Windows and Mirrors:

A Collection of Personal Essays

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a collection of seven personal essays written by the author and headed by a critical introduction. The introduction presents an explication both of the title and of the common theme uniting the various essays, that of the writer’s attempt to understand and so empathize with the people about whom she writes, and also her desire to understand herself through writing.

This thesis includes the following titles: “The Bat and Spider,” “To Watch the Trees Grow,” “Namesake,” “Unbraided,” “Five Ways of Looking at a Cave,” “The Snow Cave,” and “The Window.”

Approved: ____________________________________________________________

Dinty W. Moore

Professor of English
To my sister, Kelli
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Introduction

A writer is working when he’s staring out of the window.

–Burton Rascoe

EARLY ON IN MY STUDY OF CREATIVE NONFICTION—which I confess was not long ago—I came across a quote by the master essayist Michel de Montaigne, who, in his magnum opus Essais (literally “Attempts”), asserts his belief in the unifying and universal experience of being human:

Every man carries the entire form of the human condition.

–Book III, “Of Repentance”

Montaigne had wanted to show, by essaying, how his own day-in and day-out experiences and ruminations were simply extensions of the broad human experience we all share. He wrote of every menial aspect of himself under the sun, from personal flaws (his obnoxious voice) to daily grievances (his itchy ears) to his wonderment at thumbs. “Others form man,” he wrote. “I only report him: and represent a particular one.” But in describing that one—himself—he taps into something more expansive: humanity. When we read Montaigne, when we recognize truth in what he tells us about himself, we read about ourselves. After all, don’t we all have personal flaws, daily grievances, and private fascinations? All are part of what we might call the human experience, or the human
condition. Reading Montaigne, we come to understand, perhaps, that human condition that unites us all.

This thorough, humanistic, and possibly narcissistic study of Montaigne’s own life functioned not only as the cornerstone of his essays but also became one of the unifying and defining characteristics of personal essays that followed over the centuries. As Phillip Lopate notes in his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, “At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience” (xxiii). This is the goal of the personal essayist: to discover the very nature of humanity by exploring the self, personal experience, and individual thought, and to use the essay as an instrument to communicate the shared human condition.

As an essayist myself, I recognize Montaigne as a part of my heritage, and I embrace his goal of reflecting the human condition by exploring the personal circumstances of one’s own life, a feat not easily accomplished. I used to essay to explain myself—my personality, my beliefs and values, my history. This rather narrow and uninteresting approach is a common way for beginning nonfictionists to enter into the personal essay, and so I excuse my younger self. Now, I essay to *understand* myself, my world, and the people in it. As I do, the essay becomes a window, the instrument I use to frame my memories and examine them. I sit behind the glass and watch, diligent and contemplative, as the memory replays, and I reconstruct it on the page, artfully, yes, but more important, in pursuit of truth. Through the window, I am able to gain insight into the lives of others. My goal is to understand what is happening on the other side of the
glass, to comprehend and sympathize with the people about whom I write, and ultimately, I admit, to understand myself and how I too reflect the human condition we call universal.

The key to moving beyond the personal and achieving the universal lies in sympathy. Writer Vivian Gornick defines sympathy in her book *The Situation and the Story*: “Sympathy is simply that level of empathetic understanding that endows the subject with dimension. The empathy that allows us, the readers, to see the ‘other’ as the other might see him or herself is the empathy that provides movement in the writing” (35). As I write, I endeavor to sympathize with my characters and, by extension, their real-life counterparts. For some subjects, developing sympathy is easy. When I write about my sister in “Unbraided,” for example, I have a good deal of insight already into her character—I grew up with her, I talk with her frequently, we share our thoughts and feelings with one another freely. In short, she is one of the people in my life whom I believe I know, and know well. However, as I sit down to write and examine her through the window of the essay, she is redefined, and I am able to gain deeper insight into why she is a different person from the one I knew as a girl. I am able to move from sympathy toward empathy, which, if I am successful in the writing, lends dimension and realism to her as the subject of the essay.

For many subjects, sympathy is not so easy. For instance, whereas my sister and I, for much of our childhoods and youths, led very similar lives, my mother and I did not. The essay “Namesake” exposes my struggle to understand the woman she is and the life she has led. I do this in an effort to close what distance there is between us. Even more emotional distance separates me and Adamle, the childhood friend of my younger brother,
a boy with whom I have interacted fewer than five times in my whole life and who likely has no real memory of me; but in the essay “The Bat and Spider,” I watch Adamle through the window and try to understand why he destroyed the spider’s web.

The art of rendering realistic and engaging characters and a sympathetic author-narrator is vital to an essay’s success. Gornick writes, “In nonfiction . . . the absence of sympathy is startling—and fatal” (34). She later continues, “In all imaginative writing sympathy for the subject is necessary not because it is the politically correct or morally decent posture to adopt but because an absence of sympathy shuts down the mind: engagement fails, the flow of association dries up, and the work narrows” (35). Without sympathy, the relationship between author and reader suffers: the narrator is viewed as untrustworthy, unlikeable, and unrelatable—the universal cannot be achieved.

An author assiduously striving to understand the characters within her narrative, however, fosters a relationship of trust between herself and her reader. This relationship is also a critical one and, according to Lopate, is developed through candid contemplation and honest confession, which promotes a feeling of familiarity and confidence. Lopate writes:

The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. . . . Through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies, the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue—a friendship, if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship. (xxiii)
The friendship between author and reader makes the achievement of the universal more apparent, as not only is the essayist revealed as sympathetic, but the reader’s own sympathies are awakened—he sees himself in the author, even though his circumstances may be different, and the two are connected by their shared part in the human condition.

As I try to achieve sympathy, however, I quickly encounter complications. How can I truly understand the people on the other side of the window? I know my sister well, but am I presenting her on the page as honestly as she would present herself? Do I ever truly come to understand my mother? And are my insights into Adamle’s destructive impulses accurate? The window is an invaluable instrument of discovery—it permits me access to their worlds; but at the same time it is an impassable divide; I can get close to the truth of who they are, but I will always be limited in how much I can know them because I have no direct access to their minds, emotions, or pasts. Is sympathy necessarily restricted as well?

Overcoming the limitation of direct access inherent in the window metaphor (i.e., in the essay) requires me to rely on two interactive tools: first, imagination; and second, my own vantage point, or the past experiences and personal understanding of the human condition that I bring to the essay.

Imagination is deeply embedded in all personal essays; if not for imagination, there would be no essay, for it is woven into the fabric that is memory. As Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola explain in their book *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction*, “Memory, in a sense, is imagination: an ‘imagining’ of the past, re-creating the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches” (82). Essayists consistently engage in the
imaginative process even as they are recalling memory and aiming to relate actual circumstances, moods, and people. For example, in “The Snow Cave,” I rely on a combination of memory and imagination to recreate the inside of the icy hollow of the cave, the tremble-inducing cold, and my feelings of mounting anxiety and panic. Gornick describes this type of writing, where I, as a persona within the essay, am the central focus: “The writing we call personal narrative is written by people who, in essence, are imagining only themselves: in relation to the subject at hand” (6). She states that the “connection is an intimate one; in fact, it is critical.” But because in these segments of the essay the sole subject is myself, I am more adept at speaking convincingly of that experience that is uniquely my own than I would be if I were relating the experience of the girl lying next to me in that cave.

More difficult is recreating the character of the expert mountaineer, Stacy Taniguchi, with whom I had only occasional interactions. When I relate his story of summiting Mount Everest, the only memory I have to draw on is his, which comes to me filtered through storytelling. Because I was not present with him, memory will not serve me as well as imagination. I want to reconstruct Stacy’s experience on the mountain as genuinely as I can, but how can I know what he was thinking? What was he feeling? What fears and desires did he experience in that crucial moment of indecision?

What do I see when I watch Stacy through the window?

I engage sympathy. I imagine what I would have felt had I been in his place. I put myself in his snow boots and adjust his heavy pack on my back and try to feel the same fears and desires I imagine he felt. I am able to do this because feeling these emotions is
an attribute of being human; though the situation on Everest was personal and unique to him, the universal experiences—fear and desire—enable me to stand on common ground and understand, at least to some degree, what Stacy experienced.

Imagination is also my primary vehicle for sympathy in “Five Ways of Looking at a Cave,” where I contemplate the final moments of the life of a Native American separated from me by two thousand years. Throughout the essay, I try to unravel the mystery of dying. With regards to this ultimate human experience, I suggest within the essay itself that “curiosity . . . is only natural, almost instinctive,” and so directly engage the universal. My window here is set in a cave and framed around those who have died, and it functions as a divider between life and death. Because I cannot experience death for myself (and then write about it), imagination is my only access.

Aiding my imagination is the second tool I have for overcoming the limitations of sympathy: my own vantage point, or the persona I construct on the page. This persona is imbued with my own history and relationships, values and beliefs, shortcomings and grievances. Gornick calls the “I” the “instrument of illumination” (7), but it is a very specific type of illumination, colored according to the construct of the persona. My vantage point is necessarily different from any other writer approaching the same essay—we look through different windows and experience different angles of vision. Though we all might take part in the human condition, our individual writing is shaped by our individual pasts and personalities, and the realities we present are likewise shaded with different hues.
Miller and Paola compare this concept of vantage point and the use of “I” in the personal narrative to photography, a sort of visual essay, and explore the disadvantages inherent in the form:

A useful way of looking at how creative nonfiction employs the “I” is to align the genre with photography. Both photography and creative nonfiction operate under the “sign of the real” . . . ; both operate as though the medium itself were transparent. In other words, when you look at a photograph, you are lulled into the illusion that you see the world as it is—looking through a window, as it were—but in reality you are being shown a highly manipulated version of that world. The same is true with nonfiction. Because it operates under the sign of the real, it can be easy to mistake the essay as presenting life itself, without adulteration. (75–76)

Perhaps the reality presented is adulterated by the restrictive vantage point of the “I,” but it is this “I” that allows for the subject to be explored in the first place and for sympathy to arise between author and subject, and author and reader. The narrator on the page is able to ask questions, struggle with personal flaws and weaknesses, engage with other characters, express frustration and wonderment, and sometimes reach conclusions, all while taking the reader, who accepts the author’s view through the window, along the journey toward understanding and truth.

Truth is, indeed, one of the primary concerns of the nonfictionist. As E. B. White writes in his introduction to his collection of essays, “There is one thing the essayist cannot do. . . . He cannot indulge himself in deceit or in concealment, for he will be
found out in no time” (x). Essayists must be truthful about their observations, and the essay is a window into the truth of the people who populate the essay. Looking beyond the glass, I study them, imagine their thoughts and feelings, and come to sympathize with them. In this, I hope I am successful. But when my eyes shift focus and I concentrate on the glass itself, I see a reflection of myself, unable to be concealed. The window becomes a mirror, and by examining that mirror I can come to discover the truth of myself.

What can be said of the essayist who notices the scent of her sister’s hands or who remembers every tree her family ever planted? What does she reveal about herself when she describes her grandmother as “difficult” or disadvantaged women as “scroungers”? An essay need not be a direct inspection of the self (the narrator-persona) to divulge who the essayist is at the core; in fact, Miller and Paola argue that how the essayist writes about any given subject serves as a reflection, once again comparing the essay to a photograph: “A good photograph will mirror the inner vision of the photographer, just as a good essay will reflect the unique sensibility of the writer, whether or not that writer focuses on material interior to the self” (76).

What I see in others as I come to empathize with them is a reflection of who I truly am, and in this way I discover the truth of myself. Focusing on the negative in my mother reveals the negative in me: I learn that I am unduly critical, petty, and proud. Watching the death of the Native American man—over and over again in my mind—exposes my own interest in or obsession with dying. Examining my sister’s new love uncovers my keen sense of something lost and nothing gained. In relating Stacy’s adventure on the top of the world, I make known my eagerness for adventure, heroism,
and triumph. Even focusing on my family’s trees as characters is a window through
which I reflect on how transience has shaped me.

At the same time, any failure to empathize also reveals the truth of the writer. The
persona who has only negative interactions with her grandmother, who makes little effort
to understand this character within the story, bares her prejudices as surely as if she had
written the very word prejudice to describe herself. She cannot hide herself behind the
text, because any discerning reader will see her reflected clearly in the glass.

The window (or essay), then, functions as a mirror in which I can see and
examine myself. I may find the face staring back at me disagreeable, blemished, and
disturbing; then again, in some cases, I might see something beautiful. The reflection
causes the essay to become personal: careful readers learn as much about me, the writer,
as they do about my subject. And, if I have done my job right, they will also see in me
what Montaigne calls “the entire form of the human condition.” As I achieve sympathy
with my characters, and my readers with me, we come to recognize the universal that
connects us all.
Works Cited


The Bat and Spider

I REMEMBER ADAMLE, the childhood friend of my younger brother. He walks down the streets of my memory swinging a wooden bat at his side. In our flower garden, a black-and-yellow garden spider has made her web. It stretches more than fifty inches from the top railing of the porch down into the yew bushes—we have patiently observed its construction over the last week. Thin lines, finer than hair, shine softly under the sun and reveal the intricate spirals and shoots of the web of the master spinner. Charlotte, we have named her, and we talk about her around the dinner table.

We find her dead in the evening, my younger brother crying on the porch. Adamle wanted to break the web, he tells us. The boy had seen its weakness, its tenuous wholeness. He had seen how easily it could all be undone. I had seen it, too. So why the force? Why the bat? And why, after destroying her delicate home, had he chased its maker as she fled, skittering down the porch bricks and across the weeded garden? There, between the crushed marigolds, we find her body smeared, the bat deserted. Adamle had run away when my brother screamed. Flimsy traces of floss-like web still cling to the bat and flutter, unhinged, from the porch railing. I stare. I had been waiting for its ruin.
To Watch the Trees Grow

I. Sycamore

Along the borders of the field at Plymouth Elementary used to stand a dozen large sycamores. I say, used to. Not long after my family moved away, they were chopped, though I’m not sure why. I seem to recall complaints from homeowners whose property butted up against the field that the trees were messy and littered their well-manicured lawns with leaves from spring through fall. Or maybe they were felled to make room for the new phone and cable lines that ran from the street to a newly developing neighborhood row of condominiums. Whatever the reason, they were gone, and the field was left bare, and within a few short years the children at Plymouth never even guessed that the sycamores were missing.

I spent only three years at that school, kindergarten through second grade, and I took the presence of those trees for granted. I played around them almost every recess. With my friend Gina, I collected fallen twigs, snapping them in half to discover the five-point star inside, which we supposed was good luck. In the fall, we made nests of the fallen leaves and for thirty minutes believed we were birds. We peeled off scraps of spotted white bark and used them as currency in our make-believe mall. And when others
came to join us in our play, the wide trunks became home base in games of Mother, May I? and Tag.

To my eyes, the trees were giants, and that is how I will always remember them. Strong and silent giants, holders of memory. It is unreasonable, I know, but I believe that if my family had never left that town, somehow, the trees would still be there. But we did leave. Over the course of my childhood, we left a lot of places. We planted trees wherever we went, maples and spruces and birches, but we were never around long enough to watch them grow.

II. Crabapple

The Taylorsville house was the first my parents ever built, though it was their sixth home since marrying. For me, the third of five children, it was my fourth. I remember celebrating my fourth birthday in that house, sitting in the old blue rocker, wearing a frilly purple dress, and peeling away wrapping paper from My Little Ponies. Our neighborhood was in the early stages of development and all the houses were new, and—Utah being the desert that it is—all of the trees were new, too.

Mom and Dad planted a crabapple in the front yard when I was four, maybe five. It flowered but it never grew. Not while we lived there. It was on the opposite side of the driveway, in the lesser patch of lawn, an area too small to play on. On the larger side, my older sister, Kelli, and I created our wonderland. In the winter it was the breeding ground of snowmen and in the hot summer months our own version of a water park. When Dad wasn’t around to help us with the Slip ’n’ Slide, we would set up the sprinkler, the kind
that connects to a long, green garden hose and waves water back and forth, first in front, then in back, a dozen individual streams of glistening arches. It was like magic. When the water bridged away, shooting toward the East, we jumped, passing through the enchanted gateway and into a new world, one of unearthly wonders and fantastical creatures. But eventually, when Mom called us inside for lunch, or when the cooling August evening put an end to our play, we had to cross back into the real world. To go back home, back to our ordinary front yard where the gateway was just an ordinary sprinkler, we had to jump through again, this time when the arches glittered westward. That was the rule, established and fixed, and we never thought to do anything to the contrary.

I was still young, only eight, when we moved away from that house, before the neighborhood kids started doing drugs, before the horse fields became stretches of pavement and cookie-cutter houses, before the sycamores at Plymouth were destroyed. Our family was growing and we needed more room. I didn’t think much of what I was leaving behind—my best (fair-weather) friend Gina, fifty-cent ice cream sandwiches from the dairy at the end of the road, the scones Mrs. DeRose gave all the trick-or-treaters in place of candy, my bedroom with its four pink walls—but on occasion we’ve been able to go back and stare at the old place from behind car windows as we slowly roll by, wondering if anyone will see us, recognize us.

“That’s where Colin dropped the brick on his toe,” I recall.

“The Clawsons lived right over there,” says Dad.

“Do you think our handprints are still in the cement under the basketball hoop?” asks Kelli.
“Look at our crabapple,” says Mom. “See how big it’s gotten?” She sounds disappointed. “It never grew for us.”

I don’t care much about that tree, not like she does. I don’t remember the day it was planted.

III. Apple Tree

In my grandparents’ backyard stands an apple tree and in the front four large sycamores. Dad lived his whole childhood there on Ellis Street while the rest of the world grew up around him. The house itself is a character in his history, and every room holds a thousand stories. Dad never tires of telling us how Grandpa had converted the garage into a dining room, or added a second story, or built the tool shed out back. His favorite tale is of digging out the basement with a shovel and transporting all the dirt out on a conveyor belt. I know he is telling the truth, because when I go down the uneven steps into the basement, I explore. The floor of the fruit room is bumpy, gravelly, and all the cupboards in the walls open to tunnels of dirt, never-finished storage units. I think what fun it will be to show my future children the secrets of the house I grew up in. At ten, I believe that this will be our newest home—for me, house number six—in South Jordan. We’ve been there for almost a full year.

The backyard apple tree had been an anniversary gift to my grandparents from my Uncle Wayne and his first wife. I’ve seen an old, brown photo of it when it was still a sapling, Grandpa standing beside it holding a shovel, having just set it into the earth. I came to know it many years later, when it stood almost as tall as the two-story house.
Grandpa hid Easter eggs among the lower branches for us grandkids to hunt, and Grandma enlisted our services for plucking apples in the summer and storing them in boxes. I was always disappointed in the apples: they never grew larger than the size of my tiny closed fist, their color hovered between mossy green and almost-red, and they tasted perfectly sour. Of course, Grandma did tell me not to eat them. They were Jonathan apples, she said—whatever those were—and she used them only for jams and pies.

Aside from its fruit value, it was a great tree for climbing. I didn’t have such a tree in my own yard at home, so going to Grandma and Grandpa’s satisfied my childhood urge to climb the irregular rungs of a tree ladder and stand on the shoulders of giants. A small thing myself, I was impressed by the grandeur of an apple tree that was not really that large, the permanence of a plant that had been standing less than twenty years, the beauty of a thing my grandfather called ugly. I never separated the tree from the house, and the house was intimately connected with my grandparents. I was too young to envision a day when the house would be empty of them and the tree would become the property of someone who had not even planted it.

IV. Globe Willow

In our new house, in a developing neighborhood, we were required to plant two columnar maples alongside the street as part of the neighborhood code. They grew up, not out, and would never grow into good climbing trees. Mom hated the trees, and so
when one died and had to be uprooted, her attitude was *good riddance*, and we never replaced it.

My parents made the rest of the yard our own. The process was slow.

Two years after we had moved in, Dad finally put in the front lawn. The ground was so dry and rocky that we spent countless hours raking rocks, shoveling rocks into the wheelbarrow, and carting rocks away to the truck to be got rid of. I don’t know to where. The work was hard and for many weeks dominated our cherished Saturdays, but we trusted that the work would be worth it in the end, that we would enjoy the fruits of our labors for many years to come.

After soiling, seeding, and a season of watering, we finally had grass strong enough to step on. Mom and Dad went to the nursery and brought home two honey locusts and a redbud. To me they were little more than long sticks and a smattering of leaves; I couldn’t quite grasp what they would grow into, but I knew they wouldn’t be good for much more than shade. I held onto a promise that Dad made me, that when we finished the backyard, he would plant a giant, a tree I could climb, hang a tire swing from, and sleep under. He promised me a globe willow.

After dinner one night, the summer before I entered the seventh grade, Dad kept us all at the table for a family talk. “A lot of things are changing in my company right now, and to keep my job, I’ve had to submit my name to other positions.” I felt his words before I heard them, and my chest seemed to deflate within me, as if all my air had been sucked out with a vacuum. “Today, official decisions were made. They’re relocating me to Colorado.”
I cried. I was the only one at the table who did. It became apparent to me that Kelli and Jacob had been forewarned of the possibility, and Colin and Sam were still too young to appreciate all its implications. Again, we were being uprooted. Again, I would start at a new school, friendless in an unfamiliar environment. New house, new city, new state. Leaving behind what we had worked so hard to build, only to rebuild it all again. I hated it, this transience. I felt like the rock being kicked ahead by a child on a trail, and whenever I came to a rest, it was only a matter of time before that child reached me again and gave me another kick, sending me bouncing wildly into an unknown future.

To sell the house, to increase its value and interest to potential buyers, we had to finish the backyard. There were so many rocks to rake that we were certain our land had once been a riverbed, ten thousand years ago, before the sun baked everything to sand. I dug the rake into the dust and stones, grinding my teeth to hear the grating *chink chink chink* of rock against steel prongs, repeated over and over. What were the fruits of this arduous labor? They would not be mine. Again, we soiled and seeded and watered, and while the tiny blades sprouted we forbidden to play in the backyard. I didn’t want to be back there anyway.

In the northwest corner, Dad planted his promised willow.

That November, we moved. I have since been back to that now-developed neighborhood. All the lots have been bought, and no lot stands empty. Several “For Sale” signs are posted in the yards, but many of the people I once knew are still there, and the streets look virtually unchanged but for the now large columnar maples lining the sidewalks.
I pull onto my old street, feeling so strangely the stranger in this place I once called home. As I approach number 3772, I ease off the accelerator and let the car roll by the house. They have painted the door and taken out the basketball hoop. New curtains frame the edges of what used to be my bedroom window, coloring the room so I don’t recognize it anymore. And they’ve built a fence, preventing me from seeing all I had hoped to. It’s made of stone, but I can still peer over it and see, in the backyard, a full and flowering globe willow.

* See how big it’s gotten?

Not for us. I turn my face back to the road and speed away.

V. Pine

I can’t remember any of the trees we planted in Colorado. Mom says we put in a few more honey locusts, but I couldn’t say where. We weren’t there long enough.

My parents had bought a spec home in yet another new and developing neighborhood, and the pine trees that were planted along the greenbelt between houses weren’t even as tall as I was yet. They wouldn’t even make for a decent Christmas tree. It was a nice house, probably the nicest we would ever own, and the college town of Fort Collins was clean and friendly. I dug my heels in and made instant friends, determined to get to know the place where I would finish middle school, learn to drive, get my first job, go to prom, and graduate. It would be years before I would learn just how unhappy Dad was in his new job and wanted to leave it, how passionately Jacob pined for our old home
and his last girlfriend, or that Colin was daily suffering the bullies at his new school. We stayed only eighteen months.

VI. Locust

I counted them up, once we got to Indiana and settled precariously into our newest house. Including all rental homes while waiting for a house to be built, as well as that several-months’ stay with Grandma and Grandpa when the family’s financial situation was no good, I had lived in eleven houses in the span of only fourteen years.

“Oh, it hasn’t been that many,” Dad responded when I told him this.

I listed them for him, ticking them off on my fingers and having to reuse a thumb: Oconomowoc, West Point, Layton, Taylorsville, West Jordan, South Jordan, Fort Collins (two houses), Delphi, Lafayette, and West Lafayette. He looked guilty. I wished I had sounded a little less accusatory, but I wanted him to know it all the same, how ephemeral our lives had been across so many moves. Our frequent moving has become a family joke, an indelible part of our history and character. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like, though, to remain in one spot long enough for my roots to latch firmly onto the soil. At least, long enough to watch the trees grow.

When people ask me where I am from, I never quite know how to answer. “I was born in Wisconsin,” I sometimes say, or other times I will cite the home I most recently occupied. For most people, whose question had been one less of interest than polite inquiry, this will suffice. Still, I can’t help but feel like I’m lying, to them as much as to myself. I have no true hometown, or at least no single hometown, and I don’t expect that
I ever will. Since graduating high school, I have not stayed in one home for more than eight months together. I leave notebooks and journals in boxes and socks and winter clothes in suitcases.

After the period of only a few months in any one place, I get restless and begin to idly shop around for the next apartment. I have adopted one of my parents’ favorite pastimes: looking at houses. I like to pick up floor plans from boxes in front of houses that are for sale and read descriptions of amenities. I take note of which trees they have chosen to grace their lawns, looking for the familiar locusts Mom has long favored. When I hear that someone is moving, I ask questions about their new home: How much property does it stand on? What is the square footage? Does it have a full basement, a three-car garage, eight- or nine-foot walls? But I worry that no one will ever have the need to ask me those questions. I don’t envision a future in which I am settled enough to buy a house.

Transience is more familiar than stability, and with that perspective I approach life. Don’t get too comfortable. Don’t form strong attachments. I make new friends wherever I go with practiced ease but with the understanding that my friendships will last only a short time before we say goodbye. Don’t care too much. You won’t be here long enough to care. After a short while, I will move on, leaving nothing behind to hold me in memory.
VII. Giants

In West Lafayette, we built house number eleven on an acre lot of a veritable forest—trees had to be cleared away to make room for the house. But Dad left the backyard full of them. This excited me as much as any feature of the house itself. In September all the leaves began to turn, and October reds and oranges splashed through the windows on every wall. I spent hours in the backyard, swinging in the hammock Jacob had brought home from two years in Guatemala (one of his temporary homes), staring into the leafy canopy, wondering how long my trees had stood there, taller than the world around them, reaching for the clouds, enduring the lashing rains and whipping winds of the changing seasons. Their roots were deep, their memories long. In the front Mom planted a redbud, an ornamental pear, and a silver maple, but they weren’t nearly so wonderful as the giants that were already there, so long before we were. I was happy to become a part of their history, which was now a part of mine.

I drove by the West Lafayette house with Mom, a year or so after we left it. The new owners of our latest “old house” had painted Mom’s country-red front door a cornflower blue and replaced the outer sconces of the garage with more contemporary designs. The silver maple had grown so large that it hid half the house. Around back, we saw, they had cleared the forest in favor of a wide stretch of grass. The giants had been felled.
I had lived sixteen years with my middle name before I learned that I had been mispronouncing it all along.

“Tree-sa,” Grammy corrects me upon hearing me say it ter-ee-sa. “Two syllables. Tree-sa. That’s how we say it in Scotland.”

On the couch beside her, my mother shakes her head and sighs out her breath slowly. She is getting a headache but can’t stop herself from arguing. “She’s saying it fine, Mom. That’s how we say it in America.”

Grammy harrumphs, her hands coming up in a gesture that on anyone else would have signified surrender. “It’s a Scottish name,” she says. Her accent becomes suddenly pronounced. “Shouldn’t I know? It’s my name.”

When naming children, the tradition in my family is to give a family name as the middle name. Of the five of us, four were named for the men and women on my father’s side of the family. I am the only one to carry the name of someone on my mother’s side.

“Well, it’s her name, too,” says Mom. She is trying to be off-handed, but I feel her annoyance radiating off of her as if she’s a space heater.

“Tree-sa,” I repeat amiably to keep the temperature in the room down.
But Mom is riled and won’t let it alone. “At least it’s a normal middle name. I got stuck with Canham.”

“It’s a family name,” says Grammy.

“It’s a surname, Mom. And you gave Kathi Baragwanath. Little girls aren’t supposed to have middle names like Canham and Baragwanath.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“You gave Linda ‘Joan,’ and Annette got ‘Margaret!’”

“So?”

The volume in the room is escalating.

“So why did they get real names?”

“You’ve never appreciated anything I’ve given you.”

“Canham, Mom? Canham?”

“I was honoring my ancestors.”

Mom sits back into the couch and flips the page of her magazine hard. “Sure, Mom,” she mutters.

Grammy puts her hands on her knees to push herself into a standing position. She swings her head from side to side, her hands waving in mock defeat. She leaves the room without a word, to pace the backyard or take another one of her walks around the block.

Mom tears a page. “You’ll tell me if I ever get like that,” she says.

I am a senior in high school, nearly graduated, when I find the photograph, lying on the top of a tall stack of family photos Mom is scanning into the computer as part of
her never-ending genealogy project. I am in the center of the photo. My long brown hair falls over both shoulders and my head is cocked coquettishly to one side; my smile brightens my face and crinkles my eyes into lines darkened by lashes and a fuzzy camera lens. I’m sitting an orange-bricked courtyard with friends on either side of me.

I frown—I cannot remember ever sitting this photo. I don’t recognize the courtyard, or the girls and guys surrounding me. A heartbeat later, I realize that the blue-and-brown striped shirt I wear, the brown corduroy pants, and the penny loafers aren’t mine. I’ve never been to that courtyard. I’d never met any of those kids.

With a jolt, I realize that the girl featured in the center of the photograph isn’t even me. It’s Mom.

“Oh, wow,” I say.

At that moment, Mom comes into the room. I hold the photo out to her. “Mom, did you see this?”

She takes it and smiles. “Oh yeah. This is from my senior year. We’re sitting in the Senior Commons—I’ve told you about the Senior Commons, haven’t I? In my high school in Tulare? That was my best friend Michelle—you know her—and that’s Marty Gomez, and Mike Olson, and . . . oh, what was her name?”

“No, look at it. Look at you. You look just like me.”

She looks a little harder at the photo, then at me, then back again. “You know what,” she says, “you’re right.”

“I mean, it’s uncanny. I thought this was me.” I can’t quite emphasize how startling this is.
Mom merely smiles and shrugs. She seems pleased.

I simply can’t let this go. I show the photo to Dad, who comments on how beautiful my mother had been at my age, giving me a wink. I show it to my older sister, Kelli, who many people have at one time or another thought was my twin, but she just laughs, thinking the resemblance humorous. And finally, I show it to my grandmother. But Grammy is the least impressed. “Well, of course you look like her. You’re her daughter! Who did you think you would look like?”

Josephine Teresa Magurn Forman, my mother’s mother and Grammy to the whole family, has always been—for lack of a kinder word—difficult. Understanding this was part of my early childhood education, and we are all well versed in the do’s and don’t’s of spending a holiday with Grammy. As far as conversations go, the list of off-limit subjects is interminable: religion, politics, movies made post-1959, her failed marriage, her smoking problem, Blacks or Hispanics, World War II, and all them new-fangled gadgets she never bothered to learn how to work, like a DVD player. We are allowed to ask her about the miserable childhood she endured, or to commiserate about how inexcusably long the grocery store line is, or to nod sympathetically but with tight lips when she complains about how the jackasses in Washington are destroying the country. Most recently, we have learned to frown with pity at every mention of her knees or hips or eyesight or any other bodily malady that comes with old age.

As a girl, I often heard Mom complain about Grammy’s unbearable selfishness and insatiable need to be loved: how she had refused to learn to drive and instead
imposed herself on family and neighbors; how she had embarrassed the entire dinner party by griping about the food service in a restaurant, or the draftiness in our corner booth, or the policy of not accepting personal checks; how she took offense because her nine-year-old grandson wasn’t wild about the clothes she bought him for his birthday and held a grudge about it over the next two decades. When she is not with us, we groan about holidays and graduations spent with her, and when she is, we are careful to hold our tongues.

Mom is never slow to stress how unlike her mother she is. For her, it is a source of pride.

“She so ungrateful,” Mom says over dinner. She has just gotten off the phone with Grammy. Like usual, there was a lot of shouting—Mom had been trying to explain that the email machine we got her for Christmas is *not* a computer and is easy to use. It will help her keep in touch with her family. I think the gift was a bad idea.

This launches us into another session of Grammy-bashing, at the conclusion of which, Mom asks, “I hope I never become like her. I’m *not* like her, am I?”

We assure her that no, of course not, *nothing* like Grammy. She seems mollified.

We are too shy to mention the moments when she is *exactly* like Grammy.

I had never seen much of Mom in me. No one had ever told us that we looked much alike. Until I saw the photo, I had never believed there was any reason for them to. The closest I had ever come to being mistaken for her was over the phone.

“Hello?”
“Hi, Claire!”

Withholding a sigh. “Just a minute, I’ll go get her.”

“Oh, sorry! Is this Holly? You just sound so much like your mother.”

On the flip side of that coin, I have often overheard Mom being mistaken for me:

“Hello?” Pause. “This is she.” Pause. “I know! Everyone always tells me I sound just like her!”

For some reason, this thrilled her, to sound twenty-five years younger. She never considered how it was to be on the opposing end of the field, being thought twenty-five years older. Even over the phone, an eighteen-year-old girl should never sound forty-three.

I take the photo to my room in the basement to stare at it. What has captivated me like this I can’t say, but I simply cannot look away. I cock my head from one side to the other, like I am scrutinizing a piece of incomprehensible contemporary art. If I squint just a little, I am able to fit her face with other pictures I have seen of her from her high school and early college years, and then I see Mom. But if turn the picture just slightly counter-clockwise, I see in her my own smile, my same crinkled eyes spaced the same distance apart, and my same long, brown hair. We could have been twins.

And at some point, this young girl of eighteen whom I see frozen in a moment of contentment had become different, virtually unrecognizable. Something had changed.

With a stab of dread, I think, Is she the woman I will become?

I stand up quickly and, photo in hand, go in search of the family albums.

* * *
Mom stands at about 5’1, a full foot shorter than Dad. I have long considered my own 5’6 height a blessing inherited from him, one bestowed upon all their children. Once Sam, the youngest, turned twelve, Mom officially became the shortest member of the family. I hold my position as the tallest female proudly, passing Kelli by only an inch. We tease Mom about her shortness, especially when the capris she buys fit her more like pants and her long-sleeve sweatshirts have to be rolled four or five times to give her free use of her hands. Her feet don’t quite touch the floor when she sits in a deep couch, and the driver’s seat always has to be pulled up to its final notch so that she can reach the brakes. She complains about it when she struggles to reach higher shelves or the top of the fridge, but this is endearing to us, not least because we are grateful that the rest of us stand taller.

One of the first photos I come to is also among the earliest. It is Mom and Dad’s engagement photo. It was taken by the botany pond south of BYU campus, a place they both point out whenever we drive past it. In the photo Mom wears a mauve, velvety dress and Dad a brown suit. Her hair falls just past her shoulders and flips up at the ends, and her bangs sweep across her forehead in imitation of Dad’s, whose classic seventies-style haircut makes me smirk. Her arms drape daintily over his shoulders as she looks up into his smiling face. Her own is young, slim, and beautiful. They are almost eye level with one another, and I remember the story: Mom stood on a rock and Dad was in a hole, and thus was the height difference resolved for the picture.

Turning the page, I come to their wedding photos, and I marvel to think that my parents had ever been so young. Even so, looking into Mom’s elegant, glowing face on
that day, I see only her. I look back at her teenage photo to recapture myself in her image, and then once again at the glowing bride. Only Mom. Had so much changed during the few short years between two photos?

A few pages later, I come to a photo of Mom holding a baby: Jacob, my oldest brother. Here the change is astounding. Less than a year after her wedding, and her hair is cut short, her clothes are the frumpy browns and blues of the later 1970s, and her hip protrudes outward where she carries Jacob at her side. I know those hips; they are my hips. But the face I recognize as Mom’s, the one I see every day of my life, if only younger. I can no longer see myself at all.

The photos show the progression of a dozen years rapidly. After Jacob comes Kelli, then me, and then Colin. Mom’s hair goes from short to long to bobbed to permed, and with every new child she puts on more weight. She becomes rounder below the breasts and wider in the hips, and her once-slim face fleshes out and droops. Then, six years after Colin, she has her last baby, Sam. She is fat, and she isn’t coming back from that. I pull a face and close the photo album.

For a while during my younger years, Grammy did not live far from us, and Sundays would frequently find us over at her place for dinner. Her condo had a very distinct odor, which I attributed to “old woman,” until Mom corrected me by informing me that Grammy was a secret smoker, and the smell was a mixture of tobacco and a perfumed aerosol used to cover it up. Being Scottish, she also drank liberal amounts of
Both were bad, to my young understanding, and only aided to the general understanding that Grammy was, on the whole, a bad person.

I am seven, and we enter her tobacco-and-lilac smelling condo and sit on the pale blue sofa, me, Mom, and my brothers and sister. I can tell Mom is nervous. She sits on the edge of the sofa, her hands clasped tightly together, her head bobbing slightly up and down as she searches for the words. There is a tension in the room, so potent that even Colin, who was only five, is still and somber. “Mom,” she says, “I have some news.”

At the word “pregnant,” Grammy startles me by rising to her feet and, without one word of response, walks away and into the kitchen. The reaction is a bad one, and I watch with wide eyes as Mom takes a deep breath to steady her emotions. Then she turns to us. “Kids, go wait in the car.”

The car is too warm and the four of us are quiet, uneasy. I wish my older brother would say something. The minutes drag; Colin grows restless and starts kicking the seat in front of him and I stare at the closed door, waiting. When Mom finally comes out, she is in tears. Grammy follows her, hobbling gingerly along in her house slippers as though she walks on glass. “Claire! Claire!” she calls, but Mom doesn’t turn back. Through the open car window, I hear her cry back to her mother, “Why can’t you just be happy for me?”

Mom hates shopping for clothes. I do, too, but mostly because I hate shopping period. I think this dislike stems from hours upon mind-numbing hours spent in fabric stores as a kid, waiting with fruitless impatience for Mom to finish flipping through
clothes patterns, walking up and down aisles and aisles of bolts of fabric, picking through buttons and threads and needles and bobbins and whatever else so fascinated her in those places.

When she must, when her old jeans finally become too worn for public viewing and her shirts sport too many holes at the armpits and the seams, she ventures unhappily into the petite section of a JCPenney’s or Kohl’s. Or a Wal-Mart. Nothing too nice. But as a short, fat woman, nothing ever fits her right. She grows frustrated easily, tries on one item—maybe—and leaves the store quickly, feeling discouraged and depressed.

I am twenty-one. I stand in a changing stall and squeeze myself into a size six jeans, turning from side to side to see if my gut is being pressed flat enough. Size eight is a better fit, but I’ll always try a six first, and as long as I can manage it, that’s what I’ll buy. I like to give the illusion that I am a skinny girl, but I know myself in the shower. I do not like to see myself naked, for every untrimmed curve and too-soft bulge when I sit or bend over portends my future as a fat woman. My gut worries me the most.

I saw hers once, through the fabric of her white-with-pink-flowers pajama bottoms. Often, when she wears the right clothes, her chubbiness is hidden, and I can convince myself that she is not that overweight. Maybe just twenty or thirty pounds. But then I saw it. She was bending over to pick something up off the ground and the light from the window behind her shone through, revealing to me the sagging, fatty gut that her jeans usually held in place, or her Sunday skirts hid altogether. I had to look away, sucking in my own stomach as I did. What does she see when she stands in front of the mirror? Or has she stopped looking?
Sometimes I put a hand over my gut and wonder how large it will grow.

At Thanksgiving, shortly before I turn twenty-five, I win the prize for being the first to offend Grammy.

In a family full of Mormons, Grammy is the lone Catholic, born and raised. But she did not marry one. Instead, she married my grandfather, Ward Forman, who, while being Mormon, was not a practicing one. Nevertheless, he managed to involve his four daughters in his faith, which ultimately resulted in their raising Mormon families of their own. Josephine and Ward divorced when my mother was sixteen, and since then the Church has always been a matter of great sensitivity at family gatherings. Unless we are aiming to rile her, we assiduously avoid all talk of church and religion, sticking instead to the much safer topic of the weather.

While waiting on the turkey, Grammy shows us photos of her most recent trip. Mom and Dad flew her from Iowa to Indiana in October and took her to see the University of Notre Dame, mostly because it’s a Catholic university, which pleases her, and because she has already seen everything there is to see of Amish country. She snapped dozens of photos during their tour of the campus, and I flip through them without much interest as she drones on about this site or that. Then I come to a shot of a giant Jesus mural—his hands are in the air like a referee.

“They call that the Touchdown Jesus,” says Mom, who is looking over my shoulder. I hear the amusement in her voice. “At games, if you’re sitting in the right place, you can see this giant Jesus right through the goal posts.” She chuckles.
Enjoying the joke, I quip, “How sacrilegious!”

Grammy, thinking I am attacking her faith and belittling her Jesus, snatches the photo out of my hands. I know instantly that I have made a very grave mistake. “Well, some people don’t find it offensive at all,” she says.

She storms out of the room and out the back door to pace the backyard. She doesn’t seem to hear me call after her that I was only joking.

The moment the door slams and before I can apologize to her for setting Grammy off, Mom throws her hands up. “Oh, I can’t stand her! If I ever get that way, shoot me.”

Claire Baker doesn’t look a thing like Josephine Forman. At least, I don’t see it. Aunt Nette looks like Aunt Linda and Aunt Kathi looks like Mom, but none of them looks like their mother. I have looked through pictures of Grammy when she was young, about eighteen, and as far as I can tell, there is no family resemblance at all. I wonder if Mom ever sighs with relief when she notices that.

“What does your dad do for a living?”

“He works for State Farm. He’s a regional manager over Illinois, Michigan, and Indiana.”

“And your mom? What does she do?”

I cannot repeat how many times I have had this conversation. I hate admitting how I force a straight face to answer, “She doesn’t work. She stayed home to raise the family.”
Mom never graduated from college. At seventeen she went to a community college in her Californian hometown of Tulare; at eighteen she transferred to BYU; and by nineteen she was engaged to my dad. They were married just two weeks after her twentieth birthday. The young couple was unable to pay for two tuitions, so Mom dropped out of school to help support Dad through graduation. Before long, she was pregnant, and she never went back to school. This would not, I vowed, happen to me.

I have put some effort into making sure I don’t repeat Mom’s early decisions. At a young age, I determined that I would never watch those inane soap operas that occupied my mother’s weekdays from one o’clock to two every day, or read those cheap romance novels that so often shamed her nightstand. In my teen years, I made a conscious effort to ignore all reality television, from *The Bachelor* to *American Idol*, two shows that Mom watched religiously with each new season. Such shows, I thought, were for the simple minded, not college-bound intellectuals like me. In fact, my only justification for watching *The Mole* as zealously as I did was because it was, I thought, “clever.”

Instead, I focused on getting good grades, studying for standardized tests, and applying to good colleges. Dad was an active participant in the application process, and when it came to advice about where I should go, I went to him. But when I got accepted to BYU, no one was more excited for me than Mom.

“Oh, Holly, you’re going to have so much fun. You’re going to love it, absolutely love it. I know I did. I’m jealous of you, you know. I would love to go back and finish.”

I have heard her say that before. But she never does anything about it. I know of other kids’ mothers who have gone back to school, earned their degrees, and entered the
work force later in life. Why doesn’t my mom do that? But I can’t picture her working out of the home. There was a time during my high school years, lasting probably less than a year, when a friend of hers who ran a quilt store offered her a job. At first, she enjoyed the extra income; but before long, after only a few short months, she began to complain about coworkers, business procedures, and the time it took out of her day. Eventually, she quit. I told her she shouldn’t be stuck doing what she doesn’t enjoy—though I had enjoyed the brief stint of telling friends my mom was at work—and hid my shame.

I don’t think my grandfather ever paid child support. Among the many mistakes of his life, that was one of them. Consequently, Grammy had to work. I don’t remember if I ever heard what different odds-and-ends sorts of jobs she held over the years, but her last one is working at a House of Fabrics not far from her condo. I’m eleven years old when she quits.

She walks out in the morning and calls Mom in the afternoon, saying she is sick of being disrespected by the younger women, sick of the hours she has to work, sick of all of it. Mom hangs up the phone, grabs her keys, and drags me with her to drive to Grammy’s condo so they can talk about it.

“You can’t just quit, Mom,” she says. “What are you going to do for money?”

Grammy crosses her arms and looks out the window.

“You plan to live off social security?” I can hear the edge in Mom’s voice. A few more seconds and she will be shouting.
“You don’t understand it, Claire. You don’t know what it’s like for me to live like this. I shouldn’t have to live like this, you know. And I shouldn’t have to put up with those women yelling at me all day long.”

I look around her basement condo, comparing it for the first time with our two-story house. The kitchen, breakfast nook, and living room are all, essentially, one room. A door leads to a bedroom and a bathroom. There is a linen closet. After nearly seventy years of living, everything she is fits snugly within these four walls, and there is virtually nothing outside of it. Now, not even a job. Not many years will pass before she moves into a studio apartment in an assisted-living facility. I am struck with the loneliness of this woman’s existence.

“Fine, Mom,” says my mother. “Fine. You choose to live like this. Don’t forget that.”

We don’t stay long because Mom has to hit the pharmacy before they close, to pick up her migraine pills. She always finds reasons to keep our visits short.

I get angry at her one day. I am eighteen, getting ready for college, and I have recently discovered how little Mom really knows about the world. I don’t have to take her seriously anymore.

She calls me away from the TV to unload the dishwasher and get the table ready for dinner. I ignore her—I’ll do it at the commercial.

“Holly, did you hear me?”

“Yes,” I say, but I don’t move. My eyes are fixed to the TV screen.
“Well?”

“Don’t freak out, I’ll get around to it.”

From the corner of my eye, I see her back straighten. “You might want to show a little gratitude for all I do around here,” she says. “The least you could do is help out.”

I feel sharp annoyance at this, like she’s just stabbed a needle into my neck. I snap back. “You sound just like Grammy.”

Usually she fights back. Her voice pitches into the loud, argumentative tone I learned to fear as a little girl and despise as a young teen. She’s adept at throwing insults to deflect against any verbal attack against herself. This time, however, she says nothing.

I am still staring forward, unwilling to look at her. But I brace for the rebuke. It doesn’t come. I glance and find that the room empty. She has gone without a word, and I am left alone to stew in my stinging words. I know she is hurt, and instantly my throat closes up as the guilt begins to invade my sanctuary of contentment. Sitting there, unmoving, only augments my discomfort, and I rise to find her.

She is sitting at the dining room table where she has set up her sewing machine. Her right foot presses down hard on the pedal and the cloth zooms past the needle, which stabs through the fabric in frenzied, uncontrolled motions. I see that she is staring hard at her hands, hands that are so much like mine, as they push the cloth forward and into the machine. She does not look at me.

“Mom?” I say. “Mom, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I was just . . . annoyed.”

To my dismay, she bursts into tears. Her foot comes off the pedal and her hands off the cloth, and she begins to sob into them. I fall into the chair beside her and put my
arms around her, but all she can do is shake. I say I am sorry, over and over, because I can think of no way to take it back. I hate myself, more than I have ever hated anyone.

After several long, awful minutes, she is able to speak.

“I just don’t want you to hate me. I don’t want my kids to hate me. What if I become like my mother? I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want you to hate me.”

When I have a daughter, what will she think of me? Will she love me when I am old, fat, and silly? Will she think my ideas are simple and my work unimportant? Will she fault me my past? Will she be afraid of becoming me?

I’m twenty-three when I ride with my mother from Salt Lake to Los Angeles, there and back, just the two of us. My life is not going as planned. I am in my last year of college, still single, and though I have done well in school, I don’t know what to do after graduation. I fear my life won’t go anywhere. Adding to my confusion, I am dating a man I’m not sure I love.

“How do you know,” I ask her, “when you’re in love? How do you know when you’re making the right choices?”

She tells me about her life. She tells me about her parents’ divorce and how it had affected her, how it still affects her; she tells me about her first boyfriend, her first kiss, and her first love; she tells me about meeting my dad and how wonderful he was back then and how much she is still in love, even thirty years later; about the hard decision to drop out of school and to start their family so soon; about the hardest times when she didn’t think she would make it, and the best times she didn’t want to end.
“I would do it all again,” she tells me. “Just the same.”

“All of it?”

“All part.”

Grammy turns eighty on March 9, 2005, and my mother and her sisters throw a celebration dinner for her. Her whole family is there: four daughters and their husbands, sixteen grandchildren, four great-grandchildren.

My Aunt Linda runs a slideshow of Grammy’s life: black-and-white photos of her as a little girl in Scotland; colored photos fading to brown showing her as a young mother with a baby in her arms; a Polaroid from the eighties showing her sitting on our family couch surrounded by five of her grandchildren. She’s holding me on her lap—I’m only a few months old.

I’ve seen many of these photographs before, but one is new to me and makes me sit up straighter in my chair. Grammy is a young woman, maybe eighteen or nineteen. She is dressed in her army uniform from her days serving in the British military during World War II. The camera lens softens her features with light and dark tones of gray. Her skin appears smooth and unblemished, her eyes big and bright. But I don’t see Grammy; I see Mom. The same eyes, the same quiet smile.

The slideshow finishes, and my mother rises to talk. She gives a biography beginning with Grammy’s parents and finishes saying, “Look around you, Mom. Look at your family. We fill the room, and we’re still growing. This is your legacy.”
I look around, too. Of the thirty-eight of us, I am the one, the only one, bearing her name.

Above my bed I hang a framed photo of Mom and me. In the photo, I have just gotten off a plane, returning home after being away in another country for eighteen months and not once seeing my family. We are standing side by side as close as we can get, holding each other around the waist. We share the same eyes, the same nose, the same smile. Every year I grow to look a little bit more like her. I am growing more comfortable with myself.

My oldest brother gave his son his own name, Jacob, as a middle name. His first daughter is named after his wife, Amanda. Their third child is Clara, after my grandmother—Dad’s mother.

Kelli, my sister, named her son Joseph Emmanuel: Emmanuel for her husband.

When I have a daughter, I want to name her Claire.
Unbraided

I

My sister’s hands smell faintly of lavender and chamomile. I notice this as her fingers tease through the tangles in my hair and comb my neck and brush the floating strands away from my eyes. She does this because she knows I like it, because it reminds us both of days now long past. Of summers spent in bathing suits and sprinkler water, of afternoons sitting side by side at the piano trying to harmonize, of secret evenings that stretched to midnight sharing fantasy stories and saltwater taffy. Back then, her hands smelled like pink rubber erasers.

Beyond a closed bedroom door, Kelli’s baby cries. The fingers pause, and I tell her it’s fine, go, I want to hold my nephew. I say this because that’s what sisters say to each other, when they are grown, and their lives, loves, and losses are no longer braided together. Let me hold your son. Let me feel that soft black hair beneath my cheek, those tiny fingers around my thumb. Let me kiss his small, round nose, like you do every day. Maybe, then, I will know you again.
II

Little Joseph has just turned one. He has Kelli’s large eyes and Emmanuel’s dark skin. The perfect combination of his parents, we say. His tiny lips form the familiar smirk of my brother-in-law, his irises are the same black-brown. Already, people know him for his Mexican beginnings, not his Dutch or Irish roots. He hasn’t started speaking yet, and I wonder if that first word will be in English or Spanish.

For his birthday I bought him a drum, a red and yellow plastic toy that speaks when you hit it. *One! Two! Three!* it counts as large dots of light outline the large numbers appearing beneath Joseph’s tiny fist. Emmanuel slides the button near the bottom as Joseph whacks away, and we hear the overly enthusiastic female voice change: *Cuatro! Cinco! Seis!* Joseph’s dark eyes are wide, his lips spread in glee. *Siete! Ocho! Nueve! Diez!* The family applauds him for completing the sequence, and his papa cries, “¡Bien hecho, hijito mio!”

Almost everyone in my family speaks Spanish, but we are not native speakers. As a young twenty-something, I lived eighteen months in Spain, where the language of Andalucía was my daily bread and water. But we don’t speak it together, not even with the Castros. That’s Kelli’s world, now, and there I am only a visitor with a clumsy tongue. I can scarcely wish them a good day without fearing I am saying it wrong.
Old cardboard boxes in my parents’ basement hold traces of what we once were together—wrinkled sheets of piano music, unlabeled cassette tapes of our play-acting radio show, a torn, once-beloved copy of *The Secret Garden*. And notebooks. Stacks and stacks of lined paper and fading pencil marks. Back then, Kelli wrote all her stories by hand, simple love stories. They were presages of her future romances, and she told them to me as we sat cross-legged on the twin bed, our knees touching, our hands smothering our laughter so that we wouldn’t disturb our sleeping brothers.

We no longer share long nights, but we still talk about stories—mine now, not hers. I cannot imagine a day when I will no longer rely on my stories.

She passes me her baby, and I laugh and say, Good morning, Joe-Joe! I call him this because no one else does, and I am glad. I need a part of him to be uniquely mine. I want his tía, his only blood-aunt on either side of the family, to be more to him than merely his mother’s sister. I need him to be more than merely my sister’s son, because that’s just not enough.

I am still young, but I sometimes wonder if I will never marry. I wonder if I will ever have a child of my own, a new love.
I hold him close and hold my breath, trying to feel a thread that ties him to me and me back to her. But Kelli wrinkles her nose and reaches to take him back. Someone needs to be changed! she says. She takes him out of my arms, and I follow her to the changing table. While she undresses him, I gather together a diaper, the wipes, and the baby powder scented with lavender and chamomile. As she cleans him up, we try to resume our conversation, but neither of us can remember what we had been talking about.
Five Ways of Looking at a Cave

1. Nothingness

I think I know what it would be like to have no body. I sit here, perfectly still, my feet planted on the floor and my hands clasped together in my lap. For a short while, I can feel the cold of the metal bench seep through the worn fabric of my jeans, and my joined hands warm one another. The air is an unvarying fifty-five degrees, and if I think about it, I can feel the coolness on my cheeks and at the ankles where there is a gap between my socks and pant legs. Then nothing. The sensations dissipate, or at least my awareness of them does, and I no longer feel.

Nor hear. I hold my breath and listen. The white noise that is normally the soundtrack of my daily life—the rumble of passing traffic, the hum of my computer, the soft sweeps of wind—is missing: my world is utterly devoid of sound, and the lack of it presses upon my ears like water.

I lift my hand and hold it only inches away from my face. Again, nothing. My sight has been just as thoroughly dissolved as my sense of touch and sound. Fascinated, I wave my hand before my eyes, straining to see one dark shape against another, a faint
outline, anything at all on which to focus my eyes. But no photon of light exists in all this space, and I am blind, buried some three hundred feet beneath the earth.

There is no sight, no sound, no feeling. No scent. No taste. For all my senses tell me, I have no body.

The perfect quiet is disrupted: noise strikes against my eardrums, like sledge hammer against rock. Someone is coughing.

*Go away,* I think.

The invasive sound has permitted others to begin whispering, cracking their knuckles, and giggling in their throats. The illusion of deafening stillness is spoiled.

We continue to sit in the dark as our guide begins to tell the story of a man who fell through a sinkhole on the surface of the world and ended up in the caves. He had no light, no food, no water. Nothing. For hours and hours, coming on three days, he waited in the dark for someone to find him, afraid to move. In that same hollow space, I try to feel his terror. I try to experience the same doubt that would render me immobile and root me to the floor. Will moving forward take me closer to the sky or deeper inside the earth? What if another misstep plummets me down an unclimbable rocky slope, or what if I injure myself on a low-hanging rock?

What if I am never found?

Why does this thrill me?

The unfortunate man, in such perfect silence, had begun to hear his own blood rushing past his eardrums. He had begun to see shapes, hallucinations, tricks of the memory of sight, even as his eyes had begun to atrophy. His heart had kept on beating,
his body had kept on living—in the nothingness of the cave, his body became real, vulnerable, perishable. I try to feel that. But all I know is the sensation of having no body at all.

   The guide finishes with the man’s story of rescue, and a startlingly audible click brings me out of my daydreams. The cavernous space is once again illuminated with a soft glow from the carefully placed fluorescent light bulbs, which are turned on only when a tour group passes through, to maintain the pristine quality of the untouchable calcite deposits, gypsum and dripstone formations, and limestone rock.

   Though dim, the sudden visibility makes me wince. I look down at my hands until my eyes adjust once again to the ability to see, and I am almost surprised that I can distinguish the few colors within my vision: the peachy flesh of my hands, the pale blue of my jacket, the dusty gray of the cave floor. And with the return of light, any sense of nothingness, terror, or wonder flees.

2. The Story of Man

   In a tour group of forty, maybe fifty, I try my best to stand apart and forget that I am being guided, that there is a designated path, that too soon I will stand in daylight and uncontained air. I prefer the end of the long walking queue, with a little distance between me and the others. Or, when we come to a stop, I turn my back to them and face the cave walls.
If I were alone, I would touch them. I would drag my hands along the walls, brushing free the dust and feeling every bump as it guided me forward, deeper inside the world, to discover what secrets were held in its underbelly.

To the unknowing traveler these caves are hidden. There are no mountains, no rises of land, no gaping entrances to suggest that there are hundreds of miles of tunnels and massive air pockets running through the earth’s crust below your feet. That is, unless you know where to look for them. The people who came before me, long before—they knew. They were unhindered, sometimes solitary explorers, men pressed forward by the human need to wonder and discover. They had left traces of themselves behind: markings on the walls, primitive tools, and the oils of their fingers that turned white rock black.

The black rock is part of the story, the evidence of humans interacting with the caves. It is a story that today we are not allowed to share: our passing through cannot be told in the same way. Today, we do not permit casual curiosity to lead to discovery. One must have passion and certifications and degrees. Lacking the latter two, I must stifle my adventurous spirit and leave the work of wondering to the professionals, the scientists and sanctioned workers. I must travel the safest, well-trodden way and resign myself to being led. At the end of the tour, I will sign a guestbook and add my name to the millions of other guests, placing my name in a book that no one will ever read. That is my story.

Iron bars and grated staircases and professional guides remind us to keep our hands in our pockets and to mind our children. Stay back! That two-ton stalagmite took ten thousand years to form, and it is our responsibility, now that we’ve discovered it, to preserve its purity. Don’t touch! Those five-thousand-year-old soda straws hanging from
the ceiling in tight clusters, like creatures on the ocean floor, are delicate and easily
 DAMAGED by human fingers. The guide frequently stresses the age of rock, the slow work
 of earth-formation, as if our interference with the world will halt it indefinitely. It was
 here long before us, he says. Won’t it last, then, long after we have all gone? Why not
 leave a part of ourselves behind?

Its untouchability is maddening—it may as well be behind glass and I in a
museum. But I want my presence here to last. Let some part of me stay.

The lights clip off behind me as I follow the group farther along the path. Having
lingered, I am now at the end of the line of thirty (but for the tailing guide, who makes
sure that no visitors wander off the trail for a private spelunking adventure of their own),
and for the first time I can imagine what it would really be like to be alone in the cave.

A small thrill tickles up my spine—for the adventure, though, not the fear. I
imagine a lonely and arduous trial of survival and self-reliance, of fortitude of conscience
and willpower, and of a heroic, even miraculous, escape from the depths of the tomblike
caves. The impression lasts only moment. My mind is too keenly aware of the others to
feel any of the danger of true isolation in this place. As we walk, I try to hold onto that
feeling, try to grasp at the terrifying fantasy, but the more I think about it the less tangible
it becomes, like gripping a handful of sand underwater. Soon, that sensation, both terrible
and wonderful, is gone completely.
3. Treasure Chest

Two thousand years before I ever set foot there, a Native American man entered the caves. It was late spring or early summer and the air was warm—he wore nothing more than woven shoes and a simple waistcloth.

After a breakfast of crushed hickory nuts and sunflower seeds, this man, who stood only five feet tall, lit a torch and ventured deep into the caves. He was a miner. Like others of his tribe, he frequented the caves in search of treasure: white crystals made from calcium carbonate. He collected them, chipping away carefully to separate them from the limestone walls and keep them whole. They would be used in jewelry and trade; they were his livelihood.

Over the years, the crystals nearest the mouth of the cave had already been discovered and collected, so on this day the man walked a mile or two, torch in hand, to a certain spot where he had come before, where he knew he could find more.

He searched, high and low, and the torchlight revealed to his probing eyes the tiny glittering crystals. They grew tight to the wall on a ledge, just beneath an overhanging slab of rock. The gap between the rock and the cave floor was only thirty inches high. There was space enough, he decided.

There he began to dig. He scooted himself under the slab and began to chip away at the crystals. But he dug too deep. Perhaps he heard the breaking stone before it happened; perhaps, in that final moment, he realized his mistake and tried to scramble to safety. Whatever might have gone through his head, the six-ton slab came down, crushing him beneath its unbearable weight.
It wasn’t until 1935 that he was discovered, still under the boulder, perfectly preserved. Because of the steady temperature and humidity, and thanks to the niter salt in the soil, his body never decomposed. When he was found, that two thousand-year-old mummy still had hair, skin, and fingernails. A treasure of humanity’s past enough to excite any scientist.

The mummy, once encased in glass for the touring public to see, had been trapped for centuries in the veritable coffin that these caves are. It was taken away many years ago and now resides in a museum somewhere for the mildly interested to gawk at for thirty seconds before moving on to the gift shop. But in my mind’s eye I can still see him wedged beneath the heavy rock, only his head and one arm exposed. Had he died instantly? Had he been alone? Or had he been with friends?

The latter possibility unsettles me. If he had had friends, what panic had seized them at the instant of the collapse? It must have been like watching a car turn over on the freeway or a tidal wave sweep through your hometown on the news—demise so real and so beyond human control. Maybe they had tried to save him. But their efforts to raise the boulder had proven futile, nor could they pull him free. Company at the moment of death must be a comfort only for the dying.

And so I choose to believe that he had died among friends. The story is still a tragic one, and yet somehow a little less bleak in that someone had known what had befallen the unfortunate man. Ignorance is as terrible as darkness, I guess.

I imagine their sorrow as the miners left the caves, one member short, to tell his family and the other members of the tribe. They had had no choice but to leave their
friend in the dark, never to visit him again. Perhaps they could not remember the way back to him. But at least they knew he was there.

I stand near that spot where the boulder had ended the man’s life and feel my own mortality a little sharper. Hugging my arms around my waist, I press my fingers firmly into my sides and feel my ribs yield slightly against the force. How easily they would snap! In that moment, I can even feel the pressure of stone against my back and the solid cave floor against my sternum, and I know that death had been instant for the poor man. Thousands of years have passed, but I am glad for him.

4. Morgue

This place had once been a hospital.

In 1839 a physician by the name of John Croghan bought the caves for ten thousand dollars. He had observed the mummified bodies of Indians, as well as the furry bodies of long-dead bats and old wood that had not even begun to decay. Croghan determined that the cave air had some sort of a healing, or preservative, properties. So deep inside the earth’s crust, he constructed cabins and brought sixteen of his patients suffering from consumption down into the caves, believing that the cave air would heal their disease.

It is odd to see cabins inside the caves. The shingled roofs seem particularly superfluous. Each cabin is built of old logs and large, square nails. To me, they seem to stand shorter, squatter maybe, than normal cabins, but it may just be the low cave ceiling and close walls. Alongside the cabins are clotheslines on which hang old quilts and
overalls; a rocking chair rests on a porch. The inner cabins glow faintly. Past each
glassless window frame I can see an electric candle standing on a wooden table to light
the interior, and on a faded red towel lies a loaf of bread beside a knife and a clay pitcher
for water. An old-fashioned lantern, now powered by electricity, hangs from a hook
above each door.

At first, the patients all claimed to be improving, and Dr. Croghan, thinking he
had hit upon a cure, began drawing up plans to build an entire hotel inside the caves. But
his enthusiasm was short-lived. After just a few weeks, it became clear that his patients
were not, in fact, getting healthy again—they had only experienced a morale boost at the
promise of recovery. When it became clear that they were dying, many begged to leave
the cave and see the sunlight again, but he encouraged them to stay, insisting that it
would take only a little longer before the effects reversed.

The experiment failed. Five of his patients died, and for a time the hospital
became a morgue. Ultimately, Dr. Croghan admitted defeat and returned the remainder of
his patients to the surface where, with time, the disease ran its natural course and each
died. Six years later, Dr. Croghan contracted the disease himself. He died in 1849.

The ending of this story makes me smile. Perhaps it is the irony of Dr. Croghan’s
fate, or maybe it is simply because I do not know how better to react to stories of death.

I do not like to claim a morbid fascination with death—it does not seem healthy.
But I am fascinated. Who can say that death does not prick basic human interest? I find
amusement in pondering my own death, at guessing how it will find me, at planning how
I will meet it. I see myself alone and in the dark, calm and ready, but it won’t likely happen that way. I fear I will be afraid.

The truth is, I want to know the unknown without coming to harm. I want to touch and to see and to feel the inevitability as something real, but this is not allowed. I cannot experience it directly, only peripherally. I listen to the stories, I witness others pass, and strain to see through the dark.

I cannot help but ask myself, what is the moment like? That instant of death, when life is no more and all that is left behind is an empty shell of what used to be you? Curiosity, I’m sure, is only natural, almost instinctive. One moment, you are the possessor of a tangible self, and in an instant you have lost it—you have no body.

Was death nothingness, like sitting in a dark, unexplored cave, unable to see or to hear or to feel? In that quiet moment, had I brushed against it? And yet, I had still been able to think. I had still been able to wonder about my nothingness and about myself. I had been able to remember the sensations of sunlight that made my eyes squint and water, the music that made me want to move my body in imitation of it, the vibrations on the floor that told me someone was walking into the kitchen.

It would not be enough!

I resist the very thought of nothingness, of memories existing separated from a body, of a being incapable of new experiences. The man who had lost himself in the caves, whose sight had begun to atrophy, continued to hear and move. Perhaps this was closer—a part of him lost, but not all, and further discoveries yet to be made.

Death, perhaps, is nothing more than exploring a little deeper into the cave.
5. Home

The metal staircase is long, and I ascend slowly, reluctantly. My head swivels from side to side, taking in these last images of tunnels, crevices, shadows. I am leaving unsatisfied. It had been too easy, this passing through.

Ahead of me, I hear the light tinkling of water, and I look up. I come upon a small pool, just on the other side of the railing. Water secreted through the surface had trickled down the rock and collected into a pocket in the stone. There is movement in the water, and I let people pass me by so that I can get closer.

As I lean on the railing and stretch my neck in order to see the pool, I shake my head, marveling. Simple, white lines undulate in the dark water, gliding seamlessly just below the surface, disappearing, and materializing once again in imitation of the slow pattern of creation. They are eyeless fish, creatures that, because they spend their entire lives in darkness, waste no energy developing eyes. For them, the cave is no tomb, but a home. It is filled with life, the kind that I never knew existed in this underground world.

The guide leads us back to the daylight, but too soon. There is so much I haven’t seen, so many miles still left in the dark.
The Snow Cave

The inside of the snow cave seems to glow. Mid-afternoon sunlight bounces across the tightly packed crystals of the narrow tunnel and into the dome where I am scraping the rounded walls of loosened powder with the edge of my avalanche shovel. The low ceiling keeps me hunched over and on my knees, and though I am surrounded by ice, my clothes are damp with sweat, not water, my cheeks flushed with heat, not cold. I load the grain shovel with snow and send it back through the tunnel to Ciara. Our little hollow is almost finished. I imagine the four of us will sleep quite comfortably tonight.

As I work, the hollow suddenly darkens, and I look over my shoulder to see Stacy pushing himself through the tunnel. His body blocks the light only momentarily. In the snow, Stacy becomes whatever snow-wise animal is best suited for the task: in this case, a penguin. He slides into the dome on his belly, grins up at me, and rises to his knees without ruffling a feather.

“How’s the work coming along?” he asks.

“Almost finished,” I say; my tone invites him to critique our work.

“Looks good from where I am,” he says. “You have ventilation holes?”
I point them out to him, one on top, four nearer the base. The tip of a ski pole is visible through one of them.

“No worries then,” he says.

“This thing’s not going to cave in on us, is it?” I joke—but I really want to know.

“Nah,” he says. “You could jump up and down on the roof of this thing and it would hold.”

I give him a tight, close-lipped grin.

“You may get a little cold, though,” he adds, nodding back to the tunnel.

The smile slips. “Colder than one would expect when sleeping in snow?”

“Your tunnel is a little too level.”

Now I remember. The entrance to the snow cave is dug out first, a five-foot-deep hole in the ground with a tunnel at its base. The tunnel should slope upward so that the colder, heavier air will sink out of the cave. We had dug parallel with the ground, not upward.

He sees my concern and says with a wink, “Dress extra warm.”

He promises to check on our cave one last time, once we’ve finished and before we actually fall asleep in it. I bid him farewell as he glides back out and into the sun, forcing a carefree lilt into my voice. Stacy’s not worried, and I shouldn’t be either. After all, I have done everything else right; I have paid strict heed to every word that has ever passed Stacy’s lips, every warning, every tip, every tale of survival and testimonial. I have absorbed it all, and his words of wisdom echo soundly, confidently, in my brain. I know it all by rote, so I cannot permit discouragement.
I had signed up for the winter campout class on a whim, and even before the semester began I was looking forward to it being over, just so that I could look back and say, “See that? I did that. Me.” It was to be a test of my own strength, or fortitude, or self-mastery. I’m not sure what. I just knew I had to do it.

Our first outing as a class was a half-mile snowshoeing hike and winter cookout up Provo Canyon. My group (consisting of me, Tori, Ciara, and Janae) won for best-tasting meal: chicken alfredo and boiled broccoli, all prepared in lightweight saucepans over tiny gas burners. Our prizes were folding blue polyethylene camping chairs designed for sitting in the snow. That, and Stacy’s approbation. I was proud for having proven myself an able outdoor winter cook and expected that I would perform admirably in all upcoming challenges.

But this, our second excursion up American Fork Canyon, presents different challenges, and I do not take very easily to cross-country skis. The half-mile uphill trek takes the better part of an hour, and though the group of some twenty-five of us all start out at the same time, I quickly find myself at the end of the line. After twenty minutes, I’ve lost sight of everyone but Ciara, who pitifully trails behind to keep me company.

I drag my right foot forward and the tip of my ski pushes through the tightly packed white crystals, creating a narrow trench in the snow. In the same motion, my left foot slides backwards. I’m doing it all wrong. A backwards push should propel me forward, into a glide, achieving perfect balance on one ski. But I haven’t quite assimilated the motions of the cross-country skier yet. All that is keeping me from sliding
back down the hill is the newly applied kick wax on the bottom of the skis and the thirty pounds of equipment on my back that push my body downward and into the snow.

But the snow beneath my skis is packed and crusted with ice, and neither the wax nor fish scale pattern provides grip. I slip, but before I go down, I lift a boot and plant the long, narrow strip of ski into untouched snow and drive my ski pole down beside it. The fiberglass tube bends with my weight but holds strong. Steady again, I take a breath and push myself onward, upward, and refuse to mark the distance still before me.

Now, my left shoulder is weary with the weight of my pack. No matter how often I readjust the strap across my chest or the buckle hugging my hips—where I am supposed to be carrying the weight—the left shoulder strap seems to bear the whole burden. I shrug that shoulder for the fiftieth time, trying to jostle the contents of my pack to the right, but the weight comes down into the bone of my shoulder and stings all the worse. Every time I try this, I hear Stacy’s voice sounding in my head. Pack light. As light as you can. Only the essentials. After a few hours on the trail, you feel every ounce, so don’t bring so much as an extra tube of Chapstick if you don’t need it.

I had believed him. Absolutely. But at the same time, I thought it absurd to fret over the ten grams a tube of Chapstick would add when considering all the other “essentials” we were instructed to carry: a zero-degree sleeping bag, a green foam sleeping pad, my polyethylene camping chair, two 8-oz. cans of gas, two lightweight tin pots, a plastic bowl, a fork and spoon (I brought a spork), a six-ounce bottle of dish soap, paper towels, a Hefty trash bag, two packets of oatmeal, dry pasta shells, powdered alfredo sauce, four tiny fruit tins, a bar of chocolate, a single breast of frozen chicken, six
frozen sausage links, a Nalgene water bottle, a lighter, a pocket knife, sunglasses (to protect my eyes from snow blindness), sun block, a head lamp, extra batteries, four pairs of wool socks, snow shoes, an avalanche shovel, a generous roll of toilet paper, other necessary toiletries, a writing journal, and a pen (the last of all these possibly four grams in weight)—all stuffed into (or somehow latched onto) a Swiss Gear Innsbrook hiking pack that extends above my head.

That’s not to mention all the clothing. Besides ski boots, wool mittens, and a wool hat with earflaps, I’m wearing a wicking layer, a spandex layer, a polyester layer, and a down layer. No cotton, Stacy says. You’ll be working hard, moving a lot, and sweating like you won’t believe. When that sweat cools, you don’t want it anywhere near your skin, and cotton will trap it, keep it. In any case, your clothes will get plenty wet as you dig out your snow cave, believe me. Come prepared to shed and replace layers. But no cotton. Nothing takes longer to dry, and we don’t want you getting hypothermia because you are sweating too much. It is a lecture we hear at least four times, before we ever even touch the snow, and in short time it becomes the group mantra: “Cotton kills; wool is divine.”

And I take it seriously. Because almost every article of clothing I own has at least some percentage of cotton in it, I spend several hours in Sportsman’s Goods and in second-hand stores checking the tags of long-sleeved shirts and jackets, and I’m surprised at how difficult it is to find something suitable. Even when the tag reads “90% polyester/10% cotton,” I move on. No cotton. I won’t take the risk.

After a number of weeks’ searching, I am successful in buying and borrowing all of the equipment I will need for my winter escapades, and in that I am prepared. As the
date of our second excursion draws nearer, however, I begin to show the physical
evidences of my anxiety: lack of appetite, interrupted sleep, that phony grin of affected
calm. I doubt myself, my capacities. Not for the first time, I question my judgment in
registering for the class. I had been excited by the adventure of it—snow shoeing, ice
climbing, snow caving, and a four-day yurt-to-yurt cross country skiing trek in the High
Uintas of northeastern Utah—and had convinced myself that I was strong enough, daring
enough. That was what it meant to me. Though I had always prided myself on my love of
snow and winter and cold, and though I had always enjoyed camping in the mountains,
really, I wanted to prove something to myself. That I could do this hard thing.

You don’t take unnecessary risks, Stacy tells us. Not out there, where one misstep
could lead to disaster.

Stacy Taniguchi knows what it is to take risks. Though born in Hawaii, Stacy was
still a young boy when his family moved to America’s opposite extreme, Alaska, the
place he still calls home today. There, he became intensely involved in outdoor recreation:
whitewater rafting, cliff rappelling, ice climbing, spelunking, backpacking, camping,
skiing, and mountain climbing, among other sports. Ultimately, his passion for the
Alaskan wilderness and testing the bounds of his own physical prowess led to his career
as a professional mountaineer and guide.

I admit I didn’t think much of him at first. For what I had heard of all he had done,
I expected a man a little more Herculean in stature. But Stacy is a small man, probably no
taller than I. His Japanese heritage has given him dark skin, hair, and eyes, and his thin
though wiry frame puts me in mind of a ninja, not a mountaineer. I know I am not in
great shape myself, but I can’t imagine how Stacy will manage to heft all the same
equipment on his comparatively smaller shoulders while also dragging an overburdened
sled uphill in the snow—until I see it. He passes us all up as easily as a figure skater on
ice, backtracks to help the slower skiers, and passes us all again. His strength and energy
are at once inspiring and annoying, his list of colossal accomplishments even more so.

In 1978 Stacy made his first ascent of Mt. McKinley in Alaska’s Denali National
Park, the highest peak in all of North America. Over the next twenty years, he climbed
McKinley sixteen more times as a guide. He knows the mountain well. During one
expedition, he even guided a blind man to the top in what was the second successful
ascent of a blind person to conquer the peak. But Stacy was not contented with his
triumph over one giant. In 1992 he summited Aconcagua of the Andes; in 1995 he
climbed Kilimanjaro in Tanzania; and in 1996 he ascended Mt. Elbrus of the Caucuses
Mountains in Russia. He had conquered four of the highest continental peaks on the
planet.

Then, in the spring of 2000, Stacy took the South Col Route in the Himalayas to
summit the greatest of them all, that fierce and imposing mountainous monster, Mt.
Everest. A successful climb would join his name with some twenty-five hundred other
climbers who had declared their triumph at the top of the world. But his was a special
expedition. As an assistant guide, Stacy and the other members of his team had the
ambitious goal of ascending the highest peak in the world to put on the summit the oldest
person to ever attempt the arduous climb: sixty-nine-year-old Al Hanna. Hanna had
climbed the forbidding slopes twice before in his life, without ever reaching the summit.
“I expect the third time will be the charm,” he said, approximately one month before they began their ascent.

A snow cave, made for four people, takes approximately four hours to build. Around noon on a sunny day in mid-February, we reach our campsite at the end of the trail up American Fork Canyon in central Utah. Hot from the climb, we drop our heavy packs and shuck off our two outermost layers and go for the water bottles. Drink lots of water, Stacy says. Even when you’re not thirsty. You get dehydrated a lot more quickly at higher altitudes. He also gives us advice on urinary habits during the trek: Clear and copious. This is recited with as much frequency as our group mantra.

Each group finds a suitable plot to begin construction of a cave. We swap our skis for snowshoes and begin to stamp down the snow in a twelve-foot diameter circle. Twenty minutes of stomping around gets me hot and thirsty again. I drain a little more from my Nalgene bottle, which is now nearly empty. While the others continue to stamp, I set up a burner and pot to melt snow for drinking water. In the front pockets of my snow pants, I keep my lighter and pocketknife. This, too, is a directive from Stacy that floats around inside my head as I work: In an emergency, if you are ever separated from your pack, you’ll need the means to start a fire. Keep a knife and a firestarter on your person at all times. Sometimes he comes up to us and begins to count, slowly. By “three,” we must produce both lighter and pocketknife, or we owe him a bar of chocolate. By the end of one day, he has earned three bars. After that, he never earns any.
When the circle of snow is complete, we begin to build on it. While Ciara and I shovel snow into a large pile in the center of the circle, Janae and Tori stamp it down, creating a thickly packed mound of snow. After a time, Ciara and I tire, and we switch places. Our cave is progressing smoothly, and more quickly than I had imagined. After only an hour and a half, the mound stands five feet tall and we are ready to hollow it out. I suppose that we will finish within three hours.

But digging out the center slows us down considerably. The entrance must be dug out first. We take turns lowering ourselves into the hole and crawling into the tunnel to scrape snow away with the avalanche shovel. Larger grain shovels heave the loosened snow out of the hole and away from the cave. I stand on top of the mound, my snow pants dripping and my hair glistening in the afternoon sun, but I am very warm from the constant movement, and my shoulders still ache from hefting the snow. I am driving the ski poles into the mound so Tori will know where the center is and dig around it. But this is also for ventilation. The ventilation holes should be about three inches in diameter, one on top, two on either side. Make sure they’re clear—you don’t want to suffocate in the night.

I’m not too concerned about that. Dark, close spaces do not bother me. But I do worry about the stability of the cave itself. According to Stacy, the snow should be two feet thick on top and four feet thick at the base to give it proper support. A weak structure is the perfect recipe for a collapse. And if that happens, there’s nothing you can do. You can’t move. You can’t scream. You can’t breathe. You just have to wait for someone to come find you. If one of these caves collapses in the middle of the night, we won’t know it
until morning, and by then it’s too late. So build it strong. Follow my instructions and you’ll be fine.

The story of Al Hanna’s journey to the top is told to me and twenty of my peers in the winter of 2008. Before us is our professor and guide for the rarely offered winter campout/wilderness writing course: Dr. Stacy T. Taniguchi himself, the man who conquers mountains. We listen, spellbound, to his every word as he describes the several tons of equipment transported to Base Camp on the backs of yaks and Sherpas over a six-day period; the need for altitude acclimatization and for oxygen tanks in the “death zone,” where there is not enough oxygen in the air to sustain human life; and the hazard of crossing bottomless crevasses with nothing but ropes and long, lightweight aluminum ladders.

“Sometimes,” Stacy says, “we would cross a crevasse in the morning with one ladder, but by the time we returned in the afternoon, the split had widened to double the width of what it had been before.”

“Then how did you cross back?” someone asks.

“We lashed two ladders together,” he answers, “with rope.”

We gawk at him as he relates this ludicrous solution, unable to imagine the fear of crossing two narrow ladders—precariously joined—over a gaping black pit. “Yes, it’s scary,” he admits with relish, “but if the ladder tips and falls, you’re still tied to your partner, and with crampons and ice picks, you can pull yourself back up.” To me, this doesn’t seem like security enough.
He has all sorts of stories like this—direct encounters with death, the struggle for survival, the victory. He relates the story of a man who fell through the snow into a dark cavity of glacial water. Unable to pull him up, they boiled water and lowered it to him on a line. The man drank the steaming water to keep his body’s core temperature up until help could arrive, several hours later. Or there is the tale of another man who fell off the side of a Russian mountain, sliding down its craggy slopes until his body came to a stop, several hundred feet below. They thought he was dead. By the time they reached him, they had already talked about what to do with his body and who would tell the family—but he was alive. His neck was broken, and probably lots more besides, and he was struggling to breathe because he kept swallowing his own tongue. Somehow, they carried him down the mountain on a pallet; to keep him from swallowing his tongue, they attached it to his bottom lip with a safety pin. He survived, but today he lives as a paralytic, incapacitated from the neck down, unable to speak, having no memory of the tragedy that befell him, or of himself at all. It is stories like his that make me wonder why anyone would dare defy a mountain.

More than two hundred people have died in the attempt to climb Mt. Everest. Most of the bodies must be left behind.

Stacy has given us the all-clear to sleep the night in our snow cave. It is structurally sound, so goodnight and we’ll see you in the morning. We hope, he says. Ciara laughs and the rest of us smile tightly and bid him goodnight. Janae insists on sleeping closest to the exit. On being questioned about my location, I reassert that I don’t
mind being the farthest away—I’ll sleep just fine. At home, the darker my bedroom the
better, and even a thin slice of light at the base of a door is enough to keep me awake, or
drive me from my covers to block the invading glow with a blanket or bundled clothes.

I arrange my sleeping bag over the foam pad, pull on two more pairs of wool
socks, and zip my fleece pullover up to my chin. At the foot of the bag I place my hot
water bottle. The cave is well insulated from the freezing outdoor temperatures, and I
wonder if I’ll actually be too warm to sleep. Ciara is sealing the cave roof with heat from
the candle: the snow only begins to melt, but the moment the heat is taken away, the
water hardens to ice, and the shell prevents any dripping during the night. While she
works and the rest of us ready for bed, Tori reads to us aloud from our course novel,
*Touching the Void*. She is already snuggled down into her sleeping bag, and she reads by
the light of her head lamp.

It is the true survival story of two climbers in the Peruvian Mountains. After a
disastrous fall while descending the Suila Grande—a nearly 21,000-foot peak—one man,
Joe Simpson, breaks his leg. Although both men recognize the broken leg as potentially
fatal to any climber at that altitude, they do everything they can to get down the mountain
and to safety. Roped together, Simpson and his partner, Simon Yates, carefully descend,
Yates lowering the injured man one hundred and fifty feet at a time on the rope. A storm
arises, and with impaired visibility, Yates cannot see that he is lowering Simpson too
quickly, when suddenly he feels the force of Simpson’s full weight on the end of the rope.
He has gone over a cliff, nearly pulling Yates with him. Suspended in the air with only a
black crevasse beneath him, Simpson hangs, helpless, unable to pull himself up. Yates
must make a choice: hold on, knowing that Simpson is alive at the end of the rope, or cut
the rope and save himself. Time passes and the strain of holding wears on his depleted
strength. If he does nothing, he will be pulled off the mountain. He cuts the rope.

Fully dressed, hat and all, I slide into my bag and yank the zipper up to my
shoulders. Too hot. My arms need room to move. I unzip a few inches and shrug a
shoulder free. Then I settle into the bag and lie facing the back cave wall. Tori continues
to read, and I ponder Yates’s moral dilemma as if it is my own. Was his an act of courage
or cowardice? Wisdom or weakness? What might I have done? She finishes the chapter
and snaps off her headlamp. A few seconds later, Ciara blows out the candle.

Absolute blackness. Only minutes pass before I begin to panic.

On the day Stacy and his team make their bid for the summit, conditions are
perfect—weather, visibility, health. The night before, sometime around ten or eleven
o’clock, they leave Camp IV for a world beyond, where there are no more camps, where
exists nothing but the climber and the mountain and the sky. It is a long and difficult trek
to the top, one that should be completed between ten and twelve hours of climbing; and,
as Stacy emphatically informs, one must reach the summit by noon, or not reach it at all.
“No matter where you are on the mountain,” he says, “once twelve o’clock noon strikes,
you turn back. No exceptions. To do otherwise is suicidal.” At that altitude, temperatures
drop so quickly with the setting of the sun, and storms are so unpredictable, that a climber
must be back at Camp IV by sundown to ensure his own life. All climbers know it. You
can’t make it back if you leave anytime after twelve o’clock noon.
A strong and able mountaineer, Stacy is probably capable of reaching Everest’s highest peak in ten hours; but he is climbing with Al Hanna. And although Hanna, too, is a well-conditioned climber, at sixty-nine he is slower than the others. That is why they leave a couple of hours earlier than most: compensation. All things are going to plan. The team knows its strengths and weaknesses well; the climbers know the mountain; they know climbing. The top of the world is only hours away, and this is their chance. Their one chance. “Because if you don’t make it on the first go,” says Stacy, “there’s no trying again tomorrow. That was your shot. You only take enough food and gas and oxygen for one shot.”

The excitement must have been invigorating, the nearness of their destination inspiring. The team pushes hard, but only as hard as Hanna can go. Stacy recalls checking his watch and marking his position as the sun climbs higher into the sky. Nine o’clock, going strong. Ten o’clock, just a little behind. Eleven o’clock—the doubts begin to gnaw. Their window of opportunity is quickly being drawn shut. A little desperate now, they push harder, taxing their strength.

At twelve o’clock, Stacy can see the summit from where he stands. It’s not far. The possibility of it is so real now, so tangible. He needs to reach it, touch it. The team has to make a choice. Everest beckons them. They are too near the victory to turn their backs on it now. So close. Too close. They continue the upward climb.

In the pitch blackness of the snow cave, cocooned in my sleeping bag, unable to move or to see, my mind betrays me to fear. My first concern is the air. Is there enough?
How can five narrow holes, bored through four feet of thickly packed snow, provide sufficient ventilation? My body, which had so recently been wearied and ready for rest, now floods with adrenaline; and my mind, suddenly alarmed and alert, is keenly aware of the danger of my being there. Is there enough air even now? I try to relax the muscles in my back and arms, muscles that abruptly begin to tremble as though from cold. But I am not cold. I am afraid.

Abruptly, I sit up in a desperate effort to breathe. At the far end of the cave is the opening: I can see it as a distant circle of pale blue light. I wonder if I can reach it, if, in the moment of a collapse, I could possibly be fast enough to free my head of the prison of snow, and scream. But the distance seems too great. I know I would never make it. Had we really dug ourselves so deep into the snow?

I lie down, hidden again from the light. I tell myself to take a deep, calming breath, but my ribcage cannot expand, as if a rope is tied around my torso. *Stop this*, I command, for even in this moment of grave uncertainty my reason tries to win out. I know that I am safe, that Stacy would not have left me at risk. The other girls lie motionless in their bags, probably asleep and blissfully unaware of the danger. It grips me in its clenched fist, holds me against my will. But I have to fight it, surmount it. That is what I came here to do—to prove to myself that I could be fearless, that I have deep reserves of strength yet untested. I believe in mind over matter, that my body must obey the authority of my mental directives. *Take a deep breath. Calm down. Relax.* But now I realize that the mind and body are inextricably linked, and the fear I have tried to corner and control is taking over, and my body responds.
There is a pressure on my chest now, making even normal breathing difficult. My stomach turns over and I begin to feel nauseated. My ears strain to hear the crunch of snow that portends a collapse, and my face awaits a dusting of powder that will signal my imminent doom. I know I am being foolish—I know it will pass—I know I will be fine. *I’m stronger than this*, I tell myself. *I’m better than this*. But the rest of me is somehow distanced from that logic. I look over the precipice into panic, unable to convince myself that it is not real.

Eyes wide open and seeing nothing, I lie shivering, struggling to breathe. Slowly, my body loses heat as the cold creeps in.

At one o’clock, three hundred and twenty feet from the top of the world, Al Hanna calls them all to a stop. The window is shut. “I’m not going to reach the summit,” he says. “I’m not fast enough. I’ll turn back and get a head start. But Stacy, *you* are fast. You can finish it.” Stacy turns to look at the peak, and the conflict in his mind is real, the clash of reason, fear, and desire. He *is* fast. He *is* strong. All those peaks he had conquered before, all over the world—in North and South America and Europe and Africa—had prepared him for *this* moment, for *this* mountain. To stand on the greatest of them all! to stand as close to the sun as any man could with his feet upon the earth! to feel in his bones the greatness of humanity, *his* humanity.

And then . . . to know that he was already too close to it. They had walked an hour too far. They had defied the rules. He shouldn’t be standing there at all.
I have seen the photo of where he stood as he debated, Everest in the background and beyond nothing but unalloyed, uninterrupted azure. This was his chance, his one and only. Three hundred and twenty feet away. He could almost see the full giant beneath his feet and know that he stood taller than the Earth’s highest peak. He could almost say it: “I conquered Mount Everest!” So close now, the top. So close, his triumph.

In some small way, important to no one but me, I fail. I cannot stay in the cave. The enclosure is too tight, the fear too real, the panic overwhelming. I lie trembling for an hour, or maybe not even that long, unable to divert my thoughts or blank them; and when my mind is on the verge of suffocating me, I flee.

On the pretense of needing to use the bathroom, I crawl over the others, whispering my apologies as my knees jostle and jar them awake. I have to lie flat on my belly and scoot myself through the tunnel and out of the cave, and I get snow up my sleeves and on the skin of my belly, but I don’t care. The minute I reach free air, I gasp, and my lungs expand to their full capacity. The coldness of the winter night envelopes me, and I welcome it. I stand straight and turn my head to the open sky. I have never seen such brilliant stars before. I want to drink them in. I want to stand and stare at them for as long as the night will last. But I know I cannot. The mountain is too cold, and in my haste to leave the cave I have left behind my mittens and hat.

I put on my snow shoes and tromp slowly to the outhouse, then back again. I take my time, watching the stars, circling the camp, avoiding. I hadn’t made it, and I fear that if I return to the cave, I will fail again. For a few minutes, I sit on a shelf of snow beside
our cooking pit and wallow in self-disgust and disappointment. I am alone—no one else has fled the caves, secure in their work and in their own minds. I can see their caves, mounds of blue snow in the otherwise black world, and marvel to think that settled beneath them, in a dark hollow, people sleep, protected in shells of snow and ice.

And now, in the silence that surrounds me, I understand that I am safe. Somehow, the escape has calmed me, maybe even bolstered me. I am ready to return to the cave.

Three hundred and twenty feet. It was as close as he ever got. Rather than tempt the mountain or claim a victory for himself, unshared with Hanna or anyone else, Stacy put his back to the summit and walked back down the mountain. He says he will not return to Mount Everest, as much as he would like to. The expense is too great, and out of consideration for his wife and family he will no longer put himself in such peril. But I wonder if it isn’t more than that. I wonder if he cannot bear to relive the sharp disappointment of falling short of the top. Three hundred and twenty feet.

_I made a choice_, he tells us. _It was the right one. Sometimes it is better to fail._

_Reaching the top—I could have done it, I suppose. But the day was getting on, and when the stakes are that high you don’t tempt the mountain. Failing may have saved me in the end._

His words startle me. I had never supposed that the victory should have been denied him. In my eyes, he had been unquestionably worthy of it. Why would he not want another chance to prove himself? But he grins as he repeats, _You only get one shot for the top._ He seems at peace with it.
I don’t sleep that night, and the hours drag by with glacial speed. My toes, enshrouded in three layers of wool and a goose-down mummy sleeping bag, feel frozen, my nose buzzes with numbness, and I can’t stop my shoulders from trembling. I have given up trying to trick myself into sleep by counting sheep or telling myself distracting tales—this works all right at home, but all I can think about is how cold I am. Every fifteen or twenty minutes, I press the Indiglo on my digital wristwatch, comforted by the glow but not the hour: 2:07, 2:23, 2:45 . . . I long for the dawn.

But I am breathing. I am calm. The cold is a symptom of being alive, and though I do not embrace it, neither do I resent it. I will endure, knowing it will pass.

At six-thirty the outside world begins to lighten, and I sit up, ready to move. Hearing me, Ciara turns over and asks if I slept. I confess that no, not one minute. She laughs and says that she, too, spent the night huddled in a ball and watching the minutes pass on her watch from inside her cocoon. I am surprised to learn that no one in the camp slept well, if at all—only Stacy, who had burrowed for himself a narrow tunnel in the snow and slept like a child.

We fix a breakfast of peach oatmeal and sausage links before packing up camp, readjusting our packs on our backs and our skis beneath our boots, and returning to the trail. Stacy says that our caves will last long after the surrounding snow has melted, perhaps as late as May or June. Other campers will likely make use of them. I am already making plans to come back. To stay another night in my cave. Next weekend, maybe.
The Window

**One window divides us from them,** and we prefer to have it closed. It is dirty on both sides, like it has never known the cleansing power of Windex, but dust and grime aren’t the only things obstructing our view. Brightly colored printer paper litters the window with notices for those on the other side of the glass. One reads, *Hours: Monday and Wednesday, 11:00 a.m.—2:00 p.m.*, and another *Take a number!*, and another, *Only one number per person—If you do not take a number, you will not be served.* There are so many colored squares because each sign is printed three times: in Spanish, in Arabic, and in English.

We open the window precisely at eleven. If we don’t, we fear, they will break it.

I arrived in the Canary Islands as a missionary in September of 2005, nervous, excited, and underprepared. Six months before, I had received my call: Spain Las Palmas. Immediately, I began to do my research. Online maps showed ten tiny islands approximately one hundred kilometers off the coast of Morocco, nowhere near the Spanish mainland, and Web sites sparkled with long white beaches, four-star hotels, and blue Atlantic water.
Not long after I learned where I would spend eighteen months of my life, a letter arrived from my mission president explaining that, of those ten islands, only seven are inhabited, and only five are populated enough to justify maintaining missionaries there. President Craig and his wife were eager for me to arrive, they said. They knew the Lord had called me there for a reason, that I would make a positive difference in the lives of the people.

It almost didn’t happen. After so many months of personal preparation, including stacks of paperwork and hours of interviews, and after nine weeks of fourteen-hour day language and teaching training, I learned that my visa had not yet cleared. I was temporarily but interminably reassigned to a state-side mission. Discouraged, I prayed fervently that I would not be delayed much longer and that I would make it to where I was supposed to be, on the islands. There was a work there to perform and a people to teach, and I intended to fulfill that call.

Nine days later, I got the phone call. I was cleared to go.

I have heard the Canaries referred to as the Hawaiian islands of Europe, a paradise, islands of eternal spring. For tourists, this is true. For me, and for the other missionaries, paradise gets in the way of the work. My first area is the heavily tourist-trafficked city of Los Cristianos on the island of Tenerife. After six months of standing before slamming doors, of struggling to communicate with vacationing Italians and Germans, and of zero baptisms, I am transferred to a place most tourists avoid: Puerto del Rosario on the island of Fuerteventura, a word that is often translated as “strong fortune.”
I am hoping for just that: fortune. I expect that I will see more success in a place with fewer Europeans on holiday and no timeshares, where the people are poorer, simpler, humbler.

But among the missionaries, Fuerte has a reputation, and I am warned—the work will not be easy.

Don’t let the tourist brochures or vacation Web sites fool you: Fuerteventura is a desert. The water is blue, and in the north and south the beaches are white, but everywhere in between there is little more than black volcanic shingle and colorless dust. We refer to this island as an “outer island,” disconnected and distanced from the heart of the islands, Gran Canaria. We joke that it is also God-forsaken.

Puerto del Rosario, the capital city, is neither north nor south but smack in the middle along the eastern coast. In high summer, temperatures are not the mild 15 to 35 degrees Celsius of an island paradise but too often hover between 40 and 50. In Fahrenheit, that’s between 104 to 122 degrees. And when the winds sweep westward over the Atlantic, dragging with it the hot, dry sand of the Sahara in giant storm clouds of dust called a calima, the island becomes rather the opposite of a paradise.

“This is what hell will be like,” says my companion. Her name is Emily Williams, but I call her hermana, sister, just like she calls me. When I arrived on this island, she had been here for three transfers already—eighteen weeks. The sun has beaten her eyes into a tight line, a permanent squint, and her skin is baked brown and dry beneath sun-bleached hair. Every day we spend nine and a half hours on the streets of the city of approximately eighteen thousand, knocking on doors and offering to share our message. Few doors open.
to us, and we are invited to pass through only one or two a day, if we are lucky. One bottle of water has to last several hours because we pinch our euros and return to our piso, our apartment, only once for lunch, when the rest of the city is enjoying siesta.

People watch at us wherever we go, through their peepholes or windows, or from opposite street corners or bus stops—we can feel the heat of their glares.

I laugh; my eyes are too dry for tears.

If hell is designed differently for each sinner, I think, this heat will definitely be part of mine. The other part will be the Cruz Roja.

March

Serve the people. Love the people. Teach the people. Usually in that order.

On the islands, LDS missionaries are expected to offer non-religious service for a few hours twice a week. The purpose of this is twofold: We become more a part of the community and less the transitory foreigners we are, and through serving the community we not only come to know the people but to love them also. It is a way to break down barriers of misunderstanding and suspicion and build up friendships based on mutual respect and genuine caring for our fellowmen.

For years, long before I ever arrived, the missionaries on Fuerte had volunteered their time at the Cruz Roja, sorting donated clothes and distributing them to needy members of the community. This has been going on for so long that we have come to believe that the place cannot function without us. We never consider leaving, not seriously. I keep any such thoughts to myself.
Orientation at the Cruz Roja, where we volunteer two days out of every week, goes something like this:

“Sort the donations. Men’s section, women’s section. Pants, tops, dresses, shoes. Children’s section. One year, two years, three years, and so on. Toss anything ripped or stained or unwearable. Window opens at eleven and closes at two. Keep it closed otherwise. No number, no service. They can take as much as they can carry.”

“Is that it?”

“That’s it.”

The Red Cross worker, Carmen, is efficient, pragmatic. She is one of the few permanent, paid employees, and she is the only person I have met here who always appears unruffled. She speaks the rapid Spanish of the native Canarians, a Spanish different from the one I had learned during nine weeks of training back in the States, but my ear is adjusting. My tongue is a little slower, but I still manage. “Me parece bastante fácil,” I say. *Seems easy enough.*

She pats my arm—is that encouragement? pity? condescension?—and leaves us to it.

Hermana Williams has primed me for the work by comparing it to volunteering at the Goodwill, only without the monetary exchange. This, I decide, is a generous comparison. The Goodwill is a warehouse; the Cruz Roja is a closet. At least, the space in which we work is. In the greater building are a cafeteria, a sick room, three or four classrooms, and a small room for first aid. The closet, as we have named it, is attached to
the outside, facing the street. Its cinderblock walls are painted bright red and can be seen up and down La Avenida de La Constitución. There’s not a soul in Puerto who doesn’t know the Cruz Roja.

We try to open the door to the closet but find it blocked by the dam of a dozen 10-gallon garbage bags stuffed with unwanted wardrobes, donations from residents of Puerto del Rosario that were dropped off over the weekend. After enough grunting and shoving, we are able to squeeze our way in, totter across the lumpy black bags, and wiggle our feet downward until we find firm floor for balancing.

The room is sweltering, but we can’t open the window yet—it’s only ten. We dump clothes onto the narrow countertop to get started organizing. I sift through a man’s faded jeans, worn out at the knee, a woman’s ugly knitted halter top, a stack of faintly stained onesies. Divide, fold, store. Cubby holes line the three walls, each labeled in Spanish: men’s shirts large; men’s shirts medium; women’s shirts large, and so forth. The women’s cubbies are the most numerous and the fullest. The men’s are almost empty.

My fingers quickly become coated with a fine, invisible line of grime—I can feel it when rub them along my palms. My hair is beginning to frizz. My feet are sweating in my shoes. By the time the other set of missionaries arrive—late as usual—the sorting is nearly done. I check my watch. Five minutes until eleven. The four of us wait in cramped quarters, joking and telling stories of our work from the day before, out on the streets, while outside the men and women are loitering. Some sit, others pace. They are all looking at the numbers each holds between two fingers, at the clock, at the window, and back.
Eleven o’clock. Elder Guzman lifts the hook from the latch. “Let the madness begin,” he says as he swings the window open.

April

“Seis!” I shout through the window.

A Muslim woman, draped head to foot in yards of bright, patterned fabric and dragging her four-year-old alongside her, rushes up to the window. At the same time, a Nigerian woman, her baby slung across her back, sprints up beside her and shoves her roughly to the side.

“I am six!” she says, thrusting her number at me.

“No! No, no!” cries the first woman. She has regained her balance and is now forcing her own arm through the window. Her well-rounded hips jostle with the other woman’s. “Seis. Seis!” The paper shakes furiously in my face. I take a step back.

“Ma’am, she has number six,” I point out calmly to the Nigerian woman.

“No. I have six. Open your eyes.”

Gritting my teeth, I look at her number. It certainly does look like a six. But it could possibly be flipped. I brace. “You are nine,” I say. “We’ll call your number soon.”

“I am six!”

But I have already taken the Moroccan woman’s number and slid her the sheet on which we have them sign their names. Unflustered, she is signing her name in scrawling Arabic, her face like stone.
The woman asks to see clothes for her young son, and while we bring her the stacks of little boy’s jeans, the Nigerian woman stands to the side, arms folded, foot tapping, head shaking. At one point, she returns to the window, snatches a pair of old Levi’s from out of the woman’s hands, and shrieks, “I need this for my baby!”

The Moroccan woman shouts something in Arabic and makes an unsuccessful snatch at the jeans.

“Ma’am!” I cry, a twenty-one year-old girl trying to be stern with two older, defiant women, but I am too timid to leave the closet and resolve the problem on their side of the window. “You have to wait your turn.”

“You are giving her all the good clothes, and my baby will go naked.”

Her baby won’t fit into these jeans for another three years.

“There is plenty more in here,” I assure her. And I know there will be plenty more next week. And I know she will be back next week, just as she was here last week. Every Monday and Wednesday, she takes away a full garbage sack of clothes. I have heard that she sells them on the street. She doesn’t understand the purpose of the distribution, or respect the system. For her, I have no patience.

“You hate me,” she says. “You hate me and my people. You love dogs more than me.” She casts a look of fury at the Muslim woman.

“You have to wait your turn,” I repeat.
May

I go through the ropes with my new companion, Hermana Osterhout. Hermana Williams has mercifully been transferred to Gran Canaria, one hundred and fifty kilometers west of Fuerte. A blessing to her, a curse to me. I wonder how many transfers I will have to endure on this island.

“We’re not allowed to use the cleaning supplies,” I tell Hermana Osterhout. I am fanning my glistening face with a handheld fan, and Hermana Osterhout’s glasses are slipping down her nose. “You have to go through special training just to hold a bottle of Clorox and, frankly, we just don’t care that much.”

From what I understand, there is a staff especially for cleaning, but I don’t think they have ever set foot inside the closet.

“Sometimes they try to grab at things,” says Elder Guzman. “Don’t let them reach through the window. They need to stay on their side.”

“And if things get bad, just close the window,” adds his companion, Elder LaPierre. “We don’t need to deal with it.”

Number one has been waiting since eight o’clock for her number, which is passed out at ten o’clock. At the call (“Uno!”), the others watch with envy as she strides forward, head held high, as proud as a lottery winner. I pass her the sheet. She signs her name and nods to the wall of cubbies behind me. “Eso,” she says.

“This?” I reach for a stack of folded women’s blouses. My companion and the elders are organizing the pre-teen clothes, sorting shoes, tossing underwear.

“No. Eso.” She points.
“This?”

“Eso.”

“This one?” I shift to another row of cubbies and point to the one I think she wants.

“No!” She is getting annoyed and slaps her hand down on the counter. She points again. “Eso!”

But I, too, am annoyed. “Ma’am, you need to tell me what you want.” I say all this in Spanish. She looks at me, blank-faced, and so I repeat myself in English.

She throws up her hands and walks away.

“What happened?” Hermana Osterhout asks. Her Spanish is good, but she’s still too nervous to work the window.

“We don’t speak the same language,” I answer with a sigh. Through the window, none of us do. We communicate in English with the Africans, but English is not their native tongue; we speak Spanish with the South Americans, but it is foreign in our mouths. And with the Moroccans we also use Spanish, which is a second language to us both.

A woman from Ghana laughed at me, once, for calling the jeans “pants” and not “trousers,” and another from Columbia scoffed when I called a stack of T-shirts “camisas” instead of “camisetas.” But I never claimed complete fluency. I know the Spanish word for “sandal” but not “flip-flop,” and I don’t know how to say colloquially, “He’ll grow into it,” although I can give the sense of it. I do my best and utilize what words I can, and
I believe that I understand almost all of what I hear. Still, communication is always a struggle. Sometimes I wonder if we ever truly understand one another at all.

June

The island is filled with immigrants, and few of them legal. Back at our piso, I hide away my passport, my religious worker visa, and legal missionary forms, protecting them so that, when the time comes, I can leave.

Every month, boats loaded with refugees and transients arrive on Fuerte’s shores. The Canary Islands serve as a sort of hub for immigrants without proper documentation. The goal is the peninsula—the Spanish mainland—but those borders are harder to cross. They come from Bolivia, Peru, Columbia, Venezuela, Paraguay, Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina. They are from Morocco, Mauritania, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Egypt. Men, women, children. The men find work in kitchens, the women in hotels, and those who cannot find work go to the Cruz Roja, to live in the communal living facilities on the north side of the building, where the bunk beds are stacked three mattresses high and twenty people share one kitchen. For all intents and purposes, it is a homeless shelter.

They are allowed to stay for twelve months.

Victoria is a regular, a Nigerian woman who spells her name differently every time she signs in. Victoria. Viktoria. Victorya. I wonder what her real name is and how long she has been on this island. Longer than I have, though not a full year. I wonder if she is counting down the weeks before the Cruz Roja turns her and her baby son out.
Today she is number twelve. Elder Guzman and his companion are working the window, and Hermana Osterhout and I are rummaging through the box of shoes, looking for a sandal’s mate. We are about to set the box outside for the scroungers to pick over, and if any shoes aren’t paired we get complaints. I spot a pair of black flats, almost new. They are the style of the time, and my own shoes are wearing at the soles from weeks upon weeks of walking dry, rocky roads. Looking closer, I notice the number: European 38. Just my size.

I have been told that we can take whatever we would like, and already I have acquired a skirt and two or three shirts. Today, in fact, I am wearing a Cruz Roja skirt. It’s khaki and falls just past my knees; it is appropriate for an hermana’s dress code. But I had taken it only after its shelf life had expired. These shoes are new and would be highly coveted among the scroungers. I convince myself that my need is as great as theirs, forgetting that I am not there to serve my own needs.

Keeping my back to the window so that Victoria will not see them, I slip one on. A perfect fit. I smile at Hermana Osterhout and drop them into my bag.

“I do not want that,” Victoria is saying. Elder Guzman is showing her the knitted halter top we had discovered and scoffed at weeks ago.

“Why not?” he replies. “It’ll look great on you.”

“No. It is ugly.”

“Ugly? Come on, you know you want it.”

“No.”

He’s holding it up to his chest as though to model it. His smile implies mockery.
“I do not want it,” she repeats, her eyes downcast. She has been unusually picky today, and only three simple articles for her son are on the counter. She is folding them slowly, and her chin is hard set.

“Oh come on, it’s pretty.”

I see her eyes snap up. They are shining, angry and humiliated. “You think are you better than me?” she demands. “I was someone back in my country.”

Elder Guzman, abashed, becomes defensive. “But I do think it’s pretty.”

He’s lying. We’ve been laughing about the revolting knitted top since March.

“You are not my god.”

She turns away from the window and disappears.

July

I cannot stop thinking about Victoria. Her words echo in my head every time I knock on a door or speak to someone on the street, every time I try to talk to someone about God. I feel the guilt of the hypocrite, the one who claims to represent God but never learns to love His children, who sees only borders and boundaries and doesn’t know how to cross them. Serve the people. Love the people. Teach—

We have been informed that the Spain Las Palmas mission is being consolidated with Spain Málaga on the mainland. “Consolidated” lessens the sting, but we all know what it means. Our mission is closing. Not enough growth, not enough success. Missionaries will remain to keep the branches going and to keep teaching any who will listen, but there won’t be many. They are taking the sister missionaries out of
Fuerteventura permanently. At the next transfer, I will be relocated to the peninsula. They will make me leave.

I am not ready. I have not done my work. But the time is far spent; my days were numbered, and now they are gone.

I have only a few more days working at the Cruz Roja. Hermana Brown and I wonder if there will be a Red Cross on the peninsula that needs volunteers. She’s going to Málaga, I to Sevilla. Neither of us is happy about the change. Málaga is not my mission—Las Palmas is. But I failed the people, and my God. He is moving me.

The window opens at eleven, just as always, and Elder Lopez, a Spanish native who recently replaced Elder Guzman here on Fuerte, takes the box of shoes out of the closet and to the waiting women as Hermana Brown calls the first number. Watching through the window, I see the box instantly surrounded. Heads knock, shoulders hunch, arms stretch through pressed hips and large waists, seizing whatever they can touch. A few children, crushed in the mix, begin to wail.

I try to focus on other tasks, but my attention is recaptured when a woman breaks free from the group, an armful of mismatched shoes clutched tight to her breast. Someone shrieks, and two or three women start after her. They grab her hijab and yank, and the shoes topple to the ground as she howls. There is a scramble for the shoes. Shouting, Arabic, Spanish, and English words of anger and hate.

I imagine that I can restore order. I believe I can redeem some small part of the last six months. Boldly, I rush out of the closet, out from behind the window, and into the
midst of the conflict. Women are poised with shoes as missiles, ready to launch. “Put them down!” I shout. “Put them down! ¡Dejadlos todos!”

“¡Puta!” one of them cries. “¡Perra!”

The heel of a silver pump strikes me at the temple. I stagger, shield my head, and retreat. Others are now intervening, and Carmen is able to rapidly calm things down. She sends the women away and tells them they are not welcome here for the rest of the week. At last, she turns to me and asks if I am all right. Embarrassed, I say I am fine, and I walk back to the closet, to where my companion had watched me through the dirty glass. My head throbs but the skin is unbroken. Several minutes pass before my hands stop shaking.

Carmen now stands over the box of shoes, and the women take their turns with civil patience. There are hot stares but no words, and I look at Carmen, who stands only five feet tall, and wonder how she does it. But I don’t need to wonder. I know. This is her island, her home. For her, there are no barriers—she has given herself to the transients and residents alike.

August

Our bags are packed, the piso is cleaned and emptied, and we’ve said our goodbyes. I doubt our absence will be long felt. We step outside and feel the hot sun scald our necks for the last time. The elders drive us down La Avenida de La Constitución in Puerto del Rosario and past the Cruz Roja, because I ask to see it one last time. It’s Tuesday, and the window is closed.