ABSTRACT

AS GOOD A PLACE

by Margaret Elaine Bouldin

This thesis is a collection of personal essays that examine the tensions within my identity as a displaced Southerner – both as an Appalachian transplanted to Nashville, and as a Tennessean transplanted to the Midwest. The family of my Indiana-born significant other plays an integral part in these pieces; with them, there is a sense that I should feel at home “back in the country,” since I have traveled from a rural setting (Appalachia) to urban (Nashville) and then back to rural once again. However, I am compelled to illuminate the disparities between his “country” and my “country,” knowing my time in Nashville will color my view of the former. These essays show my struggle to understand myself not only in relation to the places I came from but also with an awareness of the places I have gone to, and of how they have altered that understanding.
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A Thesis

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Apparently, I have a knack for getting my boyfriends’ sisters pregnant.

The first time this happened, I was with Clifford. Usually, people think I made up his name. I did not. He was Clifford Raymond Smith, and I was terribly, chaotically in love with him – in love with him enough to drive myself to my first flare-up of Crohn’s Disease over him. (It seems irresponsible of me not to regret this.) He was exactly the type of guy whom I was always attracted to back then – quiet enough to have secrets, and emaciated enough to need nurturing – but he was the very first to reciprocate the feeling.

Clifford was a genuine mathematical genius. My father, who has taught calculus for thirty years now, was aghast after their first meeting, staring into the hardwood floor and repeatedly uttering a word he never says: “Brilliant. Brilliant. Brilliant.”

Later, though, Dad discovered something about him that he did not think was so brilliant: Clifford was a drummer, God help me. And he was also aspiring to be one of the last remaining hippies – not the angsty urban goth–hippie hybrids, the weekend hippies, the Burning Men and the Elf Festers – but the true hippies. I was an accidental journalist for a long time in their company, always recording and enjoying or at least trying to enjoy, but I was never able to acquire all the traits that were needed – the courage for shrooms, the total purging of ambition, the stamina and even the preference for the never-ending jam sessions. (Now that I look back on it, the day that Clifford announced that Phish had replaced Zeppelin as his Number One Band of Ever might have been the beginning of the end for us.) But I still loved the hippies, and dearly. And I did live their life for a time, even if I wasn’t always good at it, somehow still managing to keep up my studies. When I left Clifford, I was departing not only a lover but an entire way of living, something I had immersed myself in almost completely. A cold coming I had of it, as Eliot would say, but at dawn I came to a temperate valley – a place where I would become myself, but where I knew I would never have those old adventures again.

The other thing I left behind, the thing most dear, was Clifford’s family. They were as far from being hippies as one could get – good, solid, clean-cut, Church-of-Christ people who didn’t quite know what to do with their son’s beautiful, silky, long blonde hair or his scruffy soul patch of nonchalant rebellion. They came from West Tennessee (which, to tell the truth, doesn’t count as Tennessee at all) and business took them to California when Clifford was in high school. California took all of his Dad’s money, and it took all of Clifford’s soul. For him, it would be home ever after. (One of the final nails in the coffin of our relationship was the month he spent out there after graduation without sending me a single word.)

Steve, the stern Smith patriarch, hid his smirks under his handlebar mustache. He liked me about as much as he ever would have liked anybody. To this day, he is the only person who has ever been able to successfully explain the rules and intricacies of football to me. Steve wasn’t the most gregarious member of the family, but when you did get him talking you realized how lightning smart the man was. In retrospect, I think the only reason he didn’t invest more in me is that he could see how things were going to end up.
Then there was Stacy, Clifford’s gorgeous sixteen-year-old sister, a bright student and an exemplary daughter in all respects. After Clifford abandoned the glory-land way for congas and cannabis, it was understood that she would be the one who brought honor to the family. It fell wholly on Stacy to be “the good child.” She was shy around me, often seeming distracted; but she was never outright rude, and I always just assumed that she was stressed from school. There were also two dogs, a black lab named Joe and a yellow lab named Buster. Being dumb was all they were good for. (This is coming from a dyed-in-the-fur dog person, so you know it was bad.)

Lastly, there was Lynn, Clifford’s mother. When I looked at her I saw a strong woman, short in stature, a little tubby, with an upturned nose, bobbed blackish-grey hair, and deep blue eyes. When she looked at me, she saw her son’s salvation. I represented to her the direction she wished her son would go in; but, beyond that, we just loved each other, almost like a real mother and daughter. We would sit at her immaculately clean kitchen table and tell stories over snacks (she was the mouth, and I the ear); she would make us both peanut butter-and-strawberry jelly sandwiches to take with us on the road when we left; she would whisper and titter about marriage, specifically mine and Clifford’s; she would spoil me rotten, even sewing me a quilt of my very own in my favorite colors (which I still cherish); she would shop with me, sing with me, cry with me; and, if I had come home to Alabama again – that’s where they eventually located – she would have taught me how to cook the royal feasts which she was magically able to produce every holiday. (For the record, Lynn is the only woman I ever would have allowed to do this – the only one I would have trusted to see my lack of skill in the kitchen without making fun of me eternally for it. As things are now, I’ll never learn.)

Lynn was tough, and she was constantly running all over the place – she had to be – but no one on earth was kinder. (It reminds me of the song: “…half bear the other half cat…wild as a mink but sweet as soda pop…”) However, several months after I met her, Lynn’s tremendous strength would be tested to its absolute limits.

Clifford and I were in Nashville that day, sitting in a restaurant across from campus called the Copper Kettle. I don’t remember what he was eating, but I was having my usual Reuben sandwich; I was chomping down on my dill pickle when his phone vibrated. He dug his lanky fingers into his pocket and fished it out, bringing the receiver to his lips and growling a crumb-laden “Hello?” I kept my eyes on his face and dispatched the rest of the pickle quickly, hoping to silence the crunching in my head so I could hear the voice on the other line. I couldn’t hear, but something about the restraint in his demeanor told me he was talking to his mother. He sat there for a good fifteen minutes, only saying, “Uh huh.” “Uh huh.” “Uh huh.” I assumed that they were discussing finances – he had just lost his scholarship the semester before – but his expression betrayed nothing, even as he hung up and returned the phone to his pocket. He would not look me in the eye. Lynn had not asked to talk to me, which was odd.

I don’t remember how I asked. Probably something along the lines of, “What’s up?” Or, “What’s going on?” Or, “How’s your mom?” But what happened next has been burned into my memory for all time. In this moment, Clifford did everything slowly. He leaned over the table slowly, squinted slowly, nodded his head slowly, and said, slowly: “Stacy…is having a baby…in two weeks.”
And there it was.
“TWO WEEKS?” I recall shrieking.
“Two weeks.”

About eight months beforehand, Stacy and her equally all-American boyfriend – Martin – had made love, once, in the heat of the moment, without protection. Being who they were, they felt oppressively guilty about it and vowed to each other that it would never happen again until they were married; but the damage was done (or the gift was given, depending on how you want to look at it). It turned out that there was a much more serious reason for Stacy being distracted around me all that time: she knew she was pregnant, and she wasn’t planning on telling anyone.

Later, the couple told me that they didn’t know what they were thinking by keeping it a secret. There were no intentions to sneak off and give the baby up for adoption, and there were no attempts at an abortion. They simply put it out of their minds. They proceeded to go on being normal high school-ers, as if no one was growing inside her; Stacy even played soccer. She was one of those Nicole Kidman types who didn’t show much until right before she was about to pop, so she was able to pass as decidedly non-pregnant until the home stretch, when she made a habit of wearing heavy denim jackets every day. Lynn was only just beginning to suspect something, but Stacy issued denial after feverish denial until one of her friends caught sight of her orb-shaped belly in the bathroom and blabbed to the principal. Suddenly, the entire school knew what she had labored so long to conceal, and her mother was on the way to pick her up.

The major problem, of course, was that Stacy had gone so long without pre-natal care. I didn’t understand why, but they were past the point of using a machine to tell if anything was wrong, or even to tell what the gender of the baby was. All the doctor could tell her was, “Two weeks.”

Later, there was a knock-down, drag-out fight between Clifford’s and Martin’s parents. They had gotten along well enough before, but any previous amiability between them was shattered now. I think that Lynn, in her heart, partially blamed them for the predicament; the conception had occurred at Martin’s house, and I’m sure she wondered why his parents hadn’t kept a closer eye on the couple. Beyond blame for the present, though, the main issue was what to do with the future. Martin’s parents were wealthy, and they had great plans for their son – plans which did not include him having a son of his own this early. Thus, they were all for having the baby adopted. However, for reasons I never understood, the normally unemotional Steve dug in and stood his ground: the child would be kept, and if Martin and his family wanted nothing to do with it then that was fine, but he wasn’t about to let his grandbaby go. (This story came through Stacy and Martin, who themselves were apparently too shell-shocked and exhausted by their long deception to contribute meaningfully to the debate.) Ultimately, Steve won, and he managed to piss off the other parents so much that they did not, in fact, have much to do with the child when it came, and Martin broke up with Stacy a few months later.

But that day at the Copper Kettle, Clifford and I didn’t know what would follow. All we knew was Two Weeks.

We sat there for a while in silence, gazing through the glass window of the Copper Kettle and watching the carefree people drift by on the sidewalk, with Lipscomb University standing sturdily in the background. Other than holding Clifford’s hand and telling him I was sorry, I didn’t know what else to do. After a few minutes, he tugged his ever-present beanie – midnight blue with a sand-colored stripe around the bottom – farther down on his head, almost into his eyes, and simply said, “Wow.”
I scanned his face as he nodded and fidgeted lackadaisically with one of the Equal packets. From the slant of his eyebrows and the firmly set shape of his mouth, I knew he was processing the immediate totality of this. Usually, one has at least six months to get used to the fact that a child is on its way, but in fourteen short days Clifford would be an uncle; and he as much as anybody else had emphatically conferred upon Stacy the label of “Somebody.” I could see the hopes he’d held for her slipping out of his spindly hands like the fake sugar that was now flowing out between his fingers onto the table.

Stacy was supposed to go to law school. Now she wouldn’t even graduate from high school.

At some point I remember looking at my watch and saying that we didn’t have to go to the movie as we had planned, but his head snapped up, and he nearly shouted:

“NO! I still want to go.”

Then, softer, almost sheepishly:

“I’d like the distraction.”

We strolled arm-in-arm to the parking lot, occasionally smiling at each other for no reason. We stepped into his car, a terminal, maroon-colored station wagon, and he drove us to the Hundred Oaks area, where the Hollywood 27 movie theatre was. Most of the other students at Lipscomb didn’t like the 27; they called it the “black theater.” But I loved it for being the black theater, and I loved it for the way it looked from the front – a towering façade completely covered in rainbow neon lights – and I loved it because it had more screens and showed more movies. (Plus, 27 is my lucky number.)

Most days, I’m that girl who spends a few minutes moving up and down among the rows to make sure she’s situated in the exact middle. Most days, I’m not that girl who goes to the movies to play in the dark – not because I’m a prude but simply because movies are too important. But on this day, I led Clifford to the very back of the theatre and did my best to make him happy.

Two weeks later, I was sleeping in my little bed at the old Rockwood house, three months before Mom would decide to sell it. I woke up in the smothering darkness that only the woods can enforce. It was four o’clock in the morning, and my phone was ringing; Clifford was calling, as I had asked him to. In blackness I heard the news: mother and child were healthy, and the baby had shot an unprecedented missile of poo across the room as soon as it was born (as if to say, “I’ll show you for ignoring me!”).

Her name was Carly.

When Carly came into the world, I had not yet started to suspect that I had anything to do with her conception – that I was a walking fertility talisman or that I was just really bad luck to be around (again, depending on how you look at it). But when the man I left Clifford for unexpectedly became an uncle almost exactly two years later, I began to wonder. This time, the baby was a boy, and his name was Gabriel.

Yes, Gavri’el the archangel – holy messenger to Daniel, to Mohammed, and to Mary. It was a beautiful name, weighted with the significance of not just one but three major world religions; but it was not the name I would have expected Rachel to choose. She was Jackson’s only sister, several years younger, and she was in the process of
transitions to a much vaguer and less demanding form of Neo-Paganism. (“Hail Eris! All Hail Discordia!”)

Before I met Rachel, Jackson had shown me a picture of her from her high school days: she was a smiling, spunky, pleasantly plump blonde cheerleader. Jackson had not alerted me that anything had changed, so I was expecting a slightly grown-up version of that cheerleader to waltz up the steps to the porch that day. I was mistaken. The girl who stepped out of the car was still plump, but her hair was now dyed the color of Chicken Tikka Masala (orangey-red, like fire). She was decked out in a suggestive, lacy, dark purple tank top and a dramatic goth-inspired skirt, long and velvet and flowy and deep, vengeful green. Her pale skin was tattooed with Gaelic expressions, ominous black pentagrams, and fairies, her constant obsession (if she were here, she would correct my spelling and change it to “faeries”). She wore bangle bracelets and beaded anklets and necklaces with symbols I didn’t understand; she wore thick, ornately carved bone earrings with sharp pointy ends, earrings that declared, “If you even think about trying to plug me into your corporate machine, man, I will poke your eyes out with these.”

She wandered up the steps of the porch, cavalierly brandishing a cigarette, turning her head and launching into her typical nonsensical swearing tirade at whoever was behind her (“FACKING FACKITY FACK SKANK-HO YOUR MOM, BATTERIES! HAAAAA HA HA!”). When she looked forward again, there was someone standing in her way, someone who had been shoved out front to meet her: me, standing awkwardly with my hands at my sides in a sky blue turtleneck and khaki slacks, hair daintily pinned back with matching blue bobby-pins, and reeking of the establishment she abhorred.

“Oh,” she said. “Hey.”

If you had asked me then what Rachel would name her child (if she ever were to have one), I would have said something along the lines of “Rhiannon”, or “Lilith”, or “Stonehenge Greenblade Cthulhu.” I would not have guessed that she would pick a name belonging to a mythos she despised so passionately – a name that means something like “strong man of God” – only for the reason that it sounded pretty.

Gabriel’s birth was not foretold by angels – just by a phone call. I was sitting in the kitchen of the loveable ranch-style house where Jackson used to live. Jackson was preparing spaghetti. (And Lo, God saw that the woman could not make food, so he sent her someone who could.) I was doing my homework, probably Biomedical Ethics, and the kitchen table was stacked with perpetually messy piles of Lord-knows-what. The pot on the stove was just starting to boil when the phone rang.

This time, I knew exactly who had called; though I couldn’t hear what she was saying, I could recognize Rachel’s shrill Hoosier inflection from where I sat. (Jackson, in turn, was holding the phone a good six inches out from his ear.) Jackson wasn’t saying much at all, but I didn’t think anything of this, initially, because neither his sister nor his mother usually let him do much of the talking. As he was opening up the cardboard box of pasta and dumping the long yellow fibers into the bubbling pot, he seemed like he was only half-listening. There was a muted “Wow,” a “Yeah” or two, but that was all.

He handed the phone to me and immediately went back to the spaghetti, not meeting my eyes. Rachel sounded exuberant; I expected her to tell me that she had been promoted at the domestic abuse shelter, or that she had found another kitty, or that she had won a competition with her fire-spinning talents, or that Tori Amos was coming to
Indianapolis. So when she told me that she was pregnant, I was confused and unable to give her the wholly enthusiastic response that she had obviously been anticipating.

As she was divulging the details, I set myself on conversational autopilot and cast a wary glance over at Jackson. I could not see his face, which was focused with unnatural intensity on the pasta. I could only see a tired body, turned away from me, encased in a taupe-colored tee and flannel pajamas; a cascade of yellow hair, dirty from the day’s work and curling at the ends; and a shell, an exoskeleton whose only purpose was to stir.

Soon, I recovered enough of my tact to appear sufficiently excited, sparing sore feelings on Rachel’s part. Before she hung up, I teasingly asked her if this was intentional or if it was an accident, knowing she wouldn’t mind the question. A snippet of her reply:

“We weren’t trying, but we weren’t not trying.”

*Then you were trying*, I thought, as I put down the phone.

I suddenly recalled the last time this had happened. Though this pregnancy was just as much of a surprise, Rachel was at least older than Stacy had been: she was twenty-three. And she was engaged. She and Lowell were to be married in April, although the date would eventually have to be moved up a month in order for her to fit into any kind of wedding dress, maternity or not. (Unlike Stacy, Rachel would look like she was at nine months when she was only at six.) But I couldn’t work myself up into happiness over the impending birth. Lowell wasn’t even through with his undergrad, and his only means of “employment” was the small compensation he got for working on Indiana State University’s school paper. Rachel did noble work at the shelter, but her salary was paltry, and she was already on the verge of bankruptcy. I couldn’t help but wonder why they thought this would be a good time in their lives to have a solid month or two of raunchy sex without using condoms or any birth control whatsoever (a course of action she freely, even gleefully divulged to me). And I couldn’t help but wonder if having a baby triggered any sort of hormone response in a woman – anything that would improve focus, or anything that would turn a complete and utter ditz into a halfway decent mother.

Jackson was in an even worse state, but he wouldn’t talk to me about it for another two years. I snuck up behind him and wrapped my arms around his middle, nuzzling his back.

“You like it al dente, right?” he said.

I let go of him as he moved to grab the strainer, and I watched him as he flopped the spaghetti into it, draining the steaming water into the sink. He picked up a limp strand in his fingers as I asked:

“Well…what do you think?”

He studied the pasta and took a nibble of it before answering.

“Well, I think it’s *al dente.*” He smiled at me, almost unsettlingly.

I blinked. “Jackson…”

“What do you want to drink?” he queried, from far, far away.

I blinked again. He was beyond me tonight.

*Just be there for him when he crashes.*

“Ginger Ale,” I answered.
In my Oxford apartment, a bulletin board hangs from a tack on the wall in my kitchen. Attached to it are three pictures and a Best Buy coupon. I see them every time I open my refrigerator. One of the pictures is of Gabriel when he was only a few months old, lying in his crib and aiming a goofy smile at the camera. The other two are of Carly.

I feel guilty about this. I have two pictures of her and only one of him. I tell myself that this is because the other photographs of Gabriel I have are too big to fit on the bulletin board. But if Rachel and Lowell ever come to visit, I know that I will take the board down from the kitchen wall and slide it underneath my bed.

I got attached to Carly. Clifford and I went down to visit her a couple of weeks after she arrived, and I spent hours by her side, holding her tiny hand and watching her sleep, not missing a breath. Most newborns are ugly, amorphous blobs. (I certainly was.) I mean, I’d rather have a puppy any day. But Carly was different. She was the first baby I ever thought of as beautiful. (And lest you think I’m exaggerating when I write about how pretty she was, know that Stacy later entered her into a baby beauty pageant, just on a lark, and she won the whole damn thing.)

She didn’t open her eyes much then, so I wouldn’t have known their color even if they had settled that early; but she had a shock of dark hair – her father’s hair – with long dark eyelashes, and perfect little lips, and wiggly little toes. I stood sentry over those toes and those lips, those fluttering eyelids and gentle whimpers, for as long as I was in Alabama. The others would have made fun of me, but I was not the only one who was already wrapped around her miniscule finger. Her crib was in the living room – they hadn’t had the time to prepare a nursery – and sometimes we would all sit around her on the big green leather couches and marvel at how perfect she turned out, at how impossibly small she was. Our sense of tragedy was keen until she was born; but when we heard her pitifully soft cry (“wu-ahh, wu-ahh”) and held the weight of her brand new soul in our arms, we could no longer think of any reason to be unhappy.

The last time I saw her, she was just starting to say a few words. Poor Clifford would lean over the kitchen table and look her in the eye, with deadly seriousness, and try to teach her his name:

“Uncle Clifford. Un-kull Clif-ford.”

Her big blue eyes would stare up at him, amused but confused.

“Uncle Clifford. Uncle Clifford. UNCLE CLIFFORD.”

We tried to explain to him how difficult that would be for a baby to say, but he persisted. (By the time she did start saying it, I was gone.)

I don’t recall her being able to walk yet, but she was almost there. We were buddies by then. She would stand up in her crib – now in a room of her own – and shake the side bar whenever we tried to walk away, moaning until we relented and came back.

Later, when Clifford was trying to lure me back a month or two after nearly destroying me, he made sure to mention how much his family had missed me, and in that moment I saw two faces: Carly, standing in her crib and shaking the bars, calling for my return; and Lynn, standing in the kitchen and mournfully setting aside some fresh pecans for me, just in case I ever came back home.

About a year ago, I was surprised and overjoyed to get a letter from Lynn after I had sent her a graduation invitation. In the message, she detailed how much Carly had grown, how much fun she was to be around; how Stacy was now seeing a guy who was ten years older and had a daughter that he never saw, how I needed to keep her in my
prayers; how Clifford was going to be living with them to save money on rent the summer before he started grad school. I wrote back immediately and jubilantly, but I’ve never heard from her again. I keep the letter—printed on a sky blue piece of paper—secured inside my cardboard box of Important Papers, forever.

Clifford himself had told me (in the end we parted amicably, and we still talk from time to time) that Stacy had “gone off the deep end” and gotten breast implants, among other things. This perplexed me when I heard it, as Stacy had perfectly fine boobs to begin with. But I had been thrilled when Clifford told me that he was going into the mathematical physics graduate program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

I’d never thought he would go back to grad school after the MBA at Lipscomb turned out to be such a disaster, but he’s flourishing down there, and everyone who had once “given up” on him is now incredibly proud. So the family dynamics have switched again: Clifford is the “good child,” and I don’t like to think about where that leaves Stacy.

As for Carly, she ultimately was adopted—by Steve and Lynn, that is—for all intents and purposes, if not legally. I gather that her grandparents are basically raising her in the same way that my own grandparents raised my much older half-brother. If I’m right, I cannot weep too much for her. Steve and Lynn aren’t that old, and I can say with no sense of mockery that I believe they will make fine parents to her.

I scrutinize one of her photos now: she is three years old, holding onto a tree and flashing a gap-toothed grin—my little Wife of Bath. She does not look at me, but above me and to the right. She doesn’t know who I am. She will have no memory of the bespectacled girl who guarded her as she slept and held her during church. Steve has, no doubt, forgotten me, and the dogs never knew who I was in the first place. Clifford has moved on with someone whose name I do not know. And Lynn might remember me, sighing in her room as she looks over the old holiday photographs, always wondering why it didn’t work out; but I might also have been replaced in her heart by the nameless.

I, however, miss them all. Perhaps what mattered to me most was that brief period of functioning inside an honest-to-gosh family unit, warts and all—a mother, father, son, daughter, and a pet or two. A family. It was the first time in my life I’d had that feeling.

I wish I could have it both ways. I wish I could be compatible with the boy and with his kin. It’s a selfish thought, but sometimes I secretly wish that I could have Jackson with Clifford’s family—because I never miss the Smiths more than when we drive into the endless, soul-sucking cornfields of Indiana.

The other day I saw an intriguing picture of Rachel and Gabriel. Rachel’s hair is now streaked with blonde, and she’s losing some of the baby weight due to her two most recent obsessions: yoga and something called Zumba. Gabriel, unaware of the camera and looking down, is sporting a shaggy mop of golden hair; he is a toddler now, and he actually looks like an angel. (Only looks.) Rachel’s face is on the left: she is holding the camera and trying to photograph the two of them together. She is focusing so hard on taking the picture that she does not notice that Gabriel, on the right, is trying to eat a rock. It is a more effective metaphor for their household than anything that I could ever write.
I have visited Gabriel several times, but the truth is that – due to the distance between us – I have probably seen more of him through photos or home movies than I have seen of him in person. Even at the start of his life, Jackson and I were “treated” to a video of his traumatic birth by Jackson’s mother, Mary. A few months after he was born, she sat us down at her jalopy of a computer and derived a maniacal pleasure from playing and replaying the clip of Rachel’s C-section that she had recorded at the hospital.

In the video, which Mary made sure I would never forget, Rachel’s arms were shackled to the birthing table – not locked at her sides, but stretched out horizontally in mock crucifixion. There was a blue curtain that separated her upper and lower halves. I gather that, since she was awake, they didn’t want her to look down in her drugged-out state and go on a really bad trip from seeing her belly sliced open. Mary, however, was situated with the camera in such a way that she could stand above and see both sides of the curtain, both the belly and the face. Rachel’s eyelids hung heavy and her burning hair was folded up into a gauzy shower cap; she could just marginally respond to the excited exclamations that Mary directed at her. The only parts of the doctor visible in the frame were his rubber-gloved hands, cutting and searching with steady purpose. I remember reflecting that there was not as much blood as I had thought there would be, but I still marveled at how a woman could be cut like that – deep and wide, as the old song goes, deep and wide and clean across – and live through it. On the bottom side of the curtain, Rachel looked like some new Sesame Street character, or a monster out of Maurice Sendak: her belly was its giant, comic mouth, her swollen breasts its googly, crying eyes.

Somehow I was surprised when the pearly hands reached into the mouth and pulled out a baby so easily, like the candy from a plastic Easter egg. Plop closed the mouth, and up went the baby. Mary aimed the camera beyond Rachel’s emptied body, where the doctors were laying her child on a platform and encircling him in a way that was not joyful. The last image I could see on the video was a somber huddle of white coats as Rachel was pitifully wailing for her son. Mary had been reassuring her all the while, telling her everything was fine, but she conveyed to us after the video was over that everything had not been fine. Gabriel had not been breathing, and it took an agonizing several minutes for that first cold sting of oxygen to enter his lungs.

I knew from stories and movies that babies were supposed to come out crying. But I will never fully know how horrifying it must have been for Rachel, hazy as she was, to hear nothing.

Since then, however, that baby has more than made up for his initial silence. When he was born, I wondered what message our Gabriel had been sent to deliver. These days I wonder if he is the angel of God or the angel of the devil, like all children. So do his parents. They ask us if we know any nice gypsies, and they wonder how much money they would get for him on the black market. This is because he is two now, and he has morphed into GOZER THE DESTRUC-TOR; he makes lassos out of cats, cracks glass with his screaming, beats the living daylights out of all the other toddlers, demolishes television sets by dousing them with household cleaner, and takes delight in decorating every inch of his house with his own poop.

And yet, whenever he pulls down his little pants and drops a load in the kitchen floor just for the fun of it, his parents only clean it up and laugh. Their answer to all the insanity he throws at them is just to shrug and attend to the consequences – just a “What can you do? He’s crazy.” This is certainly not to say that they do not love him, or that
Rachel is not absolutely eat-up with whatever movement is currently hot in crunchy mommydom – like attachment parenting, babywearing, fanatical breastfeeding advocacy (or “lactivism”), cloth diapering, and so on. She also lists herself as a proponent of “gentle discipline,” but to the casual observer it would appear that she practices something more along the lines of “no discipline.”

Recently, when Gabriel was shrieking his curly-haired head off in a restaurant, someone at the table offended his parents by issuing a soft “shhhhh” in his direction.

“He has no concept of volume yet,” they huffed.

*He won’t have a concept until you give him one,* I grumbled in silence.

My time as a teacher of small children makes me cantankerous in this regard. But even though I believe Gabriel’s behavioral issues could be lessened by at least some form of direct response to them, I know that the lack of response is not what created them. Perhaps a child psychologist would say that all he wants is attention – that in the midst of all this new age avoidance all he wants is for them to look him in the eye and say “No” – but surely Gabriel is bright enough to mirror the chaos that daily surrounds him.

When I was with Carly, I knew she would never be a cause of tension between her family and me because I knew she would always be taken care of. She would want for nothing. I would have no reason to worry about her (not until she was a teenager, that is, when all hell will likely break loose). With Gabriel, I cannot feel assured. Though Rachel derives much of her identity from being touchy-feely earth mother supreme, she might have forgotten many of the common-sense basics in the process. I, for instance, couldn’t tell you how Mercury being in retrograde would affect Gabriel’s dreams, but I could tell you when he needs to go to bed. (Sometimes he is still staggering around at midnight, and they wonder about how he could possibly be so fussy.) I couldn’t remove his diaper rash with prayers to the Dark Goddess, but I could remove him from places he shouldn’t be. (Once my Dad walked in on me having a panic attack after I had seen pictures posted of Gabriel, wild-eyed and bewildered, wandering around in the midst of one of their marathon bacchanalian parties, grabbing his way through a haze of weed-smoke and belly dancers.) I probably couldn’t give up rocking him to sleep when they told me I needed to, but I sure as hell could give up nicotine for him. And I might not be able to keep letting him sleep in my bed, but I’d at least be able to keep an eye on him when he was awake. As it stands now, he’s a free-range chicken of terror.

But he is not my chicken; he is theirs. When it fits the family’s purposes, they refer to me as Jackson’s fiancée or wife (I am neither), and Mary says that I’m “already family”; but the moment that I so much as hinted at my worries for Gabriel, I would be an outsider, someone with no call to waltz in off the street and start telling them how to raise him. Who the hell am I, anyway? So I take two steps back; and whenever I hear that Lowell has returned to a hotel room only to find Rachel totally wasted and Gabriel going wild with sharpies and lipstick, I take two more. I hate myself for leaving him to this. I hate myself for having the gall to think I could even help.

And so it is that Gabriel is somewhat lost to me, as is Carly. The natures of my involvement (or, most likely, non-involvement) in their births have always perplexed me; after all, how strange for this to happen twice in such a way. But how different they both turned out to be. It would be a travesty to suggest, as this piece leans toward doing, that one child is inherently more lovable than the other. (Gabriel has been known to exhibit rare, heartbreaking glimpses of divine sweetness, as if he would perhaps like to be good
if he were only shown how to be; and even when I survey the swath of desolation in his wake, I cannot help but appreciate that the intelligence required to generate such carnage is formidable. As Jackson says, Gabriel will either grow up to find the cure for cancer or blow up the Empire State Building.

No, it is not a paucity of adoration that separates us, but environment. I lost Carly when I left Clifford, but her life was one had I moved through easily, laced with the comforts of a familiar culture – inhabited by a people whose codes I knew and trusted, and guarded by a woman I loved and betrayed. (Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God…) I am still with Jackson, and I will remain with Jackson, but his nephew lies beyond me – or more accurately before me, dancing with the druids in a realm that is older and wilder than all that holds up the framework of my own spirit. Love makes no difference; these are a people whose language I do not know, and whose customs I will never learn nor understand – a people I care for but also fear. So I will stand on the periphery of his life, and I shall come if I am called; and I can only hope that all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well with Gabriel. Carly’s childhood will flourish just as well without me – she will live in the pages of Peter Rabbit and Madeline, a soft and structured life (“In two straight lines they broke their bread and brushed their teeth and went to bed”). But I still keep vigil for the child who was drawn from the monster’s mouth, from a distance now, watching but letting him stay where he belongs – where the wild things are.
THE CELEBRITY

If you lived in Nashville long enough, you were bound to have an encounter. The famous fluttered down like the shimmering snowflakes we never saw—not just musicians hopping through town to make records, which happened a lot, but also people who lived there, people doing real people things. Charlie Daniels liked to frequent the music section of the Barnes & Noble. Shel Silverstein, when he was alive, would come into The Great Escape every so often to buy a vintage edition of *Playboy*. (The lead singer of the Dixie Chicks came in once, too, but just to throw a fit about how their new album wasn’t “prominently displayed.”) And everybody went to Maggie Moo’s to get ice cream: families, teens, regular college kids, but also LeAnn Rimes, who never condescended to speak, only deigning to indicate her ice cream order by pointing at that particular carton. “Her husband’s a sweetheart, but she’s a bitch,” Erika told me. She much preferred it when Keith Urban and Nicole Kidman walked in. The whole town adored them. It was easy to. Keith was the only person the girls would hand a cone of Better Batter to without tossing some sprinkles of verbal abuse on top (“Okay, fine, here’s your damn Better Batter, never mind we have thirteen other flavors that no one ever tries, noooooooo, it’s always Better Batter! Here! Eat it! EAT IT!”).


Prince William was even spotted at the Cool Springs Mall. One adventurous sorority girl approached him, then asked: “Are you Prince William?” His answer, delivered with a wry, caddish smile, became the debonair stuff of local legend:

“No. I’m taller.”

To me, though, the biggest celebrity news of all was that someone had seen the rock god. My rock god. The closest I had ever gotten to him was when his impersonator blew me a kiss from backstage at the Exit/In. It was a cover band, sure, but a great one. Almost the real thing. But now a waiter at the Outback Steakhouse in West End was telling me that the real thing was *here*, in Nashville, driving a red convertible.

“He was very nice,” said the waiter. “He chatted with me and let me get his autograph and everything.” The rock god had told him that he was in town to cut a bluegrass record, of all things. Who would’ve thought?

I looked for that red convertible. I looked hard. But I never found it. I kept hoping that one day I’d be walking down Hillsboro, would turn a corner, and there he’d be—the impish grin of yesteryear faded to a hard-earned grizzle, each sandy, curly wisp of hair striking out in a different direction on its own fantastical journey.

However, that never occurred—and by the time my fifth year in Nashville rolled around, I had still not had the glitzy encounter I was owed, not with anyone. Oh sure, I might have been in proximity with some stars, but I didn’t have any genuine interactions with them, nothing to make a story out of. I saw some people, but they never saw me.
sat behind Vince Gill when his wife was using what little range she had left to perform in our Christmas concert. I was fifteen feet from Shooter Jennings once, but I’d paid for that. One year when I still played clarinet in the basketball pep band, I looked across the stadium and observed an unshaven, leather-clad, thoroughly disgruntled Richard Marx sitting with one of the singers from SHeDAISY. I asked our director if we could start playing “Right Here Waiting For You.” He said no.

I did see Jack White at the Pancake Pantry. That was cool. I was with my father at one of the miniscule tables, crammed in with a million others, stabbing a bite of blintz with my fork and swirling it in cinnamon honey when something caught my eye from across the room. The red-haired lady and the gentleman with the black hat, who’d been sitting there the entire time, were standing up to put on their coats – but only now could I see that it was Jack White and the model he’d married in the Amazon. The funny thing was that he had made absolutely no effort to conceal the fact that he was Jack White. Strands of greasy black hair spilled into his pale white face from under the black bowler hat. He wore a red-and-black striped sweater, black pants, black shoes, and, as he surveyed the room, a facial expression that seemed to wonder whether any of us deserved to live. He was magnificent. He could not have looked more like himself.

Daddy, wiping off a dribble of blueberry compote from his chin, noticed my gaping craw as my eyes moved slowly to the right, watching the two of them leave the restaurant together. Concerned, he asked me what was wrong.

“That was Jack White,” I whispered.
Daddy blinked.
“Who’s Jack White?”
Sure, seeing Jack White at the Pancake Pantry is a paramount occasion in anyone’s miserable life. But even then, it wasn’t like I’d conversed with him, said hello to him, vaguely made eye contact with him. I’d still had none of the exchanges with notable personages, however brief, that many of my friends and relations had enjoyed. I hadn’t grown up around the glitz, hadn’t gotten used to it yet. I was the Appalachian. The bumpkin, to the dispassionate Nashvillians. I would always be the bumpkin. I was unprepared to have to deal with celebrities, to really deal with them on my level, in the normal hours of the regular old day – so I don’t think it’s fair to blame me for being starstruck when I saw her for the first time, when I was working my average-Joe job, minding my own business, and she poked her head in the door.

It was my first real job, to tell the truth. I’d made money of my own before – playing in the pep band, scribbling movie reviews for the paper, helping out at a writing center one summer – but this was the first full-time occupation out of college. I was working at a Waldorf school. I’d found it going through the private school listings in the yellow pages, just like I found all the others I called; they were the only ones to call back. I knew it would be a different sort of place when the first question they asked me in the interview was, “If you could go strawberry picking, blueberry picking, or blackberry picking, which would you choose, and why?”

I didn’t land the class teacher gig – they needed someone with Waldorf training, because (as I would learn) Waldorf is probably the most microcosmically specific, spiritually demanding pedagogy currently practiced anywhere in the lower 48. But they did need some odds and ends. English and whatnot for the upper grades, Recess Duty, “Resting Stars” for the Early Childhood, Extended Care. Definitely someone to run
Extended Care. I could do all that. So they cobbled me together a position, and it was during the first week of school, as Camille and I were getting the Sunflower room ready for Extended Care, that she appeared.

It happened so quickly that I almost missed her – she leaned over the Mr. Ed-esque white half-door that separated the room from the hallway and scanned the walls and floors, looking for something or someone in particular.

“He’s upstairs,” Camille said. And then she said her name.

“Thanks!” she said, and she was gone. That was it. I dropped the sleeping mat I had been folding and stared at Camille. She, an expert in Early Childhood, a Tufts grad, was a gentle woman, an uncommonly kind woman, soothing as the arnica gel we spread over the children’s bruises. (No one else would have put up with my ignorance as long as she did.) But not even she could behold the look on my face without giggling, softly.

“Was that…?” She smiled, nodded.

“You mean…”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Mmm hmm,” she said, bending to pick up some wooden toys.

“Well,” I said, taking the mats to the big white cupboards. “Well.” I chuckled.

“Well, I can’t believe it. I’ll be damned.”

Camille shook her head good-naturedly, as if to say “Oh, Maggie,” and went on about her work. I mumbled her name again.

“Hot damn. Nobody told me.”

Camille must have gotten a kick out of me that day, enough of a kick to tell her family about it, because her son often teased me about my reaction. Jesse was one of my English students, and I was the only one of his teachers who didn’t butt heads with him. I didn’t understand why – he just had a little ADD was all, and sure, I’d look up many a time in the middle of a lecture to see him blissfully twiddling the blinds or contemplating the wad of gum stretching out between his fingers, but it was nothing a little whistle couldn’t take care of. Jesse was a good boy, deep down, even if he didn’t have to fear me.

“HAAAA HA HA,” he’d croak, in that strange voice of in-between that many seventh grade boys have. “You freaked oooout, you freaked oooout!”

Jesse couldn’t quite understand what it was to be impressed; his best friend’s dad had won a Grammy, for pete’s sake. All this stuff was old hat for him. He’d gone to this school since he was six, and by the time I knew him, the celebrity had already been a parent there for three years.

The next time I ran into her was the only time I would successfully be able to speak to her. Following “Resting Stars” I always had a brief lunch break, after which I would usually stop at the faculty restroom before heading back down to the Early Childhood cave for Extended Care. One day, as I unlocked the door and stepped out, I looked to the far left and saw her there, waiting on the miniature wooden bench for her child to get out of class. There was not the tiniest shred of production about her – she wore overalls and gardening shoes, and her hair was pinned back underneath a ratty bandanna. And yet I was aghast, in a way, peering pitifully at her around the corner, still unnoticed. These junctures with the illustrious are always supposed to leave one disappointed somehow; “He’s much shorter in person” or “I didn’t even recognize her
without makeup” or “He has a serious problem with body odor.” But she was every bit as beautiful as she was supposed to be – actually, more. Sitting there twiddling her foot, contented, bedecked in her denim and cotton, she was country in the best sense. She was pure. She struck me as the grace this town had owned once, but had long since lost in a flurry of cocaine and cowboy hats.

I only had seconds to determine my course of action, but I decided to approach her, thinking I’d always regret it if I didn’t. I gulped, stepped forward. She looked up.

“Ma’am, I promise you I’ll never bother you again, but I just wanted you to know I really like your work.”

I had no idea how this was going to go. I couldn’t help but think of what happened to my friend Lyn at a café in Montana when she told Annie Proulx she really liked her work: “I don’t come to places like this to be bothered by people like you.”

But she wasn’t like Annie Proulx at all, the woman before me. She was positively bashful – laughing quietly, turning away, and covering her cheek with her hand.

“Oh, oh, thank you,” she said. “Thank you. I’m surprised anyone could even know who I was today. I look like death!” She laughed.

I assured her that she did not, in fact, look like death, thanked her for her time, and glided downstairs on a cloud until I smacked into one of the kindergarteners (“MISS MAGGIE MISS MAGGIE MISS” thunk!!!). She had been so sweet. And I was surprised that she had an accent, being from Illinois, but she did – an accent just like mine.

That moment outside the restroom was the only real conversation I had with her. It so happened, however, that I spoke more frequently with her son. His name was Sam.

I was glad that I was assigned to take the second grade to recess because I had a soft spot for them, anyway. They were a great class, bottom line – precocious, thoughtful, creative, well-behaved, everything Waldorf kids were supposed to be. But there was another reason. They were the first group of children I’d met at the school, and they remembered me. I tried out with their class for my interview – told them “Rumplestiltskin” and helped them use beeswax to make the ring from the story. (I kept the ring I’d sculpted for good luck, even after it got squished and just looked like a waxy pink donut.) Later, the administrator confessed that she loved the way I told tales: “It’s so… Southern,” she said, wiggling her fingers as if she’d just sampled a fine cheese.

When someone said that Sam was in that class, I knew. Nobody had to tell me which child was hers. He had her everything. Except for being a boy, it was more like she’d cloned him than birthed him. I pictured him on that day I told “Rumplestiltskin,” big blue eyes in the back of the room, just sitting, warming the beeswax between his palms, smiling, contented.

He snuck up on me the first time he talked to me; I had a lot on my mind that morning and didn’t even notice he was there, standing in the front of the queue to go outside. Sam usually was in the front, which meant he was chattering and fidgeting the least when the teacher was calling them to line up. I was posted before them, ready, waiting for her to give me the “go” signal, wearing a regulation sundress. (Dress code, only disclosed to me after I’d started the job: no pants, no skirts that don’t come below the knee, no logos, no words at all, and certainly no black. This voided most of my wardrobe. I had to hit up a lot of thrift stores that month.) We were waiting for a couple of errant second graders in the back row to get their acts together when Sam reached up and grabbed the lanyard my keys hung from.
“I like your frog button!” he squealed. He had the funniest little voice. He seemed like some kind of walking Lily Tomlin skit, except he wasn’t.

I looked down, grinned. “You do, huh?”

“Yeeaaaah.”

His eyes sparkled when I held the pin out to him and let him examine it. I locked up the campus each evening, so I had to keep keys on me, but the lanyard my boyfriend had given me had a logo stitched all over it (MIZUNO!). Thus, I’d taken the liberty of covering it with the buttons I’d collected. The particular pin Sam had pointed out was a likeness of a tiny brown toad with red eyes. I’d picked it up at a flea market back home.

“You like frogs?”

“Yeah!” said Sam. At this point, many of the girls behind him had joined in, oohing and aahing, more and more of their little hands grabbing the keys and pulling me downward. “I’m going to study frogs when I grow up, for a living,” he said.

“Oh,” I replied, impressed. “So you’re going to be a frog doctor?”

“No!” he scoffed, scrunching his nose. “It’s called a herpetologist.”

“What?” I laughed. Then the other girls laughed, too. Sam wasn’t amused.

“Herpetology. Study of amphibians and reptiles.”

“Oh,” I said, standing up to my full height and nodding back at the teacher. Before turning around, I said to Sam: “Thanks for educating me about these things.”

“You’re welcome!” he said, glad to be of service. I waved at all the children and spun to face the door. Then I initiated their favorite silly walk, leading them across the wooden bridge, down the hill, and through the metal gate to the play yard.

The place where the second and third graders had recess was the best plot of land on the property. It was a vast, lush expanse of green grass and towering sweet gum trees, the tallest in town, sloping all the way down to a hand-built stone wall that separated the campus from the highway. It was good for the children, all the space, the leaves, the bugs, and the mud, and it was also good for whoever had to preside over recess. It was a relatively open area (unlike the other big play yard, the one that was too big to keep track of, where the fourth graders would hide behind the bushes and play “Let’s see what we can do to get Miss Maggie fired TODAY”), so that whoever was supervising could stand at the top of the hill and scan across the whole swath of play. It was also a peaceful spot – a lovely spot, no matter the season.

As summer surrendered to autumn, each leaf that cut ties with its sweet gum tree became a major event. The children would huddle in a pod, excitedly watching it descend, twitching one way or another en masse in an attempt to anticipate where it would land. Whoever caught it won. But it was not an easy task; the leaf’s movements were erratic, unstable, often shifting dramatically at the last second. It was a lot like playing Plinko, or rather pretending it was you and not some doofus in California playing Plinko. The leaf would seem like it was headed in one direction, but would always surprise them, veering off in a sudden diagonal to end up in the hands of the lucky loner child – or, worst of all, on the ground.

One day, while the children were playing a game of catch-the-leaf, I noticed that Sam had detached himself from the larger pod and was dancing around the idiosyncratic little dogwood tree in the middle of the yard, counting on the hope that, in the final instant, the falling leaf would twist his way. As the undulating prize drew closer and closer to the dirt, Sam grew more and more agitated and paid less and less attention to
where he was going, darting from point to point with each spasm of the leaf until that
decisive, echoing moment when the general frenzy of the sport became so overpowering
that he ran smack dab into the dogwood tree.

“Oh, I whispered, making quick strides to where he was. “Sam? You okay?”
He turned away from the tree, blue eyes wide, holding onto his crotch.
“Sssssst…ahhhhhhhhh…ssssssst…ahhhhhhh….”
“Sam? What happened?”
He squinted at me, tried to articulate it. Between loud intakes of breath, he said:
“I thiiiiiiiiink…sssssssst…my P-I-N-U-S.”
I brought my hand up to my mouth to cover up the smile that was hatching there.
“Your P-I-N-U-S, huh?”
“Yuuuuup.” In the midst of his pain, he smiled at me, winked at me, pleased to
to show off his secret grownup knowledge of the mysterious “pinus.”
“Ouch,” I whispered, making quick strides to where he was. “Sam? You okay?”
“Sssssst…ahhhhhhhhh…ssssssst…ahhhhhhh….”
“Sam? What happened?”
He turned away from the tree, blue eyes wide, holding onto his crotch.
“I thiiiiiiiiink…sssssssst…my P-I-N-U-S.”
I brought my hand up to my mouth to cover up the smile that was hatching there.
“Your P-I-N-U-S, huh?”
“Yuuuuup.” In the midst of his pain, he smiled at me, winked at me, pleased to
show off his secret grownup knowledge of the mysterious “pinus.”

A few weeks later, when the last of the leaves had Plinkoed their way down from
the branches, my recess partner and I were having a friendly conversation that meandered
its way to the topic of the Coen Brothers. I don’t know what led me to it, but after she left
to oversee a game of tag, I began to sing to myself. I wasn’t thinking about it — didn’t
make a decision, per se — but this is what stumbled from the back of my cluttered head:

“As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol’ way
And who shall wear the robe & crown?
Good Lord show me the w—“

I looked over to the far left corner of the play yard and saw a wee blonde-haired
speck running towards me.

“That’s my mom!!!”

It was Sam. In a few seconds he had sprinted all the way to the dogwood. He
collapsed in a heap several feet in front of me, panting but proud.

I felt foolish.

“Well, yes, I, uhh, I guess it is your mom.”
He stood up, juggled his arms and legs. “Yeah, that’s my moooom. She did it
for the movie! For the movie record.”

“She sure did.” He was sort of ambling around me in a circle now. “Do you play
music too, Sam?”

“Yeeeah.”

“What do you play?”
“I like the Dobro.”

“The what?”

“You know, a lap steel,” he said.

“Sam, I’m afraid you’re going to have to keep educating me about these things.”
He did, but I didn’t quite get it. He went on to tell me that he had a dachshund named Wirrmysquirmy, since that was apparently a concept I could grasp. (Puppies: the universal language.) He especially wanted me to know that he’d named the dog himself.

What with the herpetology and the P-I-N-U-S and the Dobro lap steel and the Wirrmysquirmy, Sam walked away with the impression that I was the type of person who had to have everything explained to them – but he must not have minded explaining. After that day, he made it a point at recess to fly his invisible airplane every once in awhile up to the invisible airport where I just happened to be standing. Whenever I’d come across his mother in the afternoons, I’d see her, walking toward me, walking, smiling, walking, passing, gone, and she’d already be in the building before I could spurt, “Hidey!” But Sam was easy to talk to, and he seemed to want to talk. Looking back on it now, I think he might have enjoyed having someone to chat music with, someone more discreet than a second grader. At the Waldorf school, there were a lot of items on the no-discuss list, and anything vaguely related to media or pop culture was one of them. When I ate lunch with the preschoolers, the most difficult time of the day for me, the other Early Childhood teacher would often ask them what they had seen in their imaginations that morning. The devil-child Ricky would pipe up, “I SAW BATMAN!”

“We don’t talk about the Batman, Ricky,” she would say, every day, slowly, grinding her temples with her fingers. “We talk about things from our imaginations.”

“But I’m IMAGINING the Batman!!!” he would reply. (Ricky was also the kid who liked to slap my buddy Jeannie across the face during “Resting Stars.” Some rest.)

I thought it was a natural impulse, though, for Sam to want to brag about his mother. She wasn’t Batman; she was his mom. He jabbered to me about what fun places he’d been with her band, what his favorite song of hers was, what awards she’d won, what they’d do together for the holidays. I never said I wouldn’t tell on him, but somehow he knew.

One day, when “King Winter” was just beginning to claw his way into the yard, Sam landed his invisible plane on the hill and sidled up to me, holding a secret in his quivering fists.

“She has a new record out, you know.”

I had, in fact, known, but I hadn’t wanted to say anything. Dad had read about it in the Times and sent me a message two weeks before. The album was an ambitious collaboration with another artist, an experiment, with covers of everything from the Everly Brothers to Tom Waits. It was kind of a big deal. T-Bone Burnett was involved.

And the most important thing, the most surprising thing, was that the other artist in the collaboration was the rock god. My rock god. I realized that this project was the album he had been working on when the Outback waiter had gotten his autograph.

I couldn’t help it: I asked Sam if he’d met him.

“Oh, yeah,” Sam said, looking up to the sky. “He’s nice. He has long hair.”

Scanning the ground for spiky sweet gum seeds, Sam told me that there would be a week in the spring when he’d be absent, accompanying his mother for a short stretch of the European tour. He said there’d also be a big show in Nashville, to promote the record.

“Oh-ho! Can you get me some tickets?” I asked, teasing.

Sam thought about it. “I can sell you some.”

“Ha!”

“I can!”
“I know, hun. That’s okay,” I said, digging my hands further down into the empty pockets of my threadbare coat. For what they paid me here, I’d be lucky just to buy the album.

It wasn’t long before Santa came to the Waldorf campus, tiptoeing through the hallway and dropping organic goodies into the children’s boots. Over the break, he also brought me a new jacket. It was puffy and powder blue and I couldn’t have needed it more once school started again – for “Brother Wind” joined the children to play on the yard in January, and “Brother Wind” was a cold bastard. Through the winter months, while the collaboration album was increasing in buzz and sales, we were compulsively checking the children to make sure they had enough layers. (“Their inner temperatures aren’t set right at that age yet,” the spatial dynamics instructor warned us. “They might think they’re warm, that they don’t need their scarves or sweaters, but they do. Don’t let them get away with shedding their layers.”) Outside, we tried to keep the children moving as much as possible – the teachers said it made them warmer.

They said this to me, too.

“Miss Bouldin, put up your hood!” the third grade class teacher yelled at me one day, in such a smarmy way as to make an example out of me for the children. “And why don’t you try moving around some instead of just standing in the same spot?”

I moved. Away from her.

“I’ll put up your hood,” I grumbled to myself. “I’ll put up your mom’s hood…”

I put up my hood.

By March, the record had been certified platinum, and I didn’t have to wear a hood anymore. March was mud time, a good time to play. The parents knew to dress the children in clothes they didn’t mind getting dirty; the Waldorf people actually wanted the kids to get dirty, thought it was healthy for them to touch the earth. Even I, when helping the children to craft soil castles and fairy huts and miniature, oozing swamps, could see that it made them happy.

So it felt especially incongruous during this season of great muck and mirth to hear sniffling. I snapped around to the upper-right corner of the yard, close to the main building, and saw two second-grade boys standing tall, stiff, arms at their sides, like toy soldiers. They were so gallant, these boys, so brave, bless their hearts, but I could still hear them crying, and as I jogged up to them I could see who they were: Jacob and Joe.

Now, this was odd – these are not criers, I thought, hugging both of them together. Jacob, freckled and black-headed, was a tough little bird, athletic, perhaps a bit of trouble, but not a crier. (His father was one of the two UT Vols fans in the whole of Nashville, the other one being me. This was a dangerous position to take, and had to be appreciated. Our typical exchanges went like this: “Hey! Like-y-hat!” “Yeah! Git-r-done!”) And Joe was one of my Extended Care kids. He would always bring in his book of Pokemon cards and say, “Which one do you want me to draw today?” (I never had the heart to tell him they weren’t allowed.) I’d gotten to know him fairly well by this point in the year, but I’d never seen him like this. His black eyes popped out tear after tear and his turned-up nose popped out snot after snot, but for a few minutes I couldn’t get him to do anything except stare straight ahead and sob.

I was starting to panic at their silence, but when I turned to grab the first aid box, Jacob touched my arm with his palm. He talked like a smoker.

“We ain’t injured. It’s just Sam.”
I kneeled in front of them, perplexed. Sam?
“Yeah. He yelled at us.”
Jacob seemed to feel better after telling someone about it, but at this admission
Joe’s weeping only got worse. I held both of their hands.
“He yelled at you? Sam?”
Joe wiped a conglomeration of face fluids on his jacket sleeve. I didn’t take his
hand back. When he spoke, he had that kind of performative voice that was so expressive
on its own, the kind of voice a puppeteer needs. (His mother, in fact, was a puppeteer.)
“We were wanting to play with him,” Joe announced, “…and, all of a sudden, he
just started screaming at us to leave him alone.”
“He said he didn’t want to be friends with us anymore,” said Jacob.
“We didn’t even do anything.”
“He was just yelling.”
“But we thought we were friends.”
“But now he says we’re not.”
I looked back and forth between the two for a while, letting them register their
complaint, trying to think of what on earth to do about it. When they finished, I said:
“Okay, I’ll go talk to him, and I’ll come right back. Where is he?”
They pointed to the lower left corner of the plot, and I saw him, dejectedly
strolling around the stone bench, kicking rocks with his mud boots.
“Okay. You guys stay right here – I’ll be back, I promise.”
They nodded as I picked up my long denim skirt and took off at a trot for the
other end of the yard. Once I got closer to Sam, I stopped, took a breath, and then
slinked up to him very, very slowly, like he
was a rabbit I didn’t want to frighten away.
“Hey Sam.”
He didn’t look at me. “Heeeeeeey.”
“Is everything okay?”
“Yeah, it’s FINE,” he said, gesticulating wildly with his hands, “I just need them
to leave me a-LONE.”
“Okay.”
“They’ve just been FOLLOWING me and I’m TIRED of it.”
“Okay.”
He got louder. “I’m just…TIRED of it.”
“Okay buddy.”
He plopped himself onto the bench, looked down at the dirt, kicked his little legs
back and forth. Softly, he said, “I’m just tired of being followed.”
There was an ache in my gut, a rueful twinge. But I didn’t need to know.
I told Sam I’d take care of it, turned around, and slogged up the hill to where the
boys were waiting. Jacob had stopped crying and was sticking around to support Joe,
who was still beset by the occasional snort and shudder. I kneeled close to them again. I
put a hand on Joe’s shoulder; Jacob did the same thing, grinned a nearly toothless grin.
“Guys, I’m really sorry about what happened today.”
They nodded in unison, listening attentively.
“I want you to know that I don’t think it’s because of you two or anything you
did. I think something has happened to Sam and that…he just needs some space. So,
maybe today, everybody can just keep their distance a tad bit, and I’m sure that by
Monday he’ll be right as rain again, and we can just take care of the whole...apology...making-up...procedure...then.”

“We were talking,” said Jacob, patting Joe on the back, “and that’s what we think too.”

“So is that okay? Is that a good plan?”

“Yeah,” they both said. Joe was still sad, though.

“Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?” I asked, standing up. “You want to pretend you’re a Pokemon, just for once?”

“No, that’s okay,” he said, sighing. “I don’t wanna get you in trouble.”

“Okay,” I said. They were good boys. I spun around and moved to stand in line with them, for solidarity, shoving my hands in my fluffy pockets. Joe spoke again.

“It’s...it’s not Sam’s fault,” he said. “Sometimes his mom gets all BLAAAGGH.”

“Hmmm,” I said. “I see.”

“And then he gets all BLAAAGGH.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeeeeeaaah,” added Jacob.

“Yeeeeaaaaah,” replied Joe.

There was a long pause.

“I guess,” I ventured, “it can be stressful, huh?”

“Yup,” said Joe, looking across the grass to the far bench. “Very stressful.”

“I’m glad I’m not famous,” Jacob said.

After that, we stood sentry together on the hill for the rest of recess, quietly, all of us in our own deep ponderings, unruffled by the light spring breeze.

The last conversation I had with Sam was in May, nearing the close of the school year, when each crooked branch and tiny twig of the young dogwood was capped with a pinky-white blossom. He was feeling much better; the European tour had been loads of fun, he told me, and over time he had become fast friends with the rock god.

“I thiiink,” he said, sitting on the grass, assembling clover necklaces with a gaggle of second-grade girls, “that he might even come to pick me up from school one day.”

I folded my arms, chuckled. “So you two are pals now, huh.”

“Yup, pals.”

He smiled sweetly, looping one weedy bloom around another. As I watched him work, I remembered what another faculty member had told me, about how Sam’s father was “not...so much...in the picture.” And I remembered the rock god’s own son – how he had died, so unexpectedly, when he was only two years younger than Sam.

I walked away, left the boy to his craft. It was good for them to be pals. I looked forward to the day when the rock god would come to school, particularly for Sam’s sake, but I also feared it. I had no idea what I would do if I actually saw him. There I’d be, clomping down the steps of the manse, dirt on my skirt and lunchbox in my hands, and there he’d be, crossing the wooden bridge to get Sam. The clouds would open up and the sunbeams would burst down upon his face and the angels with their lyres would blast out the opening riff of “Communication Breakdown,” and what would I do? Would I embarrass myself? Would I “freak out” again, as Jesse said? Would I get a chance to tell him what he meant to me, that it wasn’t because he was famous, fuck that, but because he was who he was, because of what he’d done, because of the life he’d
lived, because he is the mighty overlord of all that is rock??? Or would I choke? Would I simply watch him cross the bridge and close the door?

In the end, it was a dilemma I didn’t have to face. That August, when the rock god did come to pick Sam up from school, Jesse sent me a message to tell me about it. It was “awesome,” he said. But I didn’t see the rock god come to school, because I wasn’t there.

I wasn’t there because I’d abandoned the school for more schooling of my own. But when I left, it was the children that tore something out of me, like the stinger yanked out of the honeybee, and thus my first year in Ohio was one of crawling, panting, dragging my yellowed entrails behind me. I gained weight; none of my flowing thrift store dresses would fit me anymore. Sam’s frog pin shattered into several pieces. There were no more silly walks.

At some point during my first semester, Daddy sent me an online video with the message: “Thought you’d find this interesting.” It was a clip of the celebrity, performing at a recent awards show. She was singing Sam’s favorite song. She stood alone on a stage, wearing a dress intricately stitched in a pattern of circles, with a series of old home movies projected on a screen in the background. The movies were of Sam, when he was a baby. I could see him swimming, swinging, eating, blowing out candles on a cake. I was shocked that she would broadcast those pictures of Sam to the whole world, since she had been so meticulously protective of him before; he didn’t even go by her last name (that was the one contribution he got from his father). Somebody would’ve had to work real hard to even know she had a kid. But a few minutes later, I realized that the baby on the screen wasn’t Sam. It was her. She had betrayed nothing but her own childhood, but I couldn’t tell the difference between her and the child she’d eventually had.

That February, months after I saw the video, there was a picture in the newspaper of the celebrity and the rock god, smiling together, holding five Grammys between them. It seemed to have surprised them more than anyone else. Sam will be so proud, I thought. I examined the photograph and tried to transport myself inside it, tried to imagine the shouting, the flash bulbs, the glimmering golden trophies – he so scraggly and she so glamorous, but both exalted, both luminous, both immortal.

And then I thought of Sam, flying his invisible airplane. I closed my eyes and I could almost see the wisps of blonde hair floating up with every jump and skip over root and rock, could almost hear the childish engine sounds emanating from his mouth, as far away as he was, could almost feel the universe he’d made of the moment. I thought of him, warming the beeswax in his hands, running to catch the leaves, crashing into dogwoods, reading books about frogs, weaving chains of clover, going home to play with Wirmysquirmy. I thought of Sam.

He was just a kid. A child. A precious child, just like anybody’s.
Somewhere in the wasteland they pull over. Not the wasteland in a poetic sense, but rather a land that is wasted, wasted by water, the brackish deluge stretching out on both sides of the road as far as they can squint. All Kentucky is a flood today.

They have stopped so she can take a picture of something she thinks is important. On the right, half a football field from where she stands, a lone house lies surrounded on all sides by the new lake. It is what her father would have called a tar paper shack. It must have been a sharecropper’s dwelling, many long years ago, but no one lives there anymore. The sight of the tiny, pitiful square house peeking above the bog had tugged at her to record it. She feels like it has to matter, but she does not know the meaning of it yet. She has never seen a single fragile thing so close to being swallowed.

She pushes the button on the silver camera and captures the image, the house in the marsh, the only solid shape for several miles, and gets back into the car. Now, the helpless brown shack closed in by the shiny brown water is receding behind them, shrinking into her memory. In front, the highway stretches North, on and on, away.

In truth, the operator of the vehicle had not wanted to pull over – he did not think it was safe with so little shoulder, the pavement crowning only just above the muck – but he considers it his vocation to make her happy. He is the type who brings her sour candy, balloons, freebies from his workplace, stories from the news, objects he has seen that might strike her fancy (“Seven chickens in someone’s yard this morning!”). He accomplishes for her the tasks she does not like to perform – driving, cooking, coaxing spiders into a cup and taking them outside – and nurses her whenever the Disease strikes. She, in turn, is tickled by the smallest of gestures, is contented by clouds, will be perfectly pleased if she never sees Paris before she dies. So when begged for this one extremely unreasonable thing, to be able to take a picture of the tar paper shack, he had winced, sighed, and pulled over as much as he could. There were no other cars, anyway.

They have not technically been together for long, not yet a year. There is an age difference, as well: she is twenty, and he is twenty-seven. He grew up in corn country and she’s an Appalachian but over time they have both begun to call Nashville home. They have ties to the same college – she’s attending, and he’s two unfinished term papers away from graduating. (She doesn’t know that last bit yet, in this moment, as they continue to drive up the waterlogged interstate, but she will eventually find out and nudge him into getting the degree.) For now, he’s a philosopher barista. He is concerned with questions of memory and identity, Realism vs. Nominalism, and Heidegger. Especially Heidegger.

They met at a church bonfire on October 27th, 2004. This was also the night of the eclipse, the night that his precious Red Sox broke the curse. She wandered up to him as he was yammering on to other members of the congregation, in that shrill nasal Yankee tenor of his, about how the only way to eat hot dogs is completely blackened.
“Is that your philosophy on hot dogs?” she asked.
“Yes,” he answered, demurely. She might have only really noticed him for the first time that night, locking eyes over flaming marshmallows, but he had been waiting to speak to her for months. “That’s my philosophy on hot dogs.”

He ended up missing that Red Sox game just to drive her back to her dorm. So far, he still feels good about that decision. But neither of them are sure about where he is driving her now, back to the great Midwest for his younger sister’s wedding. They are both uneasy about this trip. He has tried to conceal as much as he could for as long as he could about his family, but she will see everything this weekend.

As for her, nibbling on her nails in the passenger seat, she’s figured out on her own that she is exactly the type of person with whom his relations have nothing in common. She is as Tennessean as anybody can be. She is a debutante – white gloves, cotillion, the whole bit. She’s been brought up in such a way as to know the rules, know the code – but in an hour or so she’ll find herself in a land where no one else speaks it.

They are spending the first night in Brazil, Indiana – a little dot thirty minutes east of Terre Haute. This is where the philosopher grew up. This is also where his mother lives, with her boyfriend, David, instead of the philosopher’s father. Her name is Mary.

Mary’s wood-paneled house was built in the seventies, but it is less of a house these days than a petting zoo. She has a horse, a goose, four goats, chickens, ducks, and a cabal of rotating cats – but those are just for fun. Mary’s business is collie dogs, breeding and showing. There are twenty to twenty-five of them on the property at any given time.

Her son has never understood why she loves them so much, more than she loves her children. It might be that Mary likes the way the collies cock their heads to the side when she talks to them, back and forth, back and forth, then so far to the side that they are almost looking at her upside down. Mary might think the collies are listening to her, empathizing with her, when in fact the poor dumb animals do that thing with their heads because they are so consistently, eternally confused by what the universe has to offer.

The debutante really wants Mary to like her, she thinks, as Mary hugs her on the porch. But the debutante is also afraid of Mary, just a bit. This is mainly because Mary doesn’t have a uterus anymore, and sometimes the medication for not having a uterus anymore makes her go a little wonky. It is also partly because of Mary’s eyes, which are such a light shade of blue that they seem to have no color at all. Occasionally the girl has strange, irrational thoughts about what those eyes might be able to do – about whether they can see into the recesses of her mind and know how miserable she is here, about whether they can zap-fry her brain into light blue goo-substance and steal her uterus.

The girl adores Mary’s boyfriend, though; everyone does. Oddly enough, he is the ex-husband of Mary’s best friend – but men are scarce in Brazil, especially good ones, so Mary can’t be bothered with that. David is from Wisconsin and likes to commiserate with the girl about how Indiana is lame. In his fifties now, he grumbles and stumbles around the house with a mop of sandy blonde hair and a matching moustache, perpetually trying to cover up the fact that he’s actually a super-nice guy. David keeps the machine running; the girl has no idea how anything got done at Mary’s house before he came along.
When the boy and girl stay with Mary, she lets them sleep on her old futon in the narrow antechamber off the kitchen. All the other “inside” animals sleep there, too – the cockatiel, the canary, the cats, the guinea pigs, the rabbit, the litter of stinky newborn puppies, and Abby the neurotic whippet whose cage is right beneath the girl’s pillow. All through the night the couple is kept awake by a symphony of tweets, toots, whimpers, mews, scratches, rodent purrs, and the sound of the whippet’s nails grating against the metal beneath them. Hair and dander and feathers float through the air; their throats and noses shut off like frozen pipes. The cats like to sit on the girl’s head. Her boyfriend holds her close in the dark and trembles, whispering, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

The girl has, in fact, been up here to Brazil once before, in October. But October is unequivocally the best time to be in Indiana, when the crunchy brown leaves and the autumn fresh smell and the dried golden cornfields gave the situation a certain almost-charm, an air of, oh, this is how they live. But now the two of them are there in March, the absolute WORST time to be in Indiana, as David will confirm. In March, what the debutante already might have called a difficult place to visit turns into Viet-fucking-Nam.

Because of the spring rains, the yard becomes a swamp; legions of flies hatch out in the house and crawl over the couple’s food, nip their calves, dive into their ears. Trips to the bathroom are treacherous – piles of collie shit lurk around every corner, the water is thick with sulphur, and because of the swamp in the yard the septic tank is backed up. This means there is no flushing. This means that Mary and David have left very, very bad presents for the girl floating diabolically in the toilet, and these have accumulated over quite an astonishing period of time. This means that the girl constantly wants to vomit.

She is not looking forward to the nuptials, per se, but when the time comes to leave the house in Brazil and travel to the wedding site in Indianapolis, she’s elated. Naturally, no sane person would normally opt to hold a wedding in Indiana in March. Indeed, it was not the sister’s original plan. She had always wanted to get married in April, but was recently compelled to move the ceremony up a month. This is because the bride – Rachel is her name – is now heavily, heavily pregnant.

When the philosopher was four years old, Rachel was born with half a placenta, and since then nothing about her life came easy. She was the sort of child who could not be brought into the mall without a harness and a leash – and this was in the early eighties, long before the practice was commonplace. In the one picture the debutante has ever seen of her as a toddler, Rachel is threatening, daring the camera to click, her head cocked to the side like one of the collies and one blue eye bigger than the other; she looks distinctly like she’s waiting for the aliens to pick her up and take her back home.

Today, the day she’s getting married, she is not much taller than she was back then (the height problems go back to the placenta problem, Mary says), and it is not the aliens who are picking her up – only her brother and his girlfriend. She holds her bursting belly and ambles into the faithful white Subaru with her usual salutation of “HAY THERE YOU FACKING SKANK- HO BATCHES, HAAA HA HAAAA!”

The debutante turns around to look at her and smiles. Rachel’s hair is short, sleek, and bright, bright orangey-red – somewhere between blood and the cap on a Gatorade bottle. Her pale shoulder is tattooed in angry strokes of purple with a crescent moon and a “faery,” her favorite fetish. (If this is not clear to the debutante at present, it will become so in a few hours as Rachel is getting ready to tie the knot.) Her wrists still display the scars from the time she was high on meth and “wanted to let all the bad out.”
Rachel works at a domestic violence shelter. She likes to twirl fire. She named her cat Meatwad. She recently relinquished the practice of Wicca for something less intense called Neo-Paganism. She is still a member of a coven. She does her magicks skyclad. (The debutante has learned that this means “naked.”) The last time she tripped acid was when she was two weeks pregnant with her son. Rachel likes to party.

Her brother’s girlfriend is none of these things, but Rachel loves her anyway. Within thirty minutes of their first meeting, she ran to him and whispered, “Jackson, you have to marry her. I want her to be my sister.” The debutante did nothing to deserve this affection and is grateful for it.

Immediately after she crawls into the back seat to sit in solidarity with Rachel, Mary calls, and the two of them get into a fight over a necklace. (It is not even noon and Mary has already had just about enough of this day being solely concerned with someone other than Mary.) It occurs to the girl as she mops the tears off Rachel’s face and squeezes her swollen palms that it is she who will be fulfilling bridesmaid’s duties today.

The man Rachel will marry this evening is called Lowell, but she will not see him until the wedding; it was the one thing the bride had wanted to be old-fashioned about.

Lowell grew up hard in Gary as one small member of a large Puerto Rican family. His first memory is of his father dragging his mother down the hallway by her hair.

Lowell has done the best he can, but at twenty-six he is still struggling through his undergrad at Indiana State, living off the measly stipend from the school paper. (The girl cannot imagine that the impending birth of his son will make anything easier.)

Lowell is as low maintenance as Rachel is high, but along with that agreeable nonchalance of character he carries in his physicality a certain form of sluggishness, a certain reluctance to move, a learned habit – for fear of being noticed too much, of being harmed. Perhaps not coincidentally, Lowell also collects zombie paraphernalia.

When Lowell had casually asked Rachel to marry him down in Gulf Shores, he had been hoping that they would elope to the Caribbean. (The debutante still thinks this would have been a great idea.) That didn’t fly. The next intention, coordinated by Rachel and Mary, was to get married at a respected winery near Bloomington. But when Rachel fell pregnant and it became clear that this would need to be a much smaller, faster affair, Mary took over the planning entirely and found the Yellow Rose Inn.

When the philosopher parks the car in front of the yellow mansion with the huge white columns, even the debutante is impressed. She forgets herself and glides up the steps into the grand entryway, which is painted all across with a delicate mural of dancing Hellenic maidens, yellow rosebushes, and puffy white clouds in a deep blue sky. In the middle of the maidens is a stone structure attached to the wall – it looks like it was once a fountain, but now the ankh carved into the top only watches over the candles arranged on the bottom rim. To the left the girl can see the small, graceful parlor, which Mary, David and the other workers are setting up for the wedding; to the right she sees the opulent formal dining room. She hasn’t the foggiest as to how the family is able to afford this.

A magnificent curving staircase leads up to two more floors, but there is no time for exploring now; the philosopher informs his girlfriend that, as accidental bridesmaid, she must accompany Rachel to her hair appointment at a ritzy place downtown.

The girl likes Indy, at first glance. She likes the arrangement of it, the buildings, the lights, the fact that the streets are clean. (She can’t believe that their mall has a P.F. Changs in it.) There is also a circle in the center of the city; the girl thinks this is neat.
The hair salon happens to be located in this very circle. When they arrive, the debutante senses that the stylist is a little wary, but she is polite enough, skinny, with a blondish Katie Holmes bob – and no one will ever see Rachel’s hair looking nicer than it will tonight. (The stylist blissfully steers the bride away from her original blueprint – some druidic braided catastrophe – towards something more refined, all her ocher locks swept up into a Grecian bouffant of curls and crystals.)

The haircutting chair is situated in front of a giant glass window overlooking the city. As the girl gazes out onto the gray of March, waiting, attending to the time, Rachel is chattily explaining why the two of them are there, what the girl’s relationship is to her. The stylist asks the girl if she will be getting married to Rachel’s brother any time soon; she laughs good-naturedly and answers in the negative. When she looks up, she is alarmed to see Rachel squinting, menacing, glowering back at her – in an instant, the alien child once again. This spell continues for an uncomfortable amount of time, until even the stylist feels a chill and changes the subject. The girl returns to the window, rubbing her elbows, silent.

After the cut, when she and a silky-smooth Rachel make their way to the checkout at the front, the bride realizes that she’s only brought half as much money as she needed and unflappably asks her companion for the rest. It is not an egregious sum, but for a college student it’s still enough to mean something, and it was all that the girl had for the weekend. Her eyes dart from corner to corner as Rachel takes the money from her fingers. The debutante sulks on the way down the stairs to the street – had she not known what a place like this would cost? But she could not have said no to her, not today.

By the time they reach the philosopher, the thin, butterscotch basketweave of the girl’s nerves is so stretched out by the lack of sleep, allergies, animals, septic issues, fighting, glowering, and loss of money that it will not take much to break the basket altogether. It turns out, as she stands on the hectic street corner, about to place orders at Starbucks for the siblings, that the boyfriend is the one who ends up pushing it through.

At first, when he tells her what he wants, it comes so quickly that it sounds like he is speaking Italian, or Pig Latin, or some kind of Pidgin:

“I’d like a Venti iced americano, heavy on the ice, with an extra shot of expresso and two packets of Equal, stir it in before you add the ice.”

She blinks.

“What???”

He repeats, a little slower, almost to where it is no longer all one word: “I’d like a Venti iced americano, heavy on the ice, with an extra shot of – ”

“DAMNIT, Jackson, can’t you just get a plain fucking cup of coffee like a normal fucking human being???”

She stomps into the Starbucks and leaves her boyfriend in the car, hurt. (Rachel, on the phone with Mary again, misses the outburst.)

The philosopher has made a profession out of coffee for the last eight years – he has internalized its language to the point where he finds it inconceivable that anyone else might not understand it. But he has gradually been learning her language, too. When she gets back in the car with his complicated concoction cradled in her hands, he can soon tell by the frizz in her hair and the static in her eyeballs that this is one of those times where it’s not him or the coffee so much as it is everything else.
After they all return to the Yellow Rose Inn, he gently leads her up to the roof and lets her have her panic attack in relative privacy, sobbing into his shirt.

“I know, I know, I know, I’m sorry. It’s just all too much. I know.”

He wraps one arm around her waist and, with the other, points to the gigantic covered hot tub on the corner of the roof.

“We’ll come up here tonight, after everything’s over, and enjoy this. I promise.”

She loves hot tubs, regular tubs, pools, sprinklers, creeks, oceans, anything involving water, and he knows this. He is correct in hoping that it will be just enough of a consolation to calm her, to bring her back to her job as Rachel’s helper elf.

On the way down to the bridal suite, the girlfriend runs into another girlfriend, one who she’s met before – Mandy, the fabulous fat consort of Lowell’s younger brother (whose name, unfortunately for the couple, is Andy). The debutante likes Mandy, and Mandy seems to enjoy her company as well; they recognize in each other that slow blue burning flame of common sense, and are drawn to each other for it. Mandy tells her that Lowell and all the boys went to a strip club last night and didn’t get in until four in the morning. (“I love you, too,” she had said, after Andy had plopped down beside her in the dark, mumbling something about pasties.) Lowell was supposed to have written his vows for Rachel months ago but only sat down to write them last night after their raucous return. Both girlfriends agree that this does not bode well for the ceremony.

The girl kindly takes her leave of Mandy, but every time she almost gets to where she needs to be, another sticky strand of the monstrous web that is Lowell’s family seems to intercept her. (It is large, it contains multitudes – O, noiseless patient spider, ever launching filament, filament, filament out of itself!)

The couple she wants most to avoid is the one that most often manages to find her: Laurie, Lowell’s youngest sister, and her nameless husband. A year ago they lured a man into a shed and killed him. Beat him to death. Laurie is touched in the head, but the husband is just mean. The debutante doesn’t understand why they aren’t still in jail.

Laurie is currently scampering about the mansion, shoving a crude paint-by-numbers ceramic fairy into the face of whoever will look at it (“SEE WHAT I GOT RACHEL FOR HER WEDDUNG!!?!?!”). The seedy, black-haired husband likes to spend his time following the debutante around the bed and breakfast, popping up in unexpected places and asking her if she wants to smoke weed with him.

In general, the girl likes being alive and is very careful not to offend him.

“You know, I would, but I was diagnosed with Crohn’s a couple of years ago and I’m really not allowed to.”

“Oh,” he says. “Well, Laurie has Crohn’s but she smokes anyway.”

*Maybe that’s why she just had a miscarriage,* she thinks, slinking the last few yards to the bridal suite and closing the door behind her.

When she reaches Rachel, Mary and Aunt Mickey are helping her into her wedding dress, fretting and clucking and safety-pinning away. By this point the debutante is expecting something feathered or tie-dyed or sewn together from maple leaves, but to her surprise the gown is simple and lovely: a white lace maternity dress, empire neckline, sash tie in the back, no train. And in the end, Mary has relented and let her wear the much fought-over crystal necklace, acting like there was never any question it would be so.
In this moment, with her dainty dress and sparkling jewelry and resplendent coiffure, Rachel looks downright elegant – elegant, that is, until she attaches the homemade set of glittering green-and-purple fairy wings to her back.

“Fairy wings???” Aunt Mickey protests, smiling in such a way as to ask whether this is some kind of practical joke.

“Faerie wings!!!” shrieks Rachel with delight, perfectly oblivious.

Mickey looks over at her nephew’s girlfriend, a slight twitch in her upper lip. (The girl doesn’t know it yet, but she and Aunt Mickey will grow to like each other very much. Mickey is Mary’s older sister, her only sister. She teaches English and keeps a big tidy house up in Fort Wayne. Years later, as Mickey and the girl are walking around Mary’s yard back in Brazil together, Mickey will look wearily around the premises and pronounce: “You know, when we were small, Mary was always wanting one animal or another. Our mother would say, ‘Well, Mary, when you grow up, you can have all the animals in the world.’ And I’m afraid that’s exactly what she’s done.”)

The girl would love to see her boyfriend’s reaction to the fairy wings, but during the winging (and for the rest of the evening until the show starts), he is hunched over the bar in the kitchen, battling furiously with his sermon. Rachel would settle for nothing less than her brother as an officiant, so he registered online with the Universal Life Church and his girlfriend found him a nice old tweed jacket to go with his silk banded collar. He looks very preacherly. This is not the conventional sacrament, however, and he’s struggling with all his might to reconcile the various snatches of liturgy that lie before him on the yellow legal pad: the Apache prayers, the Dungeons-and-Dragons inspired Neo-Pagan rituals (he has removed the bits regarding swords of power and earthen goddess holes), his own bent towards the academic, and the premonition of his father’s fundamentalist glare, soon to be grinding him down from the first row of chairs, when he has to say “Make love well, and often!” He does not think this will go far towards rebuilding their relationship.

The girl sneaks into the kitchen every once in awhile to hug him or tease him for his intensity (“All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy!”), but for the most part she stays at her post. As she continues to assist Rachel with one thing or another (makeup, fetching, moral support, etc.), most of the thirty-two friends and family members have begun to arrive downstairs. She is shocked, though, when Uncle Dennis, somebody’s husband, tromps right up the steps and barges into the bridal suite, quickly surveying the layout of the room before lumbering over towards the flatscreen TV.

“What in the heck is he doing???” she asks Mary. She is too outraged to worry about sounding unmannerly.

Mary replies matter-of-factly that he’s watching the Indiana University basketball game, of course, and that this is the only room in the inn with a television. While she is explaining this, more and more male relatives have joined Uncle Dennis until there is a whole damn Hoosier coterie huddled in the corner of Rachel’s suite, running a loud, slobbering commentary on the game while the bride is trying to array herself for one of the most important days of her life. The debutante is disgusted by this obscenity, this utter lack of regard, and no matter how many years go by she will not forgive Uncle Dennis. Though she is tempted to rustle them out the door and back down the stairs, she decides to heed a wise distant voice in her head, a voice that sounds curiously like her
father’s, that tells her to keep quiet.  (Anyway, if she does complain, the cavemen will just reply that, *urrggh*, it *Rachel* fault for scheduling wedding on *game day.*)

Rachel has grown too nervous to care about the invasion, though, and has a new errand for her irritated assistant. She suddenly wants the girl to go down to where Lowell is getting ready and give him a message: she wishes her to tell him that she loves him and report back with any communiqué that he might send her in return. The girl, welcoming the opportunity to escape the cluster of apes around the television, hastens downstairs.

Lowell looks bad.  At first glance, the debutante would like to attribute it to the massive hangover and the shortage of sleep—but as he slowly paces back and forth across the room it becomes clear that something else is going on.  It depresses her just to be in the same room with him.  Somehow, overnight, he has turned into one of the living dead that he so voraciously collects.  He is his own zombie today.

“Rachel wants me to tell you that she loves you,” she says, remembering her task.  Lowell doesn’t even look at her.

“Do you want to say anything back?” she asks, prepared for the usual gushiness.

“No,” he answers, his mouth a dark ugly hole.

She raises an eyebrow.

“You don’t have anything to say back to her at all?”

“No.”

“Nothing?”

He pauses, shakes his head, smiles a strange small smile.

“Nothing.”

Bewildered, she turns and traipses back up the stairs, laboriously, unsure of what to do when she gets to the top of them. Rachel is waiting for her when she opens the door, visibly shivering now, every nostril and tooth and eyelash waiting for the message.

“Well? What did he say?”

She only has time to blink once.

“He says he loves you, too.”

Rachel closes her eyes, sighs, and drops her arms. “Okay,” she says.  She stops shaking. “Okay.”  She sighs again, nods to herself, then stands up straight and saunters back to the full-length mirror to finish putting on her makeup, to finish readying herself.

__________________________

There is, of course, a screwball precedent for weddings in the philosopher’s family to begin with.  Had the girl known this, she might have been more prepared.

Most of the other couples in Rachel’s coven would usually just have drunken handfastings that no one could remember the next morning.  When Rachel’s father remarried after leaving his first family, he personally serenaded his wife as she sashayed down the aisle to Tracy Byrd’s country ballad, “Keeper of the Stars.”

But Bill’s wedding looked like something that would be published in *Town & Country* next to Mary’s remarriage.  When she got hitched to her second husband, Chuck, they had a Budweiser & Brats wedding at a friend’s house on the Fourth of July.  The garage door opened up majestically and Mary walked out of the carport to the sounds of her son strumming the guitar and singing Aerosmith’s “I Don’t Want to Miss a
And the philosopher has many talents, but singing is not necessarily one of them. In their official wedding photo, the belly of Chuck’s polyester polo shirt is covered in a grotesque, oozing glob of sweat. Everyone hated Chuck.

So, to put it in perspective, this is just one more notch in a long leather history of wacky nuptials. And it does happen. They do get married. No one backs out. David barks all the lollygaggers into the places where they’re supposed to be sitting or standing, and Rachel comes down the grand staircase looking like a magickal flying snowball. The debutante captures this entrance for posterity, having been appointed last-minute videographer since she had a camera and Rachel had forgotten to ask anyone else. The philosopher manages to make it through the observances without having an aneurysm.

Lots of people cry (but not Mary). There is food. People eat it. There’s a fairy-themed cake topper. Rachel’s first words as a wife are “I got heretched!” Lowell says nothing.

While the service is still going on, one of the “SKANK-HO” cousins on Rachel’s side celebrates her recent release from prison by sneaking to the roof with her friends and getting in the hot tub. Afterwards the philosopher tells his girlfriend that the two of them can still use it after everyone is gone, but she says no thanks, she doesn’t want herpes.

She is, however, consoled on one matter when sweet grumpy David reappears and quietly repays her for what she spent at the salon. She discovers that it is he, not Rachel or Lowell or Mary or Bill, who has paid for the entire wedding on a factory salary.

Later in the evening, as the last of the guests are depositing their congratulations and gifts at the door, Mary sidles up to the girl she sometimes calls her daughter-in-law.

“Well, Meahgge. I think that was a great wedding,” she says, smiling broadly.

The girl nods, sleepily, half munching on a toast point covered in artichoke dip.

“I mean, everything went really well, you know?”

The girl nods again, wipes the leftover crumbs off her lips with a napkin.

“I think I did a great job with that.”

“Mm hmm.”

“Honestly, I don’t think you could possibly think of a better wedding than that.”

“Yup.”

“I mean, you’d have to work real hard to arrange a nicer wedding than this one.”

“Yup.”

“I said, I just don’t think you could pull it off better than we did here, you know?”

“Yup!!”

It comes out a little louder, a little edgier than she had meant it to.

In the morning, the boyfriend and the girlfriend pid-pad down the steps in their sock feet and pajamas to the parlor, where paperwork is being signed and the newlyweds are getting ready to go. As they enter the room, now cleared out of chairs and flowers, Rachel is showing Mary their receipt for her ring (four hundred-something dollars) and is lamenting over how badly she was treated by a saleswoman at another store.

“Yeah, it was just about a week ago, and I showed her the stone we had and told her my plan, and she got all huffy with me and said, Well, a champagne diamond will
look TERRIBLE in white gold. I just walked out of the store and found a place that would make the ring for me, if she wouldn’t. And look – it looks just fine!”

She lifts her finger so her brother and the girlfriend can see the ring. It is, as she had desired, white gold, and the engagement ring and wedding band have been welded together in the back. But the square-cut stone is not, unfortunately, a “champagne” diamond, as someone has obviously marketed it to Rachel – it is straight-up brown, as brown as the water over Kentucky, with darker brown spots floating in it.

The boy and girl look at each other. He tells his sister she’s right, it looks just fine.

They realize that checkout time is approaching fast, so they dash upstairs and quickly make provisions to leave in the convoy of cars with everyone else. On the way back down, before she walks out the door, the girl takes one long last look around the Yellow Rose Inn. It will be a while before she can afford to stay in a place like this again. She thanks David; David harrumphs. She and Mary hug each other; Mary is still wearing exactly the same broad smile she wore last night, but it seems genuine.

Just before Rachel squeezes into Lowell’s car for their honeymoon in Chicago, she stretches her purple knit top down over her belly, grins, and squeals at her brother: “Now it’s time to start planning you guys’ wedding!”

They both wave at them as their sedan rambles down the street and turns out of sight into a new life. They will have a baby in two months, the girl thinks.

Then, as the husband and wife head towards Chicago, the boyfriend and girlfriend get in the Subaru and head in the opposite direction. Before the interstate splits off, they pass close by Mary’s van, and at that angle the girl can see everything: David talking, comforting, driving with one arm and wrapping the other around Mary, who is weeping, convulsing in big motherly sobs, finally breaking down. The girl’s heart goes out to her, softened, floating through the glass. It is the only time she will ever see Mary cry.

Affected, she touches her fingers to her cheek, watches them as they take the exit ramp and gradually disappear among the steady throngs of traffic. When she can no longer make out the bulky white van, she turns to the philosopher.

Focused on navigating the lanes and cars ahead of him, his face and neck are strained, his fingers twitching on the wheel, his beard and long yellow hair unkempt. He is exhausted. They are both exhausted. She knows he will need to stop for coffee soon. She’ll go ahead and get a Vanilla Coke, maybe a Reese’s Cup, too, or some Nerds.

She takes his free hand, examining it. One of the physical things she’s always appreciated about him is his hands, so unlike her own. Her fingers are fat, her palms are wrinkled, her nails are bitten down to the quick – but he has beautiful hands. Long, straight fingers, someone should draw them. Strong, too; he opens most of her ginger ale bottles now, the difficult ones. Sometimes he accidentally hurts her when hugging her, lightly bruising her ribs, he’s just so excited. (“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”)

She starts to tickle his wrist; he glances at her out of the corner of his eye, smirking.

“I love you,” they both say, simultaneously.

They laugh.

“Jinx,” she says.

“You can’t jinx love!” he says, with mock pathos. “I’ve told you this many times.”
“I know, I know.”

She sighs.

“So.”

“So.”

“Question.”

“Okay.”

“How many people yesterday asked you when we were getting engaged?”

He chuckles.

“Several.”

From him, the King of Understatement, that means more than several. He wishes he could look at her, gauge her reaction to everything, but he can’t move his attention off the road right now. He squeezes her hand, lifts his own back up to the steering wheel.

It is left to the debutante, then, to mark the muddy hinterlands again and ponder the mysteries of the blessed event, the greatest of which will stay with her long after Rachel’s son is born, after the inevitable bankruptcy is declared, after the girl and the philosopher move up to Ohio for school – even three years hence, when she will, at last, sit down to write about that weekend. Even in that final, fleeting instant she will struggle to explain how she can need, indeed love this much, and yet still fear the dotted line – how there are bloodlines she is not prepared to own, names she is not prepared to take.
“I'm very embarrassing to look at. You know why? Here's why I'm embarrassing: 'cause there's a little bit of me in everybody...I'm like the boy that never grew up. I'm very, very passionate about what I do. I mean, I love what I do...and people are like, ‘God, give this guy a Valium or something, you know? Can't he have a bad day?’”

— Steve Irwin

I.

“KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (AP) – The alligator clearly wasn't from around here. Tennessee wildlife officers discovered a 5-foot alligator Sunday in Watts Bar Lake near Spring City, about 60 miles south of Knoxville.

'It was on a log sunning itself like a turtle,' said Dan Hicks, spokesman for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. Prior to the encounter, Watts Bar's gator population by all accounts was zero.

...'When somebody says alligators aren't found in Tennessee, we can point to it and say, “This one was,”' Hicks said” (“Alligator found”).

II.

I can’t remember exactly when my thing with Steve Irwin started. When did I start reading? When did I start biting my nails? When did I start eating spoons of Peter Pan peanut butter straight from the jar? I cannot decipher the origin of these things; they are intrinsic within me, as is my love for Steve. He is such an integral part of my personality that there is no precise juncture in my memory I can point to and say, “There. It began there. That’s what made me want to be like him.”

There had to have been a time before I knew Steve, though, because the first strong inclination I can recall as far as future occupations go was not hyperactive animal wrangler but archaeologist. I loved history, I loved the idea of ancient civilizations, I loved coded vernaculars, I loved digging, I loved wearing men’s hats, and I loved outwitting the Nazis. Obviously, this was the ideal career for me.

Alas, in spite of a long-running subscription to Archaeology Magazine and a solid if unnecessary familiarity with the language requirements for applying to Vanderbilt’s program, this dream of mine ended before I even had a chance to learn that, in the Greek, Jehovah is spelled with an I. One moment I do remember quite clearly is my father pulling the car into the driveway one day and, vexed by my incessant babble, launching into a tirade of rampant vindictive. (Or what seemed so at the time.)
“Alright, I’m about tired of this... Maggie, it’s high time you let go of this damned archaeology pipe dream!!! I mean, you’re seven years old now, and you need to get over this, come on. You’re never moving to Cairo, and there aren’t even any jobs! So just deal with it. What? What??? I don’t care if you’ve already bought the hat, what does that have to do with anything? Engineers wear hats, too, and that’s what I’ve told you to be all along. Engineering is definitely the better way to go... wait, where you headed?”

Hurt, cowed, and pouty, I flailed into my peach-walled bedroom and dug deep into the cotton ruins of my sheets until I could no longer make out the lamplight.

It must have been soon after this occurrence that Steve arrived on the scene and filled the little hole in my murmured heart with new dreams, even less marketable ones at that. Even if I had not already been fascinated by animals of all sorts, it would have been hard not to love Steve Irwin. (Had he followed other enterprises, who knows, he might have even been able to make computer programming seem exhilarating.)

When Steve married his Oregonian wife, Terri, they had opted out of the traditional romantic, relaxing honeymoon, choosing instead to take a camera crew with them while they chased dangerous crocodiles through the bush – and it was this honeymoon footage that had given birth to Steve’s show, The Crocodile Hunter, which I watched so faithfully. I was entranced by his feats of reptilian derring-do, as many viewers were, but – even when I was young – what I admired more about Steve was the overflowing passion he had for protecting all animals, no matter how deadly, no matter how seemingly inconsequential. In interviews, he brought up the fact that, though he sometimes appeared to be an entertainer, he was primarily a scientist (or “scoientist,” as he so ebulliently called it). If Steve was, as others labeled him, a clown, he was a clown with a noble heart, hoping that the more attention he garnered with his antics, the more attention he could deflect to the creatures he worked so hard to save. I adored Steve Irwin for that, and I wanted to be a “scoientist” just like him.

I was harangued by doubters on both sides of my fissured family. Patrick, my Cherokee half-brother, fourteen years older than I, told me that he had some Australian friends at church and that they didn’t much like Steve; they thought he made their country look ludicrous. Patrick was going through a long period in his life where church was his only frame of reference for anything. At my other house, I would giggle whenever Dad called Patrick’s congregation “the Church of Whoop-Dee-Doo.”

But Dad also said that Steve Irwin got on his NERVES. That’s Dad’s ultimate insult. Once you end up on that list, you are worthless. Here are some other things that get on Dad’s NERVES: public prayers at football games; high-pitched anime voice dubs; cauliflower; pushy Yankees from Oak Ridge; marching band; cats; and, worst of all, touchy-feely tree-huggy Humanities people. (Coming out of every fruitless campus-wide meeting: “I mean, let’s just all stand around a fire and sing ‘Kum Ba Ya!’ Ugh!”)

But Mom? I actually managed to convert Mom to Crocodile Hunter fandom. She loved the theatrics, the suspense, even if she didn’t always care about the crocodiles.

I had hooked her initially by making her watch Steve’s special edition biography video. Our favorite part was not about the Australia Zoo or about any especially violent animal encounters or even about how he met Terri. Our favorite, the part we watched over and over again, was Steve talking about the birth of his daughter. Bindi Sue Irwin, the blessed arrival, was named after his favorite saltwater crocodile and his trusty dog. Steve said that, when Bindi plopped out, she fell “roight in the palm of moyy heeeehnds.”
And, at this juncture, Steve would hold out both of those hands and stare into them, his black eyes wide, his mouth pursed into a jubilant little “O.” He continued his story, saying that he ran around the hospital showing off his freshly birthed child; every time a couple would say, “Yeah, we have one of those now, too,” he would shove his newborn into the air and reply: “Yeeh, weehl, ya ‘aven’t got one loike thissun, have ya then? Ha!”

After Mom saw that, she was sold. When *The Crocodile Hunter* came on TV, we would snuggle together on our living room couch, the couch whose yuppie whiteness had bored her to the point where she’d been forced to slather its surface in a Pollockian shower of green and purple paint, and watch Steve’s perilous escapades flash across our television. I still vividly remember the episode, for example, where he and his camera crew were out in the Australian wilderness in the dark of night, miles and hours from anything helpful, and Steve was bitten by a snake which he’d never seen and did not know how to classify. (And, yea, behold, there arose a snake who knew not Steve Irwin.) He had no idea if it was venomous or not, and if it was venomous, he was a dead man – so there was Steve, holding up a flashlight in the darkness and rapidly flipping through a snake encyclopedia propped on the hood of a jeep, waiting to discover whether he’d live to see the next sunrise. Eventually, he found the entry he was looking for, realized the snake was not venomous, and emitted a jubilant “Woooo-wooooo!”

Which was about when my mother and I collapsed into the floor.

Looking back on that moment, I cannot avoid thinking with fondness of how silly we were then; we never took into consideration that, if Steve had died, we would certainly have heard about it before the episode aired. Or, rather, that the episode never would have aired – that the footage would have been reviewed by experts, solemnly conveyed to Terri, then destroyed, but not without a bunch of clips crassly floating around the Internet, each claiming to be the video of Steve’s death.

I know that now.

III.

One of the most thrilling moments of all my grade school years was when Aunt Laney, my father’s younger sister, took me to the Nature Company in the Hickory Hollow Mall and let me pick out not one but TWO items of Steve Irwin paraphernalia.

My first prize was a *Crocodile Hunter* t-shirt, so that I could proudly display my affection for Steve Irwin at school. The background of the shirt was a calming viridian green, and it prominently featured the logo of the television show in large, weathered letters. Perched atop the logo was a photo of Steve, legs stoutly spread out, arms grasping a young crocodile, while below the logo was positioned one of his well-known catchphrases (“What a little beauty!”). Aunt Laney bought the souvenir on the large side, so that I could grow into it. This was a wise decision on her part, as I did not stop wearing that shirt until it was no longer tasteful to show it off.

My second prize was even cooler than the first, and I would soon come to count it among my most cherished of childhood possessions. It was, ladies and gentleman, the wondrous…the astounding…the splendiferous *Steve Irwin Talking Doll!!!*
Obviously, the selling point of the Steve Irwin doll was that, when its belly was pressed, an electronic box inside it would issue a litany of Steve’s signature utterances and truisms, which Steve himself had recorded. “What a rippah!” “Woo-hoo!” “Isn’t she gorgeous?” “Have a look at this little beauty!” “Cheek eout the soozie of this bloke!” “Crocs Rule!” “Ya gotta love ‘em.” “By Crikey!” “Hoo-lyy SMOKES that was close.” “Danger, danger, danger.” Most of the doll was fabric and stuffing; it wore Steve’s standard khaki uniform with sewn-on pockets and white buttons, four fingers and a thumb on each hand, clearly delineated knees, and ribbed army-green socks. But the brown hiking boots and the head were made of molded plastic.

The doll did, in fact, look like Steve. The face, topped with that unruly shock of center-parted hair, was sculpted to be an alarmingly close caricature of him; the makers had gone so far as to include his warts and both of his scars. The countenance of the doll even wore that sublime Steve Irwin expression, the surprise in the eyes and the perfect roundness of the mouth, which always served to show his wonder, his absolute, never-ceasing joy at what all of creation had to offer – his conviction that there was, once again, something new and exciting that warranted getting out of bed from day to day.

And perhaps that very joy – that refusal to bend to the regimented world and stop giving a damn – was, in the end, what had enthralled me most about Steve Irwin.

IV.

(Video Evidence A: a Scandlyn Family Christmas. This is at the house Mom and I used to live in, the house Mom and Dad had built together, before she sold it to move into the apartment above Nanny and Granddaddy’s place – so this was years ago. Video begins with the food already eaten and the presents already opened; Patrick is sitting on the green-and-purple couch playing “Day Tripper” on guitar, while Nanny and Granddaddy are conversing on the other couch. Granddaddy is having a great day here. I’m glad I have this video. Now, the camera pans over to contemplate my mother nervously messing around in the kitchen; then it zooms back out and swings down to the taupe carpet in the living room, on which is plunked a long black-and-white object, its rear facing the lens. Its two back legs are splayed out on the floor and its neck is bedecked in a ridiculous red bow. The video operator proceeds to sneak around in front of the creature, in such a way that Steve Irwin might sneak, and attempts to record it surreptitiously. I hear a young girl’s voice, familiar and embarrassing, speaking in an overstated Australian accent.)

“Eh hem. Here we have a canine, chewing on his…prey.”

(The creature, nibbling on some holiday kibbles, regards her with justified disdain.)

“This is the amazing RAGGUS MAXIMUS…”

“BOO!”
(God help us all, it’s the enormous, frightening face of my four year-old nephew that floods the lens now, wearing a porcelain sombrero ashtray as a hat and an unchanging expression of demented delirium. The videographer, still using an accent, is annoyed.)

“Hey, I’m trying to stalk a dog here. You’re not helping the scientific process.”

“Can you tie my shoes?? Can you tie my shoes???”

“No, I can’t tie your damn shoes.”

(So much for not saying objectionable words around Patrick’s family. Saying “butt” or “stupid” or “Harry Potter” would have been bad enough, but this could rustle up some trouble. Worried, the girl decides to postpone her exploration of household pets.)

“Hey. C’Mere.”

(My nephew comes back, sans ashtray, but in his haste his forehead collides with the camera. Ominous thud. Video ends on the shot of his untied tennis shoes.)

V.

When at last the point came where all potential for the study of inside fauna had been exhausted (namely, the long-suffering Raggs and my numerous teddy bears), I arrived at the conclusion that it was time to take my studies outside.

My mother was in the habit of driving us to Nanny and Granddaddy’s house several times a week so they could all play lengthy card games together. I had been banned from these proceedings because I had started a game once without finishing it, which, according to Nanny, upset the entire tournament; so my normal diversion during their merrymaking was to sit in the bedroom, under the hungry eyes of the humongous glossy cheetah lamp, and watch Johnny Carson tapes. This was not such a bad way to spend an afternoon, as my superiors had forgotten how ribald Johnny Carson could be in his prime (“Would you like to pet my pussy?” “I’d love to, if you’d remove that damn cat”). But once I had all of the sketches memorized, and once I had discovered Steve, I began to spend the card-playing hours in a different way.

Nanny and Granddaddy’s house is situated on a knoll overlooking Watts Bar Lake, standing next to a broad swath of moody, rolling land that is owned by the TVA. It’s prime shoreline property but no one can build there, thankfully, so it has remained quite blissfully wild. As I looked out across this untamed expanse one day, I decided that, being wild, it must therefore be home to many wild animals that were in need of wrangling – for science! – and that I would be the one to explore it. Thus began my era of grand sorties.

My mother and grandparents were amused by this new pastime of mine, as Nanny had previously bemoaned my lack of enthusiasm for the outdoors. My distaste for the normal American neighborhood wanderings was never once attributed to the fact that our
own house was perched above the infamous Tarwater Street; rather, this signified that I was INDOLENT and BACKWARDS and TOO MUCH LIKE HER FATHER. So they all smiled at me when I tugged on my boots and buttoned up my barn jacket, laughed as I traipsed out the door. To me, however, this was serious work. I was hoping to see some bald eagles or coyotes, the ones we could hear when the sun went down, or spot the sea monsters of the channel I’d heard tell of, jumping out of the water in a long shiny arc of terror. I even wished I could see something crocodilian, within reason – perhaps a gator that ran too far upriver, or an unlicensed caiman escaped from somebody’s trailer. I just knew there were marvelous things to be found out in that tangle, out in those fens.

And so it was that, armed with my Lisa Frank notebook and my Pilot Precise pen, I would amble over the rotted wooden slats of the stile and enter the wide world beyond the barbed wire. Through the fields of tawny grass, each tip holding a raindrop of the morning, down to the red mud shoreline I would go, then all the way round the peninsula, then back through the overgrown creek bed that connected one side to the other; the trees reached out from the bed like old, angry, crooked hands for the sky. I did not find eagles or coyotes or crocodiles there, and I did not see the monsters, but I found joy in the timid beasts that lived by the lake. These were the beings that would have been of no account to anyone else, but they meant something to me, and I liked to think they would have meant something to Steve, too – who did not view the less vicious animals as any less deserving of conservation. I tracked deer around the far point, their hoof prints mingling with pebbles and periwinkle shells in the clay; in the water, I counted the minnows and locked eyes with a little copperhead, each of us wondering what the other wanted; I hearkened to the strange cracking cacophony of peeper frogs, but never could catch one; and I somehow dodged the fat grey birds of the field that would attack when I got too close, an admirable flurry of silver wings and a tiny yellow beak headed straight for me.

I became something of an aficionado of turtles. I lived for turtles. I loved all sizes and shapes and types and persuasions, from the burly snappers that lurked in the depths to the medium slate-colored turtles that sunned themselves on logs, then flopped indignantly into the lake at my approach, all the way down to the smaller but beautifully decorated box turtles – Tennessee state reptile, incidentally – poking their heads up out of the water to disapprove. But my all-time favorite turtles were the hatchlings I would sometimes find in the grass, struggling so adamantly to make their way down to the shoreline. They were gorgeous, as Steve would have said. Arrayed in various shades of bright green and barely bigger than a peppermint patty, they would jerk their stubby arms and legs and stare at me in irritation when I picked them up. Suddenly cradled in the palm of a giant, they were transported in long, dizzying strides down to the waterfront, placed lovingly at the edge of liquid in readiness for their new lives. I would crouch in the mud and watch each one of them paddle into the murk until I could no longer divine the outline of their shells, unreasonably proud, and unreasonably heartbroken.

But over time the organism that captivated me most was not the deer or the snakes or even the turtles but the land itself, the wet seduction of endless earth, and I was tempted to push deeper and deeper into it. The day came when I decided to take the hill.

The hill, for we always called it “THE hill,” was that magnificent sloping dominion that caressed the water beyond the peninsula, and it could be seen from Nanny and Granddaddy’s house. I had always been somewhat entranced by its shape, this enormous egg of possibilities, but had never thought of actually climbing it before. I also
had a vague feeling that I wasn’t supposed to wander there, that it was off limits, even
though no one had explicitly said so. When I made up my mind to go, I didn’t give my
mother or grandparents any indication that I was altering my normal route; I just quietly
left them to their cards and set out on my journey. And it was quite a journey. There
are quicker ways to get there, of course; I simply didn’t know that at the time. My way
took me all the way around the shoreline of the peninsula, over the rocks, past a bubbling
spring, up through a forest, turning by a creepy abandoned house, on to a wavering path,
through another, much thicker forest, looming tall on both sides, suspiciously silent, into
a lovely clearing, and then finally to my destination. But it was worth it. Being on top
of that hill was the most ethereal feeling I’d had up until that point in my existence, when
I’d never even heard the word “ethereal.” I could see everything so clearly. To the right,
there was the point, the fields, the house, the boat park; in front of me there was the
rippling water, docks, houses, more woods; and to the left there was the lake, opening out
into the channel, stretching on and on and on, unrestrained until it met the horizon. I held
out my arms and felt the wind, clean and cool, and got so caught up in the peace of being
where I was that I almost forgot the rea

When I recalled my purpose and got down to the hard work of serious biological
exploration, I found that the hill was a particularly good place to observe birds. I came
back several times, not only because it was so pleasant, but because I could listen to the
cabal of squawking blue herons in the far trees, or watch the pair of ospreys tend to their
happy, fuzzy nest, only feet from where I stood. Certainly not as exciting as Steve’s
cassowaries, to be sure, but these were the birds that we had, and I loved them.

A couple of weeks after I’d first arrived there, following an afternoon’s worth of
recording and daydreaming, I was heading back down the hill towards the house when I
came upon a clearing in the grass. I gasped. Before me there had been set an exquisite
tableau of death, more striking for a child who’d rarely been around it. On the ground
was a large brown bird the likes of which I’d never seen before, its long neck extended in
a curve, an elegant question mark, its eyes and beak wide open. But whatever had killed
her had not eaten her or cut her or removed any part of her – it had only wanted the
contents of her eggs, each baseball-sized capsule now broken, all in a pile next to her
carcass. It had not been long since the event; there was no scent, no stirring, no blood, no
decomposition. All was still and perfect in its end. The scene was more like one of my
mother’s macabre art pieces than an actual bird, more like someone’s deliberate creation
than a destruction, but this only made it more horrible. I stared at her for a few more
thumps of my frantic heart, then took a couple of slow steps back, then turned and ran –
not thinking of what Steve Irwin would do, not thinking of what I should learn, but
simply running, running in fear of what I had seen, and in fear of what had caused it.

In the years since that day, I’ve never found out what that bird was. But I do at
least know that it was a bad omen for my adventures. When I made it back to the house,
muddy and breathless, I was met on the door of the porch by my mother, equally frantic.

“Oh Maggie, thank God…why have you been gone so long???” She hugged me
close. “My blood pressure went through the roof! What in the hell happened to you?”

Apparently, their card game had not taken as long as usual, and my walk had
taken longer than usual, so when I hadn’t returned at the accustomed time they had
started to worry. Mom said she didn’t understand why a trip around the point should
take so many hours. I had to confess, then, that I had not been to the point – that for the
last two weeks I had been going all the way to the hill, through the woods, to study birds. Her mouth popped open in surprise, and then she frowned at me, crossing her arms.

“I can’t believe this. You could have been snatched, and we had no way to find you, because you hadn’t told us where you were. Just look how much you upset your Granddaddy! He was about to call 911 right when you walked in the door!”

I did look at Granddaddy, through the sliding glass doors and into the living room, and I felt immediately sick. He was standing next to his easy chair, still holding the phone in mid-air, his shorts pulled up past his bellybutton and his white socks almost up to his knees. Even through the reflection on his spectacles I could see our normally unflappable patriarch gazing past the doors at me, his eyes huge, his wrist trembling as he leaned over the table and finally, softly set down the phone.

After that day, I did not go on sorties anymore. For the time being, the Crocodile Hunter on my television would have to do enough wandering for the both of us.

VI.

By the time I got to high school, Steve was famous enough to have his own movie (Crocodile Hunter: Collision Course!!!), and I had cultivated a reputation among my peers both for my affinity with him and for a general tendency towards mimicry. Each summer I would pack my special shirt for band camp, where I would be called on once again to perform my famous Steve routine in the old dorm lobby for the annual talent show. Surrounded by a throng of gaping, pajama-clad underclassmen sitting Indian style on the dusty tile floor, I would crouch behind the fake decorative plants, pounce on my friends, and pretend to tie them up with duct tape, not forgetting to issue all of the standard catchphrases and manic hand gestures. Then I would exit in a tumult of rapturous applause, just in time for lights-out at 10:30. I never earned that much love when I was myself, not even as field commander – but when I was Steve, my buddies were transfixed, and we were all momentarily transported to a life much more triumphant than the ones we led. I desperately looked forward to a day when I could work with real animals, in the wild, for a living – not just in pantomime.

However, to achieve my ambitions, I’d need to specialize in animal science of some sort, and when it came to the sciences I found myself hitting an insurmountable roadblock: Chemistry. I hated chemistry, and unlike math, no amount of hard work was going to give me an even temporary understanding of it. Utterly foreign to me, it might as well have been Old Japanese or Necromancy or, God forbid, a basketball court.

So when the deadline for college applications was approaching and I realized that a Bachelor of Sciences degree was not attainable, I was forced to change my occupational objective once again. I switched to a career goal that was not quite as dangerous on its surface but was perhaps even less financially feasible than that of Adventurer Biologist: Opera Singer!

“I still think you should be an engineer,” said Dad, driving me to the scholarship auditions at the little liberal arts school in Nashville.

I chuckled, looked down at my sheet music.
“I mean, don’t get me wrong, you have the talent,” he continued. “You have the voice. I wouldn’t have paid for the lessons all these years if I hadn’t believed that.” He smiled a small, kind smile, nodded at me in that reassuring way he nods, then put his eyes back on the road. “But you can always sing on the side,” he said. “I just don’t know if MAAAA-joring in music performance is necessarily the way to go.”

As I watched the Caney Fork pass by the window, broad and lovely, I was quiet because I knew he was right. That was his most irritating quality, being right about everything, in the long run. But singing was the one halfway viable talent I had left, and I thought it would be wasteful not to use it. At least I should try.

Dad emitted a rueful laugh and merged back into the right lane, then shrugged his shoulders. “Though it could be worse, I suppose. I guess about the only worse thing you could do for a living is be a writer. Talk about starving. Lord.”

I won the scholarship with a too-slow rendition of “O Del Mio Dolce Ardor,” and that autumn I crawled off into my own little jungle of crazy, bloodthirsty beasts. (Vocal performance majors. I mean, holy shit. You think English majors are bad?)

But I must admit that, if not for the music program, I never would have met Clifford, my sweet skinny ganja-loving drummer boy eternal. He was that most elusive of animals, he who would be loved so fearsomely but always, only, from a distance, even skin to skin – too wild to be held, too swift to be caught, too high to be grasped.

VII.

(Video Evidence B: another thrilling episode of ‘The Crocodile Hunter’, but years have passed between this tape and the recording of Video A; this seems to be from my second semester in college. The camcorder settings are on night vision, but through the shades of black and green I can still recognize the place as the movie room in the boys’ dorm. The camera is focused on a lanky body that has collapsed onto one of the mammoth, bloated couches in the center, but I can hear the snickerings of several others, to the immediate left and top right of the frame, in addition to the kooky Australian voiceover once again.)

“…and today, we’re going to catch CLIFFUS MAXIMUS, extreme crocodile, in the act of sleeppage…okay, and my associates have gotta stop friggin’ laughin’ ‘!!!’"

(This only makes the surrounding laughter worse. This strikes me as pretty pathetic now but we seemed to really have been enjoying this at the time, so I’ll keep narrating.)

“I’m gonna get me bloody arm knocked off because they’re laughin’ at me! (Pause.) Eh hem. Arright. Now, we’re gonna sneak up on the croc…”

(So I guess Clifford has fallen asleep in the middle of whatever anime we were watching, as was often the case, and we are gently mocking him. The camera moves closer to him; I can see the top of his hair, a clear outline of his face, his striped shirt, and his arm.)

“…and he’s gorgeous. Wait, he’s wakin’ up…he seems to be stirring…he seems…”
(At this point even the Crocodile Hunter is stifling laughter. She drops the accent.)

“…he seems…the croc seems to be picking his nose.”

(The croc is, in fact, picking his nose. Ferociously. Everyone guffaws and the camera shakes; Clifford, clearly awake now, raises his head, scans the room, smiles a confused smile. He stretches, cat-like, then shouts.)

“What are you guys doing? Aaaggghhh.”

(He shakes his shoulders and does that strange inhaling laugh he always did. The tape ends with him looking up into the camera, or rather behind it, his neon eyes glowing.)

VIII.

Later, the tide was turning against Steve, but I kept the faith. I think this eventuality was partially due to overexposure, and partially due to the fact that, over time, people just got plum jealous of Steve for having such a beautiful family (precious daughter Bindi had recently been joined by little Bob), an awesome job, and a naturally positive outlook on life. It was just the inevitable petty backlash that all true geniuses and visionaries had to put up with at some point in their careers.

But of course, if you were to ask anybody else, they would probably say it had something to do with that unsavory incident involving baby Bob and the crocodile. Child abuse, they were saying. Michael Jackson, they were saying. “Come on!” I wailed to anyone who would listen, repeating what Terri had said on my television. “It was a great sensory experience for lil’ Bob!”

“He’s a complete cuckoo,” said Dad.

“But he had the situation under control the whole time!”

“Plus he gets on my NERVES.”

“But…crikey.”

Things were not going well for me, either. Clifford was dissolving into the ether, and after my first flare-up and diagnosis of Crohn’s disease, I’d had to reevaluate the opera plan. Being a vocalist was a difficult gig to begin with, if you could even get it, constantly having to hop around from city to heartless city; and suddenly – looking up at the world from my immuno-compromised dungeon – it became an impossible one. I sat down, shuffled papers, weighed all that I was losing, but knew I could not base my living off a voice that, due to relentless illness, would now be silenced five or six times a year. My teachers asked me why; I danced around, stumbled, not comfortable enough with my new life yet to be honest about its demands. I’d run out of dreams. I left the major, took the minor, added one in history, then tucked and rolled over to another academic department – not Engineering, as my father still pleaded for me to do, but English.

I had no great aspirations for English. In high school, I’d despised it – loathed all those teachers who had the exact same loopy cursive, exact same denim and corduroy
jumpers, exact same constrictions and hang-ups and twitches of the nose. I was only joining it now because these professors were so loveably different, and because one of them had picked me out my first semester, brought me to his office, closed the door, and told me I might be a little good at it. I signed the forms and hoped that he’d been right.

IX.

It was Labor Day, 2006, and I was slowly waking up in that same bed I’d pitifully burrowed into once, so many years before. It was a resplendent way for a day to begin; the sunlight, filtered through the creamy lace curtains, was warming my arms and face, while I was still snuggled in a puffy surplus of sheets, pillows, comforters, and chenille bunny rabbits. Being home, at Dad’s house, I’d gotten to sleep late that morning, which was always an experience I took pride in. I wondered: how late had I made it today? Ten? Eleven, even? I stretched and smiled with satisfaction at my achievements. I was Slumbermaster; I rocked. Rolling over to face the bedside table, I felt positive about the rest of my day – nothing could ruin a morning that was starting off this splendidly.

I reached towards the table and picked up my cell phone to check the hour, only to see that, instead of the time, there was a text message there. I blinked, opened the phone, saw that the message was from my mother. It read: “criky. steve is dead.”

I sat straight up, breathing in snatches, immediately nauseous. Something in my body knew that Mom was telling the truth; still, my brain’s first impulse was disbelief. This must be another hoax, I thought. It has to be. It had happened before, fairly recently – some rumor about a crocodile chomping his leg off and him dying from blood loss. That one had convinced a lot of people, I thought, clambering out of bed to start up the computer on the bedside table, but it turned out to be false – and this one would, too.

“Plus,” I said to myself, smugly, “Mom didn’t even spell crikey right.”

But when I suffered through the interminable, screeching protocols of Dad’s dial-up connection to check the Internet for news, I found that this horrible thing which could not be true was true – that Steve was, in fact, dead. And I learned that, after the many close calls in the past, it was not even a croc or a snake that had killed him. It was a stingray. And it was completely accidental – the cruelest, most senseless death imaginable. While filming at the Great Barrier Reef, Steve had floated over the ray and unintentionally boxed the creature in, forgetting that the cameraman was swimming ahead. The stingray’s flexing of the tail was an automatic defense mechanism, not even something it could control, like the kick of the leg when the doctor hammers the knee. John Stainton, who was with Steve that day – the buddy who’d shot Steve and Terri’s honeymoon footage, who’d started it all – was quoted as saying that the serrated spine of the ray’s tail had shot straight up into Steve’s chest. The barb tore a hole in his heart.

A fucking stingray.

I threw down the mouse and sprinted barefoot out of my room, stumbling down the steps to the basement. I ran to the corner and feverishly dug past the homeless furniture, past the piles of antiques, past the boxes of books and toys and picture frames until I found it: the doll. There it was, still in its khaki uniform, its wide-eyed expression
of wonderment unchanged. I grabbed a new set of batteries and fixed the voicebox inside, then stood there for quite a while, looking at it, pressing its belly over and over again.

“What a rippah!”
“What a rippah!”
“Woo-hoo!”
“Woo-hoo!”
“I’m sure she gorgeous?”
“Isn’t she gorgeous?”
“Have a look at this little beauty!”
“Have a look at this little beauty!”
“Cheek out the soozie of this bloke!”
“Cheek out the soozie of this bloke!”
“Crocs Rule!”
“Crocs Rule!”
“Ya gotta love ‘em.”
“Ya gotta love ‘em.”
“By Crikey!”
“By Crikey!”
“Hoo-lyy SMOKES that was close.”
“Hoo-lyy SMOKES that was close.”
“Danger, danger, danger.”
“Danger, danger, danger.”

The more I pressed the belly of the Steve Irwin doll, the harder it was for me to understand that the real Steve Irwin would never speak again. It was impossible for me to fathom that I could be standing there, holding that doll, seeing that gobsmacked face and hearing those effusive words, but that the man who owned that face and spoke those words was gone. There, “roight in the palm of moyy heeehnds,” were all these lively snippets of Steve – and yet, the dastardly Internet was trying to tell me he was dead.

I was due to go back to college that day. I loaded all of my stuff into the car, clean laundry and warmer clothes for the coming fall, then gingerly nestled the Steve doll into the back. All the way across I-40 from home to Nashville, driving over the plateau, out of Eastern Time, and past the Caney Fork once again, I would look into the rear view mirror to check on the doll, to make sure it was okay.

When I got to my dorm two-and-a-half hours later, I lugged only what was necessary up the three flights of stairs; the clothes could wait until the next day, when I would have more energy. Once I was firmly ensconced in my room, having flicked the deadbolt lock on the clunky metal door and plopped into my hard wooden desk chair, I picked up the doll again. By this point, the reality was starting to sink in – but in a feeble attempt at comforting myself I squeezed the doll, just to hear Steve’s voice one more time. But there was nothing. Thinking that my thumb must have missed the button somehow, I squeezed the doll again, but there was still no sound. I had only replaced the batteries that morning. Mystified, I piffled through my closet until I found a packet of Energizers. The others must have been defective, I thought, putting the new batteries into the slot and re-inserting the voicebox; however, when I squeezed the doll once more, there was nothing, nothing, nothing. Steve’s voice would not come out, and since that afternoon, I have never, ever gotten it to work again. The doll was dead, too.

I regarded the now silent doll. I looked at its globular fingers and thumbs, then thought of Steve – Bindi in his hands, Bob in the crook of his arm, those arms and hands made ash. I looked at its face, that countenance which was once so comical, the mouth always moving, giving, the eyes always wide open, seeking, thrilled with the limitless possibilities of each dawn, those eyes and lips now closed forever. There was an ending there, on the reef and in my room that day – there was a work too soon finished, a wildness extinguished, a heart ripped clean through.

I hugged the little doll. After a while I laid it on the desk, gently, then touched my hand to my forehead, moving my gaze to the towering pile of books nearby; these were the texts for “The English Novel,” the required senior year course dreaded by
everyone. I contemplated the hulking mass of stacked words, seeming to lean towards me then, viewing the sad summation of whatever my life was going to be now – reading the adventures of others, not having my own. There would be many more piles, much more school; there would be meetings, committees, hoops, grades, procedures, signatures, evaluations, complaints, all the drudgery I’d pitied my parents for and more – a life lived behind the office door, gazing out the window towards the hills, never climbing them. This was the future I’d fallen into, the life that was left.

I looked once more at the doll, slain and helpless on the desk, then looked back at the books. I sighed, pulled Pamela from the top of the stack, and I read.

X.

Home from grad school on a Saturday in September, I stood with my mother at the kitchen sink, helping her to scrub the dishes. (She likes to claim that I am lazy and that I never do these sorts of things, but I did, and I am putting it in this essay to prove it.) This was Nanny and Granddaddy’s kitchen, of course; Mom lives at their house now, taking care of Nanny full-time, addressing all the tasks Nanny invents for her to do.

While scrubbing the dishes that evening, we peered through the broad glass window that looks out on the lake, watching the mist creep over the trees and onto the water. We discussed the dock, the seagulls, and the recent ash spill, and then she said:

“Ooh, ooh, hey, hey – did you hear about that alligator?”

I had. She had sent me the article.

“Oh. I did. I’ve been under so much stress lately so I couldn’t remember.”

I know, Momma.

“Sorry. But, anyway, can you believe that? A GATOR, here! On our Lake! Watts Bar!Never heard of such a thing. That’s just wild.”

It was wild.

Nanny shrieked for her. “Yes, moth-URR!” she yelled, stomping to the back bedroom. I continued to wash, but distractedly, staring out through the fog. I thought of all the papers that were waiting for me back in Ohio, yet to be graded, and I thought of the Granddaddy-shaped hole in the living room, the aching space in his easy chair.

Then I thought of the gator. It was out there now, somewhere, in the lake. Here at home, even – not in Cairo or Australia, but here, in our water. It could hardly be any closer to me. I imagined it perched on that log, as it had been described in the article, then imagined the neon green glow of his eyes at the far-off shine of a flashlight. At last, the great reptile, Gatorus Maximus! It had come, but too late. I wished that I could drop those dishes, go out right that second and look for it, paddling my mother’s yellow canoe through the dark – sojourning for Steve, but also for myself, to see just one wild thing.

I knew the creature was still out there as I packed my bags that night, lurking, proud in the darkness, watching through the mist – unfettered, and still unknown to me.
THE APPEARANCE OF BEING WOUNDED

Two pale people linger in the shallows by the pier. The man is some sort of displaced Viking, long yellow hair cascading down his back in a ponytail, Nordic eyes squinting through the blazing Florida sunlight. He props himself up with freckled arms and broad shoulders, letting his legs settle into the smooth sand. The girl beside him is laying down with her arms plopped out at her sides, wallowing in a happy, lazy crucifixion. She is almost wholly covered in royal blue—blue sarong around her legs, big blue hat over her face, and blue bathing suit clinging to a body slightly bloated from too many baked oysters, the salty squirmy jewels, her favorite. She rests in the warm, clear water, only two or three inches at this part of the beach, and marvels at the little dots of blameless light that filter through her hat. As she gently rocks, caressed by the tiny waves, she submits to a Plath-like desire for the womb, forgetting for the moment who she is and asking the water to shape her life into something new, something good.

She is twenty-three today. June first. She shares a birthday with her home state, which gave her the impression as a child that her destiny was somehow tied up with the destiny of Tennessee, green and rough and schizophrenic as it is. But this year, this meaningless twenty-third year, she had to get out of it. Birthdays are bad enough, always, the candles seeming to flare up and catch on her long honey hair, burning her face into nothingness. However, this birthday is especially hard, largely due to the fact that her teaching job officially ended in May. She had once thought she’d be greedy for grad school by this point; but now she could not bear the prospect of never being mobbed by her students as she walked out the door, never hearing their young tongues explore dead languages (And smale foweles maken melodye, That slepen al the nyght with open eye—). The little ones had been the most difficult to work with, but she ached for them, too—for the way they clapped along with her reading (“Alexander and the TERRible, HORRible, NO GOOD VERY BAD DAY!”), for their small soft voices calling “Miss Maggie!” She would never be called “Miss Maggie” again.

And then, in the midst of all this upheaval, her friend died—one of the only friends who had ever really mattered. It had been a long time coming, but still, she was dead now, and there was no one left to share the moon with. That was it. After that she knew that if she did not do something radical this birthday she might not survive it.

So she had decided to go to the only clean place left, the only place that wouldn’t remind her of anything else—the Gulf. She had found a deal and packed her things and turned to the reluctant Viking, saying, “I’m going. You can come or not.”

Today is their last full day here. This morning they awakened to find all the seaweed gone, washed away for her birthday. They dressed, walked down from the motel in their flip-flops, and set up their towels and their bright-paneled umbrellas. They stretched out on the cotton, breathing in the ocean and smiling at each other, good travel pals. They watched the catamarans and sailboats, the sandpipers and pelicans, the emeralds sparkling across the water. Then they sauntered down together to the shallows by the pier, which is where they loiter now, warm and undisturbed.
Finally, she sits up, shifting her hat back on top of her soaked head. For a time, she plays with the stubby little clams, all shades of pastel, digging them out with her hands and watching them doggedly burrow back into the sand over and over again. He remains silent, thinking.

Eventually, she starts to suspect that she might need more sunscreen, so they get up and meander back to their towels, past the rows of fresh new houses and hotels. As they walk, they look out at the sea and offer commentary on the adventurers, wondering aloud what it would feel like to parasail, if they could ever afford it. When they reach their umbrellas, she sits under hers and slathers on another sticky white layer of sun protection. She burns so easily.

That afternoon, while the Viking teaches a good-hearted chubby boy from Alabama how to skim board, the girl spends some time flying the new, state-of-the-art, rainbow-colored kite that he had just given her for her birthday. (This present was a laughable bone of contention the night before. They had fallen into a disagreement at a souvenir shop; she had wanted to buy a cheap, blue, paper kite, but he had grumpily and uncharacteristically disparaged this idea, sending her off to the car in a pout. When he slid quietly into the driver’s seat and shut the door, he said, “Would it make you feel better if you opened one of your birthday presents now?”)

Later, after he grows tired of skim boarding and she rolls all the kite string back on to the handle, they make a birthday sombrero in the sand. She molds the shape of the hat with her palms while he totters around the beach, looking for the pieces of orange-brown seaweed that she uses to craft the band and the border. Soon they meet Robin, a friendly, possibly intoxicated specialist in infectious diseases from Calhoun, Georgia, who helps them locate the little shells they need to spell out “FELIZ CUMPLEANOS” along the brim. When the birthday sombrero is finished, the two travelers put on their sunglasses and kneel behind it together, grinning as Robin snaps their picture.

This last day goes by the fastest. Five o’clock is on them before they know it, and they realize they haven’t yet gone swimming today. The Viking stands and removes his white t-shirt, a freebie from his retail days. (It says “Thinkfun,” the name of some unknown corporation, but the frat boys down here all love it. “Hey, man, I like that shirt! Think Fun. Yeah,” they say, sloshing their Pabst cans profoundly in the air.)

The girl follows him down slowly, unsure. A wind has come up in the last hour that’s made the water choppy, and now that the sun isn’t directly overhead she can’t see the bottom so clearly. He beckons her, shouting that they won’t swim long, and he intrepidly enters the sea. He sloshes through the line of shells and muck, making his way out to the sand bar, but she remains at the edge. Her arms are stuck rigidly at her sides as her toes are tickled by the soft white foam, the “sheep of the mermaid.” She is, like the old hymn says, a tree that’s planted by the waters – she shall not be moved.

(Later, after the incident, when she’s back in Nashville, Dr. Internet will tell her: Gut feeling is always the best preventive measure. If you suddenly feel like you shouldn’t go in the water, DON’T GO IN THE WATER! This is probably your instinct telling you that something is wrong. He will also say: Try to avoid going into the ocean at dawn or twilight, especially around five o’clock. This is when they like to feed.)

“Come on,” says the Viking, the waves around him slowly growing darker.

“No,” she replies, tensing.

“Come on!”
“No.”

Something about the sight of the birthday girl standing pathetically on the far-off sand, little blue thing with big ugly feet turned inwards – something about her must have moved him. He wades towards her now, reaching the shore with a smile. He turns his back to her and pats his shoulders with his hands.

"Come on. I’ll give you a ride.”

They stroll in to the point where the water is up to their knees. Then, one two three, she jumps, and they piggyback in together. She still doesn’t like it; her legs are wrapped around his belly and her panicked fingers dig into his chest, her face resting on the back of his neck, but he presses on, carrying her all the way out to the sand bar.

He puts her down gently and they stand with their backs to the shore, facing the undulating horizon. The waves seem much bigger than they did from the edge; he fares all right, being taller, but she has to jump as high as she can each time to avoid annihilation. She bobs in the water, remarkably colder now, each wave shoving her farther back and to the left of her companion, who stands resolute up front and right. She should not be here. She wants to get out, but she can’t manage to turn when all her energy is going to staying above the surface, pushing up with her toes every couple of seconds just to breathe. Out here in the expanse she loses her sense of where she is in relation to their umbrellas, of where she is at all, of where she is supposed to go. She frantically tries to cry out, to gurgle someone’s attention, but she feels she has been forgotten by the Viking, by the children, by the beloved dead, by God, by all. She is almost ready to stop pushing altogether, to slip back into the dark wet everything from which she came, to call twenty-three enough, when the water stops churning and the waves lull. As if commanded, the ocean gradually ceases its rocking, and the girl no longer has to jump; she only wiggles jauntily from side to side, still lodged in the big blue Jell-O, unable to hear the Viking’s voice over the beating of her murmured heart.

And it is at this point that she sees them.

She sees them first because they are much closer to her, abominably close, so close she will always grow nauseous to remember it. They come from behind. They pass by on her left, five or six of them, heading back out to sea. They each look to be four to five feet long, the top part of their tails jutting out and up, their backs, dorsal fins, and side fins curiously lined in black. They are not as big as the tiger shark she saw here several years ago, when they were all whistled out of the water and they watched him ominously cruise by, parallel to the coast – but they are certainly bigger and blacker than dogfish. They’re big enough.

She does not know now that they are actually juvenile spinner sharks, one of the only species to travel in schools. All she knows now is to run.

She screams something, probably a curse word, something now lost to time – she’ll never be able to recall it. By the time her companion sees the pack and barks her name, willing her to freeze and hold deathly still, as he is doing, she has already turned and fled – all noble childhood aspirations of adventure now dissolved by saltwater.

(Later, Dr. Internet will say: If you see a shark in the water, do not run! Stay as still as possible to avoid attracting its attention or threatening it. Sudden or erratic movements may draw attention to you and, worse yet, give you the appearance of being wounded. Clearly, the Viking has already familiarized himself with this information.)
But the girl could not possibly be splashing more, bulldozing her way through the heavy water step after frenzied step until she finally falls, her knee clashing brutally with the stinging sand. Now she is wounded, and she is bleeding.

(Again, the wisdom of Dr. Internet: \textit{DO NOT GO IN THE WATER IF YOU ARE BLEEDING!!! SHARKS CAN SMELL BLOOD FROM A MILE AWAY!!!})

But they do not smell it, or if they do, they do not care. She quickly lifts herself out of the sand and turns around to look. They are still swimming in the other direction, past her frozen friend, and she judges them to be far enough now that she can simply stand and watch them as they nonchalantly shimmy out to sea. She is already preparing herself for the doubters – “Are you sure they weren’t just big fish?” – and she is memorizing the sharks now, their shapes and movements, profiles silhouetted in such stark relief against the glimmery greenish blue. She is burning them into her brain in such a way that she will always be able to reply, “Yes. I am sure. They were sharks.” And so they are.

When the moment comes that she can no longer make out the deliberate sway of their fins, the Viking turns and begins to slowly stroll towards her, his yellow hair lit on fire by the setting sun behind him.

“Should we tell someone?” she shrieks, shaking but ethereal. “We should tell someone!”

But when he reaches her side they look to the beach and see no one. They are the only creatures here, the only witnesses to the presence of the sacred predators.

“No,” he answers, concisely.

He wraps his arm around her waist and they stomp out of the ocean together, adrenaline still pumping, commiserating excitedly. They traipse up to the crest of the sand and gaze out at the waves and the orange sunset. They should be hobbling up to the motel and getting ready for dinner, but they remain for a while on the beach, abiding in the thrill of it, a steady stream of blood trickling down from her knee into the white salty granules beneath her feet. (By tomorrow her precious sharkwound will just look like plain old carpetburn.)

Only now, as she looks down at the sticky red blood, does the full reality of the encounter start to sink in. Sharks usually swim laterally, following the coastline, scooping up the fish that dwell in the channels between sand bars – but these were traveling perpendicular to the normal path, moving straight from the shore to the sea, coming up directly behind the girl, and she was facing the horizon. Had they been interested in her – had they noticed the sharp contrast between the dark swimsuit and the ghostly white skin, had they been hungry for the fat of her human flesh – there would have been nothing she could do.

But they had not been interested. They had done no harm.

Here she stands, all her fingers still attached, no chunks of chum removed from her thighs or calves – still alive. Visited. Twenty-three, and whole.
1.

Just as cold and even grayer than the time I came four years ago, the city stands in blocks and rows behind me, the consolidated clouds a buffer in between the scrapers and the sky. This is the pulsing nucleus of the region where I live now, the colossus in the whispers; I am told I must needs love this place, or learn to love it soon – to love the spectre and the grandeur of familial crime, the glory days, to love the claws of gargoyles, love the letter “L,” to love the home of presidents and architects, to love the river which, a month from now, will change from muddy brown to Kelly green. But to my eyes, just as before, it is not green, but gray; it is not grand; it is not home; and it is not, nor will it ever be, New York.

2.

Last time I came to town was for a choir tour, songs long gone, but this time I have come to see the writer’s powwow, staring down the list of lofty names where now it’s looking like my own is never going to be. There is a beat, a breath, between one session and the next today. I am alone, I am intrepid, I am in that certain special frame of mind to get the silly schemes which, like that rhyming curly girl, are either very good or very horrid. So I swoosh out from the carouselling hotel doors, hands stuffed in puffy light blue jacket pockets, make my way into the street towards the end of land, to see a snippet of this city for myself, to try and make a tiny peace with it – this town that pigs’ blood built.

3.

Through the queues of cars on Michigan, then right on Balbo, crossing over rusted railroad tracks that stretch around the bend beyond the distance any human can divine. Below the bridge I spy the carcass of a train, steel gray and long abandoned, hemmed in by the silver puddles, sandy gravel, reddish wood-and-metal lines unending. Railroads made this place the hub, my history books once told me – yes, the hub, the center of the country, nay! the universe. I see no movement now. However, if there is a hub then there must be a wheel, and then a turning, a revolving of the world upon this axis. And if there is still a turning, what direction will I face when we drive out of here – a better, or a worse?
4.

Past the tracks and further down the avenue, but it’s too late – of course the train reminded me of you, your unpretentious ardor for the rails. I’m treading through your favorite city, after all, the town you’ve always promised you’d redeem for me, but you cannot be here with me to claim it – even in this moment, walking through the park that bears your middle name. A park with baseball fields, and tennis courts, and no one whatsoever playing on them. Now the diamonds in the fields recall my secret fear that you might have a secret hope that you could drag me here to live forever, to displace me, trick me into raising your own team of “cubs” – the sallow, sausage-eating children, they must be. I cannot think of children here. I cannot think of here. For there is love, but there are things I cannot give you.

5.

All you Hoosiers worship this, of course; you just can’t help yourselves. I know that in your mind this town is fenced in by a radius of glowing, golden cornfields, and then – Oz! It’s there, the perfect throbbing heart of the Midwest, the great grey gleaming, the compendium of all the best that man can do. But I believe you’re looking at the world through emerald-colored glasses, like the ones we made together when we helped out with the 6th grade play, back at the school, a happiness I think I should have held onto. My shift long over, and Bernice behind in planning, you and I sat at the kindergarten table far into the night: our scissors cutting green transparencies for lenses, Diet Dr. Pepper cartons for the frames, then gluing, holding, stacking – two hands fluttering, together, moving in the coming darkness for a purpose small and pure, so that the audience could see the Emerald City.

6.

Not a road of yellow brick but one of yellow pavement lines I’m crossing now, the final street before the waterfront, then down two flights of concrete stairs, and there I am – the lake. More like an ocean, though – uninterrupted all the way into the sky, no sight of solid ground, and not one soul is here to see it other than the man who walks his dog, a peppered Papillon with bright red knitted booties on each paw. What’s black and white and red all over? Now I know the answer, but the dog will not return my salutation, nor the man; instead it pads on further down the walk – a speck of black and white like one of Lowell’s skunks, it “will not scare.” They leave and leave it all to me, the water, and the famous, vicious wind which I refuse to write about, and lastly the cement – the giant blocks beside me, inexplicable, a rusted chain erupting from the center of each slab, each link besieged by little barnacles, uprooted and confused, each ashen shell long dead but open, crying to the æther.
So here I am. What will the water tell me now? What did I want to know? Why did I wander here? I’m crouching on the edge of concrete, leaning into liquid, asking: Will I ever get back home? And did I make the right decision, to forsake my plot of earth to get my piece of paper, leave my blood for learning? Will my name be found on any ledger later, deeper in the depths of time, for good or ill? The lake will not scare either, though; what knowledge she possesses she retains, disturbingly opaque, the color of an empty box from Tiffany’s. Rebuffed I stand and turn, hold up a camera, try to take a picture of myself with all the azure blue expanse of Michigan behind me, fastening my face firmly in place if only for an instant, thinking it will please you, it will ease me, to be put into this country – far too much to ask a photograph. I cannot help but gaze not up into the lens but past it, realizing there are buildings where my mountains ought to be.
TO THE DOGS

The Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show has been a tradition in Madison Square Garden since 1877 and a tradition in a small, brick house on Woolsey Road since 1991. Each February, canine breeders from all over the world gather in New York to establish which animal will receive the coveted Best in Show trophy – and a father, a daughter, and a dog gather on a couch facing their television in an antique-stuffed living room with a mixing bowl full of buttery popcorn in order to find out the exact same thing.

I am the daughter; Dad is the Dad; and, for the last twelve years, the dog has been Pip – our black-and-silver Miniature Schnauzer. Westminster is a grand two-day event, and we mark our calendars. I don’t know how it started, but do I know that ever since my parents split the annual dog show has been a sanctified ritual at my father’s house. (Uncorroborated, to be sure, but I have a feeling this was something Dad had watched since boyhood, in the Fifties, but also something my mother had not been interested in while they were together. Hence my memories of this tradition only beginning in 1991.)

Some years stick out more than others: for instance, the year that the Clumber Spaniel won (it felt like a victory for lazy people everywhere), and also the year that the Bichon Frise froofed his way to victory (his silly name, “Ch. Special Times Just Right,” has stayed perpetually lodged in my memory). But every year is special in its own way.

We have to remind ourselves of how the judging works – not breed against breed (“But that Rhodesian Ridgeback is intrinsically more awesome than that Chihuahual!”) but each dog for how it lives up to the standards of its own breed. Nevertheless, we have favorites. Dad loves the Dandie Dinmont, not so much for the genetic makeup of the actual creature but for the sound of its name – “Ha Ha here comes that Dandie Dinmont Ha Ha!” I myself favor the PBGVs, the Otterhounds, the Newfoundlands and St. Bernards. And Pip, of course, is always rooting for “die schnauzeren,” and ends up tip-tip-tapping back to the bedroom in a bit of a huff each time that they inevitably lose.

(Some things you should understand about Pip: 1., when we translate for him, Pip always speaks in this sort of pidgin German. Like, as in, “Ich has zie separation anxiety.” Or, “Ist exhaustigüchen to be this beautiful all the time. I must go to zis spa in Baden Baden.” Or, “I vill supervise you during zis yardvürkings to ensure maximum efficiency.” 2., Pip actually comes from a show dog family himself – the famous Karlshof Schnauzers of Knoxville – but he was sold as a pet due to…unspecified show flaws. Don’t mention this around him, though, or he gets depressed. And 3., Pip is totally ausgezeichnet.)

Westminster is almost like a holiday for us, not as exhilarating as Christmas but more anticipated than St. Patrick’s. To this day, I can still hear the show’s theme song in my head, and can remember with ease the most thrilling moment of the contest – that instant when the Best in Show judge has taken the ribbon, is walking towards the dogs, but has not yet lifted his hand and pointed his finger in the direction of the winner.

From what I saw of Westminster when I was little, the world of dog breeding and handling seemed irrepressibly glamorous. I demonstrated such grating enthusiasm for the show that my mother set up a training session for me in the garage at her house, with her high society friend, Vicki, and my other dog, Raggs. It didn’t go well. Vicki, all leopard
prints and leather stilettos, kept referring to Raggs as “Rex” and, at the end of the session, whispered to my mother that I should probably channel my energies into other areas.

I never lost my attraction to dog show lifestyle, however, never stopped watching Westminster with my father and my schnauzer. I was crazy about dogs, could not think of what could be possibly more fun than to spend time with them all day, every day.

Imagine my excitement, then, upon first meeting Jackson, and then discovering what it was that his mother, Mary, did for a living: Breeding and showing collies!

But Jackson was quiet.

As much as I have written about Jackson over the five-or-so years that we’ve been together, it might surprise the reader to learn that, early on, there was a major obstacle standing in the way of our little arrangement. (I hate the word “relationship,” don’t you?)

This barrier between us was not racial, societal, financial, or emotional; it was animal. And in spite of all the ways in which Jackson and I seemed, to the outside observer, to be “cut out of the same bolt of cloth,” this particular incompatibility was so pressing a problem that it was brought to my attention by many friends and acquaintances – even by my ex, Clifford, normally so reluctant to speak. But Clifford cut to the chase.

“He’s a cat person,” he said. “You should know this is not going to work out.”

Of course, Clifford might have had his own reasons for trying to dissuade me, but the core of his commentary was correct. He spoke up because he knew me, because he must have known this concern would have been on my mind – because I had said, over and over, that I could never be with a cat person. And Jackson was a cat person.

When I say “cat person,” I do not merely mean someone who likes cats. I’ve learned over time that there are a few decent cats in the world, cats who do vaguely seem to care about their owners, just vaguely, even if I’ve never encountered any of them. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental dividing line between people who self-identify as “dog person” or “cat person.” It’s like “Coke person” vs. “Pepsi person,” or “Beatles person” vs. “Zeppelin person.” (Jackson and I were, at least, in agreement on those two other issues.) When a woman steps up and declares herself “dog person,” for instance, it doesn’t simply signify that she likes dogs; rather, there are a plethora of personality traits and personal values which accompany that designation. Same goes for “cat person,” but the accompanying traits and values are as disparate as those of an actual cat and dog.

I am a “dog person,” and everything that goes along with it. I can’t change it and I wouldn’t want to; I come from a long line of dog people, mountain people, hard-up people for whom dogs were helpers and cats were nonentities – either that or something larger, menacing, shoulder blades under fur, a hiss in the darkness, known but never seen. But dogs have long been friends of the Bouldins, and we usually only have one at a time; it’s a sacred, special post, more like a sidekick than a pet – or, in Pip’s case, more like a son. There is a lengthy history of lauded canines on my father’s side, the Swiss Colony dogs, a litany of names I’ve heard since I was a baby: Silver the Cocker mix, Joshua the Bassett Hound, Shultz the Dachshund, Sandy the Spaniel. (In our family, you have to get a different breed each time. Otherwise it might feel like you were trying to replace the
last dog, which you’ll just never, ever be able to do.) If you follow this lineage far enough back, you’ll make it to the most lauded dog of all: Papa’s hunting dog, Spot!

Lo, we have heard of the glory of
Spot, the people’s hound, in
the old days, how he performed
noble deeds of valor.
That was a good dog.

Indeed.

In the ancient times before smoke alarms, when my father was small, there was a fire at the farm on Grüetli mountain. My grandfather, grandmother, and father were all sound asleep in the middle of the night and would surely have perished, having no way to know of the stealthy, smoldering doom which was coming for them, if not for the heroic efforts of: Spot! Who, upon sniffing the smoke and spying the flames, came rushing to the bedroom window, not usually much of a barker, but this night barking incessantly, maniacally, so that Papa could wake and see what was happening. Thus, you see, it is inevitable that we are dog people, because we owe our lives to one. If Spot had not saved them all, and if my father had suffocated in that fire, I would not be typing this today.

So it is that dogs are an integral part of my personality, my identity, perhaps even my basic right to exist. And this is why I recoiled when Jackson first told me he was a “cat person.” It was during the initial weeks of our getting to know each other, not quite officially dating but working on it (in the South, we call this period “talking”), and everything else was going so delightfully well; we were like two sides of a zipper already, doing that stupid stuff like picking out children’s names (“Why don’t you like Wilbur? What’s wrong with it?”) even though we’d both agreed we didn’t want to have any. But I was simply heartbroken when he told me that he’d never be able to have a dog.

I just couldn’t understand it. He didn’t seem like someone who would prefer cats over dogs; it was such a deeply illogical choice – and him, a philosopher! Baffling. To have fallen for a cat person. Those aforementioned traits and values just didn’t line up; it didn’t make sense. I would never want to change him, but I did want to find out why. How was it that he could grow up in a dog show family and not even like dogs?

Here are a few things you should know, right off the bat, about Mary’s collies.

1. You are probably thinking of Lassie, just admit it. Get rid of that picture right now. Lassie is not a show quality collie, bottom line.

“Oh, but Mary, these collies have NORMAL eyes,” Mary’s boyfriend David says, whining sarcastically. He is clicking the mouse and lamenting the fact that their kennel name – “Rainbow Collies,” I shit you not – has already been registered online by some twatbag breeder who doesn’t even have show dogs, just “pet-type dogs.” Lassie-type dogs. When he says “normal eyes,” that’s exactly what he means: big, round, black,
skeptically puppydog eyes. But those sorts of eyes register as adorable, and adorable is the last thing you want your show collie to be. (In fact, I later found an advertisement online in which a judge praised a certain collie for having “no cuteness, only the stately beauty that an adult collie has when surveying its domain.”) The eyes on Mary’s dogs are bred to be almond-shaped and unsettlingly tiny, no larger than one of my gnawed-down fingernails, and the heads are bred to be long and excessively streamlined. As this head-smoothing process has progressed throughout the years, it has left less and less room in the collies’ skulls for a brain, and this is evident in their behavior. Also, you should be aware that, in addition to generally coming in three different colors – tri (black, amber, and white), sable (amber and white, Lassie color), and merle (a prettyish blue-grey), collies also come with different kinds of coats. Rather than all the collies having fluffy, elegant, don’t-hate-me-because-I’m-beautiful manes, there are two genetic varieties: rough, with the long hair, and smooth, with short hair. The smoothness is actually the dominant gene, and Mary prefers “smooths” to begin with, so she has more of those.

Thus, picture yourself gazing out of the dusty window of Mary’s house, towards the kennel, and seeing a bevy of smooth collies with pinprick eyes – looking, at that distance, honestly more like a pack of multicolored dingoes – all staring at the house, expectantly, but confusedly, swiveling their heads from side to side, back and forth, a bunch of slobbering metronomes set to discordant beats, all twitching at the slightest sound, click, movement, errant tumble of a weed, just waiting for people, people, people. It is not an altogether endearing image, and is, in truth, a little sad.

2. Jackson’s mother is one of the top collie breeders in the nation, and, in the days of Memphis, was arguably THE top breeder in the nation.

Rainbow Collies, insipid name that it is, is nevertheless a fairly huge name in the world of show dogs – and Memphis, otherwise known as “Ch. Capella’s Midnight Blues,” was the dog that put Mary on the map. He received oodles of doggie accolades throughout his too-short life, most of which are difficult to translate into regular human-speak (they entail a complicated points system with a bunch of numbers and acronyms); however, I am at least equipped to tell you he was the winner of the Top 20 Invitational at the National Specialty, which basically means he was the best collie in the country. Imagine a spiderwebbing of paw marks stretching out across all fifty states, each silky strand carrying a child or a grandchild or a great grandchild of Memphis. Pieces of that dog are everywhere now, a takeover which has been aided by his docile daughter Brendi – poor, bleeding, slack-nippled Brendi, hobbling around but not yet allowed to die – who has been named “Top Producing Bitch” multiple times throughout her career. Through her, and many others, Memphis continues to further the Rainbow legacy, even in death.

However, out of all his honors, Memphis bears one title which is far and away the most compelling to me: The Only Collie Jackson Ever Loved. It took me a while to discover that Memphis was, for all intents and purposes, the beginning of the business, before the kennel really exploded, and that – before he was a star, first and foremost – he was Jackson’s dog. It also took me a while to discover that Jackson, as much as he loves his mother, has issues with the show dog industry. (“This is doggie incest, Ma.” “But I need to concentrate these characteristics for the bloodline…” “Doggie eugenics, then.”) And he’s gotten pretty sick of the collies in general, just as a breed, for several reasons.
But Memphis was different, special, he says. He was a friend. Memphis would wrestle with him on the living room floor; protect his sister when Jackson was away; jump up into the bed at night, big as he was, turn around in a circle, fall asleep in a huff right next to him; and run alongside him on his bike rides, down country roads, through cornfields, giving him just one sliver of that old American boyhood he didn’t otherwise have, that perfect Hoosier innocence, like some movie, lens flares and strings in the background.

Recently, when we were researching a random dog breed I’d found on the Internet (“Leonberger! Half lion, half dog, half bear!”), procrastinating, staving off the real work that needed to be done, I looked over to see Jackson crying. Big, manly, weight-lifting, Scandinavian tears – a silent, stalwart weeping. He had somehow circuitously found Memphis’s old advertisement photo on Google Images, and in an instant he was back in his lonely, ratty one-bedroom apartment, in the lowest valley of an ongoing depression, bawling into the phone as his mother was telling him that Memphis was dead. (“I can’t remember how long I cried,” he says, glumly. “Long time. Cried hard.”)

Memphis was hit by a car. He died as he had always lived, fulfilling the absolute standard of the breed. He was herding. He was a good dog, not a stupid dog, not an incompetent dog; he was doing his job, his most pure, most essential job, and the car just didn’t cooperate with him. He died on the road where he’d followed a young boy’s bike, died doing the work which he knew, without question, was the work he was bred to do.

3. When I grew up watching the Westminster tournament, I always imagined people in the dog show universe as living a rather posh life; you, likewise, after hearing of the nationwide renown of Rainbow Collies, might be picturing Jackson’s family in the same light.

Wrong, sir! Wrong! (You stole fizzy lifting drinks! You lose! Good day sir!)

The reality is that collies are a money pit. The reason many collie breeders live in rural Indiana to begin with is because it’s a relatively cheap place to reside and a central location in the country, but this only helps the situation infinitesimally. The one rare circumstance in which you might, at the end of the day, end up with a windfall is if you “sell a dog to Japan.” The phrase is in quotation marks because it’s a mantra; this is the moment they all dream about, and occasionally, just occasionally, it does happen. Mary’s friend Sally (not her real name, just the Anglicized nickname which has been bestowed upon her) will call from across the wide blue sea and say, according to Mary, “HA HA MARY HA, I NOT HAVE SMOOTH BITCH IN LONG TIME, YOU SEND DOG.” And Mary will say, “Okay!” And somebody gets a laptop for Christmas that year.

Seriously, though, that happens only slightly more often than the Brewers making the playoffs (much to David’s chagrin). What little money you do make comes in through two pipelines: puppies and stud fees. That’s it. None whatsoever for winning shows. Instead they hand you a piece of pottery or a pewter serving tray which you will never, ever use because you can’t put brats in those. Pointless.

You must understand, however, that every shred of cash you receive, either for sperm or for spawn, goes right back into the business. In fact, most of the time, you lose money. To illustrate, I’m including a list of collie-related expenses.

A. Diamond brand food.
Collies require a soy-free diet because they’re prone to bloat, so you have to get Diamond for them. You can’t pick it up at your neighborhood Aldi – only from a specialized source. It’s expensive, too. I’ve seen figures around, oh, $36.89 a bag, and remember that you have over twenty-five oozing mouths to feed. You will be spending the equivalent of monthly rent on food, and that’s not even counting the high-powered vittles and nutrient supplements you will need to buy for puppies, bitches who are pregnant/nursing, or all the dogs in the weeks leading up to a tournament.

B. Veterinary expenses.
   All pet owners deal with these costs, to an extent – you sign away your unborn child just to walk in the door nowadays – but with show collies it rockets exponentially, due to certain required surgeries and medications.

C. Entrance fees for shows, plus stud fees.
   Yes, you’ll be putting out money for stud fees, too, when it’s time to breed one of your bitches and you’re out of options in your own kennel.

D. Transportation to and from shows, plus lodging.
   This chews up a lamentable amount of dough. Because of this you will never be able to take a vacation just for the heck of it, and your son will not see the ocean until he is an adult, digging pearly toes in the clam-speckled sand, having his little panic attack, asking, what…is…this???

E. Grooming supplies. Duh.
   This could well be why Mary prefers “smooths” to “roughs.”

F. Ads on Collies Online or in other collie-related publications.
   This is not something you have to do all the time, but if you’ve got some puppies you’re wanting to sell or a strapping specimen you’re wanting to pimp out, it’s probably worth the investment. The ads are comprised of a picture of the dog/dogs taken by a professional collie photographer (often a lady named Shannon Hayes, who seems to have cornered the whole Midwestern market), overlaid with a list of the kennel’s accomplishments and some snippets of cheesy phraseology: “She’ll bewitch your mind and ensnare your senses – She is Magic”, or “This ‘Hollywood Mom’ showed she still has leading lady star power”, or, simply, “The Dragon Has Risen.” (I dunno.) Mary’s reputation is such that she doesn’t customarily feel the need to take out ads. She has only bestowed the honor on two of her dogs: Memphis, and Grant.

G. Construction and maintenance of the kennel runs (lumber, fencing, gravel).
H. Taping for the ears, even. Think about that. Ear tape.
   I’m going to stop here because I imagine you get the idea.

The point is that the vocation of collie breeding and showing is massively and perpetually cost-intensive – so much so that, depending on just how obsessed you get, it will gradually begin to seep funds from all other areas of your day-to-day life and domestic situation. This is why certain things around your house will not ever get taken care of, things like insect infestations and non-functioning septic systems and stray animals which, drawn to the mushy meat smell of the Diamond food, seem to come from miles around and amalgamate themselves in your house. You will ignore all these outside distractions until you have guests, at which point you will suddenly survey the
state of your surroundings and your profuse, neurotic apologies will make your visitors more squirmy than a bunch of flies, furrballs, or floating turds would ever have done in the first place. But you will not be able to attend to any of these problems because – remember – all your finances and physical energy must *always go to the collies*. This is what it takes to keep the machine running, and you are crushed down so far in the gears that you can never be plucked back out of it – nor would you ever want to be.

If you know all this information up front (which, now, you do), you would have no sane motivation for going into the dog show business on a professional scale. It’s madness. Financially, it’s a suicide mission. Internalize this for me, please. Knowing what you know now, it would be criminally negligible for you to even consider it. If you are rich, then okay. If you have committed to never having children, then okay. But if you are not rich, and – for the love of all that is slobbery – if you do have children, you must not ever think of being a collie breeder. Promise me.

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In my first couple of trips up to the kennel, I was still trying to maintain the naïve approach of what Žižek labels “tolerant liberal multiculturalism,” like the historian at the end of *The Handmaid’s Tale* who reminds his audience, to rapturous applause, that “we must be cautious about passing moral judgment on the Gileadeans” – that our “job is not to censure but to understand.” I thought that was my job, too. I wanted Mary to like me, so I processed all that I saw with the voiceover of “Keep cool, my babies,” with the lens that, well, this is just how they live, and it is not for me to have an opinion on it one way or the other. I did keep cool. I endorsed everything, nodded, said “Yes, Ma’am” a lot. This was, of course, before I realized that the dog show industry is, at times, good for neither the dogs nor the families who own them – that it can transcend its intended boundaries in one’s life, become less of a hobby than a sort of psychological disorder. But in my early days in Indiana, when I was trying to impress Jackson by being “on board” with the collie breeder thing (not yet knowing that he was, in fact, so far “off board” with it that he was floating somewhere in the Pacific), I picked out a puppy.

I know now that the reasons I was probably drawn to this puppy in the first place are also the reasons why the puppy would not have been a good show dog (which, in retrospect, probably sealed his doom). He was five to six weeks old, a tri rough, but smaller and chubbier than the rest, much less streamlined; so he looked more like a Bernese Mountain Dog puppy, really, and he acted so abnormally smart. I mean, smart doesn’t even cover it – he was ruthless. He went right at me. He knew a sucker when he saw one, and he went into that whole puptacular schtick: licking my face, gnawing on my earring, windmilling his white paws up in the air. I was done. Didn’t have a chance.

Soon, all parties reached an agreement that this would be “Myeahggie’s dog”, and I went on my way happy, looking forward to seeing him again. Thus, when I arrived the next time and asked for his whereabouts, I was downcast upon being unceremoniously informed, with a wave of the hand, that he’d been put down. He’d developed some stomach problem – not parvo, and not fatal, but something that, if attended to, would have necessitated a monetary loss which would have negated the eventual profit of the
animal. Essentially, it was more cost effective just to kill him than to medicate him. But this was not a language Maggies knew, and I was confused. Profit? This was a puppy.

It was after this episode that Jackson was forced to sit down with me and gently explain the many differences between having one dog as a pet, a pet which is customarily recognized as having wishes and reactions which are legitimate and separate from its guardian’s, and having over twenty-five dogs as a business.

Whenever we walk out of the house and face the kennel, we are assaulted with the visages of about two-dozen collies, every warped face gazing up imploringly, every paw pressed up against the fence, every mouth emitting the raspy, castrated call of a de-barked collie. All of these dogs, at one time or another, have been drugged and stretched out on a table, then roused to feel the itchy remnants of a gloved hand stuffed down their throats, the taste of metal on their tongues, left by the scissors that sliced their once-vibrating vocal cords, now throbbing with a hurt they cannot fathom. This is simply what’s done, I am told, in the show dog industry, when one is carrying loud, goofy creatures from motel to motel, separated from families and businessmen by too-thin walls; this is standard. But when I look at the kennel and hear the sounds, I cannot help but feel that something essential has been robbed from them, as dogs – as if someone were to remove my breasts, because they were cumbersome, or my ears, because they hear, or my own vocal cords, because each visit to the kennel renders it harder not to speak.

This piteous ensemble hopping and hacking in front of the house, behind the chain link fence, doesn’t even account for “Uno,” stranded in the very back of the yard. He’s back there, I know, even when I can’t see him. (“Uno” is not his real name; he does not have a real name. I call him “Uno” because he only has one testicle, and this is the reason for his exile. He’s a perfectly beautiful merle, all by himself, back there. They keep saying they’ll find a good family for him, eventually. I wish I was a good family.) Sometimes the kennel collies in front want to get to the people outside so badly that they will push their muzzles through the holes in the gate, the sharp ends of metal scarring their faces. Wendy, a tri rough, is especially prone to this, and I have developed a particular concern for her, always asking about her over the phone. They keep putting cream on her face but she goes right back and shoves her nose into the fence, following that singular desire – to smell, to lick, to ooze upon, to love – people, people, people.

This chorus of collies, this standing ovation, it happens over and over again each day – every time a car goes by, every time a door is opened, every time they catch a whiff of human being. Certain dogs designated as exceptional, like Grant, are let inside. (This status is being awarded to more and more of them, so many that Jackson’s sister Rachel can no longer bring her son to the house without him breaking out in hives.) But the rest of them stay behind the metal all the time, constantly trying to get our attention, not even able to offer up a decent bark, until the rare moment when it’s their turn to go to a show.

(Mary likes to talk about that certain “glow” show dogs get. “They love the ring. They eat it up.” It never occurs to anyone that this “glow” might result from the ring being the one place the dogs have a fleeting tactile interaction with their people – that they are soaking up their ninety seconds of visibility before the kennel wall closes again.)

When it comes to the rasping of the collies, Mary has learned how, after all this time, to tune it out; others are annoyed by it; the rest simply hear hack! hack! hack! hack! hack! hack! No one else bothers to translate for the dogs, to walk up to the fence, touch paw to paw, to break, to hear, You! You! Me! Love! Me! Love! Me! Love! Me!
I have asked Jackson about his chores, and I am writing down what he tells me.

Growing up in Tennessee, hopping back and forth between my mother’s house and father’s house, I didn’t really have chores. I mean, there was the basic stuff, like, “Make your bed,” which I hated, because I was just going to mess it up again and it struck me as inefficient. But I never asked for an allowance (for, lo, here be television, here be Velveeta, what more do I require?), and my parents, in turn, never asked me to do much physical labor – except for the time Mom made me build a bomb shelter in the basement, but that’s another tale entirely. Plus, I was a girl, which – in the South – was still taken into consideration. Maybe they wanted to keep my hands soft, marriageable.

But Jackson has always had chores, interesting chores, specific duties associated with the collies. To this day, every time he goes home for a visit, tempted into the void by hugs and gravy, there is, without fail, a list waiting for him (de-virus the computer, drive so-and-so to Ivy Tech, hoist this, hammer that, etc.), a list we laugh about.

“Ma,” he teases, “you don’t miss me – you just want me to do stuff for you.”

“You can fix a fencepost for your mother!” she calls, from the living room.

He can, and he does. But I am interested in the past, the childhood chores, the errands the collies required which other people wouldn’t be familiar with. Rachel was always so ill and so small (she only ever made it to 4’10) that each dog assignment fell to him, and there were many – too many, he says, for him to specifically recall right now.

I try to narrow it down for him.

“Well, which duties did you hate the most?”

“Hmm,” he says, picking up my bendy-squiggly camera tripod from the table. It’s built that way so it can attach to anything, like a tree limb, but he just likes to bend it.

“What about the shows? Did you mind losing your weekends, as a teenager?”

“Actually, not so much, that. I didn’t mind that. I got to handle the dogs in the ring occasionally, which was fun, and on the long car rides I got to read books. Plus, I saw some amazing places…”

“Like St. Louis?” I ask, sarcastically.

His smile dissipates.

“Yeah, like St. Louis,” he says, looking down at the carpet.

I hate myself.

“Well…what chores felt like chores to you?”

“Uhm…I didn’t so much hate this one, but it was mainly just annoying…”

“Okay.” Scribbling again.

“It was my job to refill the self-feeders. This entailed carrying a fifty pound bag of dog food on my shoulder out to the pen, then filling up the feeder while muddy collies jumped all over me. It was mainly the muddy collie paws that were annoying.”

“Yeah, that would grate on the nerves, I guess.”

“Then there was the breeding – ”

“I think we should save that for last.”

“Why?”

“Because, judging from the way you’ve hinted at it before, you’re probably going to be done for the day after you discuss that. I’m not sure what energy you’d have left.”
He nods.
“Fair enough.”
He’s bent the tripod into some sort of plastic animal that he’s walking up his arm.
“Let’s see…oh! Forgot. This thing, definitely my least favorite thing to do other than the breeding, was cleaning out the water buckets and refilling them. The buckets would collect algae, goopy algae that I had to wash out with a scrub brush, hard.”
He moves his hand in a sideways scrubbing motion.
“What made you hate that one more than others?”
“I just did. I just hated it.”
“Okay.”
“Well, and because of the rats.”
“What rats?”
He makes a face, looks up at the ceiling.
“These rats that would try to get water in the middle of the night, but then would fall in and drown. I’d go out in the morning and there’d be three or four of them at a time, floating there, that I had to…throw out. I just remember them flying through the air.”
I am unduly fascinated by this.
“What did they look like?”
He raises an eyebrow.
“They were rats.”
“I mean, what did they look like when you found them? Distended?”
“Oh. No, not yet.”
“Swollen?”
“No. But they were huge to begin with. Big, grey, soggy dead rats.”
“Wow,” I say, quietly, the word soggy appearing in the wide rules underneath my hand. “Thanks, Jackson. That’s…this is good stuff. I hadn’t heard that before.”
“Oh, you’re welcome.”
I am still imagining waterlogged, algae-coated rats launched through the air when he tells me about scooping “wheelbarrows full” of poop out of the kennel, and I laugh.
“Wheelbarrows full of poop?”
“Well, a wheelbarrow. That’s what I used.”
We both giggle at this for a few seconds, happy, but then we sigh. I wait for him.
“Okay,” he says, after a labored breath. “I’m going to get agitated during this.”
“At…whom?”
“At…life. Not at you.”
He shifts in his chair, prepared to embody the story, but I interrupt him.
“Jackson, this is not worth your emotional well-being. You know, I can just put in the vague snippets of what you mentioned a long time ago, just allude to it. It’s not – ”
“No,” he says. “You need the information. I want you to have it.”
“Are you sure?”
“Yes. I’m sure.”
I’m not sure.
But he tenses, closes his eyes, sits on the edge of his armchair, and puts both his hands in front of him, grasping an invisible head. His eyes open, but are looking beyond his hands, beyond the living room wall, into the ugliness of permanent memory.
“My mother would say, ‘It’s time to breed a bitch.’”
I’m writing.

“I would sit in the chair in front of the dog, and I would—” He clenches his hands.

“...hold on to either side of her collar, with the dog...looking at me. My job was to keep her calm, to make sure she didn’t turn around and snap, to hold her in place. My mom...would sit to one side, and then the stud dog...would mount from the rear.”

“The bitch is looking up at you, all this time? Looking you right in the face?”

“Looking me in the face, yes.”

“Oh.”

“Some studs would be good at it, mounting, and some would be incompetent. With the ones that were good, it would be very quick.” He bows his head for a moment, almost in appreciation of this. “With the ones that were not, that’s the reason my Mom was waiting at the side. If he...was having difficulty, she would wait until he got excited. She would reach underneath – ” An explicit gesture of the hands. “And guide him in.”

I explode. Some utterance lost to paper, to all recorded time. He guffaws.

“Are you ready for this?”

“No, but I’m writing it anyway. Go on.”

He turns back to the invisible coupling, but I am glad for the scrap of levity.

“Dogs,” he continues, “when they breed, tie together – that is, the dog’s penis expands and locks him into place, while the semen trickles out, drop by drop.”

“What does that do to her?”

“Typically, they just kind of sit there resigned.”

“Have you ever had one that didn’t?”

He reaches over and grabs the camera tripod again.

“Sometimes...they’ll still continue to struggle a bit.”

“Okay.”

“But that’s less common, I think. So, they would be tied together for anywhere from seven to fifteen minutes. At some point he would shrink down and be free, and my mother would hoist the bitch’s rear end in the air to make sure none of it dribbled out.”

“What kind of things did you tell the dog, while it was happening?”

Jackson is twisting the hell out of my camera tripod. I write this down. Is twisting the hell out of my camera tripod. Finally, he says, not looking up:

“I don’t know. Sometimes I would just rub her head...I mostly just...pet her.”

“Okay.”

“Also...sometimes the other dog would get so excited that he would come before he was inside of her. And there are very few things that smell worse than dog jizz.”

Wearily, he adjusts his baseball cap, sinks back in his chair.

“And then, sometimes, if he was having no luck whatsoever...Mom would – ”

There is a pause.

My pen stops moving.

“She would jack him off?”

He nods.

“– manually stimulate him to ejaculation. Into a Styrofoam cup.”

He says he remembers his mother’s hand moving underneath the collie. He says the smell was everywhere. He says that, all this time, every pump, he was still sitting there, holding the collar of the dog who looked up at him, so that Mary could inject the semen into her with a syringe – just like she told him to, still holding the bitch down.
I am quiet for what feels like a long time, trying to transfer the words to the notebook, retain it all for long enough to set it down. He waits, says nothing, plays with the tripod, bends it into a series of alien flower-shapes. I have only one more question.

“How old were you when you started helping with the breeding?”

He drops the toy into his lap, gazes at me for ten seconds, remembering.

“I was nine,” he says.

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There is a point in every visit to Indiana when we will all be standing on the porch, and I will turn around to look at Jackson, and there will be cats.

Droves of them congregate at the house – black cats, grey cats, yellow cats, brown cats, calico cats – flitting inside and outside as they please. They love Jackson. He is Cat Magnet. A cat looks at me and sees meat – some flesh to gnaw on – or nothing. A cat looks at Jackson and sees its mother. The ones here will follow him through the home, follow him through the yard, follow him back through the woods for miles, stopping when he stops, milling about his feet. He even woke up once in the middle of the night, sleeping on the futon in the side nook, with a curious wet rubbing sensation on his face. He opened his eyes to see that the new grey kitten was grooming his beard for him.

When we are all on the porch, the wild ones will crawl up his jeans like they’re climbing a rock wall, nestle themselves in the flannel cradle of his arm, and purr.

In instances such as these, when I hear the smooth purr contrasting with the rush of canine hacking in the background, then see the unobtrusive smile peeking out from underneath his mustache, I am finally able to realize why Jackson is a cat person. I should have known that the business would have ruined the collies for him, that he could never enjoy dogs the way that I do because he had never asked for them but they were still there, hordes of them, every morning, each one with a price, a destination, a load of work with his name on it. The cats, arriving of their own accord, were the only animals he was allowed to love organically, to care for with no compelling reason behind it. He asks no service of the cats and they ask nothing of him; blameless, they cannot remind him of the tasks he once performed, of the ways in which he might have been forgotten.

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At the close of a tall day, at the end of a meandering drive through the endless corn, Jackson and I are sitting together on the futon at Mary’s, untying our shoes. I have already taken my necessary Benadryl and am fighting to stay awake, but Mary comes in the side room to chat. She is in such a good mood and I want to savor this, so I prop myself up and let her tell me the ever-weird story of the time she was engaged before she met Jackson’s father, then about the dogs, about shows, and then about a fellow named Albert Payson Terhune. He is a hero to them, she says – a collie breeder who wrote a series of collie novels. His estate is a park now, a park where all the breeders and showers congregate once a year. It is said that whenever you drive the road up to Sunnybank, you can feel the spirits of the collies chasing you, running beside your car, herding you home.
“Collie spirits?” I ask, loopily.
“Oh yeah,” says Mary. “See, Myeahggie, there’s a difference between a collie spirit and a collie soul.”
Jackson, hidden by me, buries his face in his hands.
“See, when the collies die and go to the rainbow bridge, their spirit stays behind.”
“Behind where?” I ask.
“Like, around where they lived.”
“Like a ghost?”
“Yeah, kinda like a ghost. And their specific personality stays behind. So those collies at Sunnybank that chase the cars, those are the collie spirits.”
Jackson is laughing ruefully at this point but I want to hear more.
“Okay,” I say.
“You got me?”
“I got you.”
“The collie souls, on the other hand, get reincarnated into other collies.”
Jackson stands up. He already knows where this is going and he doesn’t like it.
“And the souls will return to people that they loved before.”
“Okay.”
“So, see, Memphis? You remember Memphis?”
“Yeah, I know Memphis,” I say.
“Well, see, Memphis’s soul has reincarnated into Grant.”
At this, Jackson takes a couple of swift, long strides out of the side room into the kitchen, presumably so he can vomit into the sink.
We hate Grant, Jackson and I. He’s Mary’s new favorite, though neither we nor Rachel nor David can figure out why. He’s a sable smooth and he’s unnaturally large, like a big, dopey bear, large enough to stand up on his hind legs and scratch out your eyeball. He’d do it, too, because he knows he’d get away with it – just like when he killed the chickens and the cockatiel. Not with the bloody intent of a hunter, of course – he just thought they were TOY! For HIM! He stood, his lumbering head cocked to the side, so utterly befuddled when the birds flopped on the ground before him, untwitching, dead.
This dog, this dog, oh!, he is comically dumb. And vexingly hyperactive. Where Mary finds the similarity with Memphis we don’t know; she sees something in him we cannot, yet is forever blind to his iniquities. For her, it was love at first sight. I was there when she pointed him out of the litter as a puppy, said, “There, this one. This is the guy,” when she gave him the name of Grant – not a whelp’s name but the family name, Jackson’s middle name, his grandfather’s middle name, the name you give your blood.
“You’re sure that Grant has Memphis’s soul?” I ask.
“Oh yes, I’m sure. My psychic friend agreed with me. She’s Creole. She reads auras. Jackson, you remember my psychic friend, don’t you?”
“Vaguely,” he mumbles, now leaning against the doorframe.
“Well, she read your and Rachel’s auras, remember? But anyway, I ran into her at the show when I had Grant with me, and she says, ‘Mary, this dog somethin’ special.’ And I said, ‘Yes I know that already.’ And then she says, ‘Mary, somethin’ else – your old dog’s soul’s done reincarnated into this dog.’ And I said, ‘I know that already, too.’”
Mary has had a good time telling this story, and looks at me for some kind of approval, as a Southerner, to see if she got the accent right. Sure. Passable. I nod. Why ruin anything. Mary beams at me, as if to say, see, see, see, I know a black person, I do.

“When she read Rachel’s aura,” she continues, giddily, “she said Rachel had ‘healin’ in her hands’…”

This is one tale I have heard before; I know it means a great deal to Mary because she quoted it in her speech at Rachel and Lowell’s wedding. Rachel is in training to be a *doula* now, an occupation which seems to combine massage therapy and midwifery, and Mary takes comfort in the fact that her Creole friend’s prophecy has come true.

“But what did she say when she read Jackson’s aura?” I interrupt.

Mary sighs deep, heaving her shoulders. She is having a harder time remembering this one. She squints up at Jackson; he squints back down at her, and then at me.

Finally, she whispers:

“She said he had an old soul.”

The thing you have to understand about being the child of a big time collie breeder is that the dogs will always, always take precedence over you.

This doesn’t mean that you’ve disappointed her, or that you’re an inherently undesirable child, or that she doesn’t love you in her own slightly disconnected fashion. You haven’t; you’re not; she does. There is an attachment between you; you will adore her in the way that Hoosier boys adore their mothers, and there will be unexpected moments in time when she will come through for you, guns blazing, to remind you that she does, in fact, care, and you will be touched. There is a sense of concern; there are those unexpected moments. But when there is anything on your or your sister’s part which leans more towards need – help with moving, help with grandchild, help with records which must be retrieved – you should learn not to count on her. There will always be a collie right before you in line, and then the window will close for the day. Every time, there will be a show, or a “bitch due.” Other arrangements could be made, yes, but you must comprehend how important it is for her to be there with the dog, under lights, with her champion. The collies are and always will be the number one priority, and it will be easier for you in the long run if you do not forget that.

This is her life. It is your life, too.

The last time Jackson walked at a graduation, he walked alone. This was before I knew him, and no one had driven down from Indiana to see him. I have this sad image of him sliding across the stage, those huge strides I can never keep up with, sauntering in his purple robe and hat, ponytail tumbling out behind. He is looking not up into the bleachers, no one to see there, but straight across to the man who holds his diploma. He could have opted out, but after six and a half years he walks now, for no one but himself.
He will graduate again in May, with an M.A. He thinks stationery is “froufrou stuff,” yet he has quietly, lovingly picked out a set of sweet white graduation invitations to send out in the mail. He bought his own cap and gown – black, this time, not purple. Polyester. He’s ready to go. He will walk, and I will be in the bleachers, waving.

I am not, however, sure about Mary. (“That would have to be the weekend of the Indiana Collie Specialty,” she grumbled over the phone.) I hope that she comes, but I will prepare for either contingency. It’s a busy time of year. This is expected.

There have been a couple of occurrences, however – occurrences when dog shows have superseded family events or catastrophes – which I still find difficult to accept. I have much to reconcile in my head. There have been some oversights, some instances of stark neglect, which clash with the picture of the woman who already calls me her daughter-in-law, who makes me Italian beef sandwiches and cheesy potatoes, says, “Eat! You are not fat!” This is a lady who laughs like kudzu, all over you, a lady who puts glow-in-the-dark eyeballs on the front door for Halloween, a lady who makes it hard for me to write this. I think Mary is a good person, addicted to a very bad business.

The most recent collie-related episode that caused friction within the family occurred last year, when Jackson’s sister Rachel was diagnosed with type-1 diabetes, previously undetected. After she developed a near-lethal case of ketoacidosis and was rushed to the hospital – after receiving the “Your system is shutting down but we’re doing all we can do” talk by her doctors, after frantically calling Mary, crying, “Momma, Momma, please come here, I’m dying” – Mary would not come. She was at a dog show, in Danville, Illinois, an hour-and-a-half away, and that was that. Thankfully, Rachel did recover, but her regard for her mother has not. (And her husband, Lowell, is just done with the whole thing. “Stop putting your dogs over your fucking family,” he says.)

However, as frightening as this contemporary calamity is, the happening that haunts me the most has to be the tale of Jackson’s bout with pneumonia.

In the realm of one’s physical health – in those late-night cuddly whisper sessions where you ask each other quirky questions like “What’s the sickest you’ve ever been?” – this juncture is acknowledged between the two of us as being his lowest, most miserable point. He has told me this story over and over again, in part because I have asked him to tell it over and over again, in part because I have asked him to tell it over and over again, each time somehow hoping that the facts will change, morph, bloom, become less hurtful – hoping that his lungs will heal in front of me, gain back the strength they lost, let him breathe in the humid summer oxygen like a regular man.

This time, I am recording his words, asking for details. This time will be the last. He has told me that his exact memories from that time are somewhat fuzzy, but that he does recall sensations, suffocations. I ask him for what feelings he can remember.

“I remember it being hot,” he says. “Beginning of August.”

He was fighting a fever of a hundred and four, but I think he’s referring to the temperature of the house, as well; the air conditioner at Mary’s has never functioned, not really – an easy fix, but another thing that is judged to be less critical than the collies.

Jackson contracted the pneumonia during his first summer home from college. At first, Mary accused him of faking it, but even when she could no longer deny something had gone wrong inside of him she did not take him to the doctor. This was the summer when many things were changing – and when Rainbow Collies was transforming from something fun, with Memphis and a few others just for the hell of it, into an industry, a factory, a rush, a thrill, a prayer, a full-blown creed. There was too much to
be taken care of right then, no time or money for a doctor. So, instead, Mary plopped him on the couch in the living room, where he stayed, for three whole weeks, only crawling to the bathroom and back, rousing himself enough to gulp down the dog antibiotics his mother pressed into his palm – the same pills she would have used on a collie bitch with a urinary tract infection. Dog meds, on a sweaty couch. He says that, when all of his energy was going into the act of breathing, he didn’t have the strength for the syllables to ask, please, take me to the hospital, Mom, Mom, please.

I ask him if he can remember what it felt like, the choking.

“Pull your tongue all the way back over your throat. Try to breathe that way.”

He demonstrates for me and makes a deathly drain-sucking sound. I try to imitate it, but I can’t. It makes me panic; it makes me gag. It’s awful.

“He demonstrates that, too, but I keep writing this time.

“It’s hard to explain, but you just can’t get any air.”

Not even looking up from my paper, I ask, “Did you think you were gonna die?”

I am not sure why I have proffered this question, since, being the tough old bird he is, I fully expect him to come back with some typically über-masculine answer (Nein! I fear NATZING! Fear is for ze VEAK!). But there is a long pause, and he surprises me.

“I didn’t know.”

My heads snaps up so I can stare at him, open-mouthed.

“Holy shit.”

He shrugs.

“I remember thinking a couple of times that it would be easier if I just did.”

I blink, slowly, recalling my own parents – long divorced, scraping by, just two community college teachers – who, seeing me stretched out on the white hospital bed, signed the forms without blinking, went into ten thousand dollars of debt so I could get the Remicade the insurance wouldn’t pay for, not even for a cure, because there is none, but just to stop the pain. Ten thousand, not even a question. Sign it. It’s what you do.

Facing him, armchair to armchair, I’m assaulted by the knowing, once again, that there is more than miles and hours between our people – that there are thoughts, ideas, and ways of living, strange and wondrous shapes which loving does, or does not, take.

Unmarried, not engaged, our things and our bodies in separate apartments still, we make plans. Happy, silly plans, for a future we cannot divine. And in these plans, we have made a compromise: that our first pet will be not a dog, not a cat, but a bunny.

This will not be a caged bunny – rather, the type of bunny that can hop around the house as it pleases, then retire at night into the cardboard castle which we’ve built for it, where it will sleep a gentle, rabbity, unmolested sleep, like the Flopsy Bunnies snoozing on the rubbish heap. We are already worrying about the breed. Lionhead? Dwarf Hotot? Netherland Dwarf? Flemish Giant? Lop? Holland Lop? Mini Lop? Fuzzy Lop?

No matter the type, though, this bunny will have no previous associations, for either of us, will carry no baggage. This bunny will not be commerce, this bunny will not
be a show, and this bunny will not be anything in a Styrofoam cup. This bunny will be a fresh start – just a pet, just a rabbit in our house, which we will love, and nothing more.

Of course, the irony in all this is that there are few people in this world who worship Jackson more than Pip. He might love Jackson even more than he loves me, as much as it grieves me to admit it. Whenever we are visiting at the small, brick house on Woolsey Road, Jackson is followed up and down the hallway by an echo of terrier tip-tip tapping; whenever he needs to use the bathroom, Pip will stand outside the door, concerned, until he emerges once again. And in the early morning, before the sun is up, Pip will wander down to the piano room where Jackson sleeps, nudge wide the door. Jackson’s eyes will open to see two long fluffy paws across the bedstead, a schnauzer face regarding him, then feel a sudden springy weight beside him in the bed, a turning, and a plop, and then a wheezing sigh – something felt long ago, and lost.

I was shocked the first Sunday morning when I opened the door to wake him for church, only to see Pip there stretched out beside my darling “cat person,” the two of them snoring together. This was before I’d raided the box of embarrassing childhood photos in Indiana, found the picture of a tiny, blonde, curly-headed boy with a tiny, grey, curly-headed schnauzer. (“You never told me.” He smirked. “Trouble. His name was Trouble.” His very first dog, before the collies, even before Memphis, was a schnauzer.)

Whenever we are not visiting, whenever Dad suits up for church alone, he tells me that Pip will wander the halls, looking for us. (Ver ist mädchen? Ver ist philosoph?)

But I know that, this coming February, Pip will be sitting on the couch as Dad lays back in his chair, watching the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show with him, and snarfing up the pieces of popcorn which fall to the hardwood floor. For the last couple of years, I have not been there, and I have not watched the show from Ohio. There have been reasons I can give. I am in grad school; it is Valentine’s Day; I don’t have cable.

But the shine is off the trophy now.

Maybe there will be a February when I am home, when I can sit with them one evening, and the next, fighting Pip for couch space, laughing together. I would enjoy that. But I cannot ever watch the show in the same way that I used to, without the rush of knowledge, numbers, memories – noises, litters, prices to be paid. “There is…with the dogs…just too much information,” I hear him saying to me, shaking, leaving the room.

I will not see the ribbons and the dogs now without seeing too much, too clear, behind the stage, beyond the lights, shadows moving at the edge of the ring.
How do I even write about you? I’m not allowed to. You’re on the list of clichéd topics, right along with dream sequences, or starting a story with the buzzing of an alarm clock. Because you were old, I’m just supposed to accept that you died. It’s the cycle of things. This is what they tell me. But there was nothing whole or reassuring in the manner of your passing, no whiff of the natural, preordained process that these people assume you took. Dad always says that if there is a harder way to do things, a Bouldin will find it – and you did. You drowned in your own body. You were drowning for years. After the heart attacks, the stroke, the cancer, the ulcers – after the falling tree, even after the train that hit you – it was the stifling slow rise of fluid that took you down. I was scattering dirt over the box they put you in the day before I drove North and learned how to teach kids who never had to get their own hands in it, who will never know work like you did. I am still here; I carry your knife, wear your sweaters, don your caps to class to speak my loss of you, to show the fealty my words are not allowed. I lost you, and I lost the link to the one set of genes I can trace, all records on my mother’s side burned in an orphanage fire. They buried you in the colony cemetery up on the mountain, back with our people, going all the way back to the stones of a language we can no longer read. There are two large oak trees there; there are coonhounds who come to visit; there are clouds that scoop by swiftly overhead to check on things, clear signs of elevation. It is peaceful. It is as good a place to be dead as any. There are times when I am tired, when I want to lay between you and her there in the ground and be loved by you again; I was the one thing you both could agree on. But even now I break the rules, for these desires may not be declared.

Everyone has lost someone like you, and those same damn freshmen I teach have been writing badly about those someones for so long that all the other teachers got sick of it, and that’s how you got put on the list of clichéd topics, the scroll of stories to avoid.

I cannot write about you. So I will write to you.

I once wrote to you often, in my appalling chicken scratch, with stickers and stamps and wax sealed with the letter B. I still have my last letter to you. I had written your full name but had not yet made it to the address when I got the call that there was no one to address it to anymore. It stays, forever sealed, in a box underneath my bed.

Had you been living, I might have written you about the Indiana State Fair, for I was thinking of you there. It was almost exactly a year after you died that we came – on a train! – into a city in a state you never drove through, never felt the need to see. You would have thought them a strange people in a cold land; you were always cold, always bundling up in blankets and turning up the stove as high as it would go – the heart, barely thumping, could not spread any heat through your body. You would not have liked it up here in this region, not in the winter. But it was August when we came to the fair, the two of us, me and the Hoosier, because it was his birthday and I could not think of any journey that would make him happier. This was the other boy, not Clifford, not the one you liked, but the other one, Jackson, the one whose Red Sox had just beaten your Yankees, the one whose shrill, stuttering accent you could never make out, the one you
told me not to marry in the last phone conversation we ever had. (I swear, had you asked anything else – but he is the one thing I cannot give up for you, the one thing, I swear.)

It might seem an odd occasion for me to be reminded of you, being in such a place with such a consort, yet there were so many things about the fair you would have liked. You were everywhere to me. There was the antique tractor parade, for one, which came right after the Red Hat Society parade. You would have liked the tractors, would have had opinions about them. There were tanks full of the fish you taught me how to catch, your thick, cracked-open thumb showing me how to loop the live worms around the hook again, and again, and again. Besides the requisite prize-winning cabbages and enormous pumpkins, there were agricultural exhibits which would have interested you, for the sake of the farm: a colossal, angry yellow caterpillar wearing an olive green army hat, chewing chunks out of the sign it was attached to (“Invaders In The Heartland!!!”), in addition to a fully functioning scenic model that demonstrated how flooding affected the state from year to year, the water inching over the little houses and cars like the liquid in your lungs, destruction at the touch of a button. They had a shiny Subaru engine set out by itself, the boxer engine, the German model, flat-4. That’s what’s in my car. I could have showed you how it works. You would have enjoyed tinkering with it. They had some of the same animals you’d husbanded once, too. I myself favored the rabbits, but they also had chickens like the ones you kept, before the weasel got them. And they had goats, scads of goats, goats all over the place. When my father was a child, you had an unnamed goat that butted him around the yard – and it did seem like all of the goats at the fair, no matter what type, tended to look at me in such a way as to size up how much trouble they could cause. I loved them for it. You would have, too.

I know, as well, how you would have laughed at all the bizarre and wondrous concoctions we ate. There was the standard pork tenderloin, the old faithful buttery roasted corn on the cob, but we also sampled London broil and the astounding Wisconsin Hot Cheese, which were new to me. And then there was the chocolate covered bacon.

I felt so achingly sorry for the chocolate covered bacon sellers. They stared out from the confines of their “Pigs in the Mud!” stand, stranded in a sea of angry white people. These entrepreneurs were Georgia men, and no one had bothered to tell them that pork was a religion up here. “Gross,” passers-by squealed. “Sickening!” they snorted. They waddled by the stand and gazed in horror, taking their deep-fried pizza slices out of their mouths for a few seconds just to gape without interruption. Wherever Jackson and I went on the fairgrounds for the rest of the day, without fail someone would ask, “Did you see that chaahhclitt cahvered bacon? Geeaahd. That’s just neeaahsty.” (I am still hearing people talk about what a blasphemy that “Pigs in the Mud” stand was, I kid you not.) Later, when I bent down to pick up something the bacon sellers had dropped (next to an ironically-placed trash bin strapped with the slogan “Getting Healthy is Not a Waste”), they stared at me in shock and said, “Thank you! Thank you for being so nice!” As if it was the first time anyone had been nice to them all day. I smiled at them, shot a pitiful look over at Jackson, and then pulled out my tattered Led Zeppelin wallet.

“Could we, perchance, have some chocolate covered bacon?”

“Heeeelllll yeeeeeaahh you can have some chocolate covered bacon!”

Jackson and I have not been able to convince anyone else that the “Pigs in the Mud” dish was, in fact, delicious. It was tasty, crispy red bacon, not greasy, cut in huge salty strips, then dipped lovingly in a bitter dark chocolate and dusted with powdered
sugar. The two main ingredients complimented each other better than I could have imagined, and it’s difficult to explain how yummy it was. Maybe that’s why I can’t get anyone to believe me, because I’m not doing a good job of articulating it. But I have this feeling that you would have believed me. When I close my eyes I can see you chuckling at this story, saying you’ll get Uncle Bill to make some chocolate covered bacon for me. Of course, you were always up for anything. You were the one who would put ketchup on pasta, who would be willing to try a dab of crab apple jelly on whatever you came across – who would gladly kill rattlesnakes and take them to the starving hippies on the mountain to eat. Conservative as you were, I think you were a believer in the far-out, random permutations of food; you would not limit its possibilities for the world.

It was in your honor that, much later in the day, I ordered two deep-fried Reese’s Cups. When it came to the deep-fried desserts, there were oodles of choices: Oreo, Twinkies, Snickers, elephant ears, etc. But when I saw that Reese’s Cups were an option, there was no more deliberation. Mushing through the cakey outside into the melted milk chocolate and hot peanut butterish substance at the center, I thought of what my mother had said about you once when she caught me licking a spoon of peanut butter before bed.

“Before that stroke, I would watch him go in their kitchen, sit down, and eat a whole jar of Peter Pan, right there, straight from the jar, I’m tellin’ the truth. Whole jar!”

I think she had been trying to warn me about my bad eating habits, suggesting that the peanut butter had led directly to your stroke. But at the time she told me this, my eyes widened and I clapped the empty spoon to my chest, so proud to find another thing I had in common with you – yet another one of your fussed-over attributes, like the messiness, which had skipped over my father and landed square on me.

I looked at Jackson, whose bearded face was scrunched up into a visage of Reese’s Cup nirvana, then looked back down at the crumbling hot peanut butter between my fingers, thinking of all I’d seen that day which would have pleased you. I wondered if there was, perhaps, just enough of Jackson’s culture on display here to prove that we were not so far apart – wondered, glancing back up at him, if it was in my power to reconcile the two of you, to link the life I led with you and the life I lead with him.

Then again, God knows why I’m making a case for these people, because they freak me out even more than they would you. There’s a part of me that found joy at the fair, and yet there’s another equal part (maybe the Nashville part?) that was disturbed by it. It’s possible that I had been tainted by my David Lynchian experiences with Jackson’s family, an hour from the city in the most desolate part of the state, but there were still a few things about that day which reinforced my qualms about the Hoosiers. They don’t have rules about space, for one. No one teaches them that, when you’re at a public place and someone is sitting at a picnic table, well, that’s those people’s table. In Indiana, a space is a space, free for the taking. Every time Jackson and I tried to sit down and eat something, congratulating ourselves on finding a table, we’d be beleaguered by a sounder of loud, sweaty, fleshy folk who would – I’m not even exaggerating – lean up against Jackson and me as they talked to each other. Until we finally took our Wisconsin Hot Cheese and wandered away, they would scoot us off the bench inch by inch like Arte Johnson on Laugh-In, only instead of “You want to play moongotcha?” they’d be shrieking “I told that facking batch that if she wanted Trahver she could facking have him cuz I’m tired of all this drama and shaata.” (Sorry for having to use the bad army words.)
It was just weird. A weird place. I couldn’t escape the weirdness. Outside in the crowds, we were mowed down by the flaxen-haired masses that had come to buy hot tubs and marble fountains. Ducking inside the Ag Center for refuge, we saw that there was a blue-ribbon Cole Porter doll made from lettuce leaves and squash, plus a humongous, imposing replica of the Starship Enterprise built completely from piles of canned goods. The Star Trek homage was constructed not by eager children but by forty-something working professionals at their corporate headquarters. (The Enterprise didn’t win the contest, though – it lost out to the gigantic Hungry Hungry Hippo made of Red Gold tomato cans. Foiled again! “Khaaaaaan!”) And to top it all off, in the arena where they had the cart hitching competition, there was a little old lady plunking “Somewhere My Love” on the lonely Hammond organ in the center while the Percherons kicked up the dust in circles around her, and no one else seemed to think it was the least bit surreal.

But in spite of whatever elitist sensibilities I held onto that day, brandishing them in front of me like a trembling Anglo-Saxon shield before the Scandinavian hordes (*A furore Normannorum libera nos, Domine!*), I could not help but love the cows. I loved the cows partially because I have always loved cows (who knows why – might have something to do with being born in the Year of the Ox) and partially because you loved cows. You had a herd, on the mountain, a herd of Herefords. You could not make your wife and sons love them, but in little Maggie the cattle had an everlasting fan.

But beef cattle are not like this, or yours weren’t. Yours had big googly eyes that took in their pastoral surroundings in perpetual wonder. Your cows spent their time roaming your hundred acres, nibbling, bathing, birthing, running, dreaming, with no clue as to their purpose in the bloodthirsty schemes of mankind.

But I have a friend up here in Ohio, Greta, the farmer-medievalist. About her animals, she says, “We do our best to make sure they only have one bad day.” Those words seem good to me, and I wonder if you operated with the same system. It seems like you did. After a while there were fewer and fewer cattle that actually went off to slaughter, and when it came time for them to die, in the natural fashion, they would somehow know that it was time and they’d meander back, alone, into the woods. This was also back where you and I would sojourn to find pine knots, where you thought the Indian mound was – where my walking cane fell four feet into the hollowed ground in one ghostly whoosh, and we gazed up at each other with nervous hope, like children.

You must know I miss you terribly.

I’m only aware of how the cows died because, after the long wearing-down of weather and time, you would collect their pearly skulls and deliver them to my mother, who hoarded them for artistic purposes – not so much to paint them, as O’Keeffe did, but just to hang them and adore them as they were. You, likewise, adored my mother, never got over it when the marriage fell apart. I was thinking of my mother, too, at the fair,
when we stumbled upon the exhibit with the calves; I was remembering her paintbrushes, my left palm tickled by the long white eyelashes of the little Milking Shorthorn.

It was Purdue that set up the exhibit with the babies, damn them. When, coming around a corner, unexpectedly, we were faced with the big eyes and knobbly knees and piteous moos of all those tiny dairy calves – a Holstein, a Guernsey, a Brown Swiss and a Jersey in addition to the Milking Shorthorn – of course they knew we would put a dollar in their jar so we could enter the gate and snuggle with them; of course they knew it would be a while before we could leave. No one can resist baby cows, especially not me.

I petted them all in turn. One was prissy, one was sleepy, and one was obstinately chewing on the cord that kept her tied to the metal gate. And then there was the one that angled her blue tongue around my two fingers, drew them into her mouth, and sucked.

“Ah!” said the handler, amused. “That one’s hungry, thinks you’re a bottle. Not time to feed her yet, though.”

It was the little Jersey who would not let me go, and it was my rotten luck that she was the most irresistible calf in the bunch. She was sandy-colored and the smallest of them all, her body no wider than a football, with large wispy ears and a wet black nose. I wasn’t sure what to do with her. Every time I popped my hand out of her mouth, she looked up at me and acted so pitiful that I just ended up giving her my fingers back. Jackson laughed, snapped a picture of me as I stood there and rubbed her on the head with my free hand, but a few minutes later it was he who had to pull me away physically. Any sensible person would have been bothered by her, unsettled by the rough and slobbery tugging sensation of her tongue and gums, but there was something in her plaintive blinking and sucking that made me want to stay there. If I could have but given her milk from underneath my fingernails, I would have. She was still lowing at me when I glanced over my shoulder, Jackson leading me out of the cattle barn into the sunlight.

I had not had my fingers in a cow’s mouth since I was with you on the mountain, with the cows you’d let me name. You trained me to pick a softened apple off the ground and stand still by the barbed wire, arm outstretched in a particular way, patient and calm until the timid Herefords would come up to me, one hoof at a time, and gently close their giant mouths around my hand. Jittery as they sometimes were, they would come to me – even Angelica, the grumpy cow with horns – and eat the fruit out of my palm, over and over. The untrammeled giggle of a girl would pierce the cool air up there, and you would look triumphantly at my father, the cow-doubter, the academic, then totter proudly away.

I don’t blame Dad for resenting the farm, though. It’s him that had to work for it, helping you. I was spoiled rotten. If I’d spent my summers like he had, I might have grown to hate it, too. It was only at the fair that, for the first time, I would see one aspect of the cattle trade that real farmers cope with – an aspect you’d always spared me from.

It was sometime in the early afternoon when the announcement came over the loudspeaker. If you want to see our newest arrival, they said, head towards the nursery right now! Jackson and I looked at each other, set off at a trot towards the other corner of the fairgrounds. Nothing was listed on the schedule for that time, so we wondered what kind of arrival it would be. Was it another baby cow, even newer than the others? Or a baby goat, or a baby Percheron, or something wacky like a baby platypus they got on loan from somewhere? Or a human baby made out of Red Gold tomato cans? Anything was possible at that point, as we approached the white tent where the map told us to go.
Squeezing through the crush of chatty fair-goers at the entrance, we saw a slipshod stack of metal bleachers on either side of us, and in the center was a square white metal pen filled with hay. A group of solemn farmers were crouched around whatever the arrival was, and we couldn’t see it. I tugged at Jackson’s brand new shirt (a birthday present from the morning), pointing to the bleachers with my other hand. We climbed to the very top slat before someone else could steal it, balancing precariously, Jackson’s head almost hitting the framework that held up the top of the tent. From there we could look down into the pen and see what the men were huddled around.

I gasped, grabbed onto Jackson to keep from falling off. In the pen was not something small and new but something large and ominous: a gigantic Holstein dairy cow, prostrate on the hay, surrounded by grim workers, with one man’s straining arm shoved deep inside her all the way up to his bicep. We watched him pull it out slowly, saw the long plastic glove drenched in hot pink slime. The cow’s belly was moving.

“Jackson,” I said, “you never told me this was gonna be…”

“I didn’t know!”

More pale spectators were crowding in as we murmured to each other, families especially – toddlers, little boys in baseball caps, little girls in pigtails licking cotton candy, walking right up to the pen without fear. They were coming to watch the show. It seemed we were the only ones who’d failed to understand that, when they told us to come see the new arrival, they meant that we would actually be seeing the arrival.

“Is this the kind of thing you maniacs do for fun up here???” I shrieked.

Jackson was stuttering, apologizing, offering to leave when I hushed him so we could listen to the old gloved farmer, who had taken a microphone from someone with his clean hand. The farmer gave his name, gave the cow’s name, and explained that it had been a long, stubborn labor, but said that if we bore with him and his fellers the calf should be coming in a few minutes. So we decided to bear with him. Jackson and I, atop our rickety perch, were so closed in by the crowd that we could not have left anyway, and I was growing almost as intrigued as I was repulsed by the pending procedure.

As the old man’s arm gently went back into the cow, rearranging whatever was inside her, I wondered if this was how you had done it with your cows, or if they had made out well enough on their own. Never in a million years would you have even considered letting me watch something like this, I know. You never even talked about it. I’m sure that, if it happened when I was on the mountain, I was sent inside to play with tinker toys while you hobbled out into the fields with your bucket of water and roll of duct tape and took care of it like a man. But now I was here, watching this, without you.

Chewing off the millimeter’s worth of nails I’d managed to grow over the summer, I began to worry about how catastrophic this event might be, imagined the splatters of blood and ripping of flesh – remembered how often my mother complained about my own birth, my “big Bouldin head.” The men closed in around the cow again; we could not see. Had something gone wrong? Why was it taking so long, anyway? Was it a breech calf? Is there such a thing as a breech calf? And what about her, the mother? Was this even fair to her, having us watch? Would she be alright, in the end? Or were we all going to be standing here today in the dead hot middle of Indiana watching a bloody disaster unfold? And why were these unattended children even here? Get them out of here! Where were the tinker toys when I needed them? (And where the
hell were you? And how can you blame me for worrying, because how, without your steps behind me, am I supposed to think that anything will end as it’s supposed to?)

But it was right as my teeth cut into the quick of my pinkie that Jackson, taller and better able to see, wrapped his arm around me and whispered, “Look.”

The circle of exhausted farmers opened up again, and the whole tent seemed to take in one great breath. There, behind the cow, all of us could clearly decipher a spindly set of two perfect feet, red and sticky, striking out into the world. It had begun.

“It’s coming,” said the old man.

No one else spoke anymore, and the violent tableau my mind had made soon dissipated into a scene of peace, the last thing I could have expected. The farmers rubbed the Holstein’s belly tenderly, whispered to her, massaged her muscles with handfuls of cool translucent jelly to stretch her bit by bit, pulling only in the smallest increments. They performed their ritual in rhythm, a burly, honest sort of love, pulsing and incanting like Hebrew midwives. Their patient made no sound at all, simply staring over her shoulder in expectation of her child. She never even seemed to notice we were there, we who were, by this point, focused on her baby so intently, almost as if in prayer, willing it outwards into the hay. There was no disturbance, not from other fair-goers, not from cell phones, not even from the children; there was nothing to distract us from the ankles we could see all of a sudden, followed by the knees, both illuminated softly through the tarp above our heads as through stained glass. Converged in rapture we leaned forward, held on to each other, waited for the revelation of a new pink nose. That afternoon each of us came together to receive the calf, to wish it well, and there was at least one breathless moment in that white tent when I was not apart from them, nor they from me.

“Happy birthday, Jackson,” I said.

He grinned, squeezed my hand so hard he almost broke it, looked down into the hay-filled pen and said, “Happy birthday, cow.”

It was as good a place to be born as any.

Later, of course, the farmers would deliver the baby whole, nestle it in the straw, lightly slap it on both sides, up and down, and be greeted by a furious round of applause, well-deserved. Later the old man would grab the microphone and say, “Damnit, another boy,” and I would be so pleased with him for having wanted a girl. Later the mother would stand up with ease, the hot pink remains of the birth still trailing from her, and lick her son into movement, lick him non-stop for the hour it takes to get him on his feet.

But nothing could beat that instant right after he crowned, when we saw how his cupped ears were plastered to the sides of his little black-and-white face, saw his eyes already somehow wide open, taking all of us in – when the spectators raised a hearty shout to the ceiling and I knew that this baby would, after all, be fine. I remembered then that, in spite of everything, in spite of all the improbabilities, this kind of birth keeps happening, over and over, keeps going, this unreasonable life, this cycle of things. This seed, this rightful growing, this entire living creature pushed through such a tiny space – it occurs even if I have ceased believing in it, even if you are beyond it. It flourishes, independent of me, and of you. It makes no sense. But it has worked for so long now, and it keeps on working. Even now, as I write this to you, it is working, somewhere in the earth, always, working – almost as hard as you did.