream shop or café, like we do at Karmê Chöling. Better because it’s so remote and better because it’s just us. The hot sulfur water drained any residual energy we might have had and later in our large dormitory room, we slept dreamlessly.
Morning *zazen*, or meditation, is at 5:30. I heard the call of the conch shell, the gentle percussion of the gong, and the soft sounds of others leaving the dormitory for the Zendo. Even though I doubted they would wake anytime soon, I couldn’t leave the boys who had not yet seen Tassajara in the light of day and didn’t know their way around. Besides, it was cold outside and Jules, my little heater boy, was snuggled under the covers with me, his head on my shoulder.

Nancy met us at breakfast in the resident dining room, a large screened-in porch just off the kitchen. The paying guests are served in a dining room across the courtyard from the kitchen. “Do you have to leave today?” asked Nancy as we ate our bowls of hot cereal sprinkled with nuts and berries. The boys were next to us on a picnic table, all the resident dining hall tables were picnic tables.

“Well, time wise, no, not really, we have a few days of flexibility,” I replied. First Hugo and then his brothers tuned into the conversation.

“I can see if you can stay another night, I don’t see why not,” said Nancy.

“That’d be great, hey, Claude, Jules! We might get to stay longer!” said Hugo. Though they’d hardly seen any of it yet, the boys were delighted with the idea of exploring this mountain valley with the cluster of buildings spread alongside the creek like dice tossed from a cup.

“It’s just that I can’t afford to spend much money,” I told Nancy.

“I don’t think they’ll charge you, but I’ll check.” Tassajara had a system of paying in part or not at all depending upon whether you were visiting a resident. I wasn’t quite sure how the system worked, it hadn’t been clear the year before when I worked half days
for all my meals and a bed, but it was a gift to be there and I needn’t know the details as long as it worked out.

After Nancy got the okay for us to stay another day, all of us hiked the trail that wind over both sides of the creek to the Narrows. Nancy and I set out our towels on boulders looking out over the large swim hole where other guests, most of whom did not bother with swimsuits, were diving from rocks into the center where the water was the deepest. The central pool looked much smaller than last year because unlike most places we’d visited that summer, Central California was experiencing a drought. The trail that criss-crossed the creek had seemed somewhat treacherous when I had hiked it last year. This year, rocks that rose above water level in the creek bed were plentiful and I didn’t even worry about Jules crossing back and forth without any assistance.

“‘I thought it would be uncomfortable for the boys if I didn’t wear a swimsuit,’” said Nancy.

“‘Oh, me too,’” I said. I was wearing my Daisy Mae bikini and the bruises on my legs were still visible, but less greenish. When we’d come to the Narrows together last year, Nancy and I had sun bathed in the nude. I appreciated Nancy’s forethought in wearing her suit with the boys present, for while they seemed almost instantly inured to the public nudity of strangers, seeing an old family friend that way might make the boys uncomfortable, if not downright troubled. I was grateful Nancy had come to that conclusion on her own.
While we watched Claude and Hugo jump into the pool from the rocks over and over again, Jules played on the other side of the Narrows at the water’s edge. It allowed Nancy and me to talk privately.

“So I’ve been getting some really intense massage from a woman who is staying here for a few weeks,” Nancy told me. People who do body work, massage therapists, chiropractors and the like seem to be extended a special offer when staying at Tassajara as long as they provide free care to the residents.

“Really, were you having pain?” I asked her.

“Well, not like you would think,” she told me, “not my muscles.”

“Really? So can I ask what it was?”

“Sure, I’ve been having a problem with chronic diarrhea.”

“Here?” I asked, somewhat incredulously, because the food at Tassajara, which is famously delicious, is all vegetarian and very healthy.

“Yeah, it’s hard to imagine isn’t it?” she asked.

“So by chronic, what do you mean?”

“Months and months, it seems to get a little better every now and then, but really it’s been going on since winter.”

“Wow! That’s a long time,” I said adding, “I thought you seemed really thin.”

“Yeah, I am. This massage therapist, she’s really amazing because when I told her what was going on, we talked and the thing is, it’s because I need to leave Tassajara.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.
“I mean the chronic diarrhea is telling me it’s time for me to leave. You know many people get sick here when it’s time for them to leave. It’s just that it can be so hard to recognize when it’s time.”

“Why’s it so hard to recognize?”

“Because it’s paradise here!” Nancy laughed, “and who wants to leave paradise?”

“I always thought Tassajara was the closest thing I’ve known to Shangri-La,” I said, referring to the mythical utopian village in the 1930s novel, *Lost Horizon*.

“Yep, you and everyone else,” Nancy laughed again. “So when your heart tells you to leave, it’s easy not to listen. Then your intellect suggests it’s time to go and you think, that’s crazy thinking. Finally, the body has to step in and wake you up with an illness. It happens here more often than you might think.”

“No, I get it,” I said and I told her about the pain I’d felt in my side for nearly a year before telling Christopher I had to leave him. Though he had been concerned when I had the pain, lately he had started belittling me for thinking it had any significance in my decision to leave him. Increasingly, to listen to Christopher it was as though we lived in a blissful, problem free marriage until May twenty-fourth. Having Nancy tell me about her physical issues reflecting her emotional reality was more than validating. It was a gift of sanity. Hearing repeatedly from Christopher that I was having a midlife crisis or depressed or grief-stricken felt like code for “you are crazy and unable to make a sane decision right now.”

Nancy’s job was in the kitchen and she was working dinner prep that day and had to be back by four. At three o’clock, I called to the boys and, after gathering our towels
and putting our shoes on, we headed back up creek. Claude ran ahead of the rest of us on the path. He was around a bend where we couldn’t see him when he cried out, “Guys, a rattlesnake! A rattlesnake, hurry!” The rest of us ran up the path, stopping abruptly when we came upon Claude.

As if he had been zapped in a game of freeze tag, Claude held his body perfectly still and pointed to the side of the trail. Coiled just off the narrow trail the small, perhaps three-foot long, rattler rose up when we gathered around it. Everyone, including Nancy, Buddhist monk nearing retirement, shrieked as we ran back to Tassajara in fearful glee, the snake being a profound teacher of the lesson of staying in the present moment.
Chapter Ten:

Pop-top Adventures

The morning we left Tassajara, the boys and I sat together at one of the picnic benches in the residents’ dining area. Our table was lined up with another table, making a long row of planks and plates. At the table next to ours a woman I had met on my first visit to the monastery was talking in earnest with a woman I didn’t know. Leslie was one of the few people who had lived at Tassajara for many years. She rarely left the premises and, in fact, I was told had at one point turned down the position of abbess of Tassajara because it would require her to attend frequent meetings at the Zen Center in San Francisco. White haired and looking to be in her sixties, Leslie had a Mother Superior quality about her. She was still wearing her dark robes from that morning’s zazen, her hair was pulled loosely back and lying in white waves on the sides of her head. Like so many people who come to Tassajara, the woman talking with Leslie was trying to decide whether or not to leave.

“I had a friend once tell me,” I overheard Leslie telling the woman, “that there are three kinds of people: Beginners, Maintainers and Closers. I guess I’m just a Maintainer.” How cool, I thought, to know you are meant to stay. I’ve never felt that in my life and suddenly I wondered, Which am I? Beginner, Maintainer or Closer? Closer sprang to mind before I gave it any thought. Though I did not willingly embrace this sudden knowledge, I knew it was the case. When studying Indian art, I had always been drawn to
knowledge, I knew it was the case. When studying Indian art, I had always been
drawn to the god Siva, the destroyer, as compared to Visnu, the preserver. I also knew
that endings are beginnings. In a traditional tale I’ve heard, there’s a village of people
who ask the gods for nobody in their community to ever die. Their request is granted and
for a few years, people are delighted at endless life until they realize that there have been
no births in all the time they have been given a reprieve from death. Before long, the
villagers ask the gods to return the cycle of life, which inherently includes death. Is my
lesson in this year of death and destruction to embrace this part of my path?

After breakfast the boys and I went to the announcement circle. Everyone gathers
next to the zendo and stands in a big circle. Jobs are assigned, updates given on incoming
guests, talks being held and the like are announced by the leaders of the monastery.
Finally, the circle is opened to anyone who has something to say. People offer and ask for
rides over the mountains and into Carmel, others mention things they are missing or have
found. When the residents seemed finished, I spoke.

““I just want to thank you all for making me and my boys feel so welcome these
past couple of days. I know we bring a different kind of, well, energy? I guess? And it
isn’t always all that contemplative, so thank you.” People nodded and then the director of
Tassajara motioned for Hugo to speak. I hadn’t noticed he had his hand up.

““We’ve been going to Karmê Chöling for a really, really long time, like our whole
lives basically, but this was the first time we’ve ever come here and I just want to say, I
looove it so much better here!” In spite of the fact that meditation centers are not in
competition with one another and the duality of Hugo’s remarks was rather un-Buddhist, everyone laughed. His enthusiasm made it impossible not to.

Nancy had to work that morning, which prevented her from seeing us off at our car as well as a long, teary goodbye. We quickly hugged her in the doorway of the kitchen before carrying the few bags we had to the car. At morning circle I had offered to take a young woman over the mountains to her car parked back in Carmel. Sitting next to me on the ride over the dusty road, she told me that while there are rarely children at Tassajara now, it hadn’t always been the case and she herself had been coming since she was a small girl. She encouraged me to consider coming and working for a summer with the boys. I told her I would love nothing more and it’s true, but it was now hard to predict anything. What would next summer look like? Where would the boys and I be living? How would we be living? Would I find fulltime work and never again be able to take them on an adventure such as this, let alone come and stay for weeks or months at a stretch? It was something to fantasize about, both thrilling and frightening.

After dropping off the woman at her car, we drove north to Monterey under a sky of deep blue with puffy clouds floating by. Nancy had thought there might be a Sears in Monterey, which is where I needed to go to fix my pop-top. I would have rather spent the day at the Monterey Aquarium than at a Sears, but after the extra day at Tassajara, we needed to get a wiggle on it, as I told the boys. In Monterey, I pulled the Matrix into a Sunoco station to get gas and directions. Inside was a large man, not heavy, just tall and broad.
“Can you tell me if there’s a Sears with an automotive department near here?” I asked the man.

“Why? What’s wrong with your car?” he asked and I explained about the broken key in the lock of the pop-top. “Lemme take a look,” he said and before I could protest, he came out from behind the counter and was heading out the door of the station’s mini-mart. The boys were still inside the station using the bathroom when I showed him the lock and my key.

“Gimme the key,” he said and even though I didn’t want to, I handed it over to him. He put the broken key into the lock slot and tried to jimmy the lock, but it wasn’t going to turn with the tip of the key free and embedded at the end of the cylinder. I told him not to worry about it and just as he gave me back my keys, he noticed my license plates.

“You’re from Ohio?” he asked and I told him we were. He then asked me whereabouts and I told him that too.

“Akron? You’re from Akron, Ohio!?!?” He lit up like a boy on Christmas morning when I said our town’s name. “That’s where Dr. Bob came from, did you know that?” I did know that Dr. Bob, one of the two founding members of Alcoholics Anonymous, was from Akron. Every June, members of AA from all over the world converge in Akron to celebrate Founder’s Day. Dr. Bob’s house is not far from our own and a hotspot during Founder’s Day weekend (like a national holiday, Founder’s Day always happens on a weekend). Many people who live near Dr. Bob’s house have yard sales that weekend, given the guaranteed foot traffic and shoppers in celebratory moods. “I can’t wait to tell
my wife I met you. God bless you. You know Jesus saved my life. God bless you.”

He looked at me, waiting for me to respond in kind and I felt guilty, like I was supposed to either be in AA or a born again Christian. All I could do is stare back at him and nod somewhat stupidly. Luckily a customer needed to be rung up inside the station and my would-be-mechanic excused himself. I followed behind to grab the boys. As we were leaving, I paused at the counter where the attendant was talking with man he had just rung up.

“Excuse me, where did you say the local Sears is?” I asked him and he looked up at me as though we’d never met before.

“Oh, there ain’t one here. You gotta go to Salinas for Sears.” And he went back to his conversation with the other customer. The boys and I went out to the car and I pulled out the atlas to figure out how to get to Salinas and then MapQuested Sears on my phone.

“Are we gonna get some more food or what? I’m starving,” said Hugo.

“Yes! Next stop, Whole Foods!” I’d seen the grocery store on our way into Monterey. Because it was a Saturday, the store had tasting stations set up throughout. The boys scattered from me to scavenge samples while I walked the aisles with the cart, loading up on more baby carrots, cheese sticks, granola bars, but also stopping along the way to sample chips and salsa, yogurt covered almonds, high protein vegan smoothies. It was a satisfying trip for us all but it was also getting late. We loaded up the car and headed towards Salinas.

“Put the story back on!” said Hugo.
“Can we just have a little quiet for now?” asked Claude and I had to agree.

Jules said he didn’t care what we did so I put some music on. Because my iPod didn’t connect to the stereo system, we were limited to the four CDs we had in the car: Dolly Parton’s *Little Sparrow*, Amos Lee’s new album, *Supply and Demand*, (which none of us liked as much as his first album), *The Crane Wife* by the Decemberists and a CD Mariko’s husband Craig had put together for us. We opted for that one since it was the most eclectic. The first song on the disc is “Go West” by Geraint Watkins, and we sang along even as we were heading back East.

Salinas Valley is Steinbeck country, or it is in my mind. Generations of families like the Joads work the surrounding fields, though not so much Okies in this new century as Latino families. We had passed by these fields that local producers like to call the “Salad Bowl of America” two times before this day, once on our way to San Francisco with Christopher, then on our way back down to Tassajara. This time, we tried guessing what the crops were as we drove by. In the Midwest corn and soybeans are dominant and it is rare to come across acres and acres of anything else. Oh, sure, smallish farms and gardens with things like tomatoes, onions and peas can be found in the Midwest, but rarely do you see full scale agribusiness acreage of anything but corn and soybeans. Around Salinas we saw artichokes (which look like giant, sage-colored thistles), spinach, pistachio trees, and broccoli in fields that stretched beyond our line of vision.

The mall was easy enough to find as Salinas is not very large and is very flat. Most cities out west, as opposed to older, Eastern cities, are laid out in grids and are easily navigated. In no time we had pulled up to the Sears automotive store.
“I’ll be so glad to have underwear on; my swim trunks rub me,” said Claude.

“Yeah, me too!” said Hugo.

“I’m sorry guys, you should’ve told me, I would’ve gotten you corn starch to put on yourselves if I’d known.”

“It’s all right, it’s not that bad,” said Claude.

“Speak for yourself, Claude,” said Hugo, “mine itches like crazy.”

“Well it won’t be long and we’ll have your clothes. Jules, baby, wake up, we’re here.” Jules sat up, his eyes opened wide and unknowing, his brain trying to reconcile what he was seeing with where he had just been in his sleep. He wiped drool from the side of his mouth.

“Did I fall asleep?” he asked.

“You sure did,” I said while holding the door open for him and then taking his hand as we walked into the store. A young woman named Becky helped us and she said her mechanics could hit the lock with a rubber mallet to knock it out and then replace it with a new lock. I also asked that they change the oil and rotate the tires since we’d driven more than 3,000 miles since leaving Akron, when I last had the car serviced. While they worked on the Matrix, the boys and I went through Sears, first passing tire displays, then exercise equipment and finally clothing before we found the entrance to the mall. We immediately noticed that our tall blondness contrasted with the rest of the people in the mall and, because it was Saturday, the mall was crowded. Claude and I were taller than everyone. We were such an anomaly it was as though we were in Mexico and Hugo said as much.
“It’s because the work here is farm work,” I told him, “and it’s mostly Mexican immigrants who work the fields in America, especially here in California.” Immigration is not the hot political topic in Ohio that it is in the states that border Mexico. Claude and Hugo both enjoy politics and have worked on campaigns doing leaflet drops, working with me at polls during elections. In the 2004 presidential election, we housed workers from other states for the Democratic Party and MoveOn.org. After years of listening to adults talk politics, both of the older boys were beginning to form opinions of their own, mostly.

“That’s stupid that people don’t want Mexicans to come here and work the fields. You don’t see anyone else here trying to do it,” announced Claude even though we hadn’t been discussing immigration policy, just the fact that immigrants work the fields.

“Yeah, who wants to work in a hot field all day? If they want the work, they should have it,” agreed Hugo.

“That’s definitely part of it, but it gets trickier,” I said wondering how to try and balance their thinking. My children are no different than others and their positions on politics are similar to mine, yet rigid. More black and white, which makes them only sound like the mirror versions of exactly what I complain about when discussing many Republican positions, they aren’t nuanced and seem ill-informed at best, cruel and dangerous at worst.

“So you know about things like Medicaid and food stamps, right? These are things that help poor people in our country get medicine and food?” They nodded. “Well it’s paid for by our taxes and some people only want American citizens to get them since
we pay for them. However, some immigrants are here legally and they too are paying taxes.”

“So those people should be able to get benefits, right?” asked Claude.

“Yes, I think so. But what about the children of the people who are here illegally? What if they become sick, should they not be allowed to go to the hospital because they can’t get Medicaid? Or what about them letting their children go to school? That costs money too. And if we don’t let them go to school, what happens to those children when they grow up and don’t have an education?” I knew I was making the issue too simple. There is never enough money for schools, even without a large immigrant population. Still, I wanted to put faces on the issue of immigration, on every issue. When we carpet bomb another country we are killing people, many of them civilians, women and children. Before we could talk more, my cell phone rang.

“Mrs. Christensen?”

“Yes?”

“This is Becky from Sears, when the mechanics knocked your lock out, the entire top cracked so we need to know what you want us to do.”

“I’ll be right there.” Shit. Now I had to buy a new pop-top. We got to the automotive center and after I told Becky that we would buy a new one, I got clothes for the boys from the old pop-top that, after days of it not opening, now could not be closed. I sent them to the bathroom to change and while they were gone, I called Christopher and explained what had happened.
“Should I get one just like the one we have now, or the smaller one?” I asked him, nervous about spending so much money. The smaller, boxy carrier was $100, the bigger one was $150. “The smaller one might cut down our gas mileage,” I told Christopher but he didn’t think it would affect it that much. I also needed him to transfer money to the account my bankcard was connected to. For as long as we had been married, most of our money was kept in joint accounts, except for a small account Christopher kept for his work expenses. Now the reverse was true. This was the first time he had managed our money, though he had tried on several occasions. Each time he found himself unable to pay the bills on time and within a month I would resume my role as the family accountant. I’d been doing our taxes for years, somewhat complicated because of the freelance work Christopher did on the side, after watching how stressful it was for him. He always procrastinated and wound up racing to the Post Office near midnight on April fifteenth. I have a different approach and would rather give more to the government in withholding all year so that in January I am eager to file for a February refund. Within weeks of expressing my need to separate, Christopher had decided it was time for him to hold the purse strings and hold them firmly.

“I know there’s not enough money in the account to pay for this, how much can you transfer?” I asked him.

“I’ll have to see. How much do you think the total will be?”

“Probably $150 with the oil change.”

“Okay, then I’ll transfer $150.”

“But didn’t you just get paid?”
“Yes, but I have to pay the bills, Holly. Your little trip has already cost us dearly.”

“It’s not been that expensive,” I said.

“Gas is over three dollars a gallon out there and coming back you’re going to be filling up, what once? Maybe twice a day?” I bit my tongue and didn’t mention the cost of flying him out. The truth was, I wasn’t spending much more traveling with the boys than I did in any other summer, when Christopher regularly urged me to take the children and leave town because he was working long hours on major deadlines. He was controlling things where he could and where I was most vulnerable, economically. Still, I figured he wouldn’t put the boys in a bad place.

“Well, we’ll need to pay for where we stay tonight and I don’t even know where that’ll be because I don’t know how long this will take,” I told him. But he was firm and only transferred $150. Earlier that summer, after Christopher took over the household accounts, I quickly opened a checking account in my name only. Any small checks that came in, medical reimbursements, the check from Akron Public Schools for driving my kids to school in lieu of bus transportation, any money Christopher did not expect or anticipate, I squirreled into this account as a security fund. I also knew that the overdraft protection on the joint account would kick in if I went over our balance, the problem was I didn’t know how much was in the overdraft account because I hadn’t been able to use my computer at Tassajara. *It’ll be fine. No, we’ll be fine.* I repeated this in my head as we walked back to the mall while the Sears mechanics put the new pop-top on our car.
It took forever. After going to several stores, eating Chinese chicken and vegetables for lunch in the food court, we walked back to the entrance of Sears and flopped down on oversized vinyl couches. I put my backpack in my lap and wrapping my arms around it like a small child so it wouldn’t get stolen, I leaned my head back on the couch and fell asleep. Claude sat next to me, his head bobbing forwards, jerking him awake. This happened three or four times before he slid in my direction and rested his head on my shoulder. Jules curled up on the seat next to me, putting his head on my legs between my backpack and my knees.

“You guys are so boring,” said Hugo.

“Yeah, well I have to drive whenever the hell they finish the car. If you want to, walk around, just don’t go any farther than I can see you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” he said and walked off. A few minutes later, he flopped down heavily next to Claude, waking me up.

“Let’s go see how much longer,” I told the boys. It had been two hours since we’d first arrived at Sears and it was nearly two o’clock. The plan was to spend the next few days at Yosemite and I wanted to get there tonight so I wouldn’t have to drive the next day other than to sites inside the park. When we went back, Becky told us they were almost done moving our items from our old pop-top to the new one. I paid and we waited a few minutes longer before they pulled the car around. Quickly, we got in the car and I headed east towards Merced. Just as when we came into California a week earlier, much of the drive was on two lane highways, the interstates in the long state running mostly north-south. Even though we only drove little more than 100 miles, on the way we briefly
got lost, had to fuel up the car and stopped to eat at a local hamburger joint in a small town on the way. It was after six o’clock when I checked us into a Motel 6 with a swimming pool and free Internet wi-fi.

“Let’s get to the room and then I’ll unpack the pop-top,” I told the boys, “just help carry in the bags from the back of the car.” Our room was small, the two double beds had little more than two feet between them or the walls on the sides, but we weren’t going to be awake most of our time in the room. Claude set down the Playmate cooler and began transferring the cheese sticks to the square refrigerator to firm them back up overnight. While the boys surfed the television channels, I took the keys and headed back to the car to finally unload the boys’ bags for the first time in days. As I walked towards the back of the Matrix, I searched the keys on my key ring for the one to open the carrier. And it dawned on me. Nobody at Sears had handed me the new keys. My broken key and the intact duplicate were still on my key ring, but nothing new. I looked inside the car, in case the mechanics at Sears had left the keys on the floor, but I knew already what had happened. They’d forgotten to give me the new keys and I had forgotten to ask for them. Shit. For the hell of it, I tried my intact key from the old pop-top in the lock. Nope. It slid in, but refused to turn. Pulling the receipt out of the glove box (Grama always called it the glove department), I called the Sears in Salinas. Becky was gone for the day and I spoke to Joe.

“Oh, yeah, well just come back in and we’ll give ‘em to you,” he said when I told him what had happened.
“I’m in Merced now, I’ve driven all afternoon and unless you want to bring
the keys to me, that’s not going to work.”

“Ah, no, no, I don’t want to drive to Merced. Just go to the local Sears and they’ll
replace it for you.”

“What? You mean the entire unit?”

“Yeah, if you have any problems, just tell them to call here and speak to Joe.”

“Is there even a Sears in Merced?”

“Hang on, I’ll check,” he said, not helping
to raise my confidence that the entire
matter could be resolved without me backtracking. Was it possible I was being held in the
part of California I had come to love so much the past two years? Had I subconsciously
forgotten the keys to forestall leaving the golden state? We’d already spent a week of our
month long trip canoodling around the same region.

“Yeah, there’s a Sears on Olive Avenue,” Joe told me before giving me their
phone number. I hung up and walked back to the room to tell the boys the situation.

Given the choice of staying in the hotel room or getting back in the car and spending
more of the day in a mall, the boys opted for the hotel. Ironically, they would not get to
swim in the hotel pool because now it was their swimsuits that were locked in the pop-
top. With Cartoon Network to the rescue, the guys were set and I headed back out.

Sears was easy to find, explaining the situation to the young woman who worked
there wasn’t. She was very young, perhaps still a teenager, with thick black hair held
back in a hair band that zig-zagged through her scalp.
“You just bought this carrier today and now you want another one?” she asked while fingering a golden crucifix on a chain around her neck. I had explained what had happened, but I also told her I was willing to buy the next one up, the one just like our old one, to replace the one we had purchased earlier that afternoon. On the drive over from Salinas, I thought I could actually feel the newer, boxy pop-top dragging down the Matrix on the highway. I imagined untold dollars being spent on gas on the drive back to Ohio all to save fifty bucks up front. “I’ll hafta call the store manager to get authorization,” she said.

“Sure, fine,” I said looking at my cell phone at the time. It was nearly eight o’clock. Like most malls across our great land, this one closed at nine. The store manager, a tall and stocky guy who looked younger than me by maybe ten years, walked up with brisk confidence. I went through the story again and when I told him I wasn’t wanting to swap out my carrier for another just like it but actually upgrade, he seemed pleased and told the clerk to go ahead and process my transaction while he waited so he could sign the return forms. I watched her short fingernails painted an unearthly bright purple fly over the keys of the register until finally she needed first his signature, then mine before giving my keys to a mechanic. They would have smash the new pop-top that was about to become the old pop-top in order to move our things to the newer pop-top I had just signed for. I thought about how many times strangers had moved our belongings today, belongings we ourselves hadn’t been able to access on our own for the past three days.

“Is there anywhere in the mall I can get a drink?” I asked her.
“There’s the food court,” she replied.

“No, I mean like a beer,” I said.

“Well, there’s a 7-eleven across the street,” she replied innocently or so it seemed.

“Oh, thanks,” I said, my eyebrows stretching up on my forehead. Did she think I was going to sit on the sidewalk with a bottle of beer in a paper bag while they took care of this mess? Or was she was just too young to know what it meant to have a day like this day and want to go sit somewhere and have someone pull you a beer, or two, from draught. Giving it a moment’s thought, I suspected the latter and having nothing else to do, I wandered through Sears and into the mall. Unlike the Salinas mall earlier that afternoon, the Merced mall was quiet. I walked past clothing stores where employees were folding shirts and sweaters in neat piles. I’ve worked retail and know the feeling, _Get the store in perfect shape so at 9 o’clock we just balance the register and fly, hey, hey, it’s Saturday night, doncha know?_

The mall was small and in a few minutes I had walked to the end of the wide corridor. And there on my left was a restaurant called the Sweet River Grill and Bar. Yes, my underage Sears clerk just didn’t get it. No harm, no foul. I found it on my own! I walked in, passed the hostess stand, the dining room and went straight back towards a large oak bar. The place was decorated with a 1970s nod to the old west, brass light fixtures fitted with frosted glass, a blond oak bar nearly as long as the room and on the wall behind it hung a large mirror in front of which oak shelves held liquor bottles. The only other patrons were a man and a woman seated at the end of the bar. The tables were all empty. I perched myself on a barstool in the middle of the bar. The bartender, who
was about my age, tanned and fit, poured me a pint. We talked while he washed
glasses in the sink behind the bar, and learning that we were going to Yosemite the next
day, he wrote down directions for the easiest way to get to the entrance. I also told him
about our day’s adventure with the pop-top and when I finished my beer, he poured me
another without asking. Soon thereafter, the manager called the bartender to the dining
room to help wait tables and I was left with my amber pint and the couple. They were
into each other and paid me no mind. It was nine o’clock when my phone rang.

“Your car is ready,” said my sober Sears clerk. I couldn’t get back through the
mall because the stores had all closed their gates, including Sears. I also couldn’t find the
bartender to pay my bill and the Sears mechanics weren’t going to wait for me all night. I
left a ten-dollar bill on the bar. Out in the vast mall parking lot, I walked from light post
to light post, like a marble in the game of Chinese Checkers, until I entered the open
garage door at Sears.
Chapter Eleven:

About Face

I woke up early the next morning and while the boys slept I wrote about our past few days on my laptop. My phone rang.

“Hi, Holly, it’s Debbie.”

“Hi, Deb!”

“Where are you now?”

“California, we’re going to Yosemite today.”

“Well, that’s nice,” she said politely, if not meaningfully, “so I was wondering, do you think you could go with us this Thursday to see Hootie and the Blowfish?”

“Oh, gosh, no way could I drive all the way to Chicago by then, but thanks for asking.”

“Well, Aretha Franklin’s also coming, she’ll be here next week on Monday, the twentieth, could you come to that?”

“Wait, did you say next Monday is the twentieth?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Shit! Shit, shit, shit!” I said under my breath and then to Debbie, “That’s the first day of school! I’m missing a week here somehow, goddammit. Listen, Deb, we need to be to you by the end of this week, okay?”
“Sure, that’s fine. Just let me know what day you think you’ll get here.” We hung up and I opened the calendar on my computer. I thought we had two weeks before school started, but we didn’t. It started in eight days. I am not a stickler for attendance and any other year I would have blown off the first day of school, the first week even. But not this year. At the boys’ Waldorf School the year begins on the first day with the Rose Ceremony. In the school gymnasium, the parents of the first graders walk their children, one at a time, up to the stage where they are met by an eighth grader. The eighth grader gives the first grader a rose before taking the child across a wooden bridge to the first grade teacher who is waiting on the other side of the bridge. Symbolically the oldest children in the school are welcoming in the youngest members. At the end of the year, the ceremony is reversed at the eighth grade graduation and the first graders give a flower to their eighth grade partner as he or she walks to the gymnasium stage to graduate. Adding significance to this years’ ceremony was the fact that because Claude was going into the eighth grade and Jules into the first they were to be partners.

Simple ceremonies to be certain, but I have found that my boys love rituals like these. And I knew that this meant something to Claude especially. More than once during the summer adult friends had asked me about the Rose Ceremony, telling me that Claude had described it to them. Missing it was not an option.

“Okay, guys,” I told them at breakfast as we looked at the road atlas, “here’s the deal. School starts in Ohio a week from tomorrow and we’re still in California.”

“It does?” asked Hugo.
“It does, I don’t know how I thought we had two more weeks, but we don’t. So we can’t stay at Yosemite, we’ll just have to drive through it.” Everywhere we stopped west of the Mississippi, people had told us that their favorite national park was Yosemite. Sitting at the amphitheater outside Carlsbad Caverns, the father of a small family told us it was the most spectacular place on earth. Craig and Mariko said the same thing as did many people at Tassajara. When asked, they couldn’t explain why it was so magnificent, but there was a uniformity of opinion from everyone who had been there. And now we had to give it a drive-by visit.

“We’ll just have to make the best of the day, guys, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Mama,” said Claude, “it’ll be fine.” It was more than fine—it was spectacular. We didn’t have time to take the road that went to the center of the park near the two most recognizable rock formations at Yosemite, Half Dome and El Capitan, because that road did not connect up to the eastern side of the park. Instead, following the directions the bartender had given me the night before, I drove north and we came in at The Big Oak Flat Entrance. The topography suddenly changed as if God had taken the fabric of this section of California between his hands and pushed it together, creating glacier polished mountains dotted with crystalline lakes. As we began wending our way up and up and up, I noticed the two-lane road inside the park was narrow, much narrower than Route 1 had been on the edge of the state. It’s the kind of detail that only someone who drives would understand, so I didn’t say anything to the boys. With little warning, the road took a sharp left onto a new bridge putting us on the other side of a river. When we looked back across the river to the road we had just been on, we could see that just
past where we had been diverted, the road was covered in a cascade of reddish rocks that looked to be the size of book boxes.

“Wow,” we all said lowly and in unison.

“Do you think anyone was on the road when those rocks came down?” asked Hugo.

“I don’t know. Maybe it happened in the spring when the park wasn’t opened.”

“They close this park?” asked Claude.

“I don’t know if they close all of it, but yeah, it snows so much here that they do close some of it off. The eastern side often opens only in June when the last of the snow finally melts away,” I told him, thinking what a little bit of everything was in California—ocean, desert, farmland, mountains. And I thought, as I often had since coming out to visit Nancy the year before, no wonder so many people move here.

I stopped the car at a lookout site on a bridge and dug around in my bags until I found an 8.5x11 piece of paper. “Yosemite 12 August 2007” I wrote in large letters.

“Stand together and, Jules, you hold this sign,” I told them as I positioned them with their backs to the vista we had just driven up. I crossed the street and from the other side of the bridge, snapped their picture with my phone camera. Behind me on my side of the bridge, a waterfall spurted down from the sheered wall of rock just feet from the road.

“Okay, back in, let’s haul!” I said and we drove another hour before the boys made me promise to stop at the next trailhead.

“Toulomne Grove it is,” I said as we pulled into the parking lot a few minutes later.
“Just let me out, I gotta pee!” said Claude. He jumped out and ran to the restrooms while I looked for parking. It was very crowded, cars were pulling in and backing out, people were walking through the parking lot to the trail. It reminded me of parking at a major amusement park, like Cedar Point in Ohio, so many cars and people all walking in the same direction. When Claude rejoined us at the Matrix’s bumper, I had a sandwich ready for him.

“It looks like the trail isn’t a loop, we have to walk down and back, but it’s not too long, grab a bottle of water and let’s head out,” I told the boys and while I closed up the car, they ran over to the trailhead and waited for me. The trail sloped down and as soon as I joined them, Jules and Hugo let the gravity pull them along as they ran with their arms flung behind their bodies to the first bend in the trail where they again waited. What we found as we entered could not have been better if I had planned it. We were in a giant sequoia forest. We first passed giant oaks that were as wide as my car and I had to check and make sure weren’t the sequoias. But when we came upon the grove of about two dozen of the truly giant trees, I didn’t have to check a thing. Some had trunks as big as houses, big houses. At the far end of the grove was something I was sure I’d seen in books as a girl: a sequoia cut through the middle in the 19th century to make a passageway for stagecoaches. The tree hadn’t been in the way of the road, but the people along the road wanted the stagecoaches to come through their neck of the woods and the giant tree with a tunnel was as popular attraction then as it is now, perhaps more so.

“Oh, damn,” said Claude.

“What is it?” I asked.
“My camera battery just died and I didn’t get a picture of the tree with a tunnel.” He had been snapping pictures all the way down the trail and sure enough he was not going to get an iconic picture in the tunnel of the giant sequoia with his camera. I asked another hiker, a man with a boy who looked to be about eight years old, to take a picture of us with my phone. He did and with that we headed back up the trail and an hour after we’d parked we were back in the car. It took several minutes to cautiously make our way through the crowds to the road, which itself had become so crowded it felt as though we were merging into a parade procession.

The boys had been dozing for about half an hour when I began seeing the mountain lakes. We were at nearly 10,000 feet elevation, 2,000 feet higher than we had been at Bright Angel Point on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. The lakes were calm disks reflecting the severity of the gray mountain peaks. Pine trees grew in the small space between the road and the water’s edge. Driving alongside a particularly large lake, I decided to park the car on the shoulder of the road.

“Hey, guys, wake up,” I said softly as I pulled the emergency brake, “look at the lake.” They were quick to rouse and in no time, we were at the water’s edge, kicking off our shoes and sandals and sliding our feet into the water.

“Yikes!” said Hugo, “It’s freezing!”

“Yeah, really!” said Jules, who was clinging to Hugo’s arm, finding his footing in the grainy sand mixed with jagged pebbles. While the younger two followed the edge of the lake to a sandy peninsula jutting into the water, Claude and I walked out into the lake. So cold, yes, we sucked in our breath, the water turning our skin red and numb.
“Hey, Hugo!” I yelled. He and Jules were on the small peninsula, digging in the sand with long sticks.

“Yeah, what?” he called back.

“Go back to the car and get my phone, I want you to take a picture.” In the photo, Claude and I stand, the cold water just below our knees, behind us a mountain gleaming in the sun. Claude’s shoulders meet my own, his head is next to my head. This boy I once carried all over Boston when he was a baby, sometimes in a sling, other times a backpack, often just my arms, was now as big as me. At thirteen he was a boy in an adult sized body.

From the lake, we pushed on to Tuolumne Meadows at the eastern end of the park. All day long, we had seen signs stating Speeding Kills Bears, and below, the number killed so far that year: eight. The closer we got to the meadows, the more signs there were reminding us of this. We stopped at the gift shop near the Tioga entrance to the park.

“Hey, look,” said Hugo, “a passport for the parks, you get stamps at each one you go to.” I looked at what he was holding and, sure enough, other than a spiral binding, it looked much like my U.S. passport with a blue leather cover and pages inside for stamps, not from countries, but from U.S. National Parks. I bought it, only regretting we hadn’t seen it at Carlsbad Caverns, the first national park we had visited. We could have gotten stamps there and at the Grand Canyon. Still, it was clever and I paid the nine dollars for one and Hugo promptly had the cashier stamp Yosemite on the first box inside the passport.
And then we were done with Yosemite. Back in our self-assigned seats in the car, Claude shotgun, Hugo and Jules in the back, we drove through the Tioga entrance. It was late afternoon and soon the sun stayed mostly on the western side of the mountains as we descended the zig-zagging passage out of Yosemite. The road straightened and spit us out in Lee Vining, a town stretched out along a road above Mono Basin, a mostly dry, ancient seabed with a shallow lake alongside the town. The lake, called Mono Lake, is endoreic, which means it doesn’t have any streams or rivers draining away the water. The lake fills with rainwater, which then either evaporates or seeps into the ground. Like most endoreic lakes, Mono Lake is salty and from the view in Lee Vining we couldn’t see anything growing around the lake. It sets upon the desert floor like a silver coin, its water appearing as parched as the earth around it. The land beyond the lake stretches out to the horizon as flat as pastry dough rolled out with on a marble counter.

“IT’s a little early, but I think we should stop here and have dinner, what do you guys think?” I asked the boys while Hugo pumped gas into the Matrix. I was next to him leaning into the downward dog yoga position with my hands holding the door where the glass went when I opened the window. Even though the price of gas was nearly a dollar higher than it had been that morning in Merced, I had Hugo fill it up. I wasn’t sure how far it would be before we found another gas station. All game for an early dinner, I decided that instead of fast food on this fast day of site seeing, I would to treat us to a restaurant dinner.

“Look, that place is called Nicely’s,” Hugo said. He had washed the car windows after pumping the gas and was standing with his hands above his eyes to block the sun
while looking up and down the main drag of Lee Vining. We decided to give Nicely’s a try and it lived up to its name. Our non-English speaking waitress was delighted when the boys practiced their Spanish, ordering *pollo por los niños y la leche con chocolate.*

“Okay, let’s see where we go from here,” I said after we ordered and I had pulled out the road atlas as I had done in so many restaurants throughout this trip. Claude, sitting next to me, leaned in to help me navigate our way. “We eventually want to get on I-80, but we’d have to drive west on State Highway 395 all the way to Reno, see here?” I showed him, tracing my finger up an orange line that ran alongside the spiral binding of the atlas. Another highway, presumably smaller because it was drawn in a lighter orange than 395, went due east, then north to yet another highway, which intersected I-80 seventy miles east of Reno.

“How do you know it’s seventy miles farther east?” asked Claude and I showed him the little red numbers between the exits on I-80.

“Those tell you the distance between the exits, so thirty-seven plus thirty-three is seventy,” I explained.

“Well we should go that way then, don’t you think?” asked Claude.

“Let me see,” asked Hugo, who had been interested in reading maps before he could read words and, as a result, was far better at it than his older brother. I turn the atlas around and slid it across the table to Hugo and again traced our two options out with my finger.

“Definitely, we should take this one,” he said with characteristic authority while tapping the line that headed east from Lee Vining.
on his straw at Claude and me, sliding it carefully back on and blowing it off over and over again. He had crumpled the end of the straw wrapper where it had broken apart a little bit.

“Jules, could you stop that?” asked Claude and Jules giggled like a mad scientist, delighted to know his plan to annoy was succeeding.

“Okay, but the thing with these state highways,” I tell the boys, “is that they may take longer than they look.”

“Which do you think is better?” asked Claude.

“I think it’s probably the same either way, but I like the feeling of heading in the direction we want to go, so I vote for the little highway.”

“Me too,” said Claude.

“That’s what I’m saying,” said Hugo.

Half an hour later, Lake Mono was on our right as we headed east on the two-lane highway. The flatness of the ancient sea basin made the road look as if it went straight ahead forever, past the horizon and beyond. Because of the heat, the edge of the earth shimmered in the distance.

“The road looks like a thin column of smoke,” said Claude.

“Write that down and hand me an energy drink,” I told him. He handed me a bottle from the half dozen or so we had piled on the floor on his side of the car before leaving Lee Vining. He then found a pen and wrote his description on the top of the Sierra Traveler Visitor’s Guide we had taken from the gift shop in Tuolumne Meadows.
Once we drove past the lake, there were no discernable features to the landscape. Nor was there evidence of humankind, save for the road itself, and the combination lent a surrealism to the experience, as though the car wasn’t moving forward even though I kept the speedometer at 70 mph. It was creepy, nothing changing no matter how fast the car went, no matter how hard the engine worked. I questioned our decision to come this way and heard the musical refrain from old western movies, used when cowboys cross desolate deserts, buzzards circling above: *Doodle doodle dooo, do, do, do.*

“What’s that?” asked Claude and in the distance were mounds of earth in lines, looking like crops back east. It was evidence of the U.S. Army ammunition depot surrounding Hawthorne, Nevada. They seemed like tiny specks, almost like heat clouds, but as we came nearer they appeared to grow larger and when we were upon them, we saw they were as big as Quonset huts half sunken in the earth and covered completely with desert dirt. Moments later, as if a veil had been suddenly lifted, we were in Hawthorne. It was very small, little more than an army base with a McDonald’s and even though it was only six o’clock, the quiet town felt deserted. We stopped at the familiar golden arches and as the boys and I walked in, the employees behind the counter silently watched us, their heads slowly turning as we walked past them towards the restrooms.

Before leaving, I bought a large diet coke, no ice, all the while feeling like I had two heads, the way the employee, a teenaged girl, looked at me. I suspected it wasn’t often strangers wandered into this McDonald’s and again wondered if we had picked the wrong route.
But then, after resuming our seats in the car, we got on Nevada 95, a larger road and with every mile, the eeriness dissipated. The boys listened to the last Charlie Bone story we had with us and when the sky began turning pink with twilight, we were at the interstate. I smoked a cigarette from the pack I had purchased on the Indian reservation we had passed through on Route 95, telling the boys that I needed to smoke more now if we were going to get back to Ohio in time for the first day of school. Once the sun had set, Hugo shrieked several times with joy from his seat behind Claude’s as he saw the Persied shooting stars zipping across the clear desert sky.

“I never see shooting stars and I’ve seen eleven tonight!” he said when we stopped in Elko, a hundred miles west of the Utah border. Claude and Jules had fallen asleep soon after we had merged onto the interstate and hadn’t seen any of the meteoric showers. Hugo, however, had remained riveted to the glass of his window, scanning the skies and telling me each time he saw a twizzle of light streak the sky.

It was midnight when we stopped at a hotel with a swimming pool and free Internet, things we wanted, as well as slot machines. Maybe it was because I had driven since eight that morning, surviving on caffeine and nicotine but I thought the slot machines gave the lobby a brittle, weary feeling. The lines between “family friendly” and “adults only” are blurred to the point of erasure in Nevada. I shuttled the boys past the blinking one-armed bandits on the way to our room where we changed into our swimsuits. The pool was conveniently open all night, making as much sense as having slot machines in the lobby, but for which I was happy to discover. Our legs had stretched little in the fourteen hours since we’d hiked to the giant sequoias. The last of our energy
squeezed out of us like the final glob of toothpaste from a tube pulled against a counter’s edge. When we returned to our room, we fell into our beds with our usual partners, Claude with Hugo, Jules with me. I turned off the light just after one A.M.
Chapter Twelve:

Wide States

I woke up at seven when my phone alarm, set to sound like a soft gong, began bonging on the nightstand next to my head. I shut it off after the second tinny bong, got up, dressed, and headed out of the room to the casino across the street. When we had pulled in the night before, I had seen the Starbucks logo on the front of the casino. Even though it is possible to gamble everywhere in Nevada, there is an effort to lure the most resisting visitors into the casinos. As with a casino we had stopped at just inside the Nevada border two weeks earlier when Christopher was with us, the Elko Starbucks was at the far end of the casino, opposite the entrance. At a quarter past seven, I saw only four people stationed at the slot machines and the casino was quiet save for the noise of the machines. Lights flashed from every direction--beckoning anyone to come closer, place a bet, pull out a coin purse. I tried in vain to find a straight path to the café.

“I’ll have a venti black eye with room for cream,” I said to the barista. I was tired and had so much driving ahead of me; my large coffee needed two shots of espresso.

The boys were still sleeping when I returned to the room and opened the curtains to let the light in.

“Come on guys, we need to get on the road.”

“Can’t we go swimming first?” asked Hugo. I hated to say no, it was going to be another long day in the car.
“Can’t we go swimming first?” asked Hugo. I hated to say no, it was going to be another long day in the car.

“I tell you what, I’ll pack up everything except the clothes you want to wear today and load it into the car while you guys swim, but it’ll have to be a quick dip, okay?” In no time they were in their swim trunks, still wet and cold from our midnight swim, and hurrying out the door. When the door clicked shut, I pulled out the atlas, but couldn’t look at it. I sat on the foot of the bed I had slept in with Jules. The television’s black screen reflected back my face to me as I sat with my elbows on my knees, my legs open. I put my face in my hands, each hand pressing on one eyeball, my cheekbones lining up with the knuckle pads under my fingers. I don’t want to go back, I don’t even want to call Christopher. All he says is, “It’ll be good to have you home,” and it makes my skin crawl. I feel like a recidivist being welcomed back to prison by the warden. And there it was again. The feeling of cold gun metal on my lips and I jumped up to push the sensation out of my mind.

Okay, enough! Get busy! I took a big gulp of my coffee, which was now more than half gone, and began throwing our things together. We were in the room for such little time it was as though we didn’t even fully place our bodies in the space, but just grazed the tops of furniture. I had three bags to carry down to the Matrix. Once stored, I went to the pool and called to the boys who were playing a game of Marco Polo with a Latino family.

Outside, the air was clear and the sky so blue. In humid Ohio, the sky is often gray-blue. Out West, in the arid flatlands, the sky is blue-blue. Piercing white cumulus
clouds floated by like cotton balls on a lazy river. Once in the car, the boys were quiet and I put their story on for them. Tired before we had even started, Claude and Jules fell asleep after eating their fill of apples and cheese sticks. Claude’s head bent forward at a ninety-degree angle, parallel with his lap. While holding the steering wheel with my left hand, I placed my right hand on his forehead and gently guided his head back to the headrest. It promptly slumped to the right and rested on the flat of his seat belt just below where it’s bolted to the side of the car.

“I’m gonna turn the story off, Hugo, your brothers are both asleep.”

“That’s fine, can I play Brickbreaker though?”

“Sure,” I said, handing him my phone I wouldn’t let them play it on my iPod, because it ran the battery down very quickly and the only way I had to recharge it was to plug it into my computer, something I did most evenings, but couldn’t do in the car. We got gas at the last exit in Nevada and again I bought coffee from a Starbucks, even though my stomach felt acidic and my head throbbed as much from the first cup of supercharged coffee as from fatigue.

The boys all seemed like they were going to stay awake so I put the story back on as we crossed the border from Nevada to the land of my ancestors, Utah, the Zion for so many European immigrants. At a time in the mid-to-late 1800s, when America was experiencing great waves of European immigration, the Mormon Church offered loans to European converts who wished to settle in Utah. It seems to me a strong incentive for conversion if all your townspeople were migrating anyways, but with a little switch in religious affiliation, you could get funding for your own family. And yet, while many
people defaulted on their immigration loans from the Church, most remained members, settling in Utah, raising large families and filling the state with those who believed Joseph Smith was a true prophet of the Lord. My grandma’s grandma, Christina Gyllenskøg was a thirteen-year-old girl in the 1860s when she traveled with her parents and younger brother from a small town in Sweden to Hamburg, Germany, where they boarded a transatlantic ship. Perhaps the church did not give money to bring over children past a certain age, because Christina’s two older sisters were sent to work in a garment factory in Copenhagen, Denmark until they could raise the funds for their own passage to America. When the older sisters eventually arrived years later, they refused to speak anything but Swedish to each other for the rest of their lives, much to the criticism of Christina, who had adopted the tongue of her new home.

From New York, Christina and her family traveled by train to a small outfitting town in Nebraska on the banks of the Missouri river. And it was from there that she and her family walked over 1,000 miles, alongside a wagon pulled by oxen. Along the way to Utah, Christina’s family encountered Indians, who caused them no physical harm, but rather mugged them, 19th century Plains Indian style. Sit menacingly in your horse and play with your knife till the nice white family gives you everything you want. It could have been worse. Another branch of the family buried a child along the way after she died from a poisonous snakebite. Christina was severely burned when she removed the stopper on a pot of boiling coffee and its contents shot up onto her face. Her mother made a poultice with melted butter and kept Christina’s wounds bandaged and moist until they
had healed perfectly. That is, except a little spot that scarred on the back of her
shoulder where her wounds did not stay covered as she lay in the wagon recuperating.

Their first year in Utah, Christina’s family lived in a dugout house half buried in
the earth. When it rained, their home filled with water and the flour had to be picked
immediately off of the floor so it would not get wet. Christina’s father took a second
wife, Mormon style, and when she came of age, Christina married Søren Henrichsen, a
Danish immigrant. Christina’s daughter, Aileen, was the mother of my grama, Dorothy.
Aileen graduated from the University of Utah in 1907. Grama graduated from the same
university in the late thirties. In 1937, when Grama was still a student at the university,
her grandmother Christina died at home across the street from Aileen and her family.
When Aileen crossed the street from her now dead mother’s home to her own, she found
Dorothy in a car in the driveway, necking with her boyfriend. “Dorothy,” I imagine her
saying as she came up behind the car with the windows open a few inches to allow in the
April air, “Dorothy, are you in there?”

“Yes, Mama?”

“Good evening Mrs. Shipley, is everything okay?”

“Hello, Kelly,” I imagine Aileen saying, not because I know it was he who was in
the car at that moment, but because Kelly was the boyfriend who broke Grama’s heart
and of whom she spoke of, on occasion, for the rest of her life, “Dorothy, your grandma
is gone, I need you to come help me dress her.”

“Yes, Mama,” Dorothy would have said before hurrying to join her mother and
other women from the church as they prepared for burial the body of Christina, dressing
her in her temple garments, like those I had seen my own grandpa dressed in shortly after he had died. Born in Sweden and baptized in the Church of Sweden, a form of Lutheranism, Christina died an American and a Mormon.

As we entered my ancestral state, we passed the Bonneville Flats on our right. Gray dirt was coated with white salt crystals when for the second time in two days we crossed an ancient sea bed and passed another, greater endoreic lake, the Great Salt Lake. I tapped the power button for the stereo, turning off the book the boys were listening to and explained to them that the flats have been used for years to set automotive speed records.

“Your grama brought her boys out here to watch a famous race car driver break the speed record of that time.”

“When was that?” asked Hugo

“The 1950s, maybe?” I speculated.

“Who was the driver then?” asked Hugo. Like many things Grama once told me, I remember more contours than details.

“I don’t know who the driver was, Hugo, but I remember Grama saying he was very famous.”

“It looks cool out here, but kinda creepy too,” said Claude. “It’s a lot like where we were yesterday, but different.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “yesterday, near Mono Lake it was sort of yellowish-greenish, wasn’t it? It’s more bluish-grayish here.” The salt made the land appear recently wet, like the residue at the bottom of a pot of boiling water forgotten on the stove and fully
evaporated. The road seemed lightly placed upon the surface of the dry seabed, as though a temporary passageway until the next great flood. When I could, I looked out over my shoulder at the far expanse of salt flats and felt unsettled, anxious even.

“Yeah, it’s cool,” said Hugo, “Can you put the story back on?”

“Sure,” I said and as soon as the story was in, I placed the iPod earphones in my ears and found the soundtrack to The Hours. Like the film, the Philip Glass soundtrack is melancholic. Pulsing minor chords swept through my chest and made me think dark, sad thoughts. I was sad, my thoughts were dark and I was tired of fighting them back. I was so tired. Guns, why guns? I wondered while feeling, as I had that morning, the sensation of a revolver barrel between my teeth like the cold head of a hammer held in place by two fragile pains of glass. I turned up the volume on my iPod and made myself review the itinerary of the past few days, seeing and smelling everything we had done. Keep it real, shake it off, keep it real, I told myself and would occasionally pinch my inner thighs to avoid drifting off into places I did not want to go.

In less than two hours after leaving our hotel in Elko, we came upon Salt Lake City. Before I could prepare myself, we passed the hotel I had stayed in near the airport just a little over three months earlier when, without Christopher and the boys, I had come to bury Grama. Because of the restrictions on my plane ticket, I couldn’t fly home the day after the burial but had to wait until two days later, a Monday, before returning to Ohio. I spent much of that Sunday in my hotel room, feeling static as though my life had reached a tipping point. It took me many days after Grama was buried to find the words for what I felt, but I felt it immediately.
“How can I be lovable anymore?” I sobbed to Christopher. We had been driving to Cleveland together early one morning after I had returned from Salt Lake. I was crying so hard, Christopher pulled the car to the side of the rural road we were on.

“What do you mean, Holly?”

“My Grama was like, you know, an endowment to me, I mean, her love for me was,” I said between sobs. “She didn’t always approve of my choices, like not joining the Church, but I could never draw on the principal, this endowment of love. If she’s not here, if she’s gone, then so is her endowment, so then how can I be lovable? Who am I without her in the world?” It was not a question he could answer. It was the question of the journey I was now taking. Not just this trip around the country in thirty days, but the journey of my life. It was time I sat in the driver’s seat for the bigger trip and stopped making excuses for what I was not.

I was not in love with Christopher. And his love for me, if there was such a thing, did not compare to what my Grama gave to me. Of course it was not meant to be the same kind of love, but neither was it real once I scratched the surface of what it was we did have. Somehow, when Grama was gone, the vacuity of the purported love Christopher and I claimed to have was made painfully clear. I was not loved any longer because her love was the only adult love I had ever trusted and believed in. Two weeks after I flew home from Salt Lake City I emailed Christopher from a friend’s home:

Dearest Christopher:

I went to bed early last night and woke up at 3 a.m. hearing my heart, call it my unconscious, or perhaps it was my ovary. Whatever it was, it told me to get a job and an apartment. Lying awake the rest of the night, I saw what I heard. In order to rate, I need
to rate with myself. I have tried for fifteen years to rate by supporting Christopher Diehl and his children. Never with any fulfillment, true fulfillment for myself. It has left me at times fabulously depressed, at other times eager to find fulfillment in another relationship, and lately, physically ill.

I have loved you and our children. But we never dated and on the second date when you moved in, for all intents and purposes, I took a script from you for the Christopher Diehl Show. My goals and ambitions were put aside and you regularly discouraged me from seeking to move outside the relationship for personal fulfillment.

I have been inspired of late by your own fulfillment gained when you made a risky move. Not something many of your colleagues would do. Similarly, I must break the horribly conventional model we have spent the last 15 years in. I cannot live any longer like we have. I do not wish to move us every three years in perpetuity in order to have you partner with me at home. I do not wish to have my children believing me to be a harridan. I do not want to be a harridan to them or anyone else.

I want us to start again in the strongest possible way. I need to be financially independent and yet nearby. I can’t live any longer in a home without even a corner in any room where I might find sanctuary. But I don’t need to tell you to live the way that is comfortable for me. Let’s separate out the issues and find our way to be together as fully formed and vital partners raising our three sons.

As soon as I listened to my heart this morning, my side, which had felt like a bass drum, stopped throbbing and instead felt warm. All this time I’ve thought that my side hurt because I wasn’t writing enough. But that wasn’t it. It hurt because I haven’t been living enough.

Holly

The note I received back was simple:

Holly:
I hear the truth in what you’re saying. Beyond any immediate consequence of that truth lies my deep abiding love for a vital, brilliant Holly that honors herself.
And for one week following this exchange, Christopher was conciliatory. The following day, we went to dinner alone, away from the boys, and he cried openly, the other diners looking at us in quick, embarrassed glances.

“I’m sorry,” I told him, “I have to do this.” And I felt as if I was finally returning to something I’d left waiting far longer than I had intended. It felt right and I remained constant in my intentions. By the second week, Christopher was mad.

“We can work on this, think of the children!” And so began the frenetic attempts to put things back as they were, the trip to Niagara-on-the-Lake, the insistence that I join him at Karmê Chöling and that he join us on the trip I was taking with the boys. Somehow, I hoped if we could live separately, I could tease apart what were the endemic problems of the marriage that were making me so miserable from problems that were mine alone. I hoped to save myself and my marriage, but when I was quiet and listened closely, I knew it was either or. Separation was undoubtedly the first step towards divorce.

* * *

Past Salt Lake City, the road turns northwards heading up to Wyoming. Instead of taking the low road, I-70, through Colorado and visiting family in Denver, I had decided to head toward Mount Rushmore. It would take us the rest of the day and the better part of the next to reach the landmark.

As I drove, I thought about the dates of Berry’s parents’ deaths with three boys present, the oldest the same age as Claude to the very month. I felt like I was living history or rather “his story.” Who knows what were the inner secrets of his parents’
marriage, secrets that led to violent deaths. Or does it really take much to trigger an act of—what? Passion? Reaction to loss? If his father killed his mother because he felt humiliated when being left by someone whom he thought was completely dependent upon him for all things, most importantly economically, could the same not be true of Christopher?

I pulled into a Starbucks north of Salt Lake. As I parked the car, the phone rang.

“It’s your father,” I said handing the phone to Claude. “You guys talk to him while I go to the bathroom.” I stepped out of the car before Claude said hello and hurried into the coffee shop. I didn’t want to be close by when Christopher asked to speak to me. I waited in the café for the boys to come use the restroom too. Hugo was still talking to Christopher when they came in.

“So you wanna talk to Mama?” I heard him say. I shook my head no and pointed to the bathroom as I quickly returned to the one-person facility and locked the door. I set my backpack down and went to the sink to rinse my face with cold water. When I looked up, I saw the water collecting in tiny rivulets around my eyes and down the sides of my nose. What are you doing in here? Go back out there and hold your seat. You are his equal, you are their mother. Their mother. I stared deeply into the blue eyes in the glass before ripping my gaze away. I dried my face on the white paper towels, placed my backpack over my right shoulder and took a deep breath before going back out. The boys were scattered around the small store, Jules was looking at the stuffed bears, Hugo was at the pastry case and Claude was sitting at a table nearby.

“Let’s go,” I said.
“Papa wants you to call him when you can,” said Hugo, giving me my phone.

We continued on, the boys seeming to have shifted into a mode of semi-hibernation, knowing how long we had to travel each day from now until we were home. The last Charlie Bone story had ended and now they too had become tired of audio books. I allowed them to play Brickbreaker on my cell phone, Claude passing the phone to Hugo in the back seat whenever his game ended. When Hugo played, Jules leaned into the side of his arm and watched.

Crossing into Wyoming, the land poured out flatly around us. Wyoming is known for Yellowstone National Park and the northern section of the U.S. Rockies, but much of the state is prairie, void of seemingly anything vertical save for grass. Again, my mind drifted into the badlands of dread as I sped east.

*Eyes closed, no sight. Gunmetal between my teeth like the cold head of a hammer held in place by two fragile panes of glass. My lips moist as they squeeze down on the barrel and, yes, I dart my tongue into the cylinder and taste the acrid remains of the last discharge before my thumb pulls the curved sliver, releasing the next.*

No, I tell myself, pushing away the sensory vision, that’s not a vision, really because my eyes see nothing. I think of the story I heard Nick Hornby describe of the man who survived a suicide attempt. He jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge and on the way down, realized that he only had one real problem. His problem was that he had just jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. *You are not suicidal, it’s just whispers. And you don’t have access to a gun.* Right. I couldn’t shoot myself, so it wasn’t real, it was metaphoric death, but why was I feeling whispers of metaphoric suicide? What was I
trying to tell myself? Music, listen to music. I put Beck’s album “Guero” on my iPod.

Smart musician music, the beat rocked and I focused on the lyrics while softly singing.

The tempo helped with the fatigue. I had driven nearly 1,000 miles since leaving Tassajara two days earlier. I wasn’t going to make it as far this day. I watched the lines in the road, my blood caffeinated with coffee and the sickly sweet Zipfizz energy drinks, my ears plugged up with rock music. Suddenly my shoulders jumped as though someone had just stuck their fingers in my armpits. I called Christopher.

“Hey, I’m having a hard time staying awake. Can you find us a hotel?”

“Sure, where’re you now?” he asked.

“We just past a town called Green River.”

“Okay, I’ll get online and call you right back.” A few minutes later my phone rang. “So the next town you’re going to come to is Rock Springs.”

“Yeah, we’re pretty close actually.”

“Oh, good. I booked and paid for a room at the Days Inn on Elk Street. It has a pool,” he said.

“That’s great,” I said, my voice flat, almost robotic. “The boys could use some activity.”

“I bet. I imagine they’re going stir crazy in the car for so long.”

“No, they’re pretty quiet actually. Thanks for getting a hotel, Chris.”

“Sure, no problem. I’m looking here on the Internet and Rock Springs was once home to Butch Cassidy. He was the town butcher. That’s how he got his name.”

“Cool,” I said.
“There’s also a Starbucks and several restaurants.”

“That’s good. Thanks for setting us up, I couldn’t have made it to Casper, I’m so tired.” I wanted to get off of the phone, but Christopher kept talking.

“I wish I was there to help you drive,” he said.

“I’m okay, just tired. I’ll be fine after a full night’s rest.”

“Well, go out and eat a good dinner tonight.”

“Yeah, okay,” I told him, the same man who two days earlier wouldn’t transfer any money to the accounts I had access to. “Hey, I’m coming to the exit, so I need to hang up.”

“Good, well, call me when you get settled in.”


The hotel was old and surrounded by concrete. There wasn’t an interior hallway, all the rooms exited outside to a sidewalk on the ground floor and a balcony the width of a sidewalk on the second and only other floor. That’s where our room was. Claude stood next to the car as I climbed on the back bumper, opened the pop-top and handed our luggage down to him. Claude and I carried the heavier bags, while Hugo strapped the bathroom duffel over his shoulder, using the handles to hold the bag up so it wouldn’t bang on his thighs as he walked.

After they got their swimsuits on, I walked with the boys to the outdoor pool. It wasn’t hot out, mid-70s, but I figured the pool was probably heated.

“Wow! The water’s cold!” shouted Hugo as he tentatively stepped into the water.
“I’m sure it’ll feel fine once you’re in,” I said. “I’m gonna go lie down. Claude, here’s a key,” I held the key up before setting it on top of his shirt on a table.

“Okay, thanks, Mama,” he said.

“No problem.”

Back in the room I fell onto the bed closest to the door. The blood in my head felt heavy and sank to the back of my skull. My temples pulsed and the slow throbbing comforted me. But I couldn’t sleep. My muscles were laden on my bones like chain mail but my nerves were popping, synapses certainly firing rapidly in my brain.

Lying on our bed in Akron, my head sinks into my pillow by the window.

Christopher straddles me and I hear the little bones and cartilage pieces in my throat pop and snap as his hands squeeze closed forever my breath and my voice. I feel the pressure building behind my eyes I wonder whether my eyes will burst free from my head before he’s done.

Placing the pads of my palms over my closed eyes, I pressed down on my eyeballs, to keep them where they belong. I used to do this when I was four and five, those first years with my mother, I would press my eyes to make color burst across the screen of my inner lids. It still worked, but not with as much color as I remembered. I let go and keeping my eyes closed, I rolled onto my side hoping for sleep, empty dark sleep.

Again on my bed, my ribs no longer arch up and over my chest cavity, protecting my organs. They lie crushed in a congealing pool of blood, my flat eyes stare up at the fan on the ceiling, unseeing. Please don’t let the children find me.
The door opened and the room fills with the light from the late afternoon and my boys.

“It was too cold to swim!” said Hugo. Jules, who was so thin you could identify all of his muscles, was covered in goose bumps, his shoulders pulled in, his lips blue.

“Okay, get outta your wet suits and get some clothes on.”

“Can I get under the covers with you?” asked Jules.

“As soon as you get dry clothes on,” I told him and he quickly peeled the wet swim trunks off, got into his underwear and slid under the covers.

“Mama is so warm,” he said to nobody in particular as he slithered his arm over my body and nestled his head and wet hair on my shoulder. I pulled him in with one arm and rubbed on his back with the other. The visions left me. For now.

Rock Springs looks like a quarry pit and later, as we drove around town for someplace local to eat dinner, we found the buildings as forlorn as the surrounding escarpments. If Butch Cassidy really was a one time resident and butcher in this town, we could not find any evidence of it. The activity of the community hummed around the interstate exits. Near the Starbucks, we found a restaurant that specialized in barbeque ribs and wings, a joint that tried to feel like a honky-tonk. C&W blasting from the bar stereo filled the entire restaurant.

“Can I have a vodka martini, up, dry with a lemon twist?” I asked the waitress once we had been seated. “And please use Skyy Vodka.” A few minutes later, she was
back asking me what was in a martini. I realized I was in beer country, but I wanted a martini even if it wasn’t shaken ice cold.

“What are wings?” asked Hugo who was reading the kids’ menu.

“Chicken, kinda like drumsticks but smaller. I think you’d like them.” All of us ordered wings, something I may have had once or twice before and the boys had never had. Somehow we had managed to miss the national craze for this particular bar food.

“They sure are messy,” said Claude when he started in on his plate of five.

“Mmmm, and really good too,” said Jules. I looked at my boys and momentarily felt satisfied. They were content. On our way back to the hotel, we called Christopher. Hugo and Jules talked only about the wings, Claude gave monosyllabic answers when it was his turn to talk to his father, and then he handed me the phone.

“Papa wants to talk to you.”

“Hello?” I said as I put the phone to my ear.

“Hey, there, it sounds like dinner was a hit.”

“Yeah, seems the boys have discovered their new favorite food--wings,” I said and he agreed.

“Oh, I can’t wait for you to be home,” he told me. I didn’t answer, my shoulder blades moved towards my spine and up my back. “Hol, are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” the words croaked out, my throat suddenly thick with mucous. I coughed, turning my head away from the phone.

“I said I can’t wait for you to be home. We can’t work on things until you’re here. It’ll be so good to have you home. I really miss you,” he said and lodestone, the word
lodestone, came to mind. I imagined a thick rope around my waist and at the other end a lodestone pulling me towards Christopher, which somehow felt like the cold dark of deep water. Hey! Death by drowning would actually be a reasonable suicide, I think, little to go wrong, little preparation required and I am certifiably a lousy swimmer.

“Holly? Holly, talk to me.”

“I don’t know what to say anymore,” I told him.

“Okay, let’s talk in the morning. I love you. Good night.”

“Good night.” I said and disconnected the call.

Once back in the room, I told the boys to get their pajamas on before they watched TV. In no time they had changed and Hugo had found Cartoon Network. I went into the small bathroom--just the toilet and bathtub were in there, the sink was in the room--and shut the door. Sitting on the closed seat, I rocked back and forth between my knees, my elbows on my thighs. “I don’t want to go back,” I whispered, “I don’t want to go back.” Hot tears spilled furiously down my cheeks. For the first time in this process, which I began, I felt like I just might not make it. Was the cold, creeping hand of madness slithering fingers up the back of my neck? I stepped into the shower and turned on the cold water. I hate cold water, but that night it soothed my inflamed eyes, swollen from crying, bloodshot from focusing on the road for the past three days. When I stepped out of the shower, I toweled off and put my Mama face on with my pajamas before entering the room.

“Time to brush your teeth, guys.”
Chapter Thirteen:

Homeward
We were back in the car and heading east on I-80 by nine a.m. Christopher called, but I did not pick up. For all he knew, we were out of cell range. Every time the phone rang and I looked down to see his name on the screen of my BlackBerry, the deathly visions of murder and suicide returned one after the other.

I pulled off the interstate in Rawlins and stopped for gas. From here we were going to take a state route to Casper, cutting our way across Wyoming towards South Dakota. I decided to call Christopher while pumping gas.

“How’re you this morning?” he asked, “Did you get enough rest in the hotel?”

“I slept fine, I guess.”

“It’ll be good when you’re home and can stop driving.”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I don’t know that it’ll be good when I get home. I am dreading it, can I just tell you? I don’t want to come back.”

“I know how you feel,” he said.

“Really, you know how I feel?”

“Yes, yes, I do,” he replied. I looked up at the gas station’s convenience store. The boys were inside using the bathroom and getting soda pops with the money I had given them. They would be in there for a few more minutes, probably until I went in and got them.

“So you know what it’s like to have visions of your own death? To imagine suicide? Do you? Do you have such dread that you can imagine being killed in a number
of ways?” I didn’t tell him that I regularly imagined him strangling me. A feeling that was both so physically real and yet I felt had been happening for years, maybe the entire relationship. Christopher was silent and for once I refused to fill the gap with my words.

“No, I guess I don’t know how you feel,” he finally said.

“I didn’t think so. Look, I gotta go. I’m gonna give the phone to the boys to say hello and I’ll let you know when we’re in Rapid City.”

“Okay,” he quietly replied.

The drive was much like the day before. The land flat, the road long. Outside of Casper, the boys called out when they saw a sign for a Starbucks. But when we pulled up, we found it was still under construction. More Zipfizz from the back for me. Though it soured my stomach with each gulp, it was all I had to keep me going for the time being.

From Casper, we were able to take I-25 to a small town called Orin. As we moved through the plains I remembered for the first time in a long time how desolate life felt then when I lived in Cheyenne. The world seemed to swallow up the people and buildings, which resembled toys placed on a floor that could easily be swept up at any moment. Nothing felt substantial or significant about human habitation on the plains. Not like Chicago or New York or even Akron where tall buildings are deeply rooted into concrete landscapes filled with tall trees, lush vegetation and moving water. The plains are flat and wide and not particularly pleased to see people. Or so it felt to me now, just as it had in 1984.

We were less than twenty miles from the border of South Dakota when I saw the lights of the cop car behind me. I pulled over, parked on the berm and asked Claude to
pull out the folder with my car papers—registration and insurance--from the glove box. When I was a senior in high school and sitting next to Berry as he drove me to a school function, a cop pulled him over for rolling through a stop sign. He was visibly nervous, which surprised me then but has become even more curious to me as I have gotten older. When cops pull you over, they may give you a ticket or they may not and then you move on. It is what it is.

“Do you know the speed limit on this road?” asked the officer after he had asked to see my license and registration.

“No, I don’t.”

“Well, the speed limit’s 65 here.”

“I was just following the other cars,” I told him, which was true. I had been in a convoy of cars for more than half an hour on this two lane highway.

“Well I clocked them at 70. You were going 75.” He looked in the window of the backseat. As he had been the whole trip, Jules was sitting behind me.

“How old are you?” the officer asked Jules and I thought at first he was being friendly.

“Seven,” he said.

“How much do you weigh?” asked the officer and I wasn’t sure what he was getting at.

“I don’t know,” said Jules and the officer turned back to me.

“Children have to be both eight years old and weigh more than 80 pounds to ride without a booster seat in Wyoming.”
“Really?” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“That’s not the law in all states, though it should be. I’ll be right back,” he said and turned to walk back to his patrol car. It’s not uncommon for me to get pulled over for speeding, but it is rare that I receive a ticket. This was going to be one of those rare occasions.

“I just gave you a warning for the booster seat violation since you don’t live here,” the cop told me when he returned to the side of the Matrix and handed me two pieces of paper with my license. The speeding ticket was going to cost me $140.

“Thank you,” I told him as I turned the ignition. I rolled the window up and shifted into first, looked in the mirror and pulled out onto the highway. “I bet it was my bumper sticker,” I told the boys.

“What’d you mean?” asked Claude and Hugo leaned forward between the seats.

“This is the state where Dick Cheney is from. In fact, when he was here a couple of years ago right after the war began, he received a standing ovation at the Wyoming state capital,” I said.

“Eeeew, Dick Cheney, really?” said Claude.

“So what about your bumper sticker?” Hugo asked.

“I still have my Kerry-Edwards sticker on from the last election, remember?”

“Oh, yeah!” said Hugo slowly, the connection dawning on him.

“That’s not fair!” said Claude.

“No, I was speeding. Unfortunately it’s completely fair.”
“What was he talking about with me?” asked Jules and I explained the safety laws. I didn’t tell him it bothered me that the cop had directly interrogated Jules. If I had gotten a ticket for Jules not being in a booster seat, Jules might have felt like he had unwittingly gotten me in trouble. Not a cool thing to do to a kid. I was happy to cross the border into South Dakota less than twenty minutes after pulling away from the Wyoming State Patrol Officer.

It’s always struck me how some state lines seem more than arbitrary map markers. For instance, when crossing the river from Ohio into West Virginia, the land is immediately hillier and the human structures more humble. Entering South Dakota we could soon see the Black Hills up ahead. The boys perked up for the first time all day and, stretching their necks, they each looked out their window. The Black Hills are old and small. Peaks like church spires poking out of pine forests, the remnants of larger mountains eroded down to these cylinders of the hardest rock, presumably granite. The air was clear and when I rolled down the windows, the scent of pine rushed into the car, clearing out the stale air we had brought with us from Wyoming. It also seemed to clear my head and I felt steadied. I reminded myself that whatever happened, the boys and I would be okay, even if a small voice deep inside me questioned this.

We passed the controversial monument in progress to Crazy Horse, a man who never wanted his photo taken, but now has been memorialized on the side of a mountain by a Polish sculptor who thought it only fair that if the dead white guys got a mountain, a dead native guy should too. Well, nearly memorialized. The work on the sculpture, privately funded, is chronically running out of money.
And then, just around the bend from Crazy Horse is the entrance to Mount Rushmore. Like many Hitchcock fans, I felt most familiar with the National Park, particularly the lodge-like visitor’s center, from the film *North by Northwest*. It was in the large, vaulted space that Eve St. Marie pretends to kill Cary Grant so that villain James Mason will stop trying to actually kill him. Just before she shoots him with a blank, a little boy, an extra in the crowd, puts his fingers in his ears. It’s a famous blooper Hitchcock missed in the editing room.

In 1998, the original visitor’s center, the one used in the movie, was replaced with a new stone center and pavilion, which is frankly so pompously over the top it could have been designed by Albert Speer. Rectangular archways line up three by three, two deep in front of an avenue of flags. Maybe it was the residual effects of getting a speeding ticket in Wyoming, but I felt as though the old visitor’s center must have been too homey for a group of zealous patriots. All the square monumentalism of the new visitor’s center seemed out of place at the foothills of this mountain. Then again, four faces carved into the side of a mountain is itself quizzical. It’s like one of those things that growing up is just presented as fiat, people grow up and get married (if they are one man and one woman), elections are won by winner take all, babies are born in hospitals, and dead white presidents belong represented on the side of a mountain in a desolate state. But it’s possible to grow up, begin to think critically and question everything that was explained as “because that’s the way it is.” But while questioning assumptions can lead to changes in society, questioning why four presidents have been carved on a mountain in South Dakota will do nothing to change the fact.
The boys raced from the car through the pavilion to the amphitheater. Storm clouds filled the sky and it was beginning to sprinkle. It thundered in the distance and Hugo and Jules shrieked when they heard it.

“Quick, stand in front of each other so I can get your photo!” I told the boys. I took their picture and after briefly browsing the gift shop, we left.

“Wow, there wasn’t much to do there,” said Hugo.

“If I’d known the sculptor’s workshop was also open, I would’ve planned better for us to stop there,” I said.

“Well, how interesting could that’ve been anyways?” asked Hugo who was pulling a cheese stick out of the cooler behind his seat.

“Hugo, think about it,” said Claude, “they probably have his tools and designs and photos and stuff. It could be interesting.”

“It could be, but I doubt it. I mean once you see the thing, you’re basically done. I think this was the least interesting thing we’ve done on the whole trip,” said Hugo and while I had to agree with him, I was also glad to have come and seen it once.

“You aren’t disappointed we came, are you?” I asked Hugo.

“No, not at all! I’m just saying, we’ve seen some really cool stuff, you know, but this is so-so compared to like the Grand Canyon.”

“What’s your favorite thing we’ve seen?” I asked him.

“Wow, that’s tough. I think either the Grand Canyon or Carlsbad.”

“It’s Carlsbad for me,” said Claude.

“Why’s that?” I asked Claude.
“I don’t know, like the Grand Canyon is really cool, but it’s just so big it’s hard to really see it in a way. The caverns have all those formations and the bats and stuff, it was just right there, you could really experience it.”

“You’re right, Claude,” said Hugo, “Carlsbad Caverns were the best thing so far.”

“Jules? What about you?”

“I don’t know, I just liked everything. Maybe the sea? I really liked going swimming in the sea.”

“You mean ocean! It’s the Pacific Ocean, Jules!” corrected Hugo and Jules just shrugged his shoulders, the difference irrelevant in his mind.

That night, we stayed in Rapid City with my friend Mike, whom I hadn’t seen in more than a decade. I met Mike in a jazz bar in Amsterdam in 1990. Back then he was a bass player in a jazz quartet in Boston. He was in the Netherlands traveling alone for a week before hooking up with friends of his who had moved from the States to Rotterdam. After studying in France for a couple of months, I wanted to travel during my break to a country where I blended in. The French are overwhelmingly petite and dark and no matter how fluent I became, being tall and blonde, I stood out as a foreigner. Traveling alone, I took a night train from Cannes to Paris, sleeping in a two-bunk sleeper car with a handsome Parisian on the other bunk. In Paris, I switched trains and arrived in Amsterdam in the late afternoon without a reservation at a hostel. I bought a paper funnel of French fries from a vendor by the train station and began walking through a steady drizzle. With everything I’d brought to Europe tucked into my backpack, and using Let’s Go Europe, I walked from hostel to hostel as they were listed in the popular guidebook.
Door after door had the sign, “Vol,” posted. I guessed the meaning, especially when, after knocking at the first three doors, nobody answered any of them. Beginning to feel panicky, I did what I would never have done in France: I approached a stranger and spoke English, verifying the meaning of vol, which meant “full,” even though I didn’t have the words to be cursorily polite in Dutch. No Please, no thank you, not even hello!

I traversed canal riven street after canal riven street for nearly two hours only to find Vol, Vol, Vol. Nobody who knew me, nobody in the entire world, knew where I was. At first I felt the thrill of secrecy, at having clandestine adventures. But finally sitting on a bench in what had become a proper rainstorm three hours after I had arrived, I felt completely insecure. Lacking the tethering to a community or even a single person, I was like a boat without mooring. Sitting there feeling my backpack pressed between the back of the bench and my body, my shoulders aching from carrying the damn thing all over the city with more canals than Venice, my feet and knees pressed together, my hands folded in my lap, I gave up and cried. Out of my jacket pocket I pulled a paper napkin I’d gotten with my fries and blew my nose. You’re 24, you have a credit card and this is a big city. Hell, you got to Europe by yourself, I think you can find a place to stay for one night and if not, well, just go back to the train station and use your pass to go back to France. I blew my nose, and after applying lipgloss, I stood up, crossed yet another canal bridge before turning right to walk alongside the canal. I looked at the row houses to my left and then across the canal on the other side of the street where I saw the sign that wasn’t listed in Let’s Go, “Bob’s International Youth Hostel.”
A few days later, I met Mike and we decided to go to France and travel the
Loire Valley together. He didn’t speak French and I was tired of fending off unwanted
advances from men. We spent a week together visiting castles by train, bike and on one
afternoon after a bit of bad planning, hitchhiking. I was clear I wasn’t interested in having
a fling and whether he was or not, I don’t know, because Mike never made a pass at me.
If I were to rate the weeks of my life, that one would be very near the top.

Seventeen years later, Mike was still a musician and though he’d had a string of
long term relationships with various women in the nearly two decades since we’d first
met, he had never married. We condensed ten years of our lives into two hours of
highlights over dinner. After which, we followed him to his tiny apartment and using our
camping gear, the boys crashed on the living room floor while I spread my sleeping bag
out on Mike’s couch. It was understandable that I exhausted from driving day after day,
but being passengers all day also seemed to suck from the boys their usual rollicking
energy. Jules slept just below me and I lightly traced my fingertips on his neck and arms
until his breathing became long and steady.

The next morning we were slow going. We ate cereal and after I had washed our
bowls and packed us up, we followed Mike in his car to a café and he bought me my first
coffee of the day. A local joint, the café walls were a soft green, the furniture upholstered
and it would have been easy to while away the morning reading the paper and taking
turns playing chess. Instead, Mike snapped our picture and we were off again.

The day was clear, the storm the night before had moved through and left the
landscape rinsed clean, the air lilting with the scent of pines. On the interstate, we drove
by billboards for Wall Drug Store every three to five miles, or so it seemed. I was very nearly tempted to stop, but given our late start it became one more thing to put in the “next time” column.

We were headed for Seward, Nebraska about twenty miles west of Lincoln. If we took the interstate all the way there, we would have to follow I-29 along the border of Nebraska, going far to the east before turning in Omaha and driving seventy miles or more back west. I have an almost pathological resistance to backtracking and chose instead to get off the interstate and follow a two-lane highway that went down pretty plumb from I-90 to Seward. I imagined, as I pulled us up to a Wendy’s for lunch and then over to Starbucks for another cup of coffee, that the choice I was making would probably require more driving time, but I did not want to get back on the freeway.

The day was quiet, Christopher hadn’t called and my mind seemed calm. I hadn’t had any morbid thoughts or tasted steel cylinders on my tongue. Once out of the Badlands and onto rolling NE Route 15, the land looked more like home than it had in the past four weeks. Acres of corn, dark green and in late August as tall as a grown man spread in all directions, the flat land broken up by an occasional farmstead. It reminded me of Eastern Ohio, outside of Dayton, where I’d lived the last five years of the 1970s, where the Ohio woodlands end and the eastern edges of the North American Interior Plains begin. Flat land with rich soil. Easy to till and tilled it is. Endless arable land that is one of the many things that makes America such a rich country. Nikita Kruschev understood this but looking at housing development after housing development, I
wondered if Americans had forgotten the true value of the land in our so-called breadbasket.

We stayed the night with a family that had recently moved from Akron to Sewell. The home they’d just had built was so big, the great room off the kitchen had more square footage than the apartment we’d stayed in the night before. After dinner, our friends took us to their stable and let the boys each take a short ride on a horse. And then, as with so many visits, our hosts asked us to stay longer, but we couldn’t. We were back on the road by nine the next morning and rolled easily through Iowa and Illinois. We crossed the Mississippi at the Quad Cities, where I’d lived in the early 70s. I mentioned this to the boys, but as I lived in so many places, I didn’t seem to register with them. Or perhaps it’s the nature of life, my history is only modestly important to my children who are living the early chapters of their own narratives.

When we pulled into Debbie’s driveway the trip felt already over. We regularly drive to Aurora, a far west exurb of Chicago, to stay with Debbie and her family. This felt no different than any of those other, regular visits. I sat back in my seat and let my hands drop off the steering wheel and into my lap. I didn’t have the energy for what lay inside the house of my aunt. My imaginary “keep-it-together mask” was threadbare and sagging around my eyes and mouth. I looked over to watch Debbie pull open her front door for Hugo and Jules. Claude was behind the car, opening the hatchback to retrieve our bags. Like jumping into a too-cold pool of water, I hopped out of the car without allowing myself to think. If I thought too much, I might not get in.
“Hi, Deb,” I said as I gave her a quick hug. She’d been waiting for us to arrive before putting a pork tenderloin on the grill. As always, she’d cooked up a storm for us—bean salad, potato salad, fresh cut fruit and Claude’s favorite, blueberry pie. Eating at Debbie’s is always a bit of nostalgia for me as she cooks the recipes of her mother, her grandmother and my mother. All women whose food I grew up eating. Heavy, Germanic farm cooking that satisfies more than the stomach. That night, already deeply weary from the week’s travel, the heavy food was as potent as a narcotic.

As I drifted off to sleep I thought of the Japanese doll Grama brought from Japan. She gave it to me in the summer of 1973 when I lived in Moline and she and Grandpa were moving to Tucson. Home alone that day, my grandparents pulled up in their Oldsmobile and Aristocrat trailer, which they had filled with the things they were taking to their new home, everything else had been sold. Maybe the drive past the Quad Cities the day before had jostled up the memory of the ten-inch-tall Japanese schoolgirl with a serious face because I hadn’t though of that doll in years, a connection to Grama that perhaps I didn’t need while she was still living. The doll had tight braids, cinched short on each side of her head, which were made of human hair. Her white knit top had the tiniest of buttons at the collar and her skirt was sea green with pale peach flowers. Before releasing myself to sleep, I decided to look for that doll as soon as I we were home.

The next morning, everyone was up when I went downstairs and found the boys playing video games with Debbie’s younger daughter, Julia. Debbie was making omelets to order.
“You want asparagus in yours, don’t you?” she asked me and I nodded. “And I have ham and cheddar, is that enough?”

“Plenty,” I told her and then moved past her to the coffee pot. “So look, I think we’ll stay here today, is that okay?”

“Oh, sure, you can stay as long as you want, Holly.”

“I just need a day off from driving.”

“That’s fine, what do you want to do today? We could go to the water park, we could go to the movies, it’s supposed to be really warm out today.” She had so much energy it was tiring for me just to talk to her. The water park was out because I didn’t have enough money for it. I had checked my bank account the night before and the overdraft on the joint account was maxed out. Maybe Christopher was refusing to transfer any funds as a way to make me come home sooner. But now I was somewhere I could stay for free. At least for a day while I prepared myself for life back in Ohio and all that lay ahead. He was not going to let me go easily, but no longer was he trying to woo me back to him. While on the one hand he kept telling me how much he wanted to work it out, the threat of economic abandonment was being made increasingly real. It’s as though he forgot I knew how much he made and what our bills were. The dynamic was becoming increasingly parental and bizarrely familiar.

“Holly?”

I looked up at Debbie.

“I asked what you wanted to do today?”
“Sorry, I’m deeply tired,” I told her. I wanted to tell her I couldn’t afford the water park, but this side of the family hates to talk about money. “I think I’ll go to a bookstore in Naperville and work for a while on my laptop while the boys read comic books.”

“Don’t you think they’d rather go to the water park?” she asked.

“Yes, but I have to get some writing done and I can’t take my computer to the pool.”

“Look, Holly, why don’t I take them to the water park? I know Julia and Diane would love to go and those boys have been in the car all week.”

“Are you sure?” I asked and cringed because this is where I should also say, *Here’s the money to get them into the water park and feed them all afternoon,* but I didn’t because I couldn’t.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” she said, but she wasn’t smiling.

In less than an hour, the boys were heading to the water park with Debbie and her girls and I was on my way to Panera in the nearby mall. Other than the little more than an hour it took to change the pop-top in Merced, I had not been alone in more than a month. I sat writing without interruption for three solid hours. I wrote about the days of the past week, the fatigue, the fear, the horrifying visions. Writing is many things for me, a compulsion in that I always feel the need to write, either little notes in a notepad, or thoughts in a journal or pieces of conversation I overhear and find interesting. But also I write to pull my thoughts out in front of me and look at them splayed out on a white screen where they can’t hide behind one another. As Eudora Welty once put it writing “is
one way of discovering sequence in experience, of stumbling upon cause and effect in the happenings of a writer's own life." I’m not always sure I believe in causality but I know that it is part of being human to want to find the story in our lives. Things happen, people come, people go and is there a narrative arc to it all? It often seems that way but perhaps only because we are compelled to tell our events in a structural form. To tell a story is to make sense of experiences and possibly find lessons of value.

What I found that day in the Fox Valley Mall was knowing I had to leave Christopher, knowing with every pulse of blood through my veins, every glance at my children, knowing that no matter how much anxiety I had, I was now determined to leave him. But that was not the same as knowing how I was going to leave him. How would I support myself and my boys? Where would we live? How did we separate not only our things but our schedules. What was the first thing I had to do? Find a job? Move into a different bedroom? All of this made harder, of course, by Christopher not wanting to find the easy way to separate because he did not want me to go, albeit for reasons that he had hidden behind his own masks. Masks of pretense proclaiming love and passion that were dropping to show fear turned to anger when I would no longer hold up what he thought was my end of the bargain—to allow him to have a somewhat glamorous career as an architect, a bigger fish in the smaller pond of Cleveland while I stayed home and did everything else. It was a contract that never worked well, probably for either of us, certainly not for me, but it had worked well enough for a long time.

I knew I wanted my life to change, had to have it change, but where was the manual for this? Therapy? We’d been in counseling more years of the relationship than
not, continuously for the previous six years, and while I was now confident enough to leave Christopher, my therapist was not telling me how to leave him. I had not yet told Liane, the mother of my heart, much less my biological mother or even Debbie. I did not want to face their disappointment, which would only mirror my own. I alone had to do this. And were it me alone, it would be simple, but I was irrevocably changing the course of my boys’ childhoods, in fact their entire lives. For this I had no guide, either human or written. But it was time to begin, in earnest, the end.

The drive the following day was uneventful. We passed LaPorte, Indiana on I-80/90 a couple of hours into the drive but there is no longer anyone there for us to visit. It is the on my mother’s side of the family the equivalent of Utah. An ancestral location to which nothing, save for history, binds me to the place. The people with whom there might once have been reason to stop for, are all gone. The day’s journey was through familiar territory and after so many long days of driving, a six-hour trip seemed like a small jaunt. I pushed out of my mind as much thinking about leaving Christopher as I could, instead focusing on the first day of school and who the boys would want to see when they first got home. It was mid-afternoon when we pulled into the driveway.

“Woohoo! We’re here, wow, look at the sunflowers!” yelled Hugo. Taller than even their father, the heavy heads of the yellow flowers lined the garden bed alongside the driveway, party pink hollyhocks surrounded the sunflowers, stretching up from below in admiration of the tall sentries. I drove the car under the Buddhist flags we had hung across the driveway the summer before and stopped the Matrix in front of the closed
garage door. I yanked up on the parking brake as Hugo and Jules jumped out of the back seat and ran to the back door, where our two dogs whined and barked, eager to get to us.

“Are you coming, Mama?” said Claude as he unbuckled his seat belt and opened his door. I had slumped down in my seat.

“Yes, give me a moment. Here’s the key to the pop-top, open it up for me would you?”

“Sure,” he said and I closed my eyes, listening to him climb up on the bumper, hearing the familiar sounds of the pop-top sliding open on its hinges. *Time to dive in* I told myself. I opened my door and went to grab the bags as Claude handed them down to me.