UNRULY: ESSAYS FROM A WOMAN EVOLVING

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ESSAYS FROM A WOMAN EVOLVING

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Thesis

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UNRULY

The summer before my tenth birthday, I was almost Ariel in my cabin's Friday Skit production of *The Little Mermaid*. Of the eight Girl Scouts in my cabin at Camp Pisgah that week, I was the most qualified to be Ariel because:

1. I had long, flowing hair.

2. In the two years since the film's release, I had memorized the entirety of *The Little Mermaid*, word for word.

3. It was the only way to get me to stop crying.

Ultimately we didn't end up performing *The Little Mermaid*; once it became clear that my vision for our performance consisted mostly of my lying dramatically across a picnic table, tossing my hair, making big cow eyes up at the North Carolina sky, and emoting "Part of Your World" while the other campers in my cabin stood around muttering mutinously, our counselor scrapped that idea. Instead, for our cabin's Friday Skit we did the Three Little Pigs with paper bag puppets.

This was the same week of summer camp that left me forever unable to chew spearmint gum, because the taste reminds me too much of the chewable Pepto Bismol tablets my camp counselor fed me all week to counteract the upset stomach I got from all the crying. This was my third summer at Camp Pisgah, and I had never been homesick before, but this summer was when my mom was not just getting another round of chemo

but actively dying from her cancer; although I didn't really *know* that, I didn't know she would be gone by fall, I just knew that I needed to be home with her, not stuck for five days at Camp Dumb Pisgah where they wouldn't even let me be Ariel. *I'll do anything,* I promised the camp director through my mouthful of pink chalk, *I'll be good, I'll be so quiet, they won't even know I'm there just please please send me home.*

I thought about that summer two decades later when I got my first tattoo. At thirty-two, the mom of three elementary-school-aged boys, I had just earned my bachelor's degree and was about to begin an MFA program in creative writing. I wanted to celebrate by inking myself with a touchstone, someone who was inspirational to me, my favorite character from that long since worn-out VHS tape – the original VHS release, the one with the box cover that Disney later pulled because it had a castle spire that looked like a sparkly golden penis – and after two sessions with a tattoo artist, my upper arm was covered in a portrait of Ursula the Sea Witch.

The thing about Ursula is that she is unabashedly fat. Queer, too – the artists modeled her on the ultra-flamboyant drag queen Divine, all sinister arched browns and deeply carved cheekbones. And despite these things – no, *because of* them – she genuinely takes pleasure in her body, wearing deep red lipstick and moving her body sensuously and sexually ("And don't forget the importance of body language!"). The filmmakers even *animated her back rolls*.

Ursula loves her body. Relishes it. Inhabits every curved line of it.

The Disney filmmakers never intended Ursula to be sexy, iconic; they were trying to use her queerness and fatness as code for *repellant*, code for *villain*, for *bad*. But

embedded in the character is an Ursula who didn't cooperate with their intentions – a meta-Ursula who had no more respect for the Disney storytellers' authority than the character had for Triton's, lurking in the vulva-shaped conch shell that is the inner sanctum of Ursula's undersea lair.

Interestingly, although it didn't make it into the film, *The Little Mermaid*'s writers' original plan was for Ursula to be King Triton's sister; and in fact this relationship is referred to a few times in the spin-off television series. This means that even though she's always merchandised as a Disney Villain, Ursula is, canonically, a Disney Princess. A fat, queer Disney Princess. There's meta-Ursula again, wrapping her tentacles around Disney's branding, subverting everything that title means.

After all those years of my watching the tape on repeat, meta-Ursula had sunk into my skin, taken up residence inside me.

It took me ages – decades – to accept that I would never be Ariel, always Ursula. To make peace with the fact that I would always be fat. I have done every diet: I have counted calories and fat grams and Points, I have cut out all meat, I have tried Atkins and South Beach and Sugar Busters and the Carb Addicts Diets and Weight Watchers and meal replacements and eating only apples and 100% whole wheat bread and just not eating, ever, for as long as I could, even when sparkling darkness crowded my peripheral vision.

And still I was fat. Still my body was wrong, fat, bad. Still my body resisted control.

I was fat, even at nine. Or if not actually fat, the possibility was lurking, had to be fended off by constant vigilance. Those days, my mom was in the hospital more than she was home, and caring for my brothers and me fell entirely to my dad. Dad was a Human Resource Manager; everything had a routine; everything was to be carefully managed, even his children; especially his children. Under his supervision, my morning routine was PFW: Pee, Flush, Weigh. Which meant, first thing in the morning, barefoot in the too-small blue-flowered flannel nightgown with the ruffle hem, I'd cross the hallway to the bathroom; the first two tasks self-explanatory; and then pull the bathroom scale out of its home in the cabinet under the sink, wait for the dial to stop swinging back and forth, and step on. Don't touch the wall or the counter or the cabinet door, just hold still while the wheel of numbers spins into place, hold still until it stops. That number, 94 or 96 or 97: remember that number while I step back down to the cold tile floor. Fish out the pencil that lives in the middle drawer. Mark that number on the line graph Dad taped to the inside of the cabinet door, the sideways eight-and-a-half-by-eleven sheet of graph paper marked with dates and weights, careful round dots plotting each day's weight, line slicing through them, a line that only ever goes *up*.

So I was fat, then, or at least pre-fat; the awareness, always, of the size and shape of my body, the wrongness of it. At nine I didn't have to be told that an upward-climbing line meant failure. But no matter how I limited my portions (carefully measuring my cereal for breakfast: three-fourths cup generic cocoa puffs in one-half cup skim milk, never mind that I still felt empty when I finished, it's normal he said to be a little bit hungry when you get up from the table, it's good, it's how your body learns not to need so much food), ate only the low-fat low-sugar low-calorie versions of actual food, took

tiny bites of my Weight Watchers chocolate torte to make it last never long enough, letting the last crumbs of artificial-tasting chocolate dissolve on my tongue – even so, it climbed, inversely proportional to my worth as a person comma female.

The female body, the female person, was to be tightly controlled. In the park, Dad and I would see ahead of us a woman also walking on the paved trail that circumnavigated the pond, and he would whisper: "You hear that rustling sound she's making? That's her thighs rubbing together." Adding: "But she's doing the right thing, out here walking it off." At the library, he would say: "Look how orange that librarian's skin is. Fake tan." Lipstick too bold, hair too obviously dyed, sweater too tight: these things were remarked on, quietly, only to me. Teachable moments. He wanted me to understand how unacceptable these things were, how embarrassing. He wanted what was best for me: to be willowy and fair, like my mother had been before the cancer ate her down to nothing. I never managed; my body resisted being managed.

I remember my dad laughing hardest at Sebastian the crab's statement to King Triton, Ariel's father: "Teenagers. You give dem an inch, dey swim all ovah you." I imagine my father felt some kinship with Triton, the weary single father, although I doubt my dad ever gave the character much thought.

King Triton is a consummate patriarch, in both his governance and his fatherhood – with his gold trident, a phallic symbol of male socio-economic and sexual power if ever there was one. He has seven daughters, whose involvement in the mer-government is solely ceremonial – they are put on display for the populace as entertainers.

Despite the apparent warmth of Triton's undersea kingdom, it is chilled by a current of fear and uncertainty. Triton is xenophobic toward humans and authoritarian and hot-tempered toward Ariel, and he only considers allowing Ariel the freedom to make her own choices after he sees that she'll be under the authority of another man, Eric. Underneath the kingdom's festive bread-and-circuses façade, many of its citizens are unhappy – and turning to Ursula for help. Look at the fat mermaid and skinny merman Ursula shows Ariel as examples of unattractive, unhappy people – they are unsuccessful in their search for love and companionship because of their inability to perform according to the gendered standards of this patriarchal kingdom. Ursula helps them become successful and happy by giving them bodies that conform to societal beauty/masculinity standards.

But without any real political power after being banished from Triton's castle, Ursula can't change the system itself, only help people adapt themselves to it, and this at a high price.

I followed the bathroom-scale line up to age fourteen with my fingers in my throat attempting to vomit into a toilet stall in my Christian high school's locker room, arching my back carefully up to protect my cheerleader uniform from splashes, the acrylic royal-blue sweater, the red polyester pleated skirt, below-knee-length to conform to the school's modest dress code. Later, on the floor of the basketball court at halftime, I kicked my left leg up until my knee was next to my cheek, falling forward into a split, arms up in a V, smiling through a fresh coat of Bonne Belle Dr. Pepper flavored Lip Smackers. My parents – by then my dad and stepmom; my mom had died, my dad

remarried – sat in the stands, watching the game, clapping and WOO!ing through our halftime routine. I was furious at myself, ashamed that I couldn't bring up the Wendy's Junior Bacon Cheeseburger my parents had brought me, that they watched to make sure I actually ate it, that was now sitting so heavily in my stomach, angry so *angry* that I couldn't control my body. I bounced back off the court with the other cheerleaders, *Let's go Mustangs!,* slumped against the cement-block wall, cool through my sweater against my back, and closed my eyes while I waited for the dizziness to pass.

By sixteen, I had a coffeehouse job and a driver's license and a GNC-brand bottle of enormous green grass-clippings-scented pills that muffled the hunger like it was a hijacked hostage bound in duct tape and thrown into my trunk, enough that I could mostly ignore its persistent thumping, the gagged attempts to scream. I no longer wore eyeliner or nail polish because my hands shook too badly to apply it. I no longer slept. I replaced food with black coffee, white-knuckled through class, wrote illegible notes that were useless for studying.

For a few minutes, maybe half an hour, I arrived at thinness. In my senior pictures, I am wearing my favorite pair of J. Crew men's boot-cut jeans with their twenty-eight-inch waist riding low on my hips, the gray wool sweater I accidentally shrank in the wash but decided I liked better for the way it hugged my small breasts, the ball-chain necklace from the dELiA*s catalog wrapped three times around my narrow neck and resting on my sharp collar bones.

Then my body rebounded, shook off the thin costume I'd forced it into. The line that had stalled on its relentless drive upward, had plateaued and even dipped, now plunged angrily upward, skyscraper high. There's that scene at the end of *The Little*

Mermaid where Ursula, disguised as Vanessa and preparing to marry Eric, sees the sun set and knows that Ariel has forfeited their deal. She calls down lightning and transforms back into her Ursula body, bursting out of the dress and into her true fat form: that was my body erupting into fatness.

Then came the years where nothing worked. No diet. No amount of exercise. No amount of willpower and self-denial, no quantity that I could count and measure and log, no pair of jeans bought a size too small in expectation that *this* time, *this* diet would work: there was nothing that made me not-fat, or even less-fat. Dutifully I stepped on the scale every morning and marked my weight on the line graph – it was taped inside the door of the linen closet of my first apartment, stored in a drawer of the vanity in our first house, later typed into an app in my phone and uploaded to the Cloud. These were the numbers that made me me, the numbers that determined my worth. The occasional dip was cause for celebration and doubling down on whatever method I was using that week to make myself smaller, but it was always followed by the inevitable rebound, inversely proportional to my value as a person. The more space I took up, the less I felt entitled to exist.

All I wanted, all I had ever wanted, was to shrink myself down to someone who did not stand out, someone whose body was good and correct and ornamental, someone who could be loved. There was a proper way to be a woman, a person, and no amount of perfection and success at anything else I did – no ACT scores, no excelling at my job, no perfect motherhood, no clean house or farm-to-table from-scratch meals or clean-scrubbed smart children, no satisfying my husband or volunteering at church or being the

smartest funniest most articulate most well read – none of it undid my failure at this most basic thing, having a body.

I became a feminist by accident, and against my will. I blame meta-Ursula.

In the conservative Christian community where I grew up, with parents who subscribed to Dr. James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* newsletter and voted only for Republicans, parents who forbade us from ever eating Golden Grahams or Honey Nut Cheerios or Cinnamon Toast Crunch or any of the other *good* cereals our friends ate because General Mills donated money to Planned Parenthood and therefore Lucky Charms was directly responsible for the murder of babies – in that community, the word "feminist" was a joke, an insult, practically a slur. I absorbed this entirely; by the time I was an adult, a wife and mother, I knew that feminism was something to be resisted, a lie that lured women away from their responsibilities to their husbands, made them selfish and shrill.

So I never set out to become a feminist. But by accident, when I was researching more diets, I stumbled upon the book *Health at Every Size*, by Linda Bacon. Its premise was:

Diets don't work.

I am paraphrasing, but: *No, not "lifestyle changes" either. Basically, for all the people who try to lose weight in any fashion, ninety-five percent of them will end up regaining more than they lost.*

According to the book, I wasn't a failure because I couldn't lose weight. I was normal.

Think about it, the book argued. *If there were an effective way to lose weight and keep it off, would we need so many different variations on diets and meal plans and lifestyle changes and weight-loss systems? Wouldn't everyone just do that one thing, and be successful at it?*

If even Oprah Winfrey, who has a zillion dollars and a full staff of personal trainers and nutritionists and chefs can't lose weight and keep it off, who can?

What if we all got rid of our bathroom scales? What if people decided to give up on losing weight and just love and care for our bodies the way they are?

I read the book in two days, and when I was finished, I threw it on my living room floor and sat on the far end of the sofa with my ankles crossed and tucked under one thigh, staring at the book in horror and fascination as if it were a hairy, kitten-sized spider sizing me up.

If diets didn't work for hardly anybody, if lasting intentional weight loss was biologically impossible for all but the tiniest handful of unicorns, maybe my persistent fatness wasn't a moral failing on my part. Maybe I didn't lack willpower, wasn't selfish and lazy and gluttonous, wasn't *bad* just because nothing I tried made me less fat.

What if I stopped?

What if I just…quit? Quit dieting, quit counting, quit waiting for my body to become something else, something better, and accepted it for what it was? What if I decided to stop treating my body like a perpetual self-improvement project and let myself be happy just the way I was?

The prospect of giving up on dieting was terrifying and exhilarating. Exhilarating because: What could I do if I wasn't always counting and weighing and wishing? I

thought of all the space in my life that dieting took up: the endless meticulous meal planning; the clothes bought half a size too small because this time, *this* time, I would finally succeed; the emotional tilt-a-whirl of brief success spiraling into inevitable failure; the all-consuming thoughts of food and hunger and my body; the obsession with the corporeality of living that filled me too full to think of anything else.

Terrifying because: Could I really live in this body? Give up on imagining my someday self, the thin girl hiding inside a fat suit, waiting to be freed? How could I make peace with a life spent fat?

Wasn't *giving up* just another word for *failure*?

Later, when I had the house to myself, I stood naked in front of the mirror in my bedroom and looked at my body. Really looked: didn't inspect problem areas, didn't wishfully superimpose a different kind of body onto mine, didn't experiment with poses that might minimize my fatness, but just stood and examined what was there.

Shoulder-length box-dyed strawberry-brown hair with blunt-cut Bettie Page-style bangs I gave myself one night after three glasses of wine.

Eyes, nose, mouth: check, check, check. Cheeks: pink and round. I bared my teeth into a smile and my cheeks pushed my eyes up into a Coca-Cola Santa crinkle.

The soft cushion of a double chin silhouetting my jaw.

Shoulders that curved out into round, dimpled upper arms that wobbled when I moved.

Breasts droopy from years of nursing babies, wide nipples staring wall-eyed at some invisible point on the carpet.

Soft, pale, stretch-mark-striped tummy that folded in on itself at the waist and then curved back out and crested into a sleepy smile over my hips. The round beauty mark four inches above my navel that I've always imagined to be the exact center of my body.

The wispy path from my belly button down into the tangle of brown hair at the junction of my legs; the tiny undulations that textured my ass and thighs, thick and soft; the strongly muscled calves and ankles and feet.

All of myself.

I practiced looking at the reflection without judgment.

Hello, me, I thought, and gave a little wave. The flesh of my arm jiggled gently. I frowned at it, caught myself frowning, stopped.

Then I pulled my clothes back on, went into the bathroom, and pushed the scale under the bottom shelf of the vanity with my toe, as far back as I could reach, well out of sight.

Once I quit obsessively trying to lose weight, I began to notice how obsessed everyone else was with weight loss, and how commercial this obsession was, the infinity of products that existed solely to make people become thinner – or barring that, to at least *look* thinner. Everywhere were low-fat yogurt ads promising me a beach body and Lose That Belly Fat In Ten Days magazine headlines and mom jeans with Tighter Tummy Technology.

It was creepy, actually, the sheer size of the industry devoted to telling me how wrong my body was – telling all women how wrong our bodies were, in fact. The

constant scrutiny, the impossible standards held up for us to conform to, the ever-moving goal-posts, the Zeno's Paradox of beauty.

Maybe I didn't owe anyone thinness. Maybe I wasn't actually required to be ornamental and attractive and petite and visually pleasing.

One of the incredible things about Ursula is that she chooses the body she has. It's not that she doesn't know what is expected of her as a woman – in her showstopper "Poor Unfortunate Souls," Ursula shows Ariel the fat mermaid longing to be thinner so she can attract a merman; she knows Ariel doesn't need to be able to speak to Eric as long as she's got her looks, her pretty face. And she could change her body if she wanted to – at the end of the film, when Ursula poses as Vanessa to entrap Eric, we see that she could have appeared thin and pretty all along; and yet *she chooses her fat body anyway.*

There is power in her choice. This is what makes Ursula a villain instead of a princess, after all: that she can decide not to play by patriarchy's rules, that she has the power to follow through on her decision. She may be exiled, but she does not disappear; her presence just outside the edge of the city is a constant reminder of the possibility that a woman might refuse to conform, to be decorative.

Maybe choosing to quit trying wasn't failure, but power.

Maybe I would be a villain.

It turned out there were a lot of us lurking just outside of the bright glow of the city, refusing to conform; you just had to know what search terms to enter. I googled *fat acceptance* and *fatshion* and *health at every size* and *body positive* and *fat liberation* and

there they were, the monsters and the villains, posting outfit photos, anecdotes from doctor's offices and public transportation, and, yes, feminist theory. Because the fat liberation movement, I learned, was just one piece of the same intersectional feminism that pushed back against the too-narrow strictures on what bodies were deemed acceptable: white bodies, thin bodies, able bodies, straight bodies, cisgender bodies, male bodies.

I began practicing not dieting. I began practicing being unapologetically fat. I ate a baked potato – potatoes had always been forbidden as too starchy, too white, too many carbs – with butter and sour cream and salt and black pepper, and instead of telling myself that I was allowed to eat the potato because I had earned it through good behavior or that I was being undisciplined and morally bad for eating the potato, I practiced tasting the potato, enjoying the potato. I practiced saying, "Can we sit at a table instead? My ass is too magnificent for this booth." I practiced finding ways to move my body that felt like pleasure, not punishment: walking, yoga, sex. I practiced not covering my belly with my hands when I was naked with my husband, practiced believing him when he told me – as he had been for years – that he thought me sexy. I practiced enjoying sex. I practiced looking at pictures of other fat bodies and finding them beautiful. I practiced looking at my own fat body and – this was harder – finding it beautiful, too.

I practiced being untamed. All around me were expectations that I would conform, from my family, my church, my culture. Instead of thinking of myself as a failure, I reframed my body's refusal to be tamed as my own resistance to these systems – systems that did not have my best interest in mind when they expected me to be ornamental, demure, small.

* * *

It's a common critique of *The Little Mermaid* that the character of Ariel is so smitten with a man that she is willing to give up the most essential part of herself – her voice – to get his attention; and she is rewarded with his love. It's not a bad critique; there are other ways to read the film, but this one is no less valid for them. Ariel finally gets to become a human, as she has always longed, but she is only allowed this happily-ever-after if she is willing to spend the rest of her life in the household of another powerful man. She gets to be part of Eric's world at last, but his world is just as patriarchal as the world under the sea.

Ursula, though – she is unwilling to submit to patriarchy, any more than meta-Ursula is willing to submit to the demands of the men who wrote and directed *The Little Mermaid*. Near the end of the film, Ursula finally seizes control of Triton's trident and uses it to turn the king into a tiny polyp. Until that point, Ursula's presence has been tacitly accepted by Triton; she is the witch who lurks outside the city, occasionally luring away unhappy, nonconforming citizens, the kind of woman fathers warn their daughters about, but not enough of a threat to be worth confronting. But once she takes Triton's power, she grows to enormous size, exceeding the boundaries of her accepted place. Eric defeats her by stabbing her through the abdomen with the long, splintered bow of a ship. The scene is rife with symbolism: Ursula usurps the phallic symbol of male power, emasculating Triton, and in retaliation, she is rammed with another phallus. And so Disney's only fat, sexual, queer, unruly Princess and her brief reign are undone by symbolically raping her to death, and the patriarchal status quo is restored. Meta-Ursula

forces the writers to demonstrate that there is no patriarchy that isn't violent; Triton's paternalistic, affectionate patriarchy is no less brutal for its apparent kindness. Meta-Ursula makes the writers reveal that underneath any veneer of jovial longsuffering, patriarchy's only response to a powerful woman, a woman who refuses to be controlled, is sexual violence and complete destruction.

Ursula is destroyed. But meta-Ursula – subversive, unruly, wresting her narrative away from the men who created her – was not through with me.

Eric the tattoo artist dipped his needle in a cup of black ink and set it, buzzing, to my skin, tracing the stencil that had been transferred onto my upper arm from shoulder to elbow. Above his gloves, his arms wore an intricate lace of intertwined tattoos, some faded to a soft blur, some still crisp. I couldn't look away from the needle's path, the swell of blood and ink that rose from my skin behind it. The sensation was more irritating than painful, like a scratch from a blunt fingernail, but as the session wore on the irritation accumulated into the dull pain of a sunburn, a carpet burn, something hot and raw. High on endorphins, I watched the needle and pictured a gold trident, a splintered mast, pictured my arm bursting into shreds and sinking into the sea.

When Eric finished, there in curved black outlines was Ursula the Sea Witch, inscribed on my skin, emerging from my unruly flesh.

BOYS' LIFE

My son has a single pubic hair.

I, personally, have not witnessed my son's single pubic hair, although I was invited to. My husband Aaron had just finished changing out of his work clothes and I was stretched out sideways across the bed with the cat asleep on my butt when eleven-year-old David came into our room one evening. "Can I, uh, show you guys something?" David asked and began unbuttoning his pants, so I shook off the cat and excused myself, because anything involving pants-removal is Aaron's department.

Aaron solemnly viewed the single pubic hair and reported back to me later. "It has begun," he said. Our oldest child was officially in puberty. David's pubescent status was confirmed for us a few days later when he realized, with a mix of pride and horror, that he needed to begin wearing deodorant; and cemented later that week at bedtime when Aaron told him that it was time to put down his Harry Potter book and go to sleep, and David burst out, "And that's why I hate being part of this family!"

I'm not ready for this.

Honeypot

But I don't imagine any parent is ever ready for their child to hit puberty. My father the HR manager certainly wasn't prepared when, on a Saturday afternoon a month

after my mom died, I came out of our yellow bathroom and told him that I'd started my period. I was ten years old, already wearing training bras and sporting what my grandmother described, upon inspection, as "a pretty nice thatch." One of my aunts had already supplied me with a brown paper lunch-bag of pads the last time we visited, and I stored them in the back of the bathroom cabinet, safe from the snooping of my two younger brothers, waiting to be called into action.

We lived in a North Carolina neighborhood that still had more open fields than houses, a middle-class-verging-on-posh subdivision nestled at the base of a mountain, with two main streets that formed a flattish circle about a mile around. "Go walk the Circle" was my dad's favorite thing to tell us kids to do: sometimes as a punishment, sometimes if we needed exercise, sometimes as shorthand for get-out-of-the-house-or-so-help-me. There was an art to walking the Circle: if you turned left out of the driveway, you'd quickly encounter the pair of narrow, steep hills next to Beaumont Falls, the manmade waterfall that poured out of the sludgy manmade pond where my brothers and I once got grounded for skinny-dipping after the mailman who lived in the house overlooking the pond spied us and called our father. Keep going and after awhile you'd come to a long, flat stretch of road that ran just across Mud Creek from the base of Teneriffe Mountain, and then around a wide curve and up the hill that made up the last quarter-mile of the Circle before you arrived back at our driveway. This last hill wasn't steep, but it was long, long enough that more times than not I'd have to walk my bike up the last ten yards, long enough that walking up the hill would bring me home sweaty and exhausted.

No, the trick to walking the Circle was to turn right out of the driveway and go down the big hill, which meant you'd still have to tackle the two steep hills by Beaumont Falls just before you got home, but that by the time you got to them you'd been walking for long enough that you felt justified in taking a rest by the pond, and you could sit by the edge for a while and poke sticks into the mud, or take off your shoes and wade back and forth across the cement top of the waterfall, cold and gravel-rough against your bare feet.

On the afternoon that I told my father I had gotten my period, he looked at me for a long moment with an expression on his face that I couldn't even begin to decipher: it could have meant sadness, or panic, or pride, or doing long division. And then he said: "Let's go walk the Circle."

So we put on our shoes and walked up our driveway, and I didn't say anything when he turned left instead of right. I don't think I had ever just walked the Circle with my father before; it was something he told us kids to do, not something he did himself. Even when I went out to sell Girl Scout cookies or school-fundraiser wrapping paper, I was sent out alone, not like some of my friends whose parents drove them around their neighborhoods and dropped them off at each driveway. We walked in silence for a while, and when we got to Beaumont Pond we left the road and walked across the grass and out onto the wobbly wooden dock that thrust out into the water. It felt all at once like my own initiation into the secret world of adulthood, and my father's hesitant foray into the barefoot, sunlight-drenched world I knew.

"I think your mom told me she was fourteen when she got her first period," he said finally, and suddenly her absence was as tangible as if it were sitting on the dock

with us. He tried, though, to make up for it, reaching for any details he could remember from long-ago conversations they must have had – when had he and my mother talked about periods? I asked him questions he didn't have answers for: Where was she the first time she had her period? Did she have cramps? Was it embarrassing? and we fell silent again and made our way on around the Circle.

As we walked, I contemplated my nascent maturity. I had heard that some mothers took their daughters out for a special celebration when they first started their period, a sort of modern coming-of-age ritual. My dad and I were walking the Circle in awkward silence, and I felt the need to mark the occasion, to acknowledge my new status, to fill the empty space between us. Climbing the last hill, I remembered a joke I had heard from one of my fifth-grade classmates, a joke I had never repeated to anyone. But now, as I panted with my father up the hill and across the threshold of womanhood, I realized that I could tell it to him.

So I launched into an unskilled retelling of the joke Amy Kobos had told me in the girls' bathroom of Atkinson Elementary School, a joke about a woman smoking cigarettes at the beach that culminated in a punchline about needing a condom that was big enough to fit a Camel. I finished just as we reached our driveway, and then I waited, proudly, expectantly, for him to react the way one adult might react to another.

My father didn't laugh. He looked at me with the same inscrutable expression he had been making all afternoon, only deeper. "I didn't know you even knew what a condom *is*," he said. And then we went back inside to where my brothers were watching Nickelodeon, where I was a girl – woman? – right back where I started, alone in a sea of masculinity.

* * *

A few weeks later, Dad brought home a new book for us to read together. Bedtime reading was a ritual my mother started, and on the nights when she wasn't at the hospital, the two of us would curl up in my pink bedroom and read together: *Strawberry Girl*, *The Voyage of Doctor Doolittle*, the *Little House on the Prairie* series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. My father tried to maintain the routine, sitting on the living room sofa with my brothers and me and reading *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. But this was new: this was a book for just the two of us to read together, he said, no brothers allowed. He was granting me a new bedtime, half an hour later than my brothers', and every evening after he tucked them in, we would read another chapter in the new book.

It was called *The What's Happening to My Body? Book for Girls*.

I scanned the table of contents in fascination and horror. The chapters had titles like "Body Hair, Perspiration, and Pimples" and "The Monthly Miracle: The Menstrual Cycle" and "Romantic and Sexual Feelings."

And I was going to read this book with my father.

I was already acquainted with the basic information about bodies and sex. A few years before, my mother sat down with me on the sofa and produced a stack of library books, and together we had looked at color photographs of blobby developing fetuses and the beautiful, totally disgusting phenomenon of childbirth. After taking me through the entirety of prenatal development, she turned to the next chapter, called, "But How'd I Get In There?"

It was a question I had never considered. But the book, and my mother, answered it anyway. I sat stunned, trying to process this information about adults and bodies and the entire human population of Earth – information that changed, it seemed to me, *everything*.

My mother looked up from the book and noticed the expression on my face – shocked? appalled? – and tried to reassure me. "Oh, it's not like that," she said, waving one hand in circles like a time-lapse video of a flower following the sun, her familiar explaining-gesture. "Sex is – it's *fun*." It did nothing to assuage my growing dismay: my parents had done this – this *thing*, this mashing-together of bodies; not only that, but they had *enjoyed* it.

In the two years since then, I had gained, I thought, all the information necessary for a human being to grow and procreate. I knew, for example, not only the joke about the condom, but also a joke about two boys who are late to school because they've been on Blueberry Hill, which turns out to be the name not of a geographical feature but a girl, and one about a boy who sees his mother's driver's license and thinks his parents had divorced because she got an F in sex. I knew which of the girls in fifth grade wore a bra, I knew that it was possible to look at one's genitals using a hand mirror, and I knew that Amy Kobos's dad kept a stack of *Playboy*s under his bed and that many of the women pictured therein had nipples that looked like Cocoa Puffs.

But that night, after my brothers were in bed, I brushed my teeth and climbed under my covers, and my dad sat awkwardly on the edge of my bed. Still wearing his Human Resource Manager uniform of polo shirt tucked neatly into khakis, he began reading aloud from Chapter One: "Puberty." It began with a few sentences describing the

changes a girl's body undergoes: growing taller, curvier hips, breasts. Then he read that "Soft nests of hair begin to grow under our arms and in the area between our legs," and I pulled my pink-and-purple-flowered comforter over my head and stayed there until he had finished the chapter, only lowering it enough to expose one eye to view the drawing of the male and female genitals and then quickly replacing it when I encountered the wide-open, carefully labeled labias majora and minora.

The Body Book was nothing if not thorough. Besides chapters devoted to each area of sexual development – plus a chapter about puberty in boys that I would reread on my own, repeatedly, with my bedroom door locked – the book included lists of all the slang terms of all the body parts under discussion, probably in an effort to push past the awkwardness and stigma of talking about anatomy. What was fascinating about the lists, though, was that many of the words given were terms that I had never heard in the context of sex and bodies, and which I have never heard in that context in all the years since. I began to wonder if the author had made them up, or had collected them from a time and place utterly different for my own, perhaps back when cool people called each other "cat" and "daddy-o."

SLANG WORDS FOR THE PENIS, SCROTUM, AND TESTICLES

Penis: Cock, dick, prick, schlong, wee-wee, wanger, pecker, peter, rod, dingus, dork, meat, pisser, hot dog

Scrotum and testicles: Balls, nuts, eggs, rocks, jewels, cubes, bags

SLANG WORDS FOR THE VULVA AND VAGINA

Cunt, pussy, muff, stuff, box, beaver, honeypot, hole, snatch, poontang

On the evenings when we encountered these lists, my father did his HR-managerial best to read through them seriously while I hid under my covers. Sometimes I could hear the edge of a laugh catch in his throat, but he never let it pass, and I was grateful, because hearing words like *dingus* in my father's voice was already more mortifying than I could bear.

But one night, after we had finished the chapter and closed the book and my father was tucking me in, the need to crack a joke about the book, the situation, the human body – the need to laugh at *some*thing about this arrangement, this pinnacle of awkwardness – it overwhelmed him, and he broke.

"Goodnight, Daddy," I said as he leaned down to hug me.

He kissed my cheek and a laugh began churning in his chest like a volcano preparing to erupt. "Goodnight, honeypot," he said, barked a single uncontrollable HA!, and fled from my room. I could hear him laughing through the closed door of my bedroom for a long time afterward.

Fruit Basket

There's not much that a younger brother enjoys more than horrifying his big sister, and I had four of them.

Matt and Luke were particularly fond of this. When my dad remarried, I gained two brothers and a sister, making me the oldest of six kids. Matt and Luke were the next in age order; Matt was only a year younger than me, and Luke two, which meant that they were coming into adolescence just as I was finding my footing as a high-schooler. It was bad enough that one of my chores was to clean the bathroom that the six of us kids

shared. At fourteen, I was thoroughly acquainted with the whimsical aiming habits of boys, and I wondered what sort of person thought that adding hinges to toilet seats was a good idea. And I had no choice but to notice when dark curly hairs began appearing in the bathtub drain and on the floor around the toilet, and when our bathroom began to take on the persistent dank odor of Curve For Men.

Dad was promoted to HR manager of a larger plant and took our family to Ohio. We moved into a house on the edge of a woods, where some previous owner had built a treehouse in one of the tall oak trees at the back edge of our property. No, not a treehouse – a tree-platform, twenty feet above the ground, with no walls or rails; just a six-by-six square of boards resting across two branches, accessible by wooden ladder-rungs nailed into the trunk. Above the platform, a zipline cable was bolted to the tree trunk and stretched out to another tree with a smaller, lower platform a few dozen feet away.

It was a twelve-year-old boy's dream, and naturally I was far too mature to ever play on it. (Secretly I was also a little bit terrified of the wiggly steps and the unfenced platform, and the thought of ever being up there made me feel as though the pull of the earth's rotation would be too strong and I would be flung to the ground, but I never admitted this.) As soon as the weather was warm enough, Matt and Luke claimed the treehouse for their own and established it as the site of their boys'-only kingdom: Thunder Club.

Thunder Club had a straightforward admission process: the initiand was to climb up to the treehouse, drop trou, jut his bare bottom out into the empty air, and poop onto the forest floor below.

I did not apply. I also did not go for walks in that part of the woods behind our house.

I may have been able to bear Matt and Luke if all they did was shit in the woods, but that would never have been enough for them. After all, the creation of Thunder Club was not to horrify me – that was just a perk – but simply for the sheer joy of dropping deuces off a tree house.

No, Matt and Luke had other, more deliberate ways of getting under my skin – not even counting urinating on my tomato plants; I spent several summers wondering why they always picked the tomatoes out of their salads. But their breakthrough came when they realized that big sisters go positively apeshit, in the most delightfully fourteen-year-old girl way, at the sight of younger-brother backsides.

It started with mooning. Walk into a room and there would be one or both of the boys: bent at the waist, pants lowered to midthigh, smooth buttocks quivering with laughter. (A decade later I accidentally mooned my brother-in-law in a burst of poorly aimed retaliation.) They became adept at anticipating what room I would be entering next so that they could stand next to each other and have their wall of cheeks waiting for me when I came in.

I shrieked, obviously. I shrieked like a teenage girl who has just been confronted by a matched set of fraternal asses, and buried my face in my hands and backpedaled out of the room. I realized quickly, of course, that this was giving them exactly what they wanted; so I began practicing my reactions – I was able to downgrade my shriek to a yelp, and from there to a heavy sigh and dramatic eyeroll. And over the following months I learned to move more stealthily around the house, using the rolling step that an actual

Cherokee Indian woman had shown my fourth-grade class during North Carolina Folk History week while we were making buckskin vests out of brown paper bags. I almost always managed to elude them, getting the drop on them before they could drop their shorts, and by my fifteenth birthday I was confident that they had given up on their quest for the moon.

But like the Soviets in the Space Race, Luke and Matt abandoned their Voskhod program only to follow it with Soyuz.

The first time it happened, I was standing at the stove cooking macaroni and cheese. Matt and Luke came swaggering into the kitchen with their hands on their hips and their pelvises tilted forward aggressively. "What's up, big sister?" said Luke in a tone of voice so deliberately nonchalant that I turned my head and looked square at him and Matt.

Each of them had, at the waistband of his pants, an imprecise wad of flesh. I wasn't sure what, exactly, I was seeing, but I screamed anyway. "GROSS!" I yelled, waving my macaroni spoon for emphasis. "Boys are DISGUSTING!" They fled, cackling.

The wrinkled pink lump I saw at each of their abdomens, they told me eventually, was something called a Texas Belt Buckle. They repeated this process dozens of times over the next three years until I left home, alternating between the Texas Belt Buckle and another move they called the Fruit Basket. Either of these maneuvers could be relied on to elicit a shriek from me, while they would scamper away, clutching their jeans, nearly falling over with laughter.

A Texas Belt Buckle is when you unzip – but don't unbutton – your fly, pull out your testicles (*balls, nuts, eggs, rocks, jewels, cubes, bags*), and pull the loose skin up and over the top of your waistband, tucking it back into the top of your pants so that it looks like a large, dimpled belt buckle.

A Fruit Basket is when you drop your pants and moon someone, but with your testicles and penis (*cock, dick, prick, etc.*) tucked backwards and clamped between your thighs so that they appear to be fleshy pieces of fruit on display in a basket that also, for some reason, has an asshole in it.

These are what you would call my brothers' signature moves, in the same way that Hulk Hogan had the Leg Drop and Jake the Snake Roberts had the DDT; and just like Hulk and Jake the Snake, their moves lost some of their impressiveness over the years, but they never stopped trying.

Science!

When I first noticed the penis attached to my brand new baby, I was too tired and feverish, after a sixteen-hour labor that had exhausted all the swear words I knew plus a few extras that I invented special for the nurse who encouraged me to try to take a walk up and down the corridors of the hospital, to think much about its ramifications. We had been expecting a girl – that is, our baby was being coy on ultrasound day and wouldn't show the goods, but I was sure that this pregnancy *felt* like a girl – but by that point in the day I was so happy to have my sweet little watermelon-headed baby OUT and be DONE that I couldn't give much extra thought to his unexpected appendage.

When our second baby arrived two years later, we were frankly relieved that we wouldn't have to go buy an entire new wardrobe of tiny pink garments, since we already had a whole baby's worth of tiny blue ones. By the time I was visibly pregnant with my third child, I was very aware that strangers are surprisingly invested in the sexes of other people's children; grocery-store cashiers would tut-tut at my cart that was full of more boy than groceries, shake their heads sadly when I answered that this third baby was also expected to be a boy, and ask me if I were planning to try again for a girl. After hearing this question a few times I began to answer crossly that I didn't expect to become pregnant again until *after* I'd delivered this baby, thank you, yes plastic please no I don't need the milk in a bag; but on my friendlier days, I would laugh and say that I grew up in a house full of brothers, I wouldn't even know what to *do* with a girl baby, I'd much rather stick with boys.

And for my first decade of parenthood, this was probably true. I was eminently qualified to be the mother of sons. People liked to warn me that boys were rambunctious, they were loud, they smelled weird, but I felt confident that my upbringing had prepared me thoroughly. I knew loud and rowdy. I had smelled every smell. I was completely inoculated against surprise penises. Nothing short of pooping off a low-flying aircraft could faze me.

Not to say that parenting isn't difficult – just that it isn't difficult because they're *boys*; it's difficult because they're *children*, and because Aaron and I are charged with not only keeping them alive and fed and not hitting each other with sticks, but also raising them into responsible adult humans who will only have to spend a reasonable amount of time in therapy for the ways that we tried to do so.

Now, at eleven years old, David is incredibly interested in science of all kinds – interested in the way that only a hyperfocused kid with Asperger's Syndrome can be. Everything from distant galaxies to microchips – if it's science, he's into it. He solves Rubik's cubes and designs and tests complicated paper airplanes and reads the science encyclopedia he got for Christmas from cover to cover as if it were a novel. So naturally, when the age-appropriate, cheerfully-illustrated books about bodies and sex that I ordered from Amazon arrived, David was hooked.

He bypassed the two books for younger kids and went straight to the book that discusses puberty. It's filled with colorful drawings of naked people of all shapes and colors and ages, anthropomorphized eggs and sperm, different kinds of families, and of course, detailed explanations of the what and how of sexual development. And ever since David read it, he has been trying to use what he has learned to decipher his own development. He wants a distinct starting-point, a moment at which he can say, Puberty has started! And so for months, we've been on Puberty Watch with him.

The thing about David is that he has very little sense of social awkwardness. Conversations that most people are embarrassed to have, words people usually rely on euphemisms for, David just dives right in. We'll be in the car on the way to church, and he will ask, apropos of nothing: "Hey Mom, you know how a boy's testicles start to descend instead of being all up by his body? Is that considered part of puberty, or does that happen before? If my testicles are getting loose, does that mean I'm in puberty now?" For him, this is simply a continuation of the conversations about bodies that we've been having since preschool, when he was obsessed with the two hundred six bones of the human skeleton and wanted to use every car ride to catalog the bones in his legs. I

take a deep breath and try to match his straightforward tone, give him information without awkwardness, tighten my grip on the steering wheel and discuss balls as casually as if we're chatting about chess strategies; even if deep inside I am wondering if he's more mature than I am – or if I'm better at being an eleven-year-old boy than he is.

Because as it turns out, I can be fazed. I thought that between the wealth of information I got from my dad and the thorough hazing into the ways of boys that I got from my brothers, I could handle anything puberty- and body-related that my sons threw my way. And it is true that when my younger two boys, Noah and Peter, are suddenly inspired to shed their clothes in the middle of dinner, put their hands in the air like they just don't care, and jump up and down, admiring each other's flopping appendages, I can calmly continue eating my broccoli. Jokes about farts and butts, with or without visual aids, don't move me. These two do their Uncle Matt and Uncle Luke proud.

But there was one thing I never learned how to do, and that was to have serious scientific conversations about puberty as if they are perfectly normal conversations to be having. My instinct is to pull the covers back over my head, or to follow my dad's route deflect by making poorly-timed jokes, and this doesn't work with David. David wants to talk about this because it is *science*, it is science that is taking place visibly on his own body, and this is *amazing.*

Now, as the mother of an eleven-year-old boy, I am learning about puberty. Again. I am learning to talk openly and frankly about bodies and sex, to shed the shame and awkwardness and embarrassment, to stop automatically using humor as a barrier to honest discussion. I am learning something new from David: to think of bodies with awe and wonder and curiosity.

But also, I am learning that I can't always deal with these subjects scientifically. Sometimes my eleven-year-old can handle these topics more maturely than I can.

It turns out that there is one benefit to having all boys that nosy grocery-store cashiers never anticipated – one resource I have that my own father didn't, and that is: when I can't have these conversations without sniggering and making inappropriate jokes, I get to leave the room and say, "You'll have to ask your dad. That's his department."

DEBBIE'S DAUGHTER

Lance the Genetic Counselor has a collection of zebra figurines arranged on top of the cabinet above his desk. There is a pink zebra, a zebra with a witch hat, a cowboy zebra, a zebra with a Mardi Gras mask, a zebra dressed like a Revolutionary War soldier. A dozen or more of the zebras are plain, unadorned, undressed, identical. I wonder if they mean anything.

I wonder if they are a metaphor: You see, most of the time, zebras look the same; but sometimes they differentiate and put on costumes, and then they are *fabulous*.

"Do you know what you are here for?" Lance asks me. I blink at him, startled. Is this a trick question?

I think of the letter that arrived for me six weeks ago, a few days after I scheduled this appointment. *Abigail Bechtel is a NEW CANCER patient*, it said. I shuddered when I saw it. Yes, I am a new patient, and yes, I am here because I am being screened for a cancer gene. But – Jesus.

I am here in Lance's office in the Children's Hospital Genetic Center because I have spent more than twenty years wondering: is there something in my body that will kill me? Ever since my mother died, I have lived in the uncertainty of not knowing, not wanting to know. Maybe it's better not knowing; maybe by not knowing, anything is still possible.

Some days I visualize my breasts as cartoon bombs, something manufactured by the Acme Corporation. Lit fuses for nipples. Waiting to blow.

This year I turned 33, the same age my mother was when she first found the lump. And I decided I need an answer.

"I'm here for genetic testing," I tell Lance. "To see if I carry a genetic risk for cancer."

Lance smiles. I've gotten the answer right. "Good, good," he says. "You'd be surprised how many people don't understand how this process works. A lot of people say they're here to find out if they have cancer. One lady told me she was here for a blood draw." Lance and I laugh, bonding together over all of those silly people who don't know how genetic testing works.

I want Lance to like me. I am here to take a very important test, and I will do whatever I can to pass it. I will be Lance's best friend if it helps. I will laugh at everything he says. I will be a total teacher's pet if it will give me an edge.

Lance runs through the standard hospital questionnaire with me: What's my insurance provider? Do I have a living will? In the past twenty-one days have I traveled to West Africa or had contact with anyone who was symptomatic for Ebola? "I'm not sure if I still need to ask about that," says Lance, "but it still shows up on my homepage notices, so I do." I nod at him, smiling. Aggressive agreeableness is a defense mechanism.

After Lance finishes the questionnaire, he turns to face me at the round, wood-laminate table. Except for the desk zebras, his office is grey and nondescript. Lance, too, is grey and nondescript, maybe thirty or forty or fifty, with slender, delicate fingers, eyes

the color of water, and a baggy white button-down shirt. His skin is smooth and pale, his hair is blondish-gray and flops just a touch too long over his ears. Lance opens a thick black three-ring binder on the table. There are hundreds of pages in this binder, all neatly encased in plastic page protectors and sectioned with divider tabs. Lance flips to a tab labeled BREAST CANCER, and then we are looking at a page illustrated with stacks of brightly-colored plastic Duplo blocks, the same kind my kids used to play with before they upgraded to LEGOs.

The Duplos are arranged in pairs on the page, blue-blue green-green red-red yellow-yellow, and Lance explains that the pairs represent the bundles of genes that make up our DNA. These Duplo pairs are responsible for making proteins that tell their cells what kind of cells they're supposed to be. One half of each pair comes from our father, says Lance, and the other comes from our mother.

Each of these pairs of Duplos – Lance turns the page; here are Duplos with circles drawn around them – is present in all of our cells. Our bodies are full of billions of these same pairs of Duplos, and as cells die and are replaced with new cells, the Duplos are replaced too. Over time, random mistakes can happen in this process, and new cells may begin forming in which one of the Duplos in a pair is missing or damaged. Lance points to a blue Duplo with a red X drawn over it. This isn't a big deal, he says; the remaining single Duplo will keep making its proteins without its partner.

But, says Lance. Suppose another random mistake happens that takes out this other blue Duplo. Now you have no one to make this protein. Instead the cells start differentiating, growing into something they weren't before. And this is cancer.

All cancer is genetic, Lance explains, because all cancer is caused by these missing or damaged genes. People hear the word *genetic*, and they think it means *hereditary*. But most cancer isn't caused by something you inherit from your parents. Most cancer is caused by these random mistakes in the genes. Over time, the chance of getting enough random mistakes to take out both halves of a pair increases, which means that as we age, the chance of developing cancer increases.

I catch myself nodding vigorously as he talks, eyebrows pushed together in concentration, determined to remember everything he says. *Chill*, I tell myself. *It's not like there will be a test on this.*

Oh wait, yes there will, ha-ha.

But, Lance continues. There are some genetic defects that can be passed from parent to child. Remember how you get half of each of these pairs from your mother and the other half from your father? (Nodnod.) If your parent passes on a defect that damages one of these Duplos – he points to the Xed out blue Duplo again – then you're already down one half of a pair from the very beginning. After that, it only takes one random mistake to damage the other half of this pair – he draws an X with his ball point pen on the page protector over the other blue Duplo – and you've already got cells differentiating into cancer.

Usually, says Lance, if we see cancer in someone young, younger than fifty, we suspect one of these hereditary genetic defects. The odds of someone developing a random, non-hereditary cancer before that age are much lower.

I'm still nodding at Lance like a goddamned bobblehead.

Lance slides the three-ring binder out of the way and pulls out a paper on which he's drawn my family tree all in symbols and numbers: circles for females, squares for males, ages and medical conditions and deaths and cancers all noted with slashes and shading and hieroglyphics. The half of the tree that leads to my mother, the Ware side, is pretty grim: cancer cancer heart disease cancer fibromyalgia autism autism cancer. My dad's side of the chart is boring in comparison – a lung cancer at 63, a prostate cancer at 70, but mostly a tidy pattern of unblemished circles and squares. There's no question which half of my gene-Duplos Lance is worried about.

One quarter of my mom's circle is shaded in, signifying her breast cancer diagnosis at age thirty-three, and a slash through the circle denotes her death at thirty-seven. Two more circles represent her sisters; one is slashed through, the other partially shaded. There are some cousins on that side, too, and second-cousins, but I don't know any of them well; I haven't seen most of my mom's family since she died. I was close with my Aunt Sara – or if not exactly close, I felt secure knowing she was around; she and my mom were best friends, and having Sara meant that if I ever needed to, I could reach that piece of my mother that she carried. But then Sara died unexpectedly six years ago – the one sister who escaped breast cancer died in her sleep from an undiagnosed heart condition: of course. That left Aunt Sue, the only living sister, the one who survived breast cancer. And my grandmother, who is a hundred now and will probably never die, ever, out of sheer New England stubbornness. None of us have spoken since Sara's funeral. Without Sara or my mom to hold us together, inertia took hold, and the rest of us have drifted apart in that careless way families sometimes do.

Before my mom died, they used to talk all the time. There's a family story about my mom and her two sisters, how once when Sue and Sara were visiting us, drinking tea in the living room and all talking at once, my dad turned to Sue's husband Uncle Leo, picked up the box of Constant Comment from the coffee table, and said, "Did you know they named this tea after the Ware sisters?" It was my mom's favorite tea, and now mine too, the one she fixed for me when I wasn't feeling well; the dark orange-peel scent smells like my mother's cool hands on my forehead and the back of my neck.

My mother called it the gift of gab, this ability to launch into conversation with anyone, comfortably, familiarly: strangers in line at the grocery store, friendly church ladies, the nurses working long shifts in the Duke University Hospital ICU. All the Ware girls have it, she said. I tried to copy her gab the way I tried to copy her looping cursive D's, but I couldn't make my conversations with strangers come out any more naturally than my attempts at her handwriting. She was graceful, tidy, effusive, artistic; I am wobbly, awkward, barely legible. My efforts at friendly banter mostly result in my saying something incredibly inappropriate and stupid, like the time my manager Cindy said that her husband Ken's supervisor at work was a terrible boss, and I joked, "Oh my God, mine too!", or the time I told my professor that I do most of my writing without pants on. Where Mom was outgoing and likable, I am shrill and desperate to be liked.

If Lance's genetic test were a personality contest, Mom would be the contender I cannot possibly be.

Here is the thing that most people misunderstand about this genetic testing, says Lance: a negative isn't necessarily predictive. Most cancers are those sporadic, random cancers that happen by chance, right? (Nodnodnod.) Take a thousand women with breast

cancer, he says, and nine hundred of them are sporadic, non-hereditary cancers. Your mom's may have been one of those, which means there is no cancer-causing gene for her to pass on to you. That leaves a hundred women with a hereditary cancer syndrome.

Between sentences, Lance's tongue darts out to moisten his soft pink lips; I find myself focusing on it, waiting for it to reemerge. Out of those hundred women, he continues, about thirty of them will have this BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutation. (Lance pronounces it "bracka.") Those are the ones everyone has heard of, because up until a few years ago, those were the only cancer-causing mutations we had found.

Twenty more people in our group of hundred will have another BRCA gene that we can test for. Nowadays when we run this test, we're checking twenty-one different genes, not just the BRCA1 and 2.

But here's where we say that a negative test result isn't predictive, says Lance. Out of our one hundred women with a hereditary breast cancer syndrome, we're still left with fifty women whose cancers are caused by genes that we haven't found yet, so we can't test for them.

I'm still nodding at Lance, even though I don't know if I understand him.

Lance explains: What it comes down to, then, is that your mom may have had a random, non-hereditary cancer, which means she couldn't pass anything on to you. Or she may have had a hereditary cancer syndrome, which she may or may not have passed on to you. If she did pass a hereditary cancer syndrome on to you, then it may be one of these mutations that will show up on the test. Or it may be a mutation that we can't test for yet, and so the test will give us a negative. A positive means that we definitely have found a hereditary cancer syndrome; a negative means that we didn't find one, either

because your mom's cancer wasn't hereditary, or it was but she didn't pass it on to you, or it was and she did and we can't test for it yet.

"So not really an answer, then, as such," I say. It's a question, but not really. This isn't what I thought I was here for. I thought that if only I could work up the courage to ask the question, I would find my answer: cancer or no cancer.

If I am completely honest, I don't know what answer I have even been hoping for. The *correct* answer is obvious: of course I want the test to be negative, of course, of course. Who wants cancer? But – in my deeper, ugly, honest places, what I really want the test to say is: *Yes*.

What I really want the test to say is: *You are your mother's daughter.*

The problem of my mother is that there is no way that I can know her apart from my own mothering. The closest I can come to understanding Debbie Ware, Human, is to map my life onto hers, try to imagine what she felt like when she did these same things I'm doing now.

When I turned twenty-seven, I began measuring my life against my mother's. Twenty-seven, because that's when she had her first baby – me. By the time I was twenty-seven, I already had a preschooler and a toddler and I was pregnant with my third. The summer that my boys were ten, eight, and five – the same ages that I and my brothers were when she died – I spent clenched up tight like my sternum was collapsing, suffocating under the weight of dual identification with my mother and my child-self. *She never got to see her babies grow any bigger than this,* I would think, clutching my children close, smelling their sweaty summertime hair; and the next minute, *I was young, too young; that much loss is more than a ten-year-old could possibly bear.* I spent the

summer flooded with too much empathy, half afraid that my babies would vanish into nothing, half afraid that I would; and now that they are very nearly twelve, ten, and seven, there is still some days a feeling that perhaps I have come untethered from what's real, that I am floating away into nothing and watching everything that makes sense shrink to pinprick-tiny.

I've carried thirty-three with me like an expiration date, not because I'm afraid of getting my mother's cancer, but because I have no idea how to outlive her. What will happen if I turn thirty-eight and I have to face a birthday she never saw? Will my mother disappear? Will I?

This is the answer I need from a genetic test: not *Will I die,* but *Is she, me?* Without cancer, can I ever really know her? Can I know myself?

Sometimes I wonder if everything that I have done as an adult, every decision I have made for my body, my life, has been an attempt to distance myself from my mother. Every hair color, every tattoo, every piercing, has been a way to try to stake out the boundaries of my self, to understand where she ends and I begin. Becoming a feminist, leaving my church, registering as a Democrat: these are the not-Debbie things I have done to define myself, and I am never certain whether they are truly mine, or just not hers. I feel tied to her as if by a rubber band; how far from her can I pull before it snaps me back? How far from her do even I want to go?

Lance tells me that if I have a hereditary breast cancer syndrome, there are three main options. The first is to have a full, bilateral, radical mastectomy: completely remove all of my breast tissue, making it impossible to ever develop breast cancer. I picture the

flat pink scar on my mother's chest, the discolored rectangle of skin on her thigh that provided the flesh to cover the missing breast; the squishy silicone prosthetic breasts in her dresser drawer, the way they felt like stress balls in my hands but cooler and smooth, the way they filled out my t-shirt when I tried them on. I try to imagine the shape of my body with my breasts removed, cannot.

The second option is to do a low-dose course of chemotherapy, enough to maybe kill any cancerous cells that might be lurking within me, but without the full brunt of the side effects of chemo. I remember my mother vomiting, unable to eat; her collection of colorful head scarves, her scalp with its few wispy brown hairs, how my brothers and I called her Yoda for these wisps, how she would recite, "Fuzzy Wuzzy was a Ware," and we would giggle and rub her soft head.

The third option is aggressive monitoring. Have regular mammograms and doctor checkups, do breast self-exams like it's my job. The American Cancer Society has instructional videos on their website; watch them to make sure I'm doing the self-exams properly, maybe attend a breast-care workshop. "Aggressive monitoring" feels like an oxymoron; it makes me think *active sitting*. It's a decision to keep going exactly as I have been, waiting for cancer like it's Godot. Doing nothing, but doing it with intensity.

Lance can't order the genetic testing panel for me himself; instead the consulting doctor swoops in, all brusqueness and sharp edges, none of Lance's soft greyness. He picks up my family tree from the table and examines it, *hmm*ing. "Really," says the doctor, "the best person to test would be this aunt who survived breast cancer. That way we would know for sure whether it's a hereditary cancer or not." He peers at me and I feel vaguely scolded for not producing Aunt Sue. "Or your mother," he adds. "It's a

shame that she died when you were so young." I don't think he's sorry for my loss, but for science's.

"There is autism in your family?" he asks me, and without waiting for a response he produces a tape measure from his pocket and wraps it around my head, measuring the circumference of my skull. "Fifty-seven point seven," he announces meaningfully; "interesting, interesting."

Lance consults a chart in his three-ring binder and says, "That's above the ninety-seventh percentile."

"You have quite a big head," the doctor tells me, grinning broadly. "Did you know that?"

I have no idea what sort of reply he's looking for from me; I open my mouth but have nothing to say. I don't understand what has just happened or how it has anything to do with the genetic test. I consider going back to my standard response of nodding aggressively, only now it occurs to me that perhaps I look a bit too much like a bobblehead, so instead I keep opening and closing my mouth like a trout.

Lance explains, finally, that one of the hereditary breast cancers they'll test for is also associated with autism and big heads, and having both autism and breast cancer in my family may indicate the presence of this particular genetic defect. I wonder if my head has always been overlarge. I wonder if people look at me and think, *There goes that chick with the huge dome.* I wonder if I should feel relieved to know why buying hats has always been so frustrating. I wonder if it's a good thing I'm fat, because if I were skinny with this noggin I would look like a lollipop in silhouette.

The brusque doctor asks me if I have any questions – I do, I have a thousand million questions, and I cannot find words for a single one of them, so I shake my enormous head, and he signs the order for the test, sweeps back out of Lance's office.

Lance gives me directions to the hospital lab to have my blood drawn for the test, tells me they'll call me in four to six weeks to make an appointment to review the results, and sends me off with the admonishment: "Remember, a negative result *is not predictive*."

Got it, I think, navigating the hospital hallways. Positive means yes, negative means maybe. There is no no.

Frozen is playing on the tv in the waiting room of the lab, and I can feel the gaze of a giant vinyl Nemo wall decoration over my shoulder. Outside the beigey-grey confines of Lance's office, there's no doubt that I'm in a children's hospital, and I feel obvious and out of place, like the time one of my boys couldn't find his way out of the habitrail of tunnels in the McDonald's PlayPlace and I had to climb in after him. I was too big to do much more than wriggle through the fingerprint-sticky plastic tubes, and all around me were children, wide-eyed watching. "There's a grownup in the PlayPlace!" they chattered to each other as I fumbled big as Gulliver to reach my son.

Too-big is my mode: rounded and soft, graceless, too much. In the months after my mother died, when no one noticed me growing and shapeshifting, outgrowing my little-girl wardrobe, I began wearing my mother's clothes: her stirrup pants and ballet flats, her watercolor-floral t-shirts and blouses, her multicolor scarves. But before long I began to grow curves she never had, taking on a shape that was unfamiliar and wrong. Somehow I evolved a form that was nothing like hers, took her jawline and her eyebrows

and the slope of her nose and encased them in layers of flesh until they were nearly obscured.

"You look so much like your mother," people would tell me, but I compared my own wobbliness to her willowiness, and I could see nothing of her about me. I clung to those words even though I didn't believe them; she was thin and willowy where I am round as a cartoon, she was confident and poised where I slouch and stammer, she was graceful where I bear eternal furniture-bruises on my shins and hips.

Not until I turned thirty and cut my hair short did I discover what others must have been seeing all along in the shape of my nose, my eyebrows, my teeth, the way I rub the dry skin of my elbow when I am thinking. She is there, just under my face. These days Debbie Ware sneaks into mirrors, flitting just past my peripheral vision; she pops up in blurry photographs of me, in the way I thrust my chin forward when I laugh.

But even so, we are far more different than we are alike, and if I am honest, I don't even know whether I want to be more or less in her shadow. There are times that I feel that I owe her thinness: that being her only daughter and carrying her cheekbones inside my skin obligates me to perpetuate her in my body, to scrape off my flesh until she is unhidden. If the test says *yes*, at least I will share something of my mother's physicality. I worry that *not-yes* will be a betrayal. If I don't carry Debbie Ware into the world, who will? Without me, will my mother still exist?

These are the questions I need this test to answer. The question of what to do with my body (*a negative isn't predictive*) is secondary to what I really want to understand, the secret answer I want to be unlocked by my blood as it splashes into vials in a lab room decorated with Mickey Mouse wallpaper:

What does it mean to be my mother's daughter?

It is Christmas Eve when I return to Lance the Genetic Counselor's office in Children's Hospital to discuss my test results. This isn't where I want to be today, but it was either this or wait until January, and I don't want to spend Christmas not knowing. Tomorrow we'll load up the kids and drive to Tennessee for a week of family: card games and mixed drinks, uncles to entertain (and be entertained by) my three boys, too much food, too much laughter.

My brothers are both certain that they don't want to have kids of their own, and Aaron and I aren't having any more, so even if the test results are positive, I will never have nieces or daughters. My mother's breast cancer legacy will end with me. If there is one.

The parking deck is mostly empty; no one comes to the hospital on Christmas Eve unless they have to. The city is drizzly and gross today, unseasonably warm for December. I want the weather to be metaphorically significant, heavy with implication; but I can't make it mean anything: not rainy or gusty or gloomy enough to be foreboding, not warm enough to be cheerful. It's damp, dreary, soggy-cardboard nothing-weather.

I check in with the receptionist, and Lance collects me from the waiting room before I've even sat down. I wonder if I'm his only patient today. We make uncomfortable small talk as we walk back to his office – "Do you have any plans for the holidays?" Oh not much, just spending Christmas Eve Day finding out if my body has plans to kill me, maybe go to Mass later, how about you?

I sit down at the round table in Lance's office – Hello, zebras – and Lance gets right to it. "Well, it's good news, to a point," he says, and I wait to feel something. None of the genetic mutations they looked for came back positive. He reminds me quickly that this doesn't mean that I didn't inherit a cancer-causing mutation from my mother; there are other genes that haven't been isolated yet. "Remember, a negative isn't predictive," he says again. I should cross-stitch that sentence onto a pillow for him.

Basically, says Lance, I should keep doing what I've been doing. Aggressive monitoring. Nothing has changed. "Your mom was thirty-three when she was diagnosed," he reminds me, as if I could have forgotten. "Even though we didn't find anything on the test, we should assume that what she had was a hereditary mutation. So either the mutation she had wasn't one we have a test for yet, or she had one of the known mutations and she didn't pass it on to you. We have no way of knowing. Maybe in five, ten years, we'll known more." Magic 8-ball says: Reply hazy, ask again later.

It doesn't matter, anyway. There is no answer that would provide closure, because the question isn't about cancer – it never was. The question is about how to live in a world where my mother has been dead for two decades. The question is about what I did inherit from her, if not her illness. The question is whether there is more to me than what my mother left me – left of me.

My breasts don't matter – *yes* would have been an easier answer, because then the decision would be simple: take them off, throw them away, I don't care. Instead all I get is *maybe*, a non-answer: aggressive monitoring, active waiting. It isn't closure; there is no such thing.

Back in the car – the parking garage attendant waves me through without paying, doesn't want my ticket; Merry Christmas – I wonder how I'm going to explain *good news, to a point* to my family. There is a birdflutter feeling inside my ribcage whispering that the absence of a positive has taken something important from me, but I press it backwards, muffle it tight. *Maybe-not-cancer* is a better answer than *Yes-cancer*, clearly better, obviously. Even if it's answering the wrong question. Even if I don't know what the right question is, or how to begin solving it.

I point my car home, into the drizzle, towards family and Christmas.

RUNAWAY

Peter has been escaping since before he could walk. At nine months old, he had his first visit to the emergency room after he climbed over the side of his crib during naptime and landed hard on the floor. While we waited for his x-ray, he toddled around the exam room, holding onto furniture to stay upright, limping, undeterred.

When Peter was nearly two, he figured out doorknobs, and suddenly he was outside at every opportunity, dashing across the street, exploring the neighborhood. The front door was too heavy for him, but the back door was manageable, so we began leaving it locked. Within the week, he figured out how to turn the lock, so we set the chain as well. Peter began dragging a chair from the dining room thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk down the five steps to the door, climbing onto the seat so that he could juuust reach the chain tippy-toed and unfasten it, then opening the door the few inches he could manage with a chair in the way and squeezing outside to freedom.

Those years, parenting Peter required constant vigilance. On weekdays I had to be careful with my fluid intake, because I couldn't use the bathroom until my husband Aaron got home in the evening, lest Peter escape during the few minutes he was out of my sight. I was taking college classes at night, and the idea was that with Peter's two older brothers in elementary school all day and only Peter and me at home, I'd be able to sit at the dining table and get my homework done while Peter played nearby; but in

practice, my attention was too divided, too much of my energy spent making sure I knew exactly where he was at every moment, never letting my guard down.

On Peter's first day of kindergarten, I celebrated by drinking a pot of coffee in the quiet house and going pee whenever I wanted to. That afternoon, caffeinated and empty-bladdered, I waited for the boys to get home from school. My oldest son David, then a fourth-grader, was charged with collecting Peter from his teacher, meeting my second-grader Noah at the corner; then the three of them would walk the few blocks home together. We practiced the routine a dozen times, but they were ten minutes late and I was wondering if I should worry when my phone rang.

"Don't worry, everyone is fine," said Peter's kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Hardman. Reassuring parents right out of the gate is a sensible habit for kindergarten teachers to develop. "But I wanted to let you know that I lost Peter this afternoon. Just for a little while. I lined up all the children at the door for pick-up, but when David got there, I looked down and Peter was gone."

I rubbed my hand through my hair, feeling suddenly jittery and over-caffeinated. "I'm so sorry," I said; apologizing seemed like the right thing for me to do. "He likes to…leave."

"Oh, no, no," said Mrs. Hardman. "Like I said, everything is fine. Some of the other parents helped look for him. He turned up in the gym."

"I'll talk to him about it," I promised. I heard the screen door slam: the boys were home. I ended the call and turned to Peter.

"Happy first day of school!" I said, and Peter wrapped his arms around my waist. Of the three boys, he's the most reliably snuggly. "I heard you left this afternoon when you were supposed to be staying with your class. What happened?"

"Oh, I was just exploring," said Peter. "What's for snack?"

"Sweetie," I said, kneeling on the floor so I could talk to him at eye level, dodging tackle-hugs from the older two boys. "You've got to stay with your teacher. It's not okay to go exploring. Mrs. Hardman didn't know where you were, and she was very worried. You could get hurt."

"I just wanted to look around," he said, shrugging my hands off his shoulders, and then he was off: upstairs, wrestling brothers, chasing the cat, outside again.

Now Peter is in second grade, and he has made best friends with the entire neighborhood. There's Nathan who lives across the street, Dylan a block up, Bailey and Serenity who spend weekends at their grandmother's house two doors down from us. Two streets over are Devin and Evan, no relation, second-grade boys who live next door to each other, and whom I can't tell apart. "Mom, Devin's the one with the red bike," Peter says, rolling his eyes, as if that clarifies everything. At seven, he is poised on the delicate edge of being too cool for his mother.

And still, he is always disappearing. Look away and he's out the door, down the street, barefoot, gone. He could be over at Nathan's or up at the school playground or blocks away, and I have no way of knowing, unless I have him followed, or microchipped. One day he came in covered with mud, leaves in his hair, pants-legs

soggy. "I found a creek!" he announced jubilantly, while my heart thumpthumpthumped against my sternum from worry.

But it's impossible to sustain maternal panic for so long; maternal guilt for not feeling maternal panic has much better staying power. A friend would call while I was out circling the neighborhood in my soccer-mom SUV, on the lookout for Peter's bike collapsed kickstandless in a yard, some clue to his whereabouts; "What are you up to?" she might ask.

"Oh, Peter's gone again, so I'm driving around to see if I can find him," I might reply.

"Oh my god, what can I do to help?" she might ask, misidentifying the exasperation in my voice as fear. "Have you called the police?"

Should I be calling the police? I'd wonder. He always turns up again, eventually. He's always safe. He's been at this for seven years now, after all.

This is not to say that we aren't trying to stop Peter from vanishing. Peter knows that he'll be grounded for the rest of the day if he leaves home without permission; but how do you ground a kid who won't stay grounded? How can we construct a punishment that will make him more likely to stay home, rather than less? Take away his video game time, and then we have a bored child who's even more inclined to go exploring. Aaron and I have laid down the law dozens of times, only for Peter step over it on his way down the street. Obviously, we're supposed to be doing *some*thing to respond to his disappearances, but he doesn't seem to be willful or defiant so much as forgetful and carefree. Secretly, I find it a bit enviable; I'd love to be so unburdened, so certain that the world is a safe place full of adventure.

"Sweetie, you left your bike in the driveway. Please go put it in the garage so Dad doesn't run over it when he gets home from work. Then come straight back inside to start your homework."

"Okay, Mom," he'll say, and the next minute he'll be down the street. It's like he gets out to the driveway and goes, "Whoa, a bike! I should ride it!", and everything else evaporates. Three hours later he'll be back, having made new friends and played with their cats and eaten hot dogs with them for dinner, and his bike will be on its side in our driveway again.

He always comes home. He is always safe. He is always delighted to leave, and delighted to return. And I am delighted that he sees friendship and adventure and possibility everywhere. But I wish he would check in with me before he goes on walkabout, because I am tired of searching the neighborhood for him, and I am tired of wondering if I should worry.

Two weeks ago, I was called in for a conference with Peter's second-grade teacher. Peter had just brought home his interim report card, the first one of his school career with letter grades instead of "S" for satisfactory or "U" for unsatisfactory, and his grades were far from satisfactory: C's and C-minuses and D's. As an overachiever raised by an overachiever and who has birthed two overachievers, I felt a pang of panic when I saw it. Once when I was in fifth grade I got a C in Language Arts, and not only was I grounded for the next nine-week grading period, I was also required to take a form that my father had created on his word processor at work around to each of my teachers every Friday for the next several months and have them record my current grade, to ensure that

I wasn't at risk of bringing home another C ever again. That anxiety, that fear of failure, has stayed with me.

I didn't want to make Peter feel that kind of shame for his grades. But I did want to understand how he had gotten them.

"Peter doesn't pay attention in class," said Mrs. Burley. I sat in a metal-and-fiberglass chair sized for a second-grader at a semicircular table in her classroom, my knees folded at an uncomfortably acute angle. I found Mrs. Burley intimidating in the way that bank tellers are intimidating, in the way that they have access to esoteric knowledge I will never understand, in the way that they have a vague and undefined authority and far too much information about my life.

"Peter doesn't pay attention in class," she repeats. "He talks to his neighbor, even when I'm talking, and he doesn't pay attention, even when I call his name. He isn't listening. It's like he isn't even aware of what's going on around him. It's like he isn't even here."

I am caught off guard. His first grade teacher used to have problems with Peter, but I wrote her off as strict, unreasonable. Mrs. Burley doesn't strike me as someone who has unrealistic expectations for her students.

"Is he having trouble understanding the material?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "He's a very smart kid, but he's falling behind," she says. "He doesn't pay attention when we go over the work together in class, so then he tries to do it on his own, and he gets the answers wrong, or he just doesn't get finished. I tap on his desk and get his attention, but a minute later I've lost him again."

Peter is staying in his seat, but he is leaving just the same. He is out the window and gone.

"Are you saying that we should get him tested for ADHD?" I ask her.

I can see Mrs. Burley choosing her words carefully. "I'm not allowed to actually say that a student should be tested," she says. "But maybe you want to talk to his pediatrician about that." She is saying *yes* as clearly as she can without actually saying *yes*.

Crumpled up in the tiny seat, I take as deep a breath as I can manage. "I see," I say. "I'll talk to his pediatrician, then. Maybe he ought to be tested for ADHD."

"That sounds like a good plan."

I unfold myself and stand up. "Thank you," I say. I try to find my footing, but I feel wobbly and off balance from the tiny chair and the thing that she has implied. Mrs. Burley thinks that Peter has ADHD, and I don't know what to do with this information.

Every few months, someone in my Facebook feed posts a link to a 2012 *Psychology Today* article entitled, "Why French Kids Don't Have ADHD."

According to the article, unlike Americans who reach for drugs to solve every problem, French psychologists focus on "identifying and addressing the underlying psychosocial causes of children's symptoms, not on finding the best pharmacological bandaids with which to mask symptoms." French parents provide structure, discipline, clear limits, healthier foods. French babies "cry it out," French children wait for mealtimes instead of snacking all day, French parents establish a clear family hierarchy and expect children to follow rules. In French families, "parents are firmly in charge of

their kids – instead of the American family style, in which the situation is all too often *vice versa*."[1]

Usually when my Facebook friends repost the article, they do so in conjunction with a passionate pitch for their pet lifestyle movement: gluten-free, or homeschooling, or "clean eating," or essential oils, or stay-at-home motherhood, or raw milk, or vitamin supplements. Usually when my Facebook friends repost the article, it's a signal that I should reconsider whether I really want to be Facebook friends with them.

Other writers have tackled the many problems with the original article, like the fact that ADHD is underdiagnosed in French children because the French use a much older, more limited set of criteria to diagnose ADHD than the one published in the DSM-IV/V in 2013 that's used by American clinicians, and that French children show a much higher incidence of anxiety, likely due to being expected to conform to standards they can't reach due to undiagnosed ADHD. But the article continues to circulate, because it enables one of Americans' favorite pastimes: forming judgments about American parenting.

Already my family carries the weight of multiple mental-health diagnoses. I have a mental illness. And so do my husband and one of my sons. Another son has a list of other neurodevelopmental disorders. Three of us take some kind of medication to make our brains do what they're supposed to. All four of us have a counselor or a therapist or a case worker. We're all mad here.

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[1] Wedge, Marilyn. "Why French Kids Don't Have ADHD." *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers LLC, 8 Mar 2012. Web. 16 Oct 2015.

Except Peter. I thought. Of the five of us, maybe at least one would be neurotypical. Free of psychiatric disorders. Healthy. *Normal.* He is a champion escape artist; maybe he could escape a diagnosis.

More than once, Peter has asked me, as we leave another son's appointment, after he has spent another hour watching cartoons in a waiting room, "Mom, when will I get to go to therapy?" He's not sure exactly what they're doing back in those cozy offices, but he knows there are toys and coloring books and uninterrupted attention from an adult; to a seven-year-old, therapy must sound like a pretty sweet deal.

And I always reply, "Stick with me, kid, and you'll need it soon enough." It's a joke: I'll probably mess you up, too, kiddo. As Philip Larkin wrote, *They fuck you up, your mum and dad*.

And now here we are: maybe-not-normal. Maybe-non-neurotypical. Maybe he, too, needs a label and a prescription and a therapist.

The French kids article showed up on my timeline again the day after my conference with Peter's teacher, and I felt that familiar gutpunch of anxiety and guilt. Even though I know the article and others like it that blame lazy parents for an epidemic of overdiagnosed, overmedicated kids is a wheelbarrowload of *merde*, I can't help worrying that maybe for me, it's accurate. Maybe this is my fault. Maybe I've failed my kids by not parenting hard enough.

I know, rationally, that this isn't how it works. I know that if Peter's brain lacks the mechanism for sustained focus, no amount of discipline or raw milk or fresh air or cinnamon leaf oil will make his brain do what we want it to, any more than it would make him regrow a missing limb. And I know, rationally, that he is *not* broken, and that

there is nothing wrong with taking Ritalin or Adderall or whatever, if those are what he needs to function at school.

The day that the *Psychology Today* article shows up in my timeline, I say aloud in my quiet house, "Fuck the French." My cat blinks at me and goes back to grooming his tail. "Fuck the French, Porchcat," I tell him.

To get Peter tested for ADHD, I first have to stop by the pediatrician's office and pick up a set of forms: the NICHQ Vanderbilt Assessment Scale. The receptionist gives me three stapled green packets: one for me and Aaron to fill out, and one for each of Peter's two teachers. That night I put the teacher forms in the Return To School pocket of Peter's homework folder, and Aaron and I sit down to fill out the parent questionnaire.

The scale asks us to rate Peter from 0-3 in several dozen areas: 0 for never, 1 for occasionally, 2 for often, 3 for very often. I sit on our boy-stained and cat-scratched living room sofa, Aaron stretches out sideways with his feet on my lap, and I read the list of symptoms out loud.

"Does not pay attention to details or makes careless mistakes with, for example, homework?" I ask Aaron.

"Three," he says without hesitating. I nod and circle *3*.

"Is forgetful in daily activities?"

"Three."

"Loses things necessary for tasks or activities."

"His bedroom," Aaron says, and I groan. Peter's bedroom is a knee-deep confusion of toys, clothes, stuffed animals, crayons. I circle *3*.

"Has difficulty keeping attention to what needs to be done."

"Three."

"Two, maybe?" I say. Maybe we are giving him too many threes. Maybe we are thinking *very often* when we should be thinking *often.*

"Abi," says Aaron, sitting up on the sofa. "Look at what it took to get through his homework this afternoon."

I sigh. I spent the afternoon sitting at the dining table with Peter, continually guiding him back to his chair, retrieving his dropped pencil, directing his attention back to his math worksheet. Okay, let's look at the next problem, read it out loud to me, you know this one, what's four plus seven, okay write it down, come back, stop talking about Minecraft, stop talking about Devin and Evan, stop talking, pay attention, pay attention. It took us an hour to get through fifteen questions. I circle *3.*

When Aaron and I finish, there is a cluster of threes on the paper. A few days later, his teachers send their responses back to us in Peter's homework folder, three after three after three. Seeing them laid out, the stark math of it, straightforward, something solidifies for me. We will take the questionnaires to his pediatrician and wait for her to see Peter for a formal diagnosis, but it is clear just the same: Peter has ADHD.

We take the three completed assessment packets back to the pediatrician's office, and after she reviews them, they call me to schedule an appointment. In the weeks leading up to Peter's appointment and his inevitable diagnosis with ADHD, I wonder what a medicated version of Peter will be like. I know better than to believe that Peter will suddenly, magically be able to pay attention, that Peter will clean his room and do

his homework and tell me where he's going before he leaves again. I've been through this before, remember; I know better than to expect him to become something other than a seven-year-old, or even to expect that we'll get his treatment plan figured out right away. This will take time and trial-and-error, calibration and recalibration, while we work out how best to help Peter become the best version of himself. Maybe he'll get that therapist he's been wanting.

What I wish for him is not that he lose his desire to explore, his excitement to encounter the world, his endless cheerfulness. Rather, what I wish for him is that he not always be disappearing, escaping, running away – that when he wants to, when he needs to, he'll be able to stay in one place.

BETWEEN WEEKENDS

The first time we *go all the way* is unplanned, even though it follows fifteen months of *everything but* – touching and kissing, sleeping naked in his dorm room bed, dirty AOL Instant Messaging. When he finally puts it inside me for the first time, neither of us has a condom, and he pulls out and comes onto my stomach: because *sex* is a thing that's strictly forbidden; to have a condom would be to acknowledge that *sex* is going to happen – which is to say that *sin* is going to happen. And it must not.

It must not happen because now I am the chewed piece of bubblegum that my high school pastor admonished our youth group never to become. I am the piece of duct tape he showed us that has been stuck to something and pulled back off: the next time I stick to something, my glue won't be as sticky, I won't adhere as well, I will be speckled with bits of lint and cat fur and dirt; and every time I stick to something new, I lose more of the thing that makes me *me*. What's the point of duct tape that's lost its stickiness?

In the moment that it happens I feel a thousand things at once. I am afraid (*Oh God what's going to happen to me now*); I am resigned (*This was always going to happen*); I am sad (*I have given away something that I can never get back*); and I am wanting, so much wanting. It is Sunday morning, and when we are done we go to his church, where everyone chooses to believe that when I visit for the weekend I stay in Cathy's dorm room. (Cathy herself only sleeps in her dorm room when her parents are

visiting from Pennsylvania; she spends the rest of her nights in Walt's apartment. She understands.)

Late that evening we drive to the gas station, where he buys me a tank of gas and a Snapple peach iced tea, and I drive him back to his dorm and hold him as tightly as I can for a long time before I drive away. I do not cry until I am off campus, and then I pull into the mall parking lot until the shaking stops.

It is three hundred and eight miles from his dorm parking lot to mine. If I don't stop, I can make the trip back to Akron in exactly five hours, even with the 25 miles per hour stretch in West Virginia. Tolls are six dollars fifty cents, and my fuel light will come on just as I pull off the turnpike.

I could almost make this drive in my sleep, which is to say that going through Pennsylvania I have to slap my legs with one hand and open my jaw wide like a snake and force my eyebrows up until my forehead muscles are sore, and more than once the rumble strips buzz me awake. I watch the road with one eye while I flip through the zippered CD binder, pop the Offspring out of the CD player and slide in Soundgarden in its place, crank it loud and bounce in my seat with the music.

The opening guitar riff of "Spoonman" goes like this: *Te-do-do-do-do, do-te do-sol, fa me do me-fa-fa-fa-do-do-do.* I shout-sing the solfege syllables because it gives my brain something to do while I drive, and because it assuages the guilt of missing my Monday morning Ear Training and Sight Singing class, which I will almost certainly sleep through, to make up for the sleepless weekend. I will fully intend to go to my next class, Advanced Piano Technique, but when it comes time to actually get out of bed I will rationalize that it would be too embarrassing if I bumped into anyone from my first class,

down there in the music building's basement hallways where the muffled sounds from the practice rooms wash like waves into the classrooms. Later I will drag myself to the practice rooms and force myself to work on whatever I missed in piano class, and I will slide the cold joints of my flute together and try to practice the music I missed when I skipped Concert Band on Friday afternoon because I couldn't wait any longer to get on the road to Virginia, but mostly I will be watching the clock tick slowly toward his phone call, and before long my flute will be resting on the top of the piano and I will be sitting on the bench writing him another letter until someone bangs on the glass door and asks if they can use the practice room.

I am very bad at being a music major. These days I am very bad at everything weekday, the long airless pause after an exhale. I live in smothered panic until it is Friday afternoon and I am back in my car, pointed east, the head of the gearshift firm in my hand.

My parents promised me a car if I stayed in Ohio for college. A seven-year-old Toyota Tercel doesn't make a very effective bribe, especially since I had to pay for half of it with the money I saved working summers at the front gate at Sea World, sweating downwind from the mingled odors of the barbecue rib shack and the flamingo pond. In the end they simply forbade me from following him to Virginia for school, and because I wouldn't turn eighteen until the end of the summer I had to comply; the car was a halfhearted concession to my halfhearted submission. They wanted me to stay in Ohio so that I wouldn't become the chewed piece of bubblegum, the lint-speckled duct tape. They were afraid that if I went to Virginia I would be so consumed with him that my grades would drop. They think that if I stay in Ohio I will stay virginal, studious, pure.

Halfway through Pennsylvania I notice the tension heavy as gravel in my shoulders – the turnpike is thick with eighteen-wheelers and my little white car dances like an empty plastic bag in their wakes. I make myself breathe in deep and flex my fingers open while I palm the steering wheel. Sunlight slants through my rear windshield and glints off of my left-hand ring finger, where I wear the thin gold band with a tiny diamond nested in a heart: the purity ring my parents gave me when they sat me down at a table in Applebee's and asked me to promise them, before God, that I would remain a virgin until marriage; the ring that is to remain on my finger until a man asks my father for permission to marry me and replaces it with an engagement ring.

I've broken the promise and *I don't even think I'm sorry*.

But I am afraid. Sex is a force so powerful that it can ruin my future marriage and rip me out of God's will. If I am not a virgin on my wedding night I will be depriving my husband of a part of myself that is rightfully his and setting up our marriage for a lifetime of unhappiness.

The only thing that can fix this mess is if *it* never happens again. We have to slow down, get back in control. It was just a one-time mistake. We'll pretend it never happened.

That night when I get to his room he holds me and we kiss and we have sex again, and when it is over I cry into his shoulder because this is *good* and there is no way we can stop now. The next morning we go to the Wal-Mart in the next town over to buy condoms, and then we go to the mall and pick out gold bands from the jewelry store. *Promise rings*, we call them, because we are promising each other that we will get engaged someday, as soon as we're through college. Because if we get married, then it's

not really so much of a sin, is it? I'm not defrauding my future husband of my virginity if my future husband is *him*. If I am chewed gum, then I have to make sure he never spits me out. If I am duct tape, then the thing that will keep me from being worthless is if I never have to stick to anyone else. What matters now is our relationship. No matter what else falls apart, what matters now is that we stay together.

These are the things I tell myself during the long airless days between the weekends, when shooting stars of panic flash in the edges of my vision.

By spring I have maxed out my credit cards on gas and long-distance calls. I am failing my classes, and I don't bother registering for the fall semester. Something vital inside the engine of the Tercel cracks and begins to stutter, so that when I am waiting at traffic lights I have to keep my left foot on the brake and use my right foot to press the gas pedal just enough to keep the engine from idling so low it stalls out; but I drive it over the mountains every weekend anyway. It hurts to pray, so I mostly don't anymore. Five days a week I can feel God and my parents watching me. Five days a week I put all my breathless energy into maintaining the illusion that I am whole and that on the weekends I stay in Cathy's dorm room. Everything else falls apart and I don't care, because I can't breathe until Friday night when his arms are around me again.

IT HAPPENED TO ME:

MY FOUR-WORD TWEET MADE NATIONAL NEWS[2]

Monday morning I was still in my day pajamas – you know the look: yoga pants, tank top, sports bra – when there was a knock at my front door, and I opened it up to find a man with a necktie and thoroughly gelled hair. "Are you Abi?" he asked me through the screen door. "Did you write the tweet about Target?"

I wrote the tweet about Target a week before, while my seven-year-old son and I were browsing the toy section. Actually, that's not entirely true: I snapped the picture of the aisle sign while we were browsing the toy section, sometime between Pokèmon cards and Minecraft action figures. I wrote the tweet later, while I was waiting for him outside the restroom so we could check out.

"Don't do this, @Target," I wrote, and attached the photo of the sign that said, "Building Sets / Girls' Building Sets" just as my son emerged from the bathroom. "Did you wash your hands?" I asked him as I tapped *tweet*.

And now my tweet had brought this smiling, begelled man to my front porch: a reporter from a Cleveland news affiliate, here to interview me. "I was actually down here

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[2] originally published on xoJane.com as "IT HAPPENED TO ME: I'm the Ohio Mom Whose Tweet About Target's Gender-Specific Toy Sign Went Viral," June 16, 2015

to do a story about LeBron," he said, "but the office called and diverted me to this instead." Before the Target tweet, the closest I had come to social media stardom was the time Roxane Gay RT'ed a selfie I took with her at a book signing. Now I had bumped a LeBron story.

I threw on a dress and some makeup, thanked God for dry shampoo, and within fifteen minutes was miked and on camera. I was brilliant and articulate, I hoped, as I explained why I thought the sign was a problem – because making *girls' building sets* a distinct category from *building sets* made it sound like *girls* are a separate category from *kids*; because the notion that girls would only be interested in special "girly" sets for building pink and purple hair salons and dollhouses and malls is the same nonsense that pigeonholes girls and women into certain roles – as my cat watched us from the front window.

That afternoon when the segment aired, I watched it from the waiting room at my dentist's office with the receptionist and a hygienist on her break. "SIGN OFFENDS LOCAL MOTHER," the title bar said, as if the aisle sign had stuck its foot out to trip me while I was shopping and then called me four-eyes. We watched in silence for two and a half minutes as my onscreen self stammered and gestured through my interview, and when it was over, the receptionist changed the channel to Cartoon Network. "Huh," she remarked conversationally. "If I'd seen that sign I would never have read anything into it."

By that evening, Local Mom was being offended in every local news broadcast. The next day the story jumped to national news shows and websites, where I became the Ohio Mom who was "angry," "upset," "outraged," even "furious." Strangers tweeted at

me that I was just looking for attention and should be spending my time worrying about more important things, oblivious to the irony that they were spending their time seeking me out to give me attention. Libertarians lectured me about how consumers drive the free market, as if I weren't a consumer who was now doing exactly that. Men's Rights forums picked up the story, and my twitter mentions became about what you'd expect from MRAs. (One man sent me a photograph of poop. Who keeps photographs of poop??) I had written a four-word tweet, and now I was being called an ISIS supporter who hates homeless, starving children.

As the conversation unfolded, I found myself being made into a gender stereotype, too. I wasn't a writer, a grad student, a university instructor; I was *Ohio Mom*. My critique of Target was *angry* and *offended*; they stopped just short of calling me shrill. In my Twitter mentions, I became *fat*, *ugly*, and *unlovable*. The more loudly people complained that this was a giant overreaction, the more they proved the need for feminism.

And yet, I began to agree with some of the trolls. Maybe I *was* making a big deal out of nothing. Shouldn't I be worrying about more important feminist issues, like violence against trans women of color? Didn't this attention rightfully belong to the activists who had earned it, instead of just some mom from Ohio? I told my therapist that I felt very aware of the white- and class-privilege that had put me at the center of this story; that I wasn't sure if I had anything important to say, or if I should even try.

"Women have fought for decades to have a voice," she said, "and yet so often we minimize the voice we have. Your words are powerful, and you can give yourself permission to use that power. You don't have to feel guilty for speaking up."

Together we made a plan for how I could own my power. I started asking interviewers not to label me "angry" or "offended," and some of them obliged – it didn't change the narrative that was already out there, but it was a step toward reclaiming my identity. I gave a friend my Twitter password and asked her to filter my mentions for me for a few days, weeding out the worst of the trolls. I stopped letting the increased attention and scrutiny affect the way I was interacting with my social media communities.

And my community stepped up, too. Online friends made fun of the trolls in my mentions and sent me cat gifs. Local friends stopped by with wine and moral support. When a producer from a national talk show scheduled a camera crew to come to my house for an interview, friends offered to watch my kids and help clean my living room. And when the producer cancelled the interview at the last minute to cover a breaking story instead, we agreed that the Target Tweet was probably preempted by LeBron's penis [http://www.mediaite.com/tv/er-did-lebron-james-flash-abc-viewers-before-tonights-game-nsfw/] and that there was a certain poetic symmetry in that. (The story arc, not the penis.)

There is something absurd in a single tweet gaining this kind of national attention. This is how the 24-hour news cycle sausage is made – by taking these small, nuanced conversations and turning them into overblown, oversimplified issues. But the beauty of social media is that we can use our voices and take our power, support each other, call for change on a whole spectrum of issues. And we don't need a man to show up uninvited on our doorsteps for that to happen.

TARGET FINALLY LISTENED TO MY VIRAL TWEET ABOUT BOYS' AND GIRLS' TOYS[3]

At the playground that afternoon, my (then) five-year-old looked hot, dusty, and flawless, with red glitter fingernail polish that sparkled in the sunlight. My kids had teamed up with some older boys, maybe fifth-graders or so, and they were all playing happily in the clubhouse, when one of the older boys asked:

"Don't you know nail polish is for *girls*?"

My five-year-old shrugged and replied, "Nah, anyone can wear nail polish if they like it. It looks really cool!" He held out his fingers for the older boys to see. "Look how sparkly it is!"

They crowded around. "Yeah, it does look pretty cool," one of them agreed. "It kind of looks like lava," said another. And then they all went back to pretending the clubhouse was a pirate ship in shark-infested waters.

Being a feminist parent of sons often feels like its own sail through shark-infested waters. Kids are constantly being fed messages about how they're expected to perform girlhood or boyhood, and so my partner and I spend a lot of time trying to help our boys to unlearn these messages.

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[3] originally published on TIME.com, August 10, 2015

That's why when I was toy shopping in Target a few months ago and noticed the "building sets/girls' building sets" aisle sign, I rolled my eyes and tweeted a picture. In an attempt to make girls feel included, it excluded them by implying that if "building sets" are for kids and "girls' building sets" are for girls, then "girls" is a distinct category from "kids." Here was one more piece of visual rhetoric telling my sons that boys are normative, and girls are other.

First grade seems to be when the awareness of cooties develops. We'd walk past the all-pink aisles of the toy section, and one of my sons – the same one who, a few years before, would snuggle next to me and nurse his stuffed animals while I breastfed his baby brother – would yell, "Ew, girl stuff!" At his girl cousin's house, he would eye her train toys suspiciously and ask, "Why do *you* like Thomas the Tank Engine?" Toys came in two flavors – boy and girl – and everything not pink was for boys only. A girl playing with toys that didn't come from the girl aisles was suspect; a boy playing with anything pink was putting his maleness at risk.

If you read the comments on any article about Caitlyn Jenner (but don't read the comments, seriously), you'll see gender anxiety in full display. If my Twitter mentions these days are any indication, a lot of men still feel that their masculinity is at risk of being contaminated by girliness just from having toys for boys shelved near toys for girls. As one man put it: "If I'm looking for a present for a boy, I'm not going to dig through a bunch of pink crap!" Masculinity, it seems, is so fragile that proximity to pink can taint it.

But we don't have to teach our kids to live inside the narrow confines of gender stereotypes. This is why Target's announcement that they're removing gender identifiers from their toy and kids' bedding department is a big deal. When toys aren't color-coded

pink or blue or labeled “boys’” or “girls’,” kids are freed up to play with what they want and pursue their own interests. No longer boxed into their half of the toy section, children of all genders can be nurturers and builders, scientific and creative, peaceful and rowdy, chaotic and organized, homekeeper and adventurer. Our kids contain multitudes, and we owe it to them to let them explore their full range of interests without anxiety or limitation.

SUBMIT: SCENES FROM A REAL MARRIAGE

Fourteen years ago I stood in our church and promised before God and all our assembled friends and family that I would obey Aaron, would submit to him and let him lead.

Last night Aaron clasped a collar around my neck and then held me down and slapped my face and breasts while he fucked me, because I asked him to. “Open your eyes,” he ordered, “look at me.” I fell into the concentration in his eyebrows, the intensity of his mouth, and his palm struck my cheek again and then I was crying and coming and feeling incredibly loved and valued and safe, and nothing made any sense and I didn’t care.

This is not what our pastor meant by “submit.” But then, I’m not part of that church anymore.

I left my church in small stages like scraping away at a callus to get at the raw soft skin underneath. So many things: their young-earth creationism, their confidence that gay and lesbian and bisexual people were broken, their support of the anti-abortion movement, their forays into the inner city and developing world that were tinted with poverty tourism. Their absence of women behind the pulpit or on the elder board. Their overwhelming middle-class whiteness.

I say "their," but for a long time it was really "our." I was one of them, committed as deeply as anyone else. This was the church that had sent me on high-school mission trips, the church where I met Aaron, the church where we were married, the church where we dedicated our babies and took them to nursery classes and Vacation Bible Schools and Mom's Day Outs. There were people there who loved us, who loved our boys. There were people there we loved. And when I started believing differently, when I started growing apart from them, it hurt like scratches on new skin.

The only language I could find to explain the way I didn't fit at our church anymore was the language of divorce. I was changing too much. I tried to go along, tried to make myself keep fitting the way I always had, but I was unhappy. I didn't think I could make things work with them anymore.

My church and I had deep, irreconcilable differences when it came to marriage. They, like most evangelical churches, held to a belief called "complementarianism," which says that men and women are created for different, complementary roles within marriage. It is a husband's job to be the leader, provider, and protector of his wife and children, and a wife's job to be the homemaker, nurturer, and helper, responsive to his leadership. These are essential characteristics of masculinity and femininity, inborn traits that men and women need to live up to in order to have successful relationships.

Aaron and I had been there, done that. On our wedding day, I vowed to love, honor, and obey him, and he promised to protect me. And for the first few years, we really did try. I stepped back and waited for him to make the big decisions for us about where we would work, where we would live, how we would spend our money; I held

myself back, determined to let him lead us, determined to follow. When we got unexpectedly pregnant, we agreed that I would leave my career to stay home in our cozy rented farmhouse and raise our babies, even though my job managing a couple of Hallmark stores paid better than his at a university. It was a given that our family would have a father-breadwinner-provider and a stay-at-home mom, because this is what we had always believed about how families were supposed to work. It was all we had ever known, all our church had taught. On paper, the numbers didn't make sense, but we knew that if we obeyed God and followed His plan for our family, He would bless us.

We fought. We came up short on the rent too many months, and we were evicted from the cozy farmhouse. We moved into a small gray house with damp walls and an uneven floor, across the street from a truck-noisy lumberyard. Aaron took a second job working the breakfast shift at McDonald's. I was lonely and unhappy; postpartum depression hit me hard, and I had nightmares of dropping the baby down the stairs, watching his head hit the floor and shatter like an overripe watermelon. I stopped showering or sleeping, stopped eating, stopped doing anything except watching the baby, haunted by the sense that monsters lurked just past my peripheral vision and the only thing keeping them at bay was the force of my attention.

Aaron was stressed, exhausted. He was twenty-four and had dark blue circles under his eyes. I longed for him to be the protector of our family that he was supposed to be, and I began to suspect that the reason we were struggling was because Aaron wasn't being the confident, committed spiritual leader that we needed. If he would schedule couple devotions and Bible studies, if he would initiate prayers with me and talk to me about the things we were learning at church, then surely everything would fall into place.

God was waiting to bless us with a Hallmark-card life, if only we would conform to the roles He had established.

It wasn't just that these roles reflected how we were made. They served a more important purpose, too: they reflected the Gospel. The relationship between a husband and wife was an image of the relationship between Jesus and the Church. Just as Christ laid down His life for the Church, so should husbands be willing to sacrifice for their wives; just as Christians obeyed Jesus and followed His leading, so should wives submit to their husbands. Marriage between one man and one woman was designed to be a portrayal of the deepest intimacies of our religious beliefs.

This meant that it wasn't possible to just disagree with the church about gender roles. Complementarianism wasn't a loose thread that I could snip off and discard – it was woven deep into the fabric of conservative evangelical Christianity. You couldn't pull it out without unraveling everything.

Every women's group and Bible study I joined talked about how to be a good wife, even if that wasn't the purpose of the group. Most of them were concerned with the question of how to restore balance in a marriage where these natural roles had been upended somehow. If our husbands weren't leading properly, it was probably our fault; a man whose wife nagged, or took over his leadership responsibilities, or didn't respond properly to his leadership, or who didn't make herself properly attractive and feminine – this man would feel emasculated and be unable to lead. If a woman initiated sex too often, or turned down sex when her husband initiated, or didn't visibly enjoy his sexual advances, these things could all undermine a man's ability to be the masculine leader and provider he was designed to be.

I tried to submit harder, tried everything I could to encourage him to lead. I checked out devotional books from the library; I presented them to Aaron and asked him to start making time for us to study them together. We made it through a few chapters, but we were both so tired, and our time together was so limited, that we couldn't make it work. On my own I read books like *The Power of a Praying Wife* and *Finding the Hero in Your Husband*, and I realized that this failure was probably my fault; by telling him how to lead, I was quietly usurping his authority in our family – his leadership had to come from him, not from my own backseat-driving of our marriage.

Instead, I tried focusing on being sexually available to him. I put on makeup and changed out of my ratty sweatpants and breastmilk-stained t-shirts and nursing bras every evening before he arrived home from work, and I waited for him to put the moves on me. I stopped being the one who always initiated sex; I knew that if I waited long enough, he would initiate things, and then I could respond to him and say yes, and it would bolster his confidence and his masculinity and set the balance of our marriage back where it belonged. Instead he fell asleep as soon as we collapsed into bed, and I lay there resenting him as his snores filled the room. He was supposed to be hardwired for leadership, and I for submission; but clearly we were both wrong, damaged, maybe beyond repair.

When our marriage hit bottom it wasn't a sudden, precise thing, but a series of failures and recommitments and failures again. For months and years I tried to submit harder, nurture harder, faith harder. He tried to lead, and I tried to follow, and we both fell short of the standard our church had set for us. When at last we gave up it was a move of desperation, not ideology, that sent me back to work and school and brought

Aaron home part-time to wrangle toddlers and groceries and laundry; and at last we began to settle into place.

I was ashamed. I thought we had failed our beliefs. Church had taught us that there was one correct, predetermined way to be man and woman, husband and wife; our inability to conform must have meant that there was something deeply wrong with me, something that was preventing me from submitting thoroughly enough to enable Aaron to lead.

It took me a long time to realize that it was our beliefs that had failed us.

That was when the rupture started. I started to grow away from the version of Christianity I had always known, and toward feminism, which said that there is no one way to be a woman or a man, that healthy relationships are partnerships in which each member plays to their own unique strengths, rather than trying to conform to some one-size-fits-all version of masculinity or femininity. I found cracks in the foundation of my faith, and the more I picked at them, the wider the cracks became. I stopped being able to reconcile my lived experience with my church's teachings. I stopped fitting.

Sometime near the end, when I was already straining against the deep knowledge that I wouldn't be able to stay with my church unless something changed, the church announced the *Real Marriage* conference. The speakers were Mark and Grace Driscoll, a Seattle megachurch pastor and his wife, who had written a book together called *Real Marriage: The Truth About Sex, Friendship, and Life Together.* Our church was to be a satellite site for their conference – the Driscolls would be beamed in on the big screens in

the Worship Center, live via satellite. In the lead-up to the conference, our pastor was encouraging church members to buy the book.

So I bought *Real Marriage*, and I began reading it.

Mark Driscoll was a stocky, fortysomething white guy with a perpetual five o'clock shadow and a tendency to preach in fitted t-shirts and baggy jeans. His close-cropped, receding brown hair was tousled and gelled – just enough hair product to look hip, not enough to look gay. Mark was into MMA fighting and traditional masculinity, and when he smiled, his cheeks became chipmunk-round and boyish. His wife Grace was thin and pretty, with natural-looking makeup and a neutral lipcolor; she wore her hair tastefully shoulder-length and blond. In all of their promotional pictures, she stood three inches shorter than her husband and snuggled into his shoulder, grinning broadly, as he stood square to the camera.

In *Real Marriage*, Mark Driscoll argued that men are sexual beings, that men are visual, and women who "let themselves go" are endangering their marriages by giving their husbands the incentive to stray. He suggested aging wives consider plastic surgery to keep things perky and fresh-looking. He said that women aren't naturally interested in sex, but men are, so it's our responsibility to do it anyway even though we probably wouldn't enjoy it that much. He recommended that a wife let her husband do anal when she was on her period, so she could still meet his need for sex. He warned women that they are obligated to have sex even when they didn't feel like it, that our job was to empower our men and sex is the most effective way to do so. Grace wrote that her "sexual sin" – being raped by a previous partner – had prevented her from being available to Mark the way she should have been, and that she had to confess this sin to God and her

husband and work on doing better for her marriage – where "better" meant having a robust sexual relationship with Mark free from lingering trauma.

Driscoll took all the complementarian rhetoric I'd learned and dialed it up to eleven. His book resounded with the message that submitting wasn't supposed to be easy or comfortable, but it was what men needed from their wives and it was what God commanded, so women had to submit or risk destroying their marriages and their lives.

I emailed the pastor who had arranged the *Real Marriage* seminar, who had recommended the book to the church, laid out my concerns: Don't you think these things are pretty troubling? I asked.

He sent his response to Aaron: Tell your wife Driscoll is a strong personality, but he's not wrong, he responded. His theology lines up with ours.

It was true. Driscoll's theology lined up with my church's. His was louder, brasher, not couched in soft language, but it was the same theology, the natural end point of the same complementarianism my church taught.

I couldn't pretend to be a submissive, giving, self-sacrificing wife. That wasn't real; it was a role I couldn't play, not for my church, not for Aaron (who didn't want me to anyway). I couldn't make myself smaller the way they wanted me to.

I stopped going to church, even though leaving felt like failure. For a long time, it hurt, and then, slowly, it didn't.

Some time after that, two years, maybe more: I am writhing under Aaron on the bed, blindfolded, bound, collared, sweating into the sheets. There are bruises and bite

marks on my breasts and my thighs, fading green marks and deep-purple new ones, galaxies and constellations. Someone is whimpering, a high keening sound that comes from no place and everyplace around us – comes from me, I realize, a fact that seems unimportant and very far away. I am flying; I am gone; I am deep in subspace, where all I can feel is my body and his body and the ferocious safety of his love for me.

How we got here isn't important – the first tentative pinches and slaps and bites, the wrists tied together with scarves, his hand on my throat, the late-night confessions of dark-secret fantasies, that heartstopped foreverlong moment before *Me, too*.

But slowly we got here, to the place where we can put a name to what we were doing: BDSM. Kink. Dominance and submission. The name gives it power, gives it momentum, and we let the idea build between us.

Aaron and I have finished reading *The Ultimate Guide to Kink* together. Now I am reading *The S&M Feminist* and *The NEW Bottoming Book*, and Aaron's Kindle app is loaded with *The NEW Topping Book* and *Two Knotty Boys: Showing You the Ropes.* We highlight passages that interest or confuse or alarm or resonate with us, and we make time for regular conversations about what we're reading. Most of these conversations end naked.

Our vocabulary begins to change. We set safewords and negotiate scenes. We talk about aftercare and avoiding sub drop. We compare different floggers and paddles as being *sting-y* or *thuddy*. We develop opinions about different types and thicknesses of rope. Aaron joins an online group for male Dominants in monogamous relationships with female submissives, and I join its counterpart group for subs. I return to my languishing

yoga practice to increase the flexibility in my shoulders so we can work up to more intricate bondage harnesses. He practices tying knots on the rungs of a chair while we watch Netflix in the evenings after the kids are in bed.

When we're playing – which is to say, when we're in our bedroom together, putting on our roles as Dom and sub, throwing ourselves into this exhilarating new world we've discovered together, our secret realm – I find myself able to let go of myself and fall into Aaron completely. I am only my body. I find the place they call *subspace*: the place that is no place, that is only my skin and flesh and need, where I am only the strain of muscle against rope and the burn and pinch of clothespins and the sting of leather and throb of yes, where there is nothing but the safety of his desire for me, his hands in my hair, his taste in my mouth. I get lost in being the thing that he wants, being used by him the way he wants to use me, being the thing that pleases him. Submission becomes everything, and sometimes when I am inside it I am weeping catharsis unclenching, or I am laughing unfolding collapsing, or I am flying above within my body, and I never want to leave. He brings me back gently, carefully, holds my hand and pulls me back to our sweatdamp sheets, holds the cup of water for me to sip, holds me in his arms while I curl against him and fall asleep.

Later, after, is when I overthink and question and gnaw. I second-guess myself. Did I actually enjoy that, or was I just doing it to please Aaron? Did Aaron really enjoy it, or was he just doing it because I asked? Is there something wrong with me?

I reach out to an internet acquaintance, another married Christian feminist sub, and ask her if we can talk. I tell her I'm afraid that I get off on submission because it's reaffirming my old programming that submitting to my husband is my job, and that the

real reason I enjoy being objectified and used is because I've been told for so long that I had to earn my worth by being alluring. I am afraid that it's this confirmation of these comfortable old lies that makes me feel good.

She can't solve this for me, but she reminds me to enter into the subspace telling myself the right things. She gives me a mantra: "I am doing this because I am wanted, and because my body is a miraculous, amazing thing that is capable of experiencing a huge spectrum of things, and that's beautiful. I want to share this beauty with my partner." I repeat these words, cling to them, hold them up against the doubts and shame-whispers.

When the shame-whispers do come, they come in pairs, springing out from two directions at once. There's the whisper that says I've let everyone from my old life down – that in leaving my church, losing my faith, changing my beliefs, I've disappointed everyone who loved me and my little family. If I had only tried harder, been more humble, more sincere, more faithful, maybe I wouldn't have fallen away. That I was selfish to leave, selfish to change my mind.

And there's the whisper that says I'm undermining my new beliefs, too – that in submitting to a man, letting him use me, asking to be hurt and objectified and made smaller, I'm failing feminism. I'm proving right all the *Real Marriage* types who have said all along that wives are meant to submit, to please their husbands, to be sexually available and responsive – proving that I long for this because it's how women are designed. Of course I enjoy submitting; I'm made to be used by a man.

This word "submit" is complicated. I can argue that this is different, now, what we are doing – because it is limited to our sex life, because it is something we both chose, because these roles are what fit the two of us best, Dominant and submissive, not because of our genders but just because we both happen to be wired this way. But what if we are wired this way because this really is how masculinity and femininity are innately meant to work? Or what if we chose this because we're buying into social gender norms? If there were another word, one that didn't overlap so much with Mark Driscoll, maybe this would be easy to reconcile; but *submissive* fits me best.

Maybe the truth is, our marriage, our sexuality, has been permeated by complementarianism. It's worked in like a stain that's been through the dryer a dozen times. It was never supposed to be us, but it's worn in deep, so maybe the best thing we can do is twist it into something that works for us – take it and make it ours, subvert it, use it to get off.

Maybe this is why we play up some of the pageantry of our D/s: the rules and protocols that demarcate our playtime, the collar, the ropes, the breathless sibilant *yes Sir*'s. This is careful sex magic we perform together, and we keep the rituals tightly in place to keep these roles from bleeding into the dinner-cooking and the checkbook-balancing and the laundry-folding. In our bedroom we can bend Dominance and submission, leadership and obedience, into something that is ours; and everywhere else we live our vanilla marriage as partners and co-parents. I am wife and partner and lover and equal and submissive, all of these roles at once, in this marriage that fits the multitudes of ourselves, this marriage that is miraculous and amazing and capable of experiencing a whole spectrum of things, this marriage that is real.

CONFIRMATION

Up close, the mustache of the Right Reverend Mark Hollingsworth, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio, is even more pinnipedian than it appears in his portrait that hangs on the wall of the narthex. It sits gray and thick and bristly on his upper lip, looking like a refugee from a 1970s porno set, out of place above his clerical collar, unless both mustache and collar were from a film about a very dirty priest. He is already talking when Mother Debra ushers me into the Sunday school – no: Christian formation, which is Episcopalian for Sunday school – classroom in the basement, where Bishop Mark is meeting with the parishioners who will be received or confirmed this morning. I am late again, like always: late for church every Sunday, late for pediatrician appointments and parent-teacher conferences, hurtling into my own grad school classes at the last possible minute, and now late for the meeting with the Bishop. The only available seat is to the immediate right of the Bishop and his mustache, and I watch it move as he talks.

The Right Reverend Mark Hollingsworth, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio, makes it to each of his parishes only about once every three years. His last visit was before I began coming here. Having him here at Church of Our Saviour is a big deal, one I've had a hard time appreciating because I've never been in a church with a higher level of leadership than the senior pastor. I imagine that to Mother Debra, Bishop Mark's

visit feels the way I used to feel when the Regional Manager came to the Hallmark store I managed. In preparation for his visit, everyone who's been everyone who's been considering joining the church has signed up to be confirmed, because it'll be another three years before he's back.

Bishop Mark is saying something about the line of apostolic succession and how that means it's important to be confirmed into the Church by a Bishop, the tradition of welcoming people into a heritage that can be traced back to the original Church. Or something. I am trying to get myself unflustered, smoothing my skirt down. Katie is wearing panty hose. I wonder if I should have worn panty hose. I wore a dress, blue and covered in pink and yellow birds, but maybe I was supposed to look more...solemn? Less like Ms. Frizzle?

Everyone takes a red hardbound Book of Common Prayer from the stack on the table and Bishop Mark walks us through the order for the Confirmation service so we know what to expect. In the Episcopal Church, there's always a script. Everything comes straight out of the book. We will all renew our baptismal covenant:

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

I will, with God's help.

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

I will, with God's help.

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

I will, with God's help.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

I will, with God's help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

I will, with God's help.

And then Bishop Mark will call us forward one by one to be confirmed, for those of us who were baptized into another protestant church; or received, for those who are emigrating over from Catholicism. Got it. Nods all around. We've all got the script.

Bishop Mark looks around the room at us: Jeannine and Rita and their daughter Jordan, Chris and Katie, Megan, me. "Now what I like to know before I confirm or receive someone into the Church," he says, "is how you got here. What brings you to the Episcopal Church, and why do you want to be received or confirmed into this fellowship?"

Rita, sitting to the Bishop's left, starts. She is a redhead with creamy white skin. She and Jeannine are wearing coordinated pantsuits: Rita in a black blazer with a red blouse, and Jeannine in a red blazer with a black blouse. Jordan, twelve years old with the same dark skin and box braids as Jeannine, is wearing a red and black plaid button-down. They belong on the cover of a coffee-table book about modern American families.

"I was raised Catholic," says Rita, "and my faith has always been very important to me. Finding this church has been such a blessing for us."

Jeannine laces her fingers with Rita's. "We're getting married in the Spring," she says. "It's important to us that Jordan grow up in a church, and that our family have a church home. We're here because this is where our family was welcomed."

Bishop Mark looks at Jordan next. She smiles and shrugs. Jordan isn't a big conversationalist.

Next Chris and Katie. He's a beardy Puerto Rican; today he's slicked his curly black hair into a high bun. Most weeks he wears a video game t-shirt, but today he's wearing a black button-down shirt and a bow tie. Katie, Chris's fiancé, is in a polka-dot dress. And the hose. Chris's family is Catholic, he says, but Chris and Katie don't want to be part of a church that doesn't support same-sex couples. Katie didn't grow up in a church, but she knows it's important to Chris, and she wants faith to be part of their life together.

Megan is next, a sociology grad student whose professor goes to Church of Our Saviour; she is in the process of discerning a call to the clergy. While she is talking I try to prepare an answer, since I'm next. I try to think of an answer to Bishop Mark's question that I can give in less than three minutes. The very, very abridged version.

It's been two years since that first October Sunday when I washed up like a shipwreck victim onto the sofa in Mother Debra's office. I came to Church of Our Saviour once before, that August, with an Episcopalian friend who was visiting from out of town and brought me with her – still feeling like an open wound from my decision to leave my old church that spring – to the Sunday morning service. I was thirty-two years old, a feminist and a lifelong Christian, and it was the first time I ever heard a woman give a Sunday sermon.

It took two months to find my way back, on a Sunday morning when I went out for a cup of coffee and ended up in the parking lot of Church of Our Saviour,

compulsively popping Altoids from a tin in my purse – I hadn't planned to go anywhere; I hadn't brushed my teeth. The sharp open-wound ache from leaving my old church had dulled to a persistent throb, and I sat in the back of the sanctuary and tried to be invisible, anonymous.

I went forward with the rest of the congregation to take the Eucharist, knelt at the altar. Mother Debra dropped the torn piece of bread into my cupped hands. "Abi, the body of Christ, the bread of heaven." She had met me only once before, and after two months, she remembered my name.

Back in my pew, I clenched my jaw hard and focused on breathing away the tears that threatened. *She remembered my name.* Taking Communion after months away overwhelmed me with a sense of connection to the universal Church – the family of Christians across the world and forward and backwards through time, the interwoven members of the body of Christ, all bound together through the ritual of bread and wine. It was as if I had grasped a power line and felt in my body the tumbling of electrons from across the power grid. It was more connectedness than I could bear.

After the last hymn, after the final blessing (*Go in peace to love and serve the Lord / Thanks be to God*), I waited in my pew for the rest of the congregation to trickle past Mother Debra at the back of the sanctuary, where she shook hands, gave hugs, asked after people's children. Mother Debra was a tiny Black woman with an upstate New York accent that slid her *r*'s forward in her mouth and rounded all her vowels – *And now, as oar Savioar Christ has toaght us, we are bold to say: Owah Fatheh, who aht in heaven…*

After the room was mostly empty, I rose and made my way up the aisle. Mother Debra greeted me warmly. "Welcome back!" she said. "We're glad you were with us today."

"Thanks," I said. "Could I, um, talk to you? For a minute? If you're not busy?"

Given my red eyes and Altoid breath, there's no telling what she thought I wanted to talk to her about, but after sizing me up for a moment, she smiled. "Wait right here while I go hang this up," she said, indicating her emerald green chasuble, and disappeared into an alcove at the front of the sanctuary.

In the quiet, as I waited, I studied the room. Two columns of wooden pews flanked the red carpet of the center aisle; overhead, ancient-looking wooden beams supported the vaulted ceiling. A banner hung against one wall: *Church of Our Saviour 110th Anniversary Celebration, 1895-2005*. I shifted my weight, and the floor creaked.

Mother Debra reappeared in a plain black dress and white collar, and she led me up the stairs to her office at the top of the building, a spacious dark- paneled room with leather sofas and a fireplace. I didn't even know what I wanted to say to her, or what I wanted her to say to me. I didn't know what I was doing there.

She sat quietly while I fidgeted. Priests and therapists are good at silence; it's a job requirement, I suppose, holding open space for people.

Finally my words collected themselves and tumbled out. "I didn't mean to come here this morning," I said. "I wasn't planning to. I just – needed church."

She nodded. Placid. Letting me talk.

"I stopped going to church – The Chapel – six months ago," I continued, naming the local non-denominational brand-named megachurch. "Because I couldn't be that kind

of Christian anymore. The conservative evangelical kind. I couldn't do all the---" I waved my hand, unable to produce a direct object for my sentence. "I thought if I stayed, I could make it better. Fix it from inside, you know? But staying just made me angry. So I left, and – and then today I came here." My hand fluttered against the stillness of her office, a broken bird beating the air, unable to say: *I don't know where I belong anymore. I don't know if I will ever belong anywhere again.*

Mother Debra slid a box of Kleenex across the coffee table to me and I realized my eyes were spilling over again. "You are welcome here at Church of Our Saviour. But you should know," she said, "we have a number of gay and lesbian and transgender people who are members of our congregation. Will that be a problem for you?"

I didn't mean to laugh, but it burst out of me before I could stop it. She did not say, *It is more important for us to welcome those who are not welcome anywhere else than to make you comfortable*, but I heard it anyway, and some defensive place in my chest unclenched a tiny bit.

Mother Debra looked startled at the sound that came out of my face.

"That will not be a problem for me," I said. I couldn't tell if I was laughing or crying. "That will be perfect."

I came back the next Sunday, and the next.

Bishop Mark looks at me, expectant, and I realize that Megan has stopped talking. "Oh," I say. "Right. Well, I grew up in a big evangelical church. But then I…"

Became a feminist.

Got fed up with how everything they taught came back down to traditional gender roles.

Read liberation theology.

Learned about racial justice.

Got fed up that the entire congregation was white and middle-class.

Got fed up with being reminded of my place as a woman.

Voted for Obama.

"…left, and I started coming here two years ago. And…I think I want this to be home."

This is sufficient for Bishop Mark, who checks his watch: we are running short on time. "I'm like the bride," he jokes, "they can't start the show without me"; but just the same he hurries out to put on his vestments.

The rest of us make our way upstairs and to the back of the sanctuary, where the choir and acolytes have already lined up for the procession. We're to walk in with the procession, too, behind the choir and just ahead of Mother Debra and Bishop Mark. I'm glad I wore flats; at least I don't have to be nervous about stumbling in heels.

One of the bigger adjustments I've had to make since I started coming here is getting used to the uniforms. When I was growing up, pastors wore dark suits and somber neckties. In the last half dozen years, as some evangelical churches have started courting Millennials, pastoral fashion has become more calculatedly casual: jeans, an untucked button-down, maybe even an ironic cartoon-character t-shirt for the particularly hip minister. The choir, if it hasn't been replaced by a worship band, hasn't worn robes since 2002.

Here, though, it's vestments ahoy, a custom that fascinates and mystifies me. The choir members and acolytes wear red button-up cassocks that cover them from neck to ankle, and on top of that a loose white cotton fluttery bit. Mother Debra wears a long white bathrobe-esque thing under a chasuble (I only know what this is called because my friend Nate, a Primitive Catholic deacon, once sent me a video of himself singing "Put your chasuble on!" to the tune of Beyoncé's "Freakum Dress"), which as far as I can tell is a fancy tablecloth worn as a poncho.

Bishop Mark is decked out in an off-white chasuble decorated with a strip of the same floral brocade fabric as the altar covering, and suddenly I wonder if Bishop Mark has to borrow a chasuble at every parish he goes to, or if he owns a closet full of chasubles so he can coordinate with any set of altar cloths he encounters, or if this is actually one of those awkward situations like going to a party and finding that you and someone else are both wearing the same tablecloth, or what. Bishop Mark is also wearing a pointy hat (a mitre: I know this word because last week in Children's Chapel the kids made mitres out of red and white construction paper) and carrying a long wooden staff, curved at the end like a shepherd's crook.

The churchbell rings – a recording of a churchbell, rather, activated when an usher pushes a button next to the panel of light switches in the foyer – and the organ begins playing, and we all slowly begin walking up the center aisle of the sanctuary behind Lauren, the high-school acolyte who carries the gold cross over her head.

This is so different from my old church. Sunday mornings at The Chapel were led by a worship band of twenty-something white guys in jeans and plaid shirts playing alterna-pop worship choruses on guitars and drums among fog machines and LED lights.

Behind them, projector screens displayed the lyrics against swirling colorful backgrounds:

And He loves us

Oh, how He loves us

Oh, how He loves us

Oh, how He loves

After the songs the worship leader would grab a microphone and pray extemporaneously, fervently: *We just celebrate you in this place today, Lord Jesus. We just thank you for your kindness and your goodness and mercy towards us, Lord. We thank you for community, we thank you that we have each other, and we just pray that we always remember, Lord, how much we need each other, Lord, how much we need these people in this room right here. And so we love you, we thank you, and we pray that we'd be doers of your word, Lord, we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.*

I loved it there. I loved the music, loved the feel of the bass rhythm in my ankles and chest, loved closing my eyes and tipping my head back and singing my worship, joining my voice with twelve hundred other voices in the Worship Center. I loved how easily I could be brought to tears. I loved the performance of it, the people working together to create an experience of art, of God. It felt like what I imagined Heaven would feel like. It felt like home.

I don't remember the first moment it stopped feeling like home. It was sometime after the thousandth mission trip slideshow of smiling sunburned white people surrounded by black faces. Sometime after the dozenth fundraiser for the pro-life crisis pregnancy center downtown. Sometime after earning an English degree made me realize

how untenable the doctrine of biblical inerrancy was. Sometime after the invitation from the pulpit for people struggling with same-sex attraction to come to our support group and find freedom in straightness. Sometime after a decade of only ever hearing men giving the Sunday prayers and the sermons and the baptisms and the benedictions.

Sometime before the gospel tracts that came home with my kids from their Sunday school teacher, the ones with little cartoons showing God sending nonbelievers to Hell after they die. Sometime before my fifth women's bible study series on Biblical Womanhood and how to be fulfilled as a coupon-clipping homeschooling homemaker. Sometime before the tenth heavily promoted marriage conference promising to heal broken marriages if husbands would just lead more forcefully and wives would just submit harder.

I went to The Chapel, and other churches like it, for almost three decades; I was fluent in the language of evangelicalism. I punctuated my prayers with *just*s and *Lord*s, I was skilled at gossiping via prayer request, I knew how to translate the "unspoken prayer request" (if it were a woman asking for prayer for her unspoken request, it was about romance, marriage, or fertility; if it were a man, it was about porn). Megachurch evangelicalism was familiar, comfortable, complacent-making, which is why it took such a long time for me to notice the ways it wasn't fitting, the ways it hurt.

At some point I still can't name, the balance tipped inexorably from *home* to *no*, and a long time after that, I left The Chapel and washed up on the shores of Church of Our Saviour. And now here I am, taking my regular pew (a third of the way back on the right-hand side), in the room whose ivory walls and beige woodwork and stained-glass windows will never be my first language, but which are at least familiar and welcoming.

Church of Our Saviour with its candles and kneeling and Book of Common Prayer feels very distant from The Chapel, a distance that I crave.

We begin the service as we do every week, with Mother Debra saying: "Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." And the congregation replying: "And blessed be God's kingdom, now and for ever. Amen." The BCP actually says "blessed be *his* kingdom," but it's an unwritten practice here to substitute "God's" for the masculine pronoun wherever it doesn't interfere with the flow of the liturgy. Here we invoke not only the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. Tired as I am of a male-only deity, I go a step farther and change up the pronouns when we recite the creed: *We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son, She is worshipped and glorified. She has spoken through the prophets.*

I have almost, but not quite, memorized the words to the Nicene Creed and the Confession of Sins, and I almost always remember to say the Lord's Prayer with *trespasses* instead of *debts*, but most weeks I read along from the book or risk getting tangled in the litany. I still forget when I'm supposed to say *Glory to you, Lord Christ* and *Praise to you, Lord Christ* – one is for before the gospel reading, and the other is for afterward. I still have to watch those around me so I know when I'm supposed to stand or cross myself or kneel on the padded kneeler that folds out from the back of the pew in front of me. There's a grace that comes from not knowing all the words and rituals and movements, the mindfulness of having to pay attention, fumbling along. It holds me down, safe like a snug seat-belt across my lap.

This morning's lesson is the story of Jesus healing the blind man. Bishop Mark stands in the center aisle, spreads his arms wide, and reads from the gospel book that an acolyte holds open for him. *The blind man said to him: "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

I wonder what it would mean for my faith to make me well. I have chosen this place to be my new home; is that enough? Is there some magic in this ceremony, this ritual of Confirmation, that will mark me as different, something as obvious and irrefutable as going from blindness to sight?

No, I realize. The problem was that I did learn to see. And like the blind man, once I could see, following Jesus meant I had to leave the place where I had been when I was blind.

For a long time after The Chapel stopped fitting, I hoped that if I stayed there, I could fix it. I could be a voice in that place who pushed for things to be better, who mentored gay and lesbian youth group kids, who pled for women to be allowed in the pulpit and on the elder board, who called for the church to examine the ways our missions to black and brown people were exploitative. I thought that if I spent myself, I could change The Chapel.

But I was met with dismissiveness and confusion, or hostility: I was too much, too many rough edges and accidentally-deployed swears and unruly unsubmissive womanhood, too fat and feminist, too far from gentle and gracious. I began feeling like I was hurling myself at an ancient wall that didn't even recognize that I was pounding

against it, much less care. Leaving felt like giving up, but it also felt like saving the last bruised, bloody shreds of myself.

Sitting in my regular pew at Church of Our Saviour, a third of the way back on the right-hand side, while Bishop Mark preaches, I wonder what the blind man felt like when the light pierced his eyes for the first time. I wonder if it stung. I wonder if he clenched his eyes shut tight, waiting for them to adjust. I wonder if Jesus had to reassure him that he was well because his brand-new sight hurt more than blindness ever did.

That first shipwrecked morning in Mother Debra's office, what I really needed to hear was, *Your faith has made you well.*

When they call us forward for the Confirmation ceremony, Bishop Mark sits in a heavy wooden chair in front of the altar, and one by one, we kneel at his feet. His hands are strong and warm on my scalp, and behind me Mother Debra places one hand on my shoulder, so light I almost can't feel it. *Strengthen, O Lord, your servant Abi with your Holy Spirit,* says Bishop Mark; *empower her for your service; and sustain her all the days of her life. Amen.*

When I rise to my feet I feel, I think, a glow that travels from my scalp and down my spine. I step back to take my place in the line of confirmands ringing the altar, and my foot lands just exactly wrong and I stumble, catching myself with an awkward too-large step to keep from falling. I whisper, "Shit!"

Behind me, an acolyte chokes on a giggle. Bishop Mark's mustache twitches.

Well, I think, *they're stuck with me now*.

After we have all been confirmed or received, Mother Debra says, “My sisters and my brothers, the peace of Christ be always with you,” and in unison the entire congregation replies, “And also with you,” and then the somber quiet of the sanctuary bursts and everyone is talking to one another and hugging and shaking hands and passing the peace. The Peace is like an intermission in which everyone gets up and greets as many people as they can before it’s time for the Eucharist. Some people roam during the Peace, moving up and down the aisle to get to everyone; others stand at the end of their pews, waiting for people to come to them. It’s a chaotic, boisterous system that seems to work somehow, and everyone passes the peace to everyone else. I’m more of a stander, myself; I move a few pews forward and backward, but the press of eager bodies is still a bit overwhelming to me, so I don’t go far.

This morning with the Peace there are hugs and “Congratulations!” and “Welcome!”s, and it occurs to me that I’ve been holding myself back since I began coming here, thinking of myself as the new girl, the outsider, and it’s time to stop. The Bishop has made it official; I’m one of them, an official Episcopalian, a part of this body. My faith has made me – if not *well*, then at least, *here*. It’s time to stop thinking of this place as *maybe* and just let it be *yes*.

Bishop Mark consecrates the elements and we move forward in a line to the communion railing. I take the bread and sip the wine and feel that familiar whelm of connectedness, and I let it wash through me and out my fingertips to soak into the walls of this place I’ve chosen to call home.

WHAT TO EXPECT

You are pregnant.

There are books for this.

You are pregnant, and it takes a very long time. You read books that compare your developing baby to various foods: a poppy seed, a pea, a kumquat – you have never seen a kumquat, but you look ahead and see that the next week, your baby will be the size of a brussels sprout. Then a lemon. A cabbage.

Your baby is the size of a cantaloupe, and in the books you find a packing list and so you pack a bag for the hospital. Your body does strange uncomfortable things and you go to the hospital and the nurses do strange uncomfortable things to your body and tell you to go back home, and you feel sheepish but the books say that this happens sometimes. And then eventually you go back to the hospital and they let you stay and your body does strange, uncomfortable, alarming, impossible things, and finally, you produce: a baby.

You spend two days in the hospital getting a crash-course in baby-care: diapering, bathing, breastfeeding, diapering, making that *shh-shh-shh-shh-shh* sound that supposedly reminds your baby of being in your uterus, which is now the size of a floppy, hollow watermelon. And then they send you home with a baby, which you and your partner are now responsible for keeping alive.

They do not offer the extended warranty.

There is a moment when you are getting – gingerly: you are quite sore – into your car, as your partner buckles your tiny new human into the car-seat that looks far too large, the car-seat that will never again be as clean as it is in this moment, when you marvel to yourself: *We went to the hospital as two people, and we are leaving here as three.*

You get home, the three of you, and you are awful at the whole baby thing, and then you get a bit better, and there are books for this, comforting books written with second-person pronouns, like a helpful Choose Your Own Adventure! book where none of the choices end with your being eaten by alligators. *Your baby has blood in his diaper. Are you breastfeeding? Turn to page 491. Don't worry! Your baby is not bleeding internally; the blood is coming from your cracked, raw nipples. Try rubbing them with lanolin cream and putting a cabbage leaf in your bra. Really.*

Just when you've gotten the hang of keeping your baby alive, he begins trying to thwart your efforts. He figures out how to scootch around and cram things into his mouth and bang his head on things, and the books tell you about childproofing and the myriad ways your baby could kill himself. You buy electrical outlet covers and you pad the edges of all your tables with cushions. You read about poisons, and you get rid of all of your cleaning chemicals and vow to never again use anything stronger than white vinegar. Then you read about germs, and you panic and buy gallons of Clorox and bleach every surface in your house to a skeletal white. Then another book tells you that perhaps you are going a bit overboard and you try to calm down because you have read that being stressed out can create a suboptimal home environment for your developing baby.

You read books about what to expect from the toddler years, the preschool years, the first day of kindergarten. You read books about discipline and potty training and parenting the gifted child and parenting the strong-willed child and parenting the easygoing child and parenting the extroverted child. You read books about science fairs and best-friend breakups and how to introduce your child to his brand-new baby sibling and how to throw a themed birthday party and how to visit Disneyworld with your family.

You take your child to the emergency room for asthma attacks and x-rays and allergic reactions and stitches. These are frightening things, especially the stitches, the blood on your child's face from where he ran into the exposed metal handlebar of his brother's bicycle, so close to his eye. He is so quiet when you hold him on the red-stained sidewalk, and in that slowed-down heartbeat second you study the curves of his face and see the baby he was not very long ago and you almost cannot breathe from the fear. But you have read about this, too, accidents and lacerations and gashes, and you use a clean t-shirt to apply pressure to the cut while you wait for the ambulance, and you do not panic or cry or fall apart until after it is over and your baby is home, fourteen stitches and a black eye and a popsicle, and you shut yourself in the bathroom and stuff a dry washcloth in your mouth to stifle your sobs. You don't come out until the shaking stops.

You are okay. He is okay. Everything will be okay.

You write these things, some of them, sometimes, blog posts and essays and journal entries and stories and Facebook statuses; it's what you do, writing, how you handle the constant busyness and the whelm of emotions – the crush of love anxiety

boredom fear resentment happiness – how you process your days, how you feel most like yourself. You tell your friends you write so you don't have to drink so much, ha-ha, and maybe it's true, if you didn't write the words in your head would pile up and up, the letters crunching and folding into each other like daddy longlegs. You imagine a separate part of your self, a writerbrain, who's constantly at work in there, writing and storing and compiling, and that when you write you are venting the pressure of all those built-up words. So you write skinned knees and puberty and snuggles and latenight talks that happen long after it should have been bedtime, cute clever things they've said, all those moments you fold into paper birds and set free.

And then one day your child hurts himself.

Not in a fell-out-of-a-tree way. In a tried-to-really,-really-*hurt*-himself,-on-purpose, way.

You did not see this coming.

This was not in any of the books.

You are quiet in the car on the way to the emergency room. You tell him, "You're not in trouble," and, "I'm just trying to understand what happened," and, "No matter what, I love you." He is not injured, not like he could have been if you hadn't ----- if he had ----- well. He is not injured.

Children's Hospital opened a new building with a new emergency room a few months ago; now you're navigating an unfamiliar parking lot outside an unfamiliar building, and maybe you're not in the right place at all, and for half a minute, you allow

yourself the luxury of thinking about changing your mind, thinking about going home and forgetting about all of this. You feel like an overexposed photograph, and you do what you always do when things are too much, which is to engage your writerbrain in another window in the background, let her siphon off all your feelings and compile them into the essay you can never write, leave you just enough of yourself to park the car and go inside, holding your child's hand, as much to comfort him as to feel his own still-aliveness against your fingers.

The lobby of the new emergency room is spacious and airy, and instead of hard plastic chairs lined up against the wall, there are comfortable-looking seats arranged together in groups like you're in the lobby of a trendy hotel or a megachurch. At the desk you repeat what the on-call nurse from the pediatrician's office told you, which is that you're there for the behavioral health emergency department; and you follow a nurse through a set of double doors, through taking your child's vitals and asking him if he's at risk of hurting himself right this very now, and through another set of double doors that only open when the nurse scans his badge.

You feel almost sheepish, bringing your child here. You were responsible for keeping him safe, and somehow when you weren't paying attention he ----- something happened. You have been careless. You feel the way you imagine you would feel if you had to return your phone to the Apple store and admit that you dropped it into the toilet. You feel the way you imagine you would feel if the toilet-phone feeling stapled itself to all your other feelings and formed a giant Feelings Voltron with itself at the center.

In the behavioral health ER, your child is given soft blue scrubs and nonskid socks to wear, and his clothes are searched and bagged and stored in a locker. You and

your son are put in a room with only a gurney and two chairs that are bolted to the floor, where the smooth black eye of a camera watches you from the ceiling. Your son is interviewed by a nurse, then a medical resident, then a mental health counselor, then an attending physician with cold hands, and you are sent to a waiting room by yourself to watch a Harry Potter movie on the wall-mounted tv while the counselor interviews your son privately, and when she comes to tell you that she is recommending that he be admitted to the inpatient behavioral health unit, it is with Lucius Malfoy's sibilant voice in the background as he sneers at the Weasleys in a bookstore.

You minimize the window that is you and you let your writerbrain take over. She transcribes and documents and narrates for you while you curl yourself into a tiny ball and scream into a dry washcloth. As long as she is in charge, this is a story that you don't have to experience right now. Right now you are not capable of operating in first-person. Right now the only way this doesn't hurt is if you turn the world around you into the text of a story that you will tell yourself later.

A security officer tells your son to stand spread-eagle and waves a metal detector wand around his body, and a nurse appears with a wheelchair, and you are escorted to the 8100 unit, which is the inpatient behavioral health unit, which is the psych ward. Your son is given a bedroom with a guard posted outside his open door, and you are given paperwork about visiting hours and security codes and prohibited items, and for one and a half seconds the text swims and you blink hard and force yourself back into composure.

They let you look in at him one last time before you leave. You are not allowed to go into his room. You smile at him like a human and make the I-love-you sign with your fingers.

You make it almost to the parking lot before the shaking really hits.

This is the essay you cannot write. This is the story that you tell yourself is about someone else, when you pretend that your writerbrain is who you really are in first-person and not the mechanism you use for keeping reality at bay.

You go to the hospital with a child, and you leave without him.

This was not in any of the books.

TARGET

The summer I broke up with my therapist, the ideas of gender and sexuality across the U.S. were fragile and anxious. 2015 was the summer of Caitlyn Jenner's *Vanity Fair* cover, of the Supreme Court ruling for marriage equality, of the Women's World Cup, of leaked Planned Parenthood videos, of Facebook profile pictures overlaid with rainbows.

Counseling through the university counseling center was free to me as a grad student, so when I needed a new therapist to replace Jennifer, that's where I went. I didn't choose a new therapist as much as order one to be custom-made from a list of specs that I brought in for my intake appointment, a list I'd honed after analyzing the ways Jennifer was a good therapist for me, and the ways she wasn't. Like Jennifer: Preferably a woman, at least my age or older. Must have a good understanding of evangelical Christianity, although current religious practice not necessary; there was too much of my own faith experience that I needed to unpack, and I didn't want to have to stop along the way to explain the language. Unlike Jennifer: Must identify as feminist. Must be trained in counseling sexual orientation issues.

Sitting in the narrow-armed chair in the intake counselor's tiny office with its fluorescent overhead lights turned off and a floor lamp in the corner glowing dimly, over the familiar safe whoosh of the white-noise machine, the ubiquitous therapy-office sound,

I said it out loud: “I’m bisexual.” It sounded more like a question than a statement. I added: “I only just realized this year.”

I forgot the intake counselor’s name, but it didn’t matter; I’d never see him again anyway. “I’ll enter all of this into the computer,” he said, half-rising from his chair, the universal therapist gesture for well-we’re-out-of-time, “and then a counselor who thinks they might fit what you’re looking for will call you to set up an appointment.”

It felt like I was doing something illicit, like creating an Ashley Madison profile, or posting a personal ad. I wasn’t sure if I was going about this the right way, not when I was still seeing another therapist, when I wasn’t sure how to end things with her. Jennifer had seen me through the past eight years; didn’t I owe her the courtesy of ending things with her before I began therapy with someone new?

Of course, if I knew how to end that therapy relationship on my own, maybe I wouldn’t need a new therapist at all.

The summer I broke up with my therapist was the summer of my son Peter’s seventh birthday, which was why he and I went to Target together that evening. In the 24 hours that he’d been clutching his birthday gift card, his imagination had created all kinds of toys that didn’t yet exist in our reality – a REAL light saber with FOUR BLADES made out of ACTUAL LASERS; robot Pokémon that you could program to battle with each other ALL BY THEMSELVES. It took a few minutes for me to talk him down to more reasonable expectations, but soon he was engrossed in weighing the merits of various Pokémon cards and Minecraft action figures and LEGO sets, and I was idly poking around the discounted toys. An aisle sign caught my eye, and reflexively I

snapped a picture of it with my phone. “BUILDING SETS / GIRLS’ BUILDING SETS,” it said.

Any parent knows it’s not a trip to the store without an emergency dash to the bathroom. At an impressive seven years old, Peter was full of dignified restraint as he turned down my offer to take him into the family restroom and insisted he go alone into the men’s. I leaned against the wall next to the water fountain and thumbed my phone like the distracted Millennial I am; pulled up the photo I took while Peter was browsing, the sign at the end of the LEGO aisle, the sign that said, “BUILDING SETS / GIRLS’ BUILDING SETS.” I tried to think of a suitable caption: “can u not” – no, backspace backspace backspace, “Don’t do this, @Target”; sent it uploading to Twitter just as Peter returned from the men’s room, full to the brim with his seven-year-old maturity.

A week later, the day of my first appointment with my new therapist, my tweet and I were on TV.

I’m actually unclear on whether I’m supposed to be a member of the Millennial Generation or of Generation X: my 1981 birthday puts me in both groups, or neither, depending on whom you ask. I’m in that liminal generation of thirty-somethings who are now old enough to roll our eyes when our middle school fashion statements come back into style, but young enough to try to wear them again anyway. We’re old enough that we talked to our high school classmates on AOL Instant Messenger over our dial-up modems, old enough that Facebook wasn’t invented until after we graduated from college (thank God), young enough to be early adopters of social media apps and blogs. I joined Twitter in 2007 when it was still in beta, early enough that I could claim my first choice

of screenname without having to append any numbers or extra punctuation marks to it; back before smartphone apps, we sent tweets from our flip-phones and pink Motorola Razrs by texting them to 40404.

In 2007, I was a stay-at-home mom in a new city, on my own all day with a preschooler, a toddler, a complicated pregnancy, a mountain of diapers, a perpetually overdue stack of library books, and a mommy-blog that no one read. Those were the lonely days. While my husband Aaron was at work, sometimes I'd go a full week without having a single conversation with an adult during daylight hours. I used social media to shout into the void, to convince the universe that I did still exist, to convince myself that I had anything to say. On Facebook, I posted cute anecdotes and pictures of the kids, carefully a-political conversations with aunts and old high-school friends, cheerful updates about our cheerful suburban life. On Twitter, I posted honesty.

Shout into the void long enough and eventually the void begins to fill. Every once in a while, I'd shout and other voices would drift back to me across the distance. I began to gather a loose collection of people that I talked to with something approaching regularity. Some of them, a tiny vibrant few, became people I trusted. Now, eight years later, I step online and find that the void has filled itself with friends – the kind of friendships that spill offline: friends I can meet for coffee if I'm passing through their part of the country; friends my family spent Christmas break with last winter, who welcomed us into their home like kin. On Twitter, I can make wry frustrated comments about my kids, I can make terrible embarrassing puns, I can obsess over cat videos and Beyoncé, I can lay out pieces of my deepest self in 140-character chunks. For a while, some of us 20- and 30-somethings disenchanted by our religious upbringings called it

"Twitter church," that space we'd fill with our questions and guesses and explorations about faith and God and love, celebrations of each other's triumphs and mourning for each other's losses, as we wandered together towards wholeness.

Twitter changed me. On Twitter, I met so many people whose lives were different and not-so-different from mine – gay and lesbian and bisexual people, Muslims, pro-choice activists, transgender people, Wiccans, Black and Latina and Native people, atheists. It was impossible to hear their stories, to see their lives unfolding in real time, and not have the assumptions and generalities I'd harbored shaken loose. Twitter is where I learned about privilege and intersectionality, and I became a feminist; where I began losing, and then finding, my faith.

Sometimes it was easy to forget that the internet was bigger than the small, friendly corner of it that I'd carved out for myself. Naturally, from time to time the uglier – or at least, less friendly – parts intruded into my online world, and from time to time I intruded myself into theirs. Once, during a conversation in which I asserted that I didn't think that either homosexuality or abortion were sins, a follower-of-a-follower popped up to call me a "sexual libertine and conversational terrorist" – a phrase that delighted me so much that I added it to my Twitter bio. Some days, I'd become the feminist crusader/activist/rantypants and slay internet dragons; but mostly, I went unnoticed, and that was fine. I knew how feminist women on the internet were sometimes treated – just look at Anita Sarkeesian, the feminist media critic and pop culture researcher whose video series about women in video games was met with online harassment, rape and death threats, distribution of her personal information, even a terrorist threat that caused her to cancel her lecture at a university. The internet can be unkind to women who speak

up about sexism, and while I wasn't trying to avoid being noticed, I wasn't eager to become the subject of that kind of abuse. I was the feminist equivalent of a mosquito: unlikely to attract any attention unless it landed directly on your arm, and even then, unable to accomplish much more than a brief irritation.

I certainly didn't expect to spark a much larger conversation about gender and feminism with the four-word tweet I sent from Target while Peter was in the men's room.

I slept restlessly the night I sent the Target tweet. My phone buzzed on my bedside table with every notification that someone else had favorited or reposted or replied to me. When I woke up the next morning, my single tweet, the lone picture of the aisle sign and my four-word caption, had been retweeted over 200 times; by lunch it climbed past 800.

The issue with the sign – "Building Sets / Girls' Building Sets" – seemed self-evident to me, so much so that I hadn't bothered explaining my thought process in my tweet; the four words I'd written, "Don't do this, @Target," had seemed perfectly sufficient. It was a language problem; naming "girls' building sets" separately from "building sets" implied that they were a distinct category from normal sets – that girls were a distinct category from normal kids. It made maleness the default, inclusive neutral and femaleness the gendered other. Tossed into an ongoing conversation about feminism and equality, it spoke for itself, I thought.

Retweeted into the timelines of hundreds of strangers, it was less clear. The conversation quickly shifted from the language of the sign itself to the existence of distinct girls' and boys' toys, and the way those categories reinforce gender norms. My

little tweet went zipping across the internet, catalyzing a discussion about gender roles and kids and the color pink, picking up editorial articles as it went.

Jennifer the therapist didn't have internet in her home, she told me once, because it took focus away from family activities. Jennifer was a mother of four, a woman who seemed at times almost aggressively patient; the kind of woman I suspected might be secretly superhuman. It was hard to explain to her that most of my friendships were online; harder to justify to her, and to myself, the attention I paid to the people on my computer screen when I could be pouring myself into my children, or at least finding a "real" social life. Facebook, Jennifer explained, could be dangerous to marriages. I didn't bother trying to explain that the danger of Facebook was not that I would reconnect with an old boyfriend and stray from my husband, but that I would get into one too many arguments with conservative family members and be disinvited from Thanksgiving dinner. After a while I stopped trying to explain my internet usage to Jennifer at all.

The day that my tweet jumped from the internet to TV was the day of my first appointment with Sara, the therapist from the university counseling center who had responded to the personal-ad-esque posting from my intake counselor. That morning, local ABC news reporter Bob Jones had arrived unannounced at my doorstep to interview me about the four-word tweet that was causing such a stir.

Sara understood without my explaining why the reporter's name, the same as the founder of the conservative fundamentalist Christian college that I had once aspired to attend, was darkly amusing to me. And she understood without my explaining what I had seen in the Target sign that had prompted me to tweet about it in the first place.

It wasn't love at first appointment, exactly. But it was hesitant trust.

Later that afternoon I watched my interview on the TV in my dentist's office waiting room. "A local mom said she was offended by an aisle sign she saw in this Target," said Bob Jones, standing at the edge of the parking lot. I wasn't *offended*, I thought. *Mildly irritated,* maybe. What's the word for *noticed-that-a-thing-is-problematic*? Is there a word that means *aware-of-having-identified-a-sexist-microaggression*? Maybe something in German?

The next morning the panelists on the Fox News talk show *Outnumbered* – so named because the panelists were four women and one man, get it? – discussed my tweet, and me. "Target coming under fire! One mom is calling out Target for categorizing its toys by gender," said one of the hosts in her most ironic voice. "The audacity!"

"I say get over it – what's next, they're going to criticize the aisle that's named for girls that has dresses in it?" said another. "That mom can go shop somewhere else."

"Leave it to Fox News for nuanced gender commentary," eyerolled one of my Twitter friends.

"Leave it to Fox News to staff a show with eighty percent women and *still* name it after the man," I grumbled, but my heart wasn't in it. Shout into the void and sometimes the void shouts back. Since the Fox segment aired, my Twitter mentions were overflowing with trolls.

"That was THE dumbest thing to be offended over," said a Twitter user whose bio proclaimed them to be a Proud Fan of The Walking Dead. "Unclench and take a shit, lady."

"You're worthless," said Ken, a Swell Guy from North of Antarctica.

"So petty!" said a seventeen-year-old whose life was #blessed. "Don't you have any real problems to worry about?"

I did, though. For one thing, I had to work up the nerve to tell Jennifer that I didn't want her to be my therapist anymore.

When I started seeing Jennifer in 2007, she was exactly what I needed: a conservative evangelical with a Psy.D. working in a Christian therapy practice. With Jennifer I worked on my grief from my mom's death when I was a child, I practiced accepting myself the way my dad couldn't, I set boundaries with my in-laws, I began letting go of my anxious perfectionism, I tried on new interests to see what fit me best. The theme was finding and embracing my *true self*, and shedding the false selves that I hid behind.

But as I grew, I drifted leftward, and she stayed put. My faith became wobbly and uncertain, and it was too hard to talk about my own unbelief with someone so devout, so constant. My faith came unmoored. I left my church. But in therapy I downplayed everything, and if Jennifer noticed that leaving church had left me shattered and raw, she never said so.

In our sessions, I compartmentalized more and more. The list of topics I felt comfortable discussing with Jennifer dwindled. I needed her, I told myself. She knew me, knew so much of my history. I needed her to help me get through grad school, and then I'd find someone new. I was stretched too thin to deal with the upheaval of changing therapists.

The tipping point was New Year's, when Aaron and the kids and I visited my family in Tennessee, and on our way back, stayed for a few days in Nashville in the home of some friends I'd met online, three roommates who had themselves met each other over Twitter.

Our friendships slid easily into real life. Their home was warm and filled with shabby, welcoming furniture and bunches of fresh flowers from Bethany's job at a florist's shop. They loved on our boys, even though the kids were cranky from too long in the car, and it was hard to stay cranky when Matt owned more Nintendo 64 games than they'd ever seen. Face to face, our internet friendships felt comfortable and sturdy.

Except.

In my fourteen years of marriage to Aaron, I've gotten the occasional fleeting crush on another man. He's had passing feelings for other women, I'm certain. *Pantsfeelings*, a blogger I follow calls them. They're harmless, these crushes, nothing that interferes with our marriage; ephemeral. And on New Year's, I found myself crushing on one of my internet friends, our hosts.

Her name was Caitlin. And I wanted to make out with her. And it was terrifying.

The possibility that I might be other-than-straight was one that I'd never considered. I'd been falling in love with boys since Tyler Ray in fifth grade, so clearly, obviously, that made me straight. End of story.

But in Nashville, I'd had definite, undeniable pantsfeelings for a woman. And, if I was honest, I'd had pantsfeelings for other women before, feelings I'd anxiously dismissed as meaningless. In a culture obsessed with attractive women, it was only

natural that I'd notice what everyone seemed to be noticing, right? Once I learned enough feminist language, I would explain to myself that I had been *colonized by the male gaze*. Of course I thought some women were hot; everyone thought some women were hot.

Caitlin wasn't a case of my just thinking abstractly that some women were hot. This was my having lady-directed pantsfeelings the same way that I sometimes had men-directed pantsfeelings. And now I had to seriously consider the possibility that my sexuality wasn't quite so, well, straightforward.

Here was something I couldn't work out in therapy. I knew that Jennifer considered homosexuality to be a sin. And even if I were bi, not gay, and even though I was in a monogamous relationship with a man, I knew that she still believed that non-straight orientations were a problem. I was afraid that if I told her, she would be disappointed in me.

Even so, it was nearly six months – long enough that my crush had faded, but my tentative new understanding of myself had not – before I finally worked up the energy to tell Jennifer that I wanted to end therapy with her; and even then, I sprung it on her abruptly, forty minutes into a fifty-minute session, blurting: "I'm ready to be done."

Understandably, she was confused. "What?"

"I think I need to be done with therapy. With – with you. I need to move on to a different therapist. I'm sorry. How do we wrap this up? I don't know what to ask for. How do we close this out the right way?"

She sat up straighter in her chair; her voice became more professional, less relaxed. "Well. If you want to schedule one more session, for closure, then we should do that. Have you already begun seeing another therapist?"

There was the guilt. I felt like I had been cheating on Jennifer. “Yes. Sort of. Only once. More like an interview. To see if she would be a good fit.” The words toppled out, scattered across the carpet, lodged themselves under the bookshelf, the sofa, the white-noise machine.

“All right. Well. Ethically I’m not allowed to continue seeing you as a client if you’re in a therapeutic relationship with someone else. If you’re going to begin therapy with her right away, then this will need to be our last session.”

It was going too fast, now, ending before I was ready. “No. I’ll hold off. I want to close this – ah – relationship the right way first.”

Jennifer nodded. I felt the familiar nubby texture of her sofa with my fingertips. “Then before our next session, I’d like you to do some writing. See if you can reflect on what your goals were when you began therapy here, what you’ve accomplished, what work is still left undone. And we’ll talk about it at our final session.” She rose in her chair, the signal for me to do the same. “Daisy will get you scheduled. Take care.”

Over the next few weeks, I wrote and reflected, reflected and wrote. And I also practiced my speech. Jennifer hadn’t asked me why I was quitting therapy with her, but I wanted to be prepared if she did.

I was not going to say: “I don’t know what I believe about God anymore, and I can’t figure that out if I’m afraid that you’re sitting there thinking there’s one right answer and you know what it is.”

I was not going to say: “Sometimes I need to say ‘fuck,’ and I don’t feel like I’m allowed to say ‘fuck’ here.”

I was not going to say: “I think I’m bisexual.”

I decided on: “Over time, my worldview has changed, and I have some things to process that I don’t feel comfortable bringing up here.”

Meanwhile, journalists contacted me for comments about Target and gender and toys, and then they stopped contacting me as the news media moved on to new stories; and the influx of internet vitriol being flung my way hit its frenzied peak. Certainly, people sent supportive responses, too, and the tweet continued to gather retweets and favorites. But far and away, the people who reached out to comment to me directly, the people who felt strongly enough to find me and tell me what they thought, were critical, even vitriolic. Shout into the void long enough and the void roars back with its middle fingers extended.

“How stupid can liberals really get? Boys and girls ARE different, they always have been, they always will. Thank goodness,” said someone whose Twitter account was mostly concerned with ending the national genocide against white people.

“Is it really that awful to admit that boys are different from girls?! God forbid!!!” said another user.

I received more than one barely legible screed: “U androgynous people just want to raise a bunch of asexually confused kids –thank god boys&girls r different. when u deny those differences u raise a bunch of kids that dont even know what a boy r girl shud b.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, quite a number of people sent me sardonic comments drawing a connection between removing gender labels from toys and Caitlyn Jenner, the trans woman whose debut photos had just been published in *Vanity Fair*. People

suggested that if liberals had such a problem with gender labels, we should take down the signs from the men's and women's clothing and mix everything together in one big heap, take down the "Men's" and "Women's" signs from the restrooms and have a bathroom free-for-all. Under all of it I heard fear: Was gender so fragile a construct that it could be broken by toy signs and Twitter? If we couldn't count on the comfortable differences between boys and girls for immutability, what could we count on?

I understood their fears. In many ways it felt easier to live according to the dictates and confines of strict gender roles. The narrow boxes may be stifling, but at least they were familiar and well-defined. There were assumptions about gender at the center of my own definition of myself – *I am a woman; I am attracted to men; I am straight* – that were becoming distorted and complicated, and as they shifted I wasn't sure who that made me.

It wasn't that I was conflating sexual orientation with gender identity. It was just that my first understandings of both gender and sexuality had been binary: as the child on *Kindergarten Cop* explained it, boys have penises and girls have vaginas. The corollary: Men like women and women like men. Even after I expanded my understanding of gender to include trans and nonbinary and genderfluid and queer gender identities, and my understanding of sexual orientation to include not only lesbian and gay but also bisexuality and asexuality and demi- and poly- and pan-, it didn't occur to me to try applying any of these labels to myself. My early understanding of myself as straight was just fine, thank you, and whenever I began to feel the hint of a question begin to form around the edges of my understanding, well, I hastily changed the subject.

Now that I wondered if perhaps I wasn't straight, strictly speaking, I had to figure out what it meant for me to be bi. If I hadn't ever slept with a woman, and wasn't planning to, did I still count as bisexual? Yes, it must; to say otherwise was to reduce orientation to sexual acts, and that was dehumanizing. Given that I was apparently "straight"-married, and thus didn't face discrimination for my sexuality, was it worthwhile for me to label myself as bi? Would my doing so detract from bisexual people who were actually experiencing oppression for their orientations? Would people think I was only doing it for attention?

Of course, the fact that I was even questioning whether it was valid to label myself according to what I suspected was my true sexual orientation was pretty good evidence that maybe I wasn't coasting as far on my perceived-straight-privilege as I'd thought. The internet provided a name for something I hadn't quite verbalized, *bisexual erasure* – the idea that people were either straight or gay or lesbians, and that was that; no one's *really* bi, they're just in denial. This was the thing that had kept me from really understanding myself until I was in my thirties – maybe it wasn't *oppression*, exactly, but it was certainly minimizing.

Not to mention not being able to talk to my therapist about it.

Three weeks later I was back on Jennifer's sofa for my final appointment with her. Her office had been unchanged over the past eight years: the muted paintings that hung over the desk, the pot of silk flowers on one shelf, the white-noise machine in the corner. Only the photographs of her kids, updated annually, marked the room as different from my first appointment. Everything else was the same, except me.

I'd brought my journal so we could talk about the writing she'd asked me to do, but she waved it away. "I've been thinking about you since our last appointment," she began, "and I'd like to know why you've decided to find a new therapist. I don't want to try to convince you to stay; I just want to make sure there's nothing we need to clear up before you go."

I took a breath and lurched into my prepared answer. "Well. Over time, my worldview has changed, and I have some things to process that I don't feel comfortable bringing up here."

Jennifer was quiet for a moment when I finished, then: "There's something you're not telling me. What is it?"

I didn't know how to answer her. "It's just, over time, my worldview has changed…" I picked at a cuticle, unsure what else to say.

"After our last appointment," Jennifer said, "the Holy Spirit revealed something to me. So I already know what's going on with you. But I want to hear it from you."

Jennifer had talked before about seeking God's wisdom, about the guidance of the Holy Spirit, about being led by the Lord. But she had never said those things *at* me before. Now I felt like I'd been tattled on by the Holy Spirit, pressured to tell her things I'd planned not to say.

"My, you know, worldview," I said.

"There is something going on with your identity," Jennifer pushed. "The Holy Spirit has laid it on my heart."

Fuck it. “It’s not my identity, it’s my sexual orientation,” I said. No more *I think perhaps*. “I’m bisexual.” I tossed the words at her like stones, and they bounced to the floor.

“And that’s not something you feel you can bring up here?” she asked. “You’re not the first client I’ve had who was struggling with their sexuality.”

“That’s just it,” I said, “I’m *not* struggling with my sexuality. I just need some help figuring out how to integrate it into the rest of my identity. And I can’t do that if you think my orientation is a sin.”

“I do think it’s a sin,” she conceded, “but not a worse sin than any other. The Bible lists homosexuality alongside a whole list of sins – envy, greed, gossip, arrogance, malice. Homosexuality isn’t in a class by itself. Everyone struggles with some kind of sin.”

I recognized the scripture reference: it was Romans 1. I had seen Romans 1 used against gays and lesbians before, but I had never considered that someone might use it against me. It was oddly reassuring; I felt like I really was part of a community.

“I don’t see it that way,” I said. She nodded and half-rose from her chair: time up. “By the way,” she added as I heaved myself up from her too-soft sofa, “I hope you’ll continue working through the loss of your mother with your new therapist.” The death of my mother when I was a kid had been a recurring topic in my therapy sessions with Jennifer. “I suspect you’ll find your mom to be connected with all of this confusion about your sexuality.”

I couldn’t reply. My throat felt clenched tight.

“Well,” she said. “Best of luck.”

* * *

By the end of June, my Target tweet had finally been lost to the twenty-four-hour news cycle and my Twitter mentions had returned to normal, and I had begun seeing Sara every week, the slow process of opening up with someone new. For a month of Tuesday afternoons, we talked about anger, boundaries, feminist identity formation models.

The Supreme Court ruled for marriage equality. The internet went up in rainbows. Quietly I overlaid my social media profile pictures not with the rainbow Pride flag that all my friends used, but with the pink, lavender, and blue Bisexual Pride colors. It was a stealthy coming-out: the only people who would know what it meant, I reasoned, were people who were already accepting. I got a handful of virtual high-fives and likes and congratulations, but mostly, no one noticed, which felt exactly right. A week later I tiptoed out a bit farther when a Christian women's online magazine published an essay I wrote in which I mentioned, briefly, being bi. I posted a link to the article on my social media, clenched my shoulders, waited to see what would happen.

The next day, my phone began buzzing insistently with notifications. *Here we go,* I thought, steadied my hands, thumbed the fingerprint button to open my phone.

But there were no responses to my post. Instead, everyone wanted to know: Had I seen Target's announcement?

A reporter from Minneapolis filled me in when she contacted me for an interview. Target had put out a press release saying that they were going to stop using gender to market toys and children's bedding in their stores. No more pink and blue shelf backdrops, no more "Girls' Building Sets" and "Boys' Action Figures": just wood paneling and toys labeled as toys.

In her article, the reporter called me "the mother in Akron, Ohio, who tweeted the initial picture that sparked the debate in June." Other writers called me for comments. A *Good Morning, America* camera crew spent an afternoon in my living room. The media had decided that Target's decision was because of my little tweet.

And the Internet went totally bananapants again.

The void screamed and raged. "You should have Target make a fat ugly worthless section so you can shop." "You fat fucking stupid cunt." "You're a fat slob. Move your fat chunky ass to Canada." "I feel sorry for those poor boys who have to be raised by you. You should just die. You are fucking evil." "Boys and girls ARE different. You're a dumbfuck if you don't understand that. Fuck you and fuck your ploy for attention. You're a worthless piece of shit looking for fame. Pipe down, fatty." And a personal favorite: "U make me sick w/your PC. Let kids be kids & yes there is a difference [between boys and girls] indoor vs outdoor plumbing." It took me a moment to understand what they meant by "plumbing," and then I laughed until my throat hurt. One man with "Reverend" in his bio told me, "your heart is dark and your soul is destined for hellfire. Your liberal views are demented. People like you are why this country's morals are in the toilet. God made male and female. Neutral is man's idea."

They raged at Target, too, of course; Target's Facebook page was a wall of screeds from angry customers. But Target had the benefit of a PR office with a paid social media team to deal with the outcry that flooded their social media channels; I had only myself, and the friendships I had cultivated over eight years of living online. That had to be enough.

* * *

The flood of fury directed at me left me gasping, but fresh off my messy breakup with Jennifer, I was stung the most by the religious response.

Public statements from Christian leaders were everywhere, raging that Target was thumbing their noses at God's created gender binary. Franklin Graham, the religious-right commentator son of evangelist Billy Graham, called for a boycott of Target. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Albert Mohler decried Target's decision on his daily news podcast, and then went one farther, talking about me specifically, implying that I was a bad mother whose real problem – "it's not a signage problem, Mom" – was that I wanted to turn my sons into daughters.

There was a distinct lack of internal consistency in the religious criticism and pushback against Target's announcement. On the one hand, critics argued that gender was an innate, inherent, immutable characteristic, and that no attempt to blur gender distinctions would be effective because people would naturally gravitate toward the things associated with their gender. In this case, then, it was a reasonable assumption that kids would still choose gender-appropriate toys regardless of whether there were signs pointing out which toys were for girls and which for boys. Give it up, Target, they said; your liberal agenda to de-gender society will never work, because we're made this way.

On the other hand, critics – sometimes the very same ones – argued that without the external prompting of signs and backdrops to teach kids what toys were appropriate for which gender, people would become confused about what their socially-approved gender roles were and might stray into gender-inappropriate territory. If we didn't keep

actively constructing gender the same way we had always constructed it, we'd have devastating gender confusion, dogs and cats living together, mass hysteria.

One thing that the evangelical outcry against Target's decision revealed – the same thing revealed by the evangelical outcry against Caitlyn Jenner, and the outcry against the SCOTUS ruling – was the evangelical discomfort with, and fear of, sexual orientations and gender identities and performances of masculinity and femininity that don't fit within narrow rigid binaries. More than that, it was the fear that those who continued to squeeze themselves into these binaries – whether they naturally fit these roles, or they had to contort themselves into position like Japanese game-show contestants – would be at the mercy of those who had let go of those binaries. But most of all, it was the fear that if we as a culture lost our grip on these divinely ordained roles, that it would be our downfall – perhaps because God's blessing and protection would be removed from our country, or perhaps even because God would punish us for our disobedience. At their most well-intentioned, they were carefully policing the borders of gender roles to save us from ourselves.

But even though I understood all this, empathized with it even, it was this, the Christian response, writ large and hurtling at me through every social media access point people could find, that began to get under my skin, aggravating the hurt I'd been nursing from Jennifer's rejection – which still burned, even though technically I supposed I had rejected her first. She wanted to save me, and she couldn't understand that she was perpetuating the very thing I needed to be saved from.

Holding those two things up next to each other in the safety of Sara's office – the raging of the spokes-Christians who didn't know me, and the loving but painfully

misguided counsel from Jennifer, who knew me perhaps better than any other conservative Christian did – I could see that all of them, Jennifer and Franklin Graham and Al Mohler, were operating from the same theologies, the same assumptions about gender and sexuality, the same traditions and fears. Jennifer was never just my therapist; to me she represented the entirety of my evangelical community. Realizing that I had to end my relationship with her, that she could only see me as damaged, that she could never truly understand or accept my true self – the very self she'd helped me find – was also my realization that my relationship with evangelicalism was done – unsalvageable.

But even as that community was irreparably gone from my life, I had tested the strength of my online community and found it solid. When well-known church leaders were against me, Twitter church had my back. These were my friends, who embraced me when I came out, who let me wrestle with what it meant to be queer after a lifetime of thinking I was straight, who let me be angry and hurt at Jennifer and Albert Mohler and the entire institution of evangelicalism, who reported trolls and direct-messaged me to check in on how I was doing and sent cute pictures of their cats. They were my real community, these friends from the void, every bit as valid as the "real" social life Jennifer had wanted me to build. Even Caitlin, who was gracious when I awkwardly confessed my waning crush to her over text-message, who understood what a revelation my feelings had been, what they had unearthed. Caitlin, Bethany, Matt, Twitter church, Sara: the community of people who could accept my true self, they were enough.

DEFYING CONVENTION

Just before dawn on Sunday morning, July 17, the day before the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, I sat on a bench at the Cleveland Amtrak station, waiting for a train.

The city was eerily quiet, even for a Sunday. There was no traffic noise; most of the roads on that end of town were closed for the RNC. I almost didn't make it to the train station. I was counting on Siri to get me there; but as I was hurtling up I-77 and into the city, I asked her for directions, and she replied that there was no available route. I'm afraid I can't do that, Dave. I was just there a few days before, dropping off Jacqui to catch the Amtrak to Chicago. Now I was coming back to the station to pick her up, so I figured maybe I could retrace my steps; but I approached what I was pretty sure was my exit and found it closed off, as were the next several. Eventually I came to an open exit and took it, and shortly thereafter found myself among rows of warehouses – not well-lit warehouses that had been converted into hipster bars and expensive lofts, but warehouses with rats and burned-out lights and ax murderers, probably. Siri continued to insist that there was no use trying to get to the train station. It was too early to call my husband Aaron, who was still sleeping when I'd left the house, and ask him to pull up a map and try to guide me from afar. Finally I found a reasonably well-lit gas station and pulled in, downloaded the Google Maps app, and was guided – no thanks to Siri – through a

winding series of back roads and the wrong way up a one-way street, arriving at: a security checkpoint.

Out my car windows I could see men in dark polo shirts patrolling the grassy areas alongside the road with German shepherds. I rolled down my window to address the large, bald man with the clipboard who had stopped my car. “I’m lost, I think,” I said. “Is this the way to the Amtrak station?”

He nodded, smiled: a cheerful security checkpoint, at least. “Arrivals or departures?” I gave him Jacqui’s name, and after some fumbling he located her on the list and waved me through to the train station parking lot. The Cleveland Amtrak station is essentially just a concrete slab behind a squat, utilitarian brick building. I walked through the building, sat on a bench, and waited for the train from Chicago. Right across the tracks, lit up red and blue, I could see the Cleveland Convention Center, which would serve as the media center for the RNC. There was a certain irony in having all those Republicans overlook a train station that would make Dagny Taggart cringe.

My skin prickled under the imminent conservative gaze. The convention didn’t even start for another twenty-four hours, but in my imagination the convention center loomed with the scrutiny of Barad-dûr. I pictured myself as an undercover agent, not quite what I appeared, guarding a secret.

Somewhere a rooster was crowing, breaking the apocalyptic silence at regular intervals. It was barely six a.m. Cops with dogs were prowling the tracks, shining flashlights up into trees and bushes. I texted Jacqui that I was there waiting for her to arrive. I was dressed for the baby shower I’d be attending later that morning; I added, “I shouldn’t have worn a dress – the wind keeps blowing up my skirt.” I sent the message

and then realized that I had just included the phrase *blowing up* in a text sent from just across the tracks from the Convention Center and I was almost certainly being monitored by the NSA. Maybe the polo shirts would all stop and raise a hand to one ear, listening to a security transmission on their wireless earpieces, and then they and the German shepherds would all swivel toward me in unison, and they would release the dogs' leashes and send them charging at me, snarling and slavering. Or drones would appear in the sky and circle me, waiting for someone in the Pentagon to push the *kill* button and take me out.

Or maybe nothing. The sky lightened, the rooster kept crowing like clockwork every five minutes, the guards and dogs kept crisscrossing the tracks, and eventually, the train arrived. I was too far away to make out passengers' faces in the dim morning light so I watched for Jacqui's turquoise blouse. She had been in Chicago for the weekend seeing her favorite band perform, Rammstein. There she was: her blond head tall above the other debarking passengers', the rhinestones on her shirt glinting in the slanted light. I walked toward the sidewalk that led from the parking lot to the tracks, trotting a little, hurrying, finally ready to divulge the secret I'd been shielding; met her halfway as she set her suitcase down on the cement, not caring that it fell over sideways; wrapped our arms around each other and kissed, hard.

"I missed you so much," she breathed against my neck.

I nodded, brushing my lips against her jawline: my girlfriend. I imagined the two of us being spotted by the Eye of Sauron across the tracks. "Let's get the hell out of this city," I said.

* * *

A few months before Aaron's and my fifteenth wedding anniversary, I made a confession. I'd developed a crush on a female friend a year and a half before and confronted the fact that I was bisexual, not straight (as I'd insisted to myself for decades). Ever since then, I'd been captivated by the thought of having a girlfriend. Or maybe multiple other partners, of varying genders. Admitting my bisexuality to myself and coming out had unleashed a torrent of other desires that seemed to be about more than simply being bi. I wanted to have crushes and partners and makeouts and cuddle piles. I wanted to be in love with everyone.

How much of this was just the elation of finally making peace with my sexuality, and how much was a genuine need to have more romantic and sexual relationships? Was I really just wanting to have my queerness made visible – to be seen in relationships with women as well as men, to not be assumed straight just because I was married to a man? Was I being selfish and greedy, wanting more than my fair share of partners?

And how could I ever tell Aaron about this without hurting him?

I found myself drawn to the topic of polyamory. I had a few poly internet acquaintances who were very open about their dating lives; suddenly I was following them with close interest, hanging onto any discussion of their partners or their schedules or how they managed their relationships. I was fascinated by their discussion of how polyamory worked for them, how not feeling owned by any of their partners meant that they had the security of knowing they were in those relationships because they chose to be, how their love for one partner didn't take anything away from their relationship with another, how they negotiated their schedules and their boundaries and their sex lives, how

forthright and honest everything had to be. It looked like an intricate dance, carefully choreographed, beautiful.

On a fat-activism podcast I listened to, one of the hosts talked about the assumptions people made of her as a fat, bisexual, polyamorous woman: that she was read as having all these unregulated hungers – for food, for genders, for partners; that she was an insatiable desire monster. This was a concern of mine too: if I embarked on polyamory, wouldn't that be selfishness? She shrugged this off. *We have this myth of scarcity,* she said, *but my being in multiple relationships with people who want to be with me isn't taking anything away from anyone else. I'm polyamorous because I like being in love with people, and I'm bisexual because I like partners of a variety of genders, and I'm fat because I like snacks. It's that simple.*

In my heart, it felt that simple. The thought of having more partners was similar to the reason Aaron and I had chosen to have more than one child: we loved our one child so much that we wanted more, and we wanted to give him the life of being a sibling. I remembered being afraid, when I was pregnant with my second child, that having another baby would detract from my love for my firstborn, would leave him with a smaller piece of the pie that was my love; but what happened was that when my new baby was born, I got a second whole pie. There were more demands on my time and energy, certainly, but not on my heart; I had plenty of room to hold them both.

And so that's what I told Aaron.

I was fifteen when Aaron and I met. It was the summer after my sophomore year of high school; he was eighteen and had just graduated. We'd gone to high school

together, but our only class together was band, where he was first-chair French horn and I was first-chair flute. We went to the same church, too, but it was a massive church with thousands of members; on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings, I went to youth group, and he played in the orchestra. Our paths rarely crossed.

But we were both in the high school youth choir. And when the choir director assigned everyone their spots on the risers for our upcoming summer concert, he put Aaron and me next to each other.

Aaron was cute and shy and awkward. I was flirtatious and eager. We exchanged AOL Instant Messenger screennames (his was Zedd97, after a character from the fantasy book series *Sword of Truth*, plus his graduation year; mine was Pabl0isBleeding, after the poet Pablo Neruda, whose poetry I hated). Eventually, he asked me to be his girlfriend. I said yes.

My parents said no.

Absolutely not. I was not allowed to date college boys, the end. I was heartbroken. They were firm.

So I downplayed my parents' refusal and convinced Aaron that we could still be a couple; we'd just have to keep it secret from my parents. He agreed. He went off to college four states away, and we sent each other emails and letters, chatted over AIM, called each other long-distance using prepaid phone cards. Secrecy was paramount; my fear of getting caught was constant. I kept the letters he sent me locked in a strongbox that I stored in the back of my closet, under a pile of outgrown t-shirts, afraid my parents would find them – or one of my siblings, who would use them as currency. For those letters, I would be willing to do an awful lot of after-school chores.

When he came home for fall break, I skipped school and he picked me up in his blue Toyota Tercel and we had lunch at a deli across town from anywhere we could expect our parents to be. We ate sandwiches and held hands shyly across the table, and after lunch we stood by his car in a parking lot and held each other awkwardly, working up the nerve for our first kiss. Every time a car turned down the alley we were on I instinctively hunched my shoulders up, bracing myself for being caught, until finally he asked if he could kiss me and I told him yes and his bearded face moved toward mine and I let myself stop worrying for a while.

Over Christmas break Aaron spent his few weeks in town hanging around my house while we pretended we were just friends, sneaking hand-touches and side-hugs in the seconds when no one was looking, kissing frantically in the few minutes we managed to be alone when I took him outside to, ostensibly, show him my dad's new car. When he returned to school in January I spent the next few days moping until my parents finally said that Aaron had made such a good impression that if I still wanted to date him they'd be willing to lift their ban on college boys, just this once. I squealed and hugged them and ran upstairs to call Aaron from the clear plastic phone in my room.

For the next two and a half years – as I finished high school and did one failed year at the local university – Aaron and I dated long-distance, having summers and school breaks together but being three hundred miles apart for eight months out of the year. The next year I moved out to where he was and got a tiny apartment while he finished his degree, and the following summer – four years to the day after he asked me to be his girlfriend – we were married in the church where we met. I was nineteen, and he was twenty-two.

Over the next few years, we had babies, we moved back to Ohio, he got a tech job at the church that married us. After a while, I went back to school, and he joined a Dungeons and Dragons group, and I got a therapist, and he got a therapist, and we went to pediatrician appointments and school band concerts and too-infrequent date nights and family vacations and parent-teacher conferences. Our relationship with our church got complicated, and I had the luxury of leaving, finding someplace new where I fit better; he stayed, because complicated relationship or not, it was a good job with flexible hours that meant he could be home with the kids when I was in class. We evolved and kept evolving, and somehow we were lucky enough that we evolved together: that every new iteration of ourselves fit together differently from the ones before, but somehow we always fit each other.

I wish I could recount the conversations Aaron and I had when I began to bring up the possibility of polyamory, the careful negotiation, the tears and kisses and late-night questions. But to be honest, I don't remember exactly how they all unfolded – it was so emotionally loaded that the details have blurred. I just know that we arrived at a place where Aaron agreed that I could try dating people, carefully, with open communication and deliberate boundary-setting every step of the way.

I'm not going to write about the things that aren't mine to tell: the decisions Aaron made for himself – to date other people or not, to propel himself toward new relationships and new love or not, to open our marriage on his end or to leave things snug, comfortable.

There were obvious complications to consider. One: our families. How on earth were Aaron and I supposed to navigate my dating without the kids thinking our marriage was crumbling? How much would they be able to pick up on? Would we have to tell them? Would this destroy everything they believed about marriage and family and love and commitment? Aaron's parents lived nearby; what if they found out? Would they disown us, try to take away our kids?

And two: Aaron worked for a conservative church, for heaven's sake. It was possible that if all those Republicans found out about my polyamory – or even my bisexuality – he could lose his job. We would have to be extremely discreet, keep this part of our lives hidden away. We were defying every convention his church taught about marriage and relationships. I thought of the slippery-slope argument they made to discredit same-sex marriage equality: If marriage isn't limited to one man and one woman, if we can define marriage however we want to, then why stop at two men or two women? Why couldn't someone decide to marry their toaster or their dog? Why not polygamy? Here I was embracing my queerness, and sure enough, I'd slid directly to multiple partners (although I bypassed pets and kitchen appliances). I was embodying exactly what they believed was the most wrong.

I decided I was okay with being a worst-case scenario, an insatiable desire monster. But I would have to be careful.

Once I had Aaron's blessing to seek out other partners, and wondering how a married woman even goes about finding people to date, I made an online dating profile.

I'd read that OkCupid was popular among polyamorous people because the site offered a "seeking non-monogamous relationships" option, so I started there.

Building a profile was weirdly stressful. I wanted to render myself honestly, but also highlight my most interesting qualities, make myself seem like someone worth dating – but not *too* interesting, because inevitably there would be disappointment when I was discovered to be an introvert whose favorite pastime is sitting on the sofa with no pants, reading a book. But just interesting enough to be worth talking to, seeing if there was any chemistry.

Of course, I didn't expect that anyone would actually even see my profile. I would be one among a sea of OkCupid users; I could tiptoe in, get the lay of the land, see what the whole online dating world was like. No one would even notice I was there. So I created a username – SeaWitch81, after my tattoo of Ursula and my birth year – and clicked "create profile."

The six things I could never do without:

The blank space yawned at me. The trick here, I imagined, was to pick six things that are highly symbolic of myself – just jam-packed with personal meaning – but without making it seem like I was investing too much in these items. Don't try too hard, but don't write something obvious like *air, food, water, shelter, clothing*, either, since that sort of attempt at irony just makes people look like they think they're too good for OkCupid.

The six things I could never do without:

What did I want to communicate about myself to a potential romantic interest? My feminism, okay. My religious faith, nontraditional as it was. My body – how was I

supposed to communicate that I was fat and I wanted a partner who would find me sexy just as I was, who wouldn't try to either change me or fetishize me? My sexuality: bisexual and kinky and, tentatively, polyamorous. My marriage.

The six things I could never do without:

The trouble was this number six. I could come up with a list of seventy-five things that together formed an image of myself in constellation. Or I could find the most meaningful two or three things, like *my husband* and *my kids* and *the Lord Jesus Christ*, like I was giving an acceptance speech and the music was swelling underneath me. But *six*?

The six things I could never do without:

I wrote, *Judith Butler and gender theory*. Okay, good start, establishing myself as an intersectional feminist and an academic.

Emboldened, I added, *The Book of Common Prayer*. Get my Episcopalianism in there.

Wrist and ankle cuffs and a collar. This wasn't a thing, it was three things – or, five things, I supposed – but essentially, one thing, a thing that said, I'm sexual and kinky and submissive and definitely not boring.

That was three. I didn't even know where to go from there, so I added, *Quality coffee. Twitter. Makeouts.* There: I established myself as a grad student who liked social media and smooching.

My self-summary:

Fuck.

It was too much pressure. Why was I even doing this? Online dating? I had school and kids and cats and, oh yes, a fifteen-year marriage to husband that I liked quite a lot. I didn't belong on OkCupid.

My self-summary:

I'm a creative writer, academic, and intersectional feminist, married but beginning to pursue outside relationships with my partner's full knowledge and consent. Turn-ons include perfectly winged eyeliner, Oxford commas, the ability to quote at length from Doctor Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, and loud* Hamilton *karaoke-fests in the car.*

What I'm doing with my life:

Grad school, writing, teaching, parenting, stacking ever more books on my nightstand, smashing the patriarchy.

I'm really good at:

I left this section blank. What I wasn't really good at, clearly, was filling out stupid online dating profiles. No one was going to see this anyway.

I spend a lot of time thinking about:

Increasingly ridiculous nicknames for my cat (think "Admiral Fluffcat von Fluffypants Fluffbottom," because human intelligence diminishes as proximity to a cat increases) (this was a reference to a webcomic, like a nerdy handkerchief code). *Words, and the careful ordering thereof. Social justice, and how I can best do justly and love mercy* (a call-out to my favorite Bible verse, Micah 6:8). *Ever-looming deadlines.*

On a typical Friday night I am:

really fat, in love with my body, and not spending time on anyone who wouldn't accept me that way. Probably not wearing pants, and either writing or feeling guilty for

not writing, because grad school. Almost certainly cuddling with one or more partners and/or cats.

You should message me if:

This was dumb. I shouldn't be here. What was I doing? This was dumb.

You should message me if:

You're into open communication, enthusiastic consent, busting through logistical barriers, and feminist cultural criticism. Or if you just want to drive around town and jam to the Hamilton *cast album.*

I read back over my profile. I didn't think *I* would want to date me, much less expect anyone else to. Ah, well. I uploaded a profile picture – a close crop of my face, showing mostly my glasses, eyebrow piercing, and short purple hair – and clicked publish.

Within minutes I received a message from a local man: "Any interest in making a submissive guy be your servant and do your chores, errands, give foot rubs, or anything like that once in a while?" Eep. What was I getting myself into? Three "Hello"s, a "Hey there," and a "Sup" quickly followed. So much for tiptoeing in. I responded to one of the "Hello"s:

Me: Hey there, how's your evening going?

Him: Let me take you out

Me: You're not even going to attempt a little polite small talk first? Sir.

Him: This is a dating site lets go on a date

Him: Dinner movies bar

Him: Or text all night

Me: While I wish I were the kind of woman who could say yes to that, I don't have room in my life to date people that I haven't at least forged a little bit of a connection with first.

Me: Tell me about yourself.

Him: Blah blah blah I have a profile

Me: Swell. Sounds like we have different priorities. Have a lovely evening.

Him: I'm straight though I'm going to the bar any way you know real life stuff

Me: Have fun!

Being on OkCupid, it turned out, was like drinking from a firehose that was spraying green gunge with occasional, infrequent sips of potable water mixed in, just often enough to keep me interested. I had checked "Interested in men and women," and my list of matches included both, but it was only men who were visiting my profile or messaging me. Of the more promising of these conversations, I noticed an odd trend: nearly all of the men I talked to were computer programmers in open marriages, and nearly all of them had first names beginning with the letter J: a John, a Jake, a few Jasons, another John. Mostly, the conversations fizzled from lack of chemistry, or maybe from my inability to make small talk. The notifications of users visiting my profile or liking me or sending me messages kept popping up at the bottom of the screen, constant and a little unnerving.

Meanwhile, I was looking at other women's profiles. OkCupid's algorithm had matched me with a number of thirty-something women with geek-girl glasses and

multicolored hair – the algorithm might've glitched when it decided my taste in men ran exclusively toward beardy J-named computer programmers, but it more than made up for this by matching me with cute women who were exactly my type. I fumbled my way through a few conversations, but I had no idea how to flirt with women; I'd never flirted with a woman before, not really, except for the visiting author I was assigned to drive around campus a few semesters before, who had said cute suggestive things to me and raised her eyebrows in a way that made me realize with a whump that I was being flirted with. Mostly, I hadn't flirted with anyone of any gender besides Aaron in more than fifteen years, and the gender imbalance on OkCupid meant that while I could say almost anything to a man and he'd still be interested in pursuing things, when I talked to a woman I needed to make myself stand out. I felt awkward and clunky, but the stakes were low – after all, I was only here out of curiosity, not to actually meet anyone, I reasoned – so I kept trying.

What caught my eye about the user named JQGC wasn't that we had a lot of shared interests – she was into Star Wars fandom and computers and math jokes – but the warmth and humor that suffused her profile. And she was gorgeous – full lips, heavy-lidded eyes like an Old Hollywood starlet. I sent a message. She replied within minutes and introduced herself – Jacqueline, Jacqui for short. A computer programmer. Ha, I thought; well played, OkCupid algorithm. We talked about makeup tutorials and food and *Hamilton* and my marriage and her divorce and terrible OkCupid dates she'd been on and *Clone Wars* and places we'd lived and video games, and suddenly we'd been chatting for two hours without any of the long awkward pauses or fumbling for getting-to-know-you topics. I stepped away from our conversation for a few hours to do dinner and get the kids

to bed, and then we picked things back up later that evening, chatting until late while I cuddled up against Aaron in bed and he read my text-messages over my shoulder. The next morning we dived back into our conversation, and that afternoon I took a breath and asked her if she'd like to get a cup of coffee sometime. She was enthusiastic, and I found myself making plans to meet up with her for dinner that evening.

I had a date.

Oh my God, I had a date.

That evening I went through a half dozen wardrobe changes, modeling them all for Aaron like a movie montage – what was I supposed to wear on a first date? What was I supposed to wear on a first date *with a girl?* In the end I landed on a black knit dress with a full skirt and cinched-in waist and a scoop neckline low enough that Aaron raised his eyebrows approvingly at my cleavage. Black flats, hoop earrings, my cutest panties – not that I planned on my panties making an appearance – and anyway, all the panties I owned were cotton and high-waisted – at least these were bright turquoise and none of the elastic was unraveling – but really all I had were mom panties, fifteen-years-of-marriage panties, *what was I doing going on a date?*

Aaron held me tightly for a long time before I headed out the door, while I took deep breaths against his neck and tried to find a balance between excitement and anxiety. "Have a good time," he said into my hair. "Really. Have fun. I can't wait to hear about everything."

"What if it turns out I'm really bad at dating?" I asked. "What if she doesn't like me?"

"Then she's dumb," he said. "You're going to be great."

"I love you so much," I said, squeezing harder. "I just really, really love you."

"I love you too," he said and kissed my cheek to avoid smearing my lipstick. For my whole drive to the address Jacqui had texted me, I could feel the trace of his lips against my skin.

When I pulled up to Jacqui's house, she was waiting for me on her front porch – god, she was *cute*. "Hi," I said when she settled herself into the front seat of my car. "I'm Abi." Like a total dork, I held out my hand to shake.

"Jacqui," she said, shaking my hand. Her hand was soft. I had never thought about how soft women's hands were before. Her eyeliner came up in a perfect sharp point.

We went to a nearby Japanese restaurant Jacqui recommended, and we ate sushi and then sat and talked for long enough that our server started giving us irritated looks for taking up a table. I wondered if she could tell we were on a date. Eventually, we left and went back to Jacqui's place to sit on the sofa with our knees touching and talk more.

Jacqui was easy to talk to, comfortable. Somewhere in the middle of a story about my childhood, Jacqui reached over and took my hand and laced her fingers through mine, and I lost my place in the sentence I was saying and thunked to a halt. "Um, hi," I said. "I forget what I was talking about."

"That's okay," she said. She was smiling. Her hand was so *soft*. And then I took off my glasses and leaned in and kissed her, and she kissed me back, and I discovered I was smiling too.

Kissing Jacqui felt different, and I realized that I hadn't kissed someone without a beard in almost twenty years, that leaning against someone with breasts wasn't the same

as leaning against someone without them, that her body was so unlike Aaron's but no less right.

We kissed for a while on her sofa and then interrupted our kissing to talk more, and interrupted our talking for more kissing, until it was late. "Can I see you again sometime? Um, soon?" I asked her when I was finally leaving.

"Definitely," she said, and I grinned again – I wasn't sure if I would ever stop grinning.

At home in bed I cuddled up against Aaron and nuzzled into my spot on his shoulder.

"How was it?" he asked.

"It was really good," I said, and then we were both crying, clutching each other. "I had a wonderful time," I sobbed.

"I'm happy for you," he said. My tears were pooling on his shoulder, and I could feel his drawing lines down my scalp.

"I love you," I said.

"Just please don't ever leave me, okay?" he said. I was holding him so tightly that my body shuddered with his sobs.

"I promise I will never," I said. "Never ever. I love you so much. I don't have to do this again, if it's too hard, okay? I can never date anyone else, and that will be fine, I will be completely happy with you. If that's what you want, just tell me."

"No," he said, "I'm happy, it was just a little scary when you were gone, I started wondering what if you never came back?" and we both cried harder.

"I will always come back," I said. "I love you and I love our marriage and our life together and even if I fall in love with someone else I will always, always come home to you."

We held each other and cried until we fell asleep.

Over the next few weeks, Jacqui and I spent more time together, and she came over to our place to play board games and eat pizza with me and Aaron and the kids – "This is our friend Jacqui," we told them. Sometimes after the kids went to bed I would sit on the couch between Aaron and Jacqui and we would watch movies or talk. Or we would clear off the dining table and play Settlers of Catan – Jacqui played friendly Catan, trading away whatever resources Aaron or I needed, moving the robber to a blank space whenever she rolled a seven instead of blocking one of us and stealing our cards, and somehow she always won anyway. Jacqui and Aaron began to develop a friendship, and Aaron grew more relaxed about the evenings I was out with her. I was happy – I was glowing – and most of the time, he was genuinely, truly happy for me, what polyamory people call *compersion*, feeling joy about your partner's happiness in another relationship.

Aaron and I had to become experts at communicating with each other about our needs. We realized early that last-minute plans and impromptu dates don't work for us; we began having regular calendar sessions, where we blocked off the kids' activities and my classes and then scheduled in the times I'd be out with Jacqui, the times the three of us would get together, and especially, uninterrupted me-and-Aaron evenings. On those nights he and I would put the kids to bed and turn off our phones and spend time

together, just the two of us, drinking wine and talking, or eating Ben & Jerry's in bed with a Redbox movie, or making love.

The first time Jacqui and I went upstairs to her room together, carefully undressed – unhooked each other's bras: this was new – the first time we had sex, I was all at once hit with the dizzy panic at making love to someone who wasn't Aaron, and I rolled away from her, shaking.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," I gasped, "I've just need a minute, I'm sorry."

"Shh, it's okay, it's okay," she said, rubbing my back. "We don't have to do anything you aren't comfortable with."

I had never done any of this before: slept with someone who wasn't Aaron, dated anyone. Everything was unfamiliar and new, and at thirty-four, I felt like I was learning steps to a dance everyone else had committed to memory years before. There was a layer of covertness that Aaron's and my life required of my polyamory, and the need for Jacqui and me to present ourselves as friends in front of my kids and in some public spaces (we called my neighborhood grocery store "the friendzone Acme" and hers "the girlfriend Acme," based on the likelihood of encountering anyone I knew). Beyond that secrecy, Jacqui and I had to navigate being queer in public – the constant nagging worry that our being a couple would trigger hostility from strangers. I felt a little bit like I was back in high school.

But even as I fumbled my way along, I felt full of light, overflowing with feelings – in polyamory they call it New Relationship Energy – like I had so much love to give, and having more places to put it was only making it grow.

* * *

In August, a month after the Republican National Convention, Jacqui and I drove back up to Cleveland together. We found a parking spot on the street by the Cleveland Convention Center, next to the Fountain of Eternal Life, a war memorial with a tall green figure rising up out of a ring of water; and we walked southeast, following the garbled noise of too much bass pumping from a sound system. It was already hot and muggy by midmorning, and once we turned the corner and crossed to the grassy lawn of Public Square there was no shade save that provided by the tents of the vendors and non-profits that lined the street. Everywhere there was color: bright clothing and rainbow banners and glitter, a beautiful queer kaleidoscope.

It was my first Pride, Jacqui's second. We held hands and walked around the square, stopping to talk to friends of hers, picking up buttons and flyers from the tents, listening to the speaker-blare of musicians performing on the stage at the center of the square. I wore blue, purple, and pink eyeshadow, the colors of the bisexual flag; Jacqui and I had on matching violet lipstick. She stopped to talk to someone she knew from an LGBT student group, and a man in leather pants struck up conversation with me. "I love your purple hair!" he said. We chatted for a while; small talk felt easy. For once I wasn't checking over my shoulder; anyone I ran into here would be someone I could trust to know about me and Jacqui.

"Everyone is so friendly," I told the leather pants man. "I love this."

"That's because we're all family, honey!" he said, throwing his arm around my shoulders. He was a little drunk, but not in a gross way, and I didn't mind the touch. I felt seen and safe, recognized for myself, accepted into a family I'd never met.

Jacqui finished her conversation and turned back toward me. “This is my girlfriend,” I told Leatherpants. She grinned at me. Saying the word still felt new, electric: *my girlfriend*.

“Happy Pride, honey!” Leatherpants said, raised his plastic cup of wine in a toast.

Later that afternoon, Jacqui and I stood on the lawn in front of the stage and listened to a friend of hers play a jazz set. Couples around us were slow-dancing – I saw Leatherpants swaying happily by himself – and for a minute Jacqui and I did too, but we were sunburned and hot and sticky with sweat, so we made do with holding hands. The wind was picking up; flyers for STI testing and support groups and women’s rugby teams were blowing across the square.

Dark clouds were gathering as Jacqui’s friend finished her set, finally muting the sunshine, and we turned to leave. As we stepped into the street fat raindrops began to fall, tilted diagonal by the wind. A curtain of mist blew out across the sidewalk from the Fountain of Eternal Life, toward us, beckoning, and Jacqui and I walked into it. My dress clung to my thighs and mascara ran down our cheeks. From inside the spray blowing from the fountain, we could barely see the street.

“Happy Pride!” I laughed, turning to her. The mist felt cool against my sunburn. She slid her arms around my waist.

“Happy Pride, babe,” she said, and we kissed. Water droplets collected on my skin, and I could feel the whole city stretching its arms to embrace us.

WERE YOU THERE?

1. Formed

Early on Monday morning, November 7, 2016, the day before I hoped Hillary Clinton would be elected as the forty-fifth President of the United States, I sat in a pew in the biggest megachurch in Akron, Ohio, preparing to listen to a presentation about the dinosaurs that roamed the earth alongside humans during the Bronze Age.

The speaker was Ken Ham, the president, CEO, and founder of Answers in Genesis, a Christian apologetics organization whose mission is to prove that the Bible is true by defending the historical and scientific accuracy of the events in the first book of the Bible – the six-day creation of the universe and the worldwide flood. Or as AiG says on their website: "The account of origins presented in Genesis is a simple but factual presentation of actual events and therefore provides a reliable framework for scientific research into the question of the origin and history of life, mankind, the earth, and the universe." AiG also operates the Creation Museum in northern Kentucky, and recently they opened the Ark Encounter, a full-sized replica of Noah's Ark according to the description in Genesis 6.

At 8:50, ten minutes before Ham was scheduled to begin, the 1,800-seat Worship Center (that's megachurch for *sanctuary*) was filling up. The first session of the day, "Dinosaurs and the Bible," was for elementary-school-aged kids. Outside, the street

behind the church was lined with buses from local Christian schools, most of which had "Academy" in their names. A few dozen kids in matching red polo shirts filed in, chattering. There were smaller groups interspersed around the Worship Center as well, possibly homeschool families and co-ops. A family a few rows ahead of me took a selfie with the Answers in Genesis logo on the screen behind them: a mom and dad and their three children, all five blond and neatly combed. The room was reaching capacity. As Noah probably said, we're gonna need a bigger boat.

At 9:06, a pastor took the stage to introduce Ken Ham, and then prayed: "Thank you, Lord, for the opportunity to hear not just from Ken Ham but from Your Word. Lord, we just pray that we would have open hearts to hear, that we would be empowered, that we would know You more, and be better able to defend our faith." Three video cameras in the back of the room were pointed at the podium, beaming Ken Ham's face, with its silver hair and chinstrap beard, onto the big projector screens behind the stage. His face on the screens looked craggier than it did in his promotional photos; the tendons in his neck formed a sort of Grand Canyon. I wondered if this one formed slowly over time or happened suddenly via a massive geological trauma, perhaps a worldwide flood. I wondered if my antipathy for Ken Ham showed on my face. My eyebrows are always giving things away; they have no chill.

Ham began by addressing the adults in the room. "I believe it's vitally important to teach our kids how to defend their faith," he said in his charming Australian accent. "Dinosaurs and evolution are used more than anything to try to drag our children away from believing the Bible."

Then Ham turned to the kids. “What I want you to do,” he said, “is to raise your hands as quickly as possible when I count to three. One, two, three.” The kids’ hands shot up. “Oh, that was very good,” he said, “but I bet you can do it even more quickly. One, two, three.” The hands flew up again.

“Very good!” Ham said. “Now, put your hands up if you’ve heard the word ‘evolution.’” Hands went up around the Worship Center. “Put your hands up if you’ve heard that ape-like creatures supposedly evolved into people.” He got the same response. “Put your hands up if you’ve heard that dinosaurs lived millions of years ago. Notice, mums and dads, that all the kids have heard this.” Around the room, the parents and teachers murmured, *Hrm* – a note of surprise, I supposed, that their kids had been exposed to these ideas despite the parents’ and teachers’ best efforts to shelter them. I wondered if any of these kids had actually been exposed to these concepts outside of a creationist textbook refuting them.

Ham put up a picture of a church on the screen behind him. “Suppose,” he said, “somebody dumped a pile of bricks there, threw in a stick of dynamite, there was an explosion, and poof!, there was a church.” The kids all laughed. This was patently ridiculous. “We know this church building we’re in didn’t just come about by chance,” he said. “Life is much more complicated than these manmade things, but *some people* believe *we* happened by chance.”

He clicked through the next few slides, photoshopped pictures of human/ape hybrids. “Did your grandmother look like this?” he asked. The kids roared with laughter, and some of them shouted, “No!” This time he didn’t even bother explaining – *some people* believe *we* came from *this*. Absurd.

"The Bible is God's history book to tell us who we are, where we came from – in fact, it has all the answers we need in it. I call it: The History Book of the Universe." He asked the kids to repeat this phrase, and the whole Worship Center rang out: *The History Book of the Universe*.

I'd forgotten how good Ham was at connecting with kids. He had a natural rapport. But I supposed this made sense; before he turned to apologetics, he was an elementary school teacher back in Australia.

Ham said he was going to explain what he called the Seven Ages of Dinosaurs: Formed, Fearless, Fallen, Flood, Faded, Found, and Fiction. He had the kids repeat those words: *Formed, Fearless, Fallen, Flood, Faded, Found, Fiction*.

I took frantic notes as Ham talked. Typety-typety – I'm sure my key-clacking was annoying to everyone around me. Here is how Ham described the Seven Ages of the Dinosaurs:

First: *Formed, about 4000 BC*. I recognized the date Ham put on the screen, although he didn't explain where the number came from: It was the date given to the creation of the world in Ussher's Chronology, named for James Ussher, a seventeenth-century archbishop who calculated the age of the world according to the genealogies in the Old Testament. He added together all those begats and arrived at the beginning of time: October 22, 4004 BC. A Saturday, around six in the evening.

God made everything in six days, then rested for one, Ham told the kids. On Day Six, He made the land animals and the first man, Adam. He said, "Let the earth bring

forth the land animals"; He made man in his image. This means we're different from the animals.

"I'm from Australia," said Ham, "which is full of interesting animals." He put up a picture of a koala, and the entire room went, *Awww*. Koalas and kangaroos are marsupials, said Ham, and they have pouches. When a tiny baby kangaroo is born, it knows how to crawl up and into the mother's pouch and latch on. Could that have happened by chance? The kids yell: *No!*

"This is my favorite animal: the platypus! The platypus has a bill like a duck, a beaver-like tail, hair like a bear, webbed feet like an otter, claws like a reptile, it lays eggs like a turtle, it feeds its young on milk like a mammal, it has spurs on its feet like a rooster, and it has poison like a snake. If it evolved, it evolved from everything! Every time an evolutionist looks at a platypus, I think God smiles, because I think He made it just for them. God designed the platypus. It's designed to do what it does do. What it does do, it does do well. Doesn't it? Yes it does. I think it does. Do you? I do. Hope you do, too. Do you?"

Ham put this tongue-twister up on the screen and had us all repeat it. *It's designed to do what it does do. What it does do, it does do well. Doesn't it? Yes it does. I think it does. Do you? I do. Hope you do, too. Do you?* Faster and faster, everyone repeated it, tripping over their words. Ham teased the kids that they sounded like the Tower of Babel.

"God made all the animals," Ham continued, "and He made Adam, and He brought the animals to Adam to give them names. Do you know why God brought the animals to Adam to name? To show Adam he was alone – he had no female counterpart. Everywhere he looked he saw male/female pairs, but there was no counterpart for Adam.

So God put Adam to sleep and made Eve. The Bible says God made them male and female. This was the first marriage. It's God who invented marriage, and marriage is to be one man and one woman. Boys and girls," he said solemnly, "we live in a time where there are people who reject God's word and they think that marriage is not between a man and a woman, and who would've thought I'd even have to talk to boys and girls about that?" This was met with stony silence – the silence of a room full of elementary school kids disapproving of those who rejected God's word, I imagined.

Back to dinosaurs. On Ham's slides, cartoon dinosaurs frolicked in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, who were both pale-skinned and naked, their privates concealed by carefully placed plants. Ham told the kids that Job, who lived after Noah's flood, talked to God, and God asked him, "Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth?" Ham advised kids to say that to scientists who tell us dinosaurs were millions of years ago: "Were you there? You weren't there, but God was there and I have his history book." Who do we trust, Ham asked, God or the scientists? On the screen flashed the words: WERE YOU THERE?

"But Mr. Ham, if dinosaurs lived with people, wouldn't Adam have been concerned about T-Rex?" Ham asked himself. "No, because before Adam sinned – in fact, before the flood – God tells us that originally animals and people were all eating plants." That brought us to:

Fearless, 4000 BC – about 2400 BC. According to Ham, originally all the animals and humans were vegetarians. After the flood, God changed their diet.

"Originally, when God created everything, everything was very good," Ham said. "Boys and girls, would you call today's world 'very good'? Because I wouldn't. There's

terrorists and tragedies and hurricanes and diseases and people killing each other…" The kids' faces were grim as Ham recited his litany of badness. "No, today's world is not very good. You know why? It *changed*. Originally it *was* very good. There was no death originally."

"But what about T-Rex's teeth, Mr. Ham?" Ham asked himself Socratically. "T-Rex has sharp teeth, so obviously he's a meat-eater, right? Let's talk logic. Just because an animal has sharp teeth doesn't mean it was a meat-eater, it just means it has sharp teeth." People around me were nodding at this, smiling a little, perhaps thinking: *Gotcha!* Ham went through slides with a panda skull, a fruitbat skull, and a South American primate called a uakari, all vegetarian, and all with pointy-looking teeth. "Just because you have sharp teeth doesn't mean you use them for eating meat," he said. "Bears have sharp teeth, and most bears eat mostly vegetarian. Originally *all* the animals ate plants and fruits, but things changed because of sin.

"What about the great white shark?" He put up a picture of a shark with a mouthful of pointy teeth. "Well, a Discovery Channel documentary showed researchers offering sharks squid, tuna, and kelp. The shark ignored the tuna and squid and went for the kelp instead, and *then* came back for the tuna and squid. The point is, sharks can and do eat plants! I even saw a YouTube video of an alligator eating kumquats!"

So, he concluded, originally all the animals were plant-eaters, living happily with each other and Adam and Eve, but then:

Fallen. Adam ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, and sin entered the world. "After they ate the fruit," Ham said, "Adam and Eve realized they needed clothes, so God killed an animal to make them clothes out of animal skin – telling them that blood

had to be shed to pay for sin, and looking forward to Jesus." Ham walked through the basic salvation message: humans are separated from God by our sin, Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sin instead of us, and if we accept Jesus we can be with God forever. I saw adults nodding their heads as he talked, and I wondered if there were anyone in the Worship Center who had heard this fewer than a zillion times already.

Ham went on: The fossil record *couldn't* have been laid down before Adam sinned, because before that there was no death. All the evidence in the fossils of animals eating other animals, of dinosaur fossils with brain tumors and diseases like cancer – well those *couldn't* have happened over millions of years because originally God made everything Very Good, and that was only six thousand years ago, so there *wouldn't* have been things like cancer and animals eating each other until after sin entered the world – that's how we know the evolutionists' dating methods are wrong. This seemed to me like very circular reasoning, but Ham was moving so quickly that there was no time to think about it.

Ham continued, "But now we've got thorns and death and weeds and pests and animals eating each other – all because we sinned. Remember, when we see all the bad things in the world like hurricanes and tsunamis and people starving, that's not God's fault – that's our fault, because we sinned like Adam against a holy God." Whoa, I thought, that's a *really* dark thing to tell a bunch of five- to eleven-year-olds.

Then, Ham went on, Adam and Eve had a lot of children, and those children had children, and so on, until by Noah's time, the whole world had rebelled against God. And God said, Noah, the world is so wicked I'm going to judge it, so I need you to build an ark please.

Flood, 2400 BC. And so we reached the part of the presentation where Ken Ham argued that Noah brought dinosaurs on the ark.

It went like this: God told Noah that He was going to send him two of every land animal for the ark. Dinosaurs were land animals. Therefore, dinosaurs went on the ark, of course. Not all dinosaurs were huge; some were as small as chickens. And baby dinosaurs were quite tiny, even the ones that grew up to be big sauropods. So, Ham suggested, God would've sent teenage dinosaurs to the ark, not full grown ones.

Furthermore, said Ham, even though there are over six hundred named dinosaurs, the Bible says that Noah only took two of each *kind*. For instance, there are tons of breeds of dogs, everything from wolves down to Chihuahuas, but Noah only took two dogs, period, and then after the flood, from those two of dog-kind descended dingoes, coyotes, jackals, wolves, and domestic dogs. He probably did the same for the dinosaurs – maybe seventy or eighty different kinds, tops. All together, there were probably only about seventeen hundred kinds of animals needed on the ark, and many of them were very small, so they would have all fit easily. I wanted to see the math on this.

Ham put up a picture of a cartoon Noah's Ark, the sort of thing people decorate preschool Sunday School classrooms with, and his voice got stern. "Cutesy pictures of Noah's Ark teach children that the Ark was nothing more than a fairy tale. That's from the devil," he admonished. In his accent it sounded like *divvil*. "The devil says that if I can convince you the flood was not real, then I can convince you that heaven and hell are not real. Therefore we need to get rid of these cartoony bathtub-ark depictions. Noah's ark was an incredible structure." On Ham's slides, a photo of the huge wooden ark from the Ark Encounter rammed into the cutesy cartoon ark, sinking it. Everyone cheered.

"Can you imagine what it must have been like?" Ham asked. "Noah and his family and the animals all on board, all the people outside scoffing at him? Imagine if you were outside the ark, and then –"

A video began to play. First, from inside the ark, we saw the huge wooden door swing shut and thud into place. Then underwater: a rift opened up on the ocean floor, and water began shooting up, creating a massive wave. Next a shot of the globe, its one huge supercontinent being consumed by water. And then we cut to the inside of a home, where a mother and a little girl – human actors: this was live-action, with realistic-looking computer graphics – sat playing a board game, then looked out their window to see the wall of water advancing on them. Next a marketplace, people fleeing in terror as the tsunami came rushing in.

Ham was right – this was no cutesy cartoon. This was *awful*.

As soon as the video ended, Ham dived back into his presentation. I supposed he was inured to the effects of his video, but I was shaken, and I struggled to keep up. He was arguing that dinosaurs were mentioned in the Bible – the "behemoth" in Job 40:15, that "moves his tail like a cedar."

"Now some people think this behemoth is just a hippo or an elephant. Tail like a cedar – does this sound like an elephant tail to you?" Onscreen he showed pictures of elephant butts, one after another. Then hippo butts. Everyone was laughing, totally cracking up. I thought, *Nothing unites an audience after watching a mother and daughter be killed at their kitchen table like butts.* No, Ham concluded, with a tail like a cedar, it *must* have been a dinosaur.

Next up: *Faded.* "So what happened to the dinosaurs?" Ham asked. "They died." There was no big extinction event, no meteorite, no ice age – they just: died. Lots of animals become extinct; same for dinosaurs. No mystery.

Found, c. 1800-present. Dinosaurs were rediscovered in the nineteenth century – "I say rediscovered, not discovered, because the first man to discover a dinosaur was Adam," Ham laughed. He showed a photo of a horseshoe crab. "This has survived virtually unchanged for over 300 million years, supposedly – 100 million years before the dinosaurs, and still alive today," said Ham. "And they think it's silly for us to believe dinosaurs lived alongside people? They say the crocodile has been around for 240 million years – older than the dinosaurs. But they think we're the ones who are silly?"

And finally: *Fiction*. "I call this last age of the dinosaurs 'fiction,'" Ham said, "because today we learn things that aren't true, like evolution and millions of years." Ham sighed and said that the Indianapolis Children's Museum was called the best children's museum in America, but he knew that really, the best children's museum in America was the Creation Museum and the Ark Encounter. "Because we tell the truth," he said. "All the exhibits at the Children's Museum show millions of years – isn't that sad?" he asked. "They're using dinosaurs to indoctrinate our kids about evolution and millions of years. And boys and girls, what question do you ask when someone tells you millions of years?"

In unison the kids called back, "Were you there?"

2. Fearless

I was in eighth grade when I first learned how to defend my faith. Before eighth grade, I had always attended public school; but after I spent seventh grade being the target of intense bullying, my parents pulled me and my younger siblings from public school and enrolled us in Faith Christian, a local K-12 private school.

We lived in Western North Carolina then, in the Bible Belt, and although Faith was nominally non-denominational, in practice it was heavily informed by Southern Baptist fundamentalism. We had mandatory chapel services every Tuesday and Thursday; Mrs. Currie the music teacher would roll the upright piano out onto the floor of the gym and pound out hymns and worship choruses, and all the students would sit in the bleachers and sing along, and then sit and listen to a sermon from whatever local pastor was there to preach at us that week. Most of these sermons were about how we needed to be saved, or if we were already saved, how we needed to repent of whatever sins we'd been up to and rededicate our lives to the Lord. Most of these sermons ended with an altar call. Mrs. Currie would play softly on her piano, and Pastor Whoever would lead us in a prayer of salvation and/or recommitment that we could repeat silently in our hearts. Then, while every eye was closed and every head bowed, he would ask us to raise a hand if we had prayed along with him that day. "Hallelujah, sister, I see that hand," he would say. "Amen, brother. Yes, I see that hand, glory to God." This would continue for as long as it took for the pastor to reap some predetermined number of souls for the Lord, while Mrs. Currie played the same chord progression over and over. The more show-offy ministers would actually invite us to come down to the red line at the edge of the gym floor and kneel there in prayer. (I learned early into my Faith career that if I worked up a

good cry during a red-line altar call, I could use it to get out of the first twenty minutes of my next class. My faith was sincere, but it was also opportunistic.)

My eighth grade science book began by debunking the Big Bang Theory and warning us that secular scientists were motivated by their determination to disprove the Bible. We were safe in the hands of our Bob Jones University Press *Earth Science for Christian Schools* textbook, though, which taught us how the earth was created less than 7,000 years ago, how a worldwide flood was the cause of the fossil layers and the Grand Canyon, how carbon-dating methods were unreliable but God's Word wasn't. In World History, we began with Creation, studied the descendants of Adam and Eve all the way down to Noah, and then got to all those ancient civilizations that formed after God got mad about the Tower of Babel and scattered everyone – the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Babylonians.

And in Bible class, I learned 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." The thing was, our faith was constantly under attack – secular scientists and historians, driven by the sinful desire to reject God and live however they wanted, were constantly looking for ways to undermine the truth of God's Word. That verse meant that it was our job to learn how to defend our faith.

I didn't learn the word *apologetics* until a few years later, but the concept was clear: People would ask questions about why I was a Christian, or suggest objections to Christianity, or – worst of all – give false information that contradicted Christianity, and I had to be prepared to prove that Christianity was true. These people might be well

meaning, or they might be trying to pull me away from my faith, but either way, it was my job to study, to be prepared, to have absolute certainty.

I remember one time a few years later, when I was in high school, I was at my best friend Angela's house. By this time I'd moved to Ohio, and my family attended the same megachurch that would host Ken Ham a couple decades later. Angela and I met in the church youth group; she was a homeschooler, and I went to another private Christian school, and we were both doing our best to be on fire for the Lord.

I don't remember what Angela and I were talking about, just that we were in her living room getting ready to go somewhere, and her dad was stretched out in his recliner with their dog Sadie asleep on the floor next to him. But for some reason, in response to something Angela and I were saying, Mike spoke up from the recliner and said: "I believe in evolution."

I thought at first he might have been joking – he was that sort of dad, the type to say ridiculous things with a straight face and see if I bought it. Mike was a huge Italian man, well over six feet tall, with thick black hair and a blue-collar job and a truck with an NRA sticker on it. I was a little afraid of him. He was probably joking? I choked out a "Ha."

"No, I do. I believe in evolution. The scientific consensus is that the earth is billions of years old and that life evolved from single-celled organisms millions of years ago. I believe that."

"But," I said, "that's not what the Bible says at *all.*" I looked at Angela; she was giving me wide round *stop* eyes.

"Doesn't matter," Mike said. "It's what the science says."

"But – you're a Christian!" I said. I was fumbling for words. I had never actually met someone who believed in evolution. And he *went to my church*.

"Yeah," said Mike. He raised his eyebrows, challenging me to continue.

Ange grabbed my sleeve, tugged. "Dad, leave Abi alone," she said. "C'mon." And she pulled me out the door, while I kicked myself. Here I had an actual chance to defend the faith, and I froze up.

3. Fallen

After the elementary-school presentation, Ken Ham gave a similar talk for a packed house of middle-schoolers; and that evening, Ham presented his final session. This one was for adults, and it focused on explaining why the church was losing young people – two thirds of the kids who grew up in church left when they reached college age, he said – and what needed to be done to stop the hemorrhaging.

I sat in the back row of the balcony just to the left of the sound booth – my old pew. It had been three years since I sat in that Worship Center, back before the kind of Christianity I learned there became too full of contradictions – within the belief system, within myself. I spent fifteen years at that church, in that pew, first as a high-schooler when my family moved out of the Bible Belt and up to Ohio and enrolled me in another Christian school with "Academy" in its name. Later, even after my parents moved away from Ohio, I returned as a young mom, my kids happily tucked away in age-appropriate Sunday school classes to sing songs and color pictures of Bible stories, cartoon arks, friendly smiling animals.

The problem as Ham saw it was that churches had stopped teaching young people to defend the truth of Genesis. Genesis was foundational to all of Christian belief, because it's in Genesis that we learn that everything is tainted by sin and death. "We can't understand the good news of the gospel unless we first understand the bad news in Genesis. People don't want to be saved because *they don't understand what it means to be lost*."

That morning, during the session for middle- and high-school kids, Ham had asked the students, "What are the implications for our lives of believing the history of Genesis?"

Well for example, he said, there's the problem of gay marriage. He acted out two sides of a debate with himself:

"'Suppose it's two men and they love each other, what's wrong with that?'

"'Well, what if someone loves their dog? Where do you draw the line?'

"'Why do we have to limit marriage to only two people? Why not polygamy?'

"'Well, two comes from the Bible, it comes from Adam and Eve.'

"'We see homosexual tendencies in animals, that means it's natural.'

"'Well it's a fallen world. We also see animals that eat their young, are you going to do that?'"

Ham stood up straight behind the podium. "Genesis is a history of the universe," he said. "God has given it to us. All our doctrines as Christians go back to Genesis – why we're sinners. The gospel message. The promise of the Savior. And we see that God created male and female. It's true that because of sin we have people that can struggle

with issues like this, but God created male and female." By *people that can struggle with issues like this*, I assumed Ham meant *transgender people* – he was denying them the validation of using the name, reducing them to simply *struggling with issues.* Listening to him, my shoulders and upper back felt tight. Undoubtedly, statistically, there were queer kids in that room, hating themselves, wondering if they would ever be okay.

"We get marriage from Genesis. Adam says, 'This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.' Therefore – which means *this is the reason* – therefore, a man, male, shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife, female. That's the origin of marriage: one man, one woman." His voice thundered; somehow he had shifted from folksy science enthusiast to stern preacher. "The history of Genesis is the whole foundation of marriage, meaning a man and a woman, and anything else is against God's word. And it's about time our Supreme Court justices and presidents and Congress woke up to that."

The Worship Center full of students had erupted into applause.

I'd been one of those kids once, smug in the knowledge that I was on the side of good, the side of God. Smug, and somewhere far underneath, terrified. It would take me years to recognize in myself not only the applauding, confident kid, but also the self-denying queer one. I understood too well what it meant to be lost.

Sitting in the Worship Center that evening, on the same familiar teal-and-purple upholstery of the same concentric rows of pews, the same wide sweep of white ceiling arcing out overhead, I felt like an interloper, a spy. I was, after all, part of the epidemic of young people who had fallen away from the church. I had come back for the AiG

conference partly out of morbid curiosity, partly because I needed an essay topic and this seemed to have humor potential – look at that weirdo with his ark full of dinosaurs, ha ha. I was there for the spectacle, and I had told myself that I had enough distance to merely observe and document and interpret. But now, I could feel in my shoulders the tension of a day spent listening to him.

Onstage, Ham's presentation about young people leaving the church was building towards its peak. "Abandon the foundation of God's word and you have moral relativism," Ham declared. "Once you abandon the foundation that man is made in the image of God, you can do abortion. Once you abandon the foundation that God ordained marriage as one man one woman, you get gay marriage."

He was gathering steam. "You want to know where our culture is heading, read Romans 1. You'll see that God judges a culture and turns them over to their own devices. God is going to act. He already has been acting in this nation; He's been getting this nation's attention. Even all the turmoil in this election, God is getting our attention. That's where we are because we threw God out – we threw God out of schools and courts and nativity scenes. When we throw God out we're not left with neutrality, we're left with atheists – they're a minority in the culture but they're running things. Where are the Christians?" he crescendoed. "Why haven't we stood up?"

I had thought I could get a gently comedic essay out of the conference. But this didn't feel funny anymore, bumping against old wounds and old frustrations. I had imagined Ken Ham on stage in the Worship Center railing about dog-kind and vegetarian Tyrannosaurs and moral relativism; but I had forgotten to imagine the pews full of people, all those rapt faces. This audience wasn't some fringe religious sect, some

anachronistic remnant of fundamentalists. This was a church whose membership was overwhelmingly made up of middle-class people with college degrees, professionals, pillars of the community. This was a church whose main building, the one where Ham was speaking, was across the street from a public research university; a church with a college ministry attended by hundreds of students every week.

Ken Ham was there to speak about a world that was only six thousand years old; a world where scientists were liars and no one outside the church could be trusted; a world where secularists lurked, waiting to indoctrinate kids and pull them away into moral relativism; a world where women murdered a Holocaust of infants; a world where young people who left the church became enemies, responsible for God's judgment on America. And the pews were full.

4. Flood

Watching Ham talk to the kids that morning, I wondered if anyone had ever calculated how many words he spoke in a minute, an hour, a ninety-minute session. He reminded me of the Micro Machines man from Saturday morning tv commercials when I was a kid, supposedly the World's Fastest Talker, only Ham wasn't pitching tiny cars and airplanes but an entire ideology, complete with the threat of divine wrath for those who didn't go along with him. His lecture went past so quickly that there was no time to consider what he was saying – just listen, internalize, and move on. Raise your hand when he tells you, repeat the catchphrases he chanted, go go go. Don't ask questions. Listen, believe as hard as you can, or you'll go to hell.

It was ironic, then, how he kept warning against indoctrination. Secularists, he said, were methodically using schools and museums to indoctrinate kids to believe in evolution. "This is not just an intellectual battle. There is a spiritual battle going on," Ham said. "The Bible says that those who are not for Christ are against him. The devil" – *divvil* – "is out to get you to not trust God and His word. This is a battle that's raging around us all the time. The secularists legislate to protect the teaching of evolution and call it science, and then they forbid the teaching of creationism. But if the science is so overwhelmingly obvious, why do they have to go to all this length to protect it and keep young people from hearing about creation? They're imposing an anti-God religion on students."

Atheism, in Ham's view, was a religion every bit as much as Christianity, a belief system built on blind faith – after all, where was the proof of God's non-existence? Growing up I had believed that deep down, everyone believed in God – it was impossible not to believe in Him – and the only reason for anyone to reject Christianity was a desire to sin. Ham seemed to think that secularists were as devoted to evangelism as evangelicals were – that the purpose of any religion was to win converts – in which case it was only fair to use their methods too. Oh, I doubted that he would ever characterize his teaching style as *indoctrination*, and anyway, there was a spiritual battle going on and all's fair in war.

But listening to him as an adult, I could see behind the curtain in a way I hadn't been able to as a child, could see the leaps and the circular reasoning and the logical fallacies that made young-earth creationism work. And I could see why he talked so fast:

he had to talk faster than his listeners could think. If he gave them time to catch up, to examine what he was saying piece by piece, they would see the cracks, too.

5. Faded

A few years ago, I wrote a paper for my final undergraduate literature seminar about the way H. G. Wells uses the language of premillennialism, a branch of Christian end-times theology, in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. When I went to my professor to talk about my rough draft, he was critical. "You've got such an interesting topic," he said, "but you've padded out your paper with all this stuff everyone already knows."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"All this about evolution," he said, flipping through pages. "I can see where it's important to your argument, but you can cut most of this information out and just summarize it in a couple paragraphs. It's all common knowledge."

I had included several pages of explanation of Darwin, natural selection, survival of the fittest – everything Wells would have understood about evolutionary theory. Those pages represented several days' worth of library research.

"Instead," he continued, turning a page, "you need to give a lot more explanation in this section where you talk about the Old Testament. You've glossed over a lot of material here that needs to be developed."

I could feel my eyebrows trying to climb up into my hairline. My eyebrows have no chill. "Sorry," I said, "I thought the Bible stuff was more familiar. But this –" I gestured to his red-pen marks on my paper, all my research. "– you're saying everyone knows this stuff? All this biology?"

"It's pretty basic high school science," he said, "don't you think?"

I sighed. "I wouldn't know."

6. Found

"Where are the Christians?" Ken Ham had asked. "Why haven't we stood up?"

The day after the Answers in Genesis conference, the Christians stood up and they went to the polls, where 81% of white evangelical Christian voters chose Donald Trump. They may have held their nose while they did so, as more than one person I've talked to since the election has described doing; they weren't blind to Trump's divorces, his greed, his coarseness, his biblical illiteracy. But reluctantly or not, evangelicals overwhelmingly voted for Trump.

Writing after the election, Dr. James Dobson, the founder of the evangelical parachurch organization Focus on the Family and a member of Trump's Evangelical Executive Advisory Board, said that evangelical Christians supported Trump because of "the sanctity of human life, the Constitutional guarantees of religious liberty that are being shredded, and the promise by Mr. Trump to appoint pro-life Justices to the Supreme Court." Translated, *the sanctity of human life* is evangelical for *opposing abortion*, *religious liberty* for *opposing abortion and homosexuality*, and *pro-life*, obviously, for *opposing abortion* again. Evangelical concerns about "religious liberty" generally come down to two things – fear that Christians will be forced to support in same-sex marriage, whether as business owners who must bake cakes for gay weddings or pastors who must officiate them; and worries that businesses and organizations will be forced to pay for abortions by providing health insurance policies that cover reproductive

healthcare. As Christians, they say, they must not participate in such things. The Bible is clear – it's right there in Genesis, *male and female* and *image of God*. Their literal, young-earth creationist reading of Genesis requires this conclusion.

Or perhaps it goes the other way. Perhaps this conclusion – opposition to abortion and homosexuality, the twin shibboleths of American evangelicalism – requires a literal, young-earth creationist reading of Genesis. After all, it's just like Ham said – if you abandon that foundation, you lose the justification for these beliefs. If you no longer believe that God actually created one man and one woman and ordained their marriage as the model for all human marriages to come, why does it matter whether relationships follow that one template? If you no longer believe that God actually created humans, including embryos, in His divine image, why does it matter if you end a pregnancy? Abortion and homosexuality are cornerstones of evangelical politics; they require a creationist reading, a literal hermeneutic, to support them.

The passage in Genesis about the creation of Eve gets a lot of play from evangelicals, particularly at weddings and marriage seminars. God created Eve to be a "suitable helper" to Adam, it says, and that's why a man will "leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall be come one flesh." Because Eve was created to be a helper to Adam, and their marriage is the model for all marriages, marriage must not only be a union of one man and one woman, but of one man who leads and provides for his family and one woman who submits to her husband's leadership and helps him by nurturing their family. That's a lot to read out of a handful of verses; perhaps instead it's the rigid gender roles that are the true starting point, and the literal reading of Genesis that supports it.

Young-earth creationism, then, becomes the stand-in for religious freedom, for opposition to abortion and homosexuality, for opposition to women's and LGBT equality, for women submitting to their husbands and lacking control over their reproduction. This is what Ham's defending the faith looks like. Scratch young-earth creationism and underneath you find patriarchy, sanctifying itself with scripture.

You'll find white supremacy, too. People have been taking the Genesis creation story at varying levels of face value for centuries, but it wasn't until the lead-up to the Civil War that biblical literalism became a cornerstone of evangelical belief. This arose out of Southern evangelicals' use of the Bible to justify slavery: Abolitionists were arguing that Christianity required freedom from bondage; slaveholding Christians responded by pointing to specific texts supporting slavery. They looked to Genesis 9 for the "Curse of Ham," the story of Noah's son who was cursed for seeing Noah naked and passed out drunk in his tent – tradition held that Ham was cursed with dark skin and ordered to serve his light-skinned brothers, and this justified the African slave trade. After slavery was ended, they looked to Genesis 11, where God punished people for building the Tower of Babel by scattering the people and giving them different languages, to justify segregation and anti-miscegenation laws. When schools were desegregated, white Christians formed private academies where their kids could be educated away from black students – and where they could keep teaching young-earth creationism while they're at it.

Even if white evangelicals today no longer support segregation, even if they celebrate Martin Luther King Day and would never dream of using the n-word, even if

they all vehemently agree that racism is a sin, they are still reading the Bible with the same hermeneutic that their predecessors used to sanctify white supremacy.

The day after Ken Ham's conference at the largest church in Akron, Ohio, 81% of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump. They did this because they believed he would oppose abortion and homosexuality and defend "religious freedom," and they did this knowing that he had run a campaign built on racism and sexism. Perhaps their political priorities were shaped by how they interpreted the Bible. Or perhaps their interpretation of the Bible was shaped by their priorities.

7. Fiction

In February 2014, Ken Ham and Bill Nye faced each other in a debate on the question, "Is Creation A Viable Model of Origins?" What happened was, a YouTube video had gone viral in which Bill Nye, the bowtie-clad scientist from the tv show *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, denounced teaching kids creationism as inappropriate and irresponsible. "We need scientifically literate citizens," he said, which is impossible if you don't accept the science of evolution. Ham took exception to this statement and challenged Nye to a debate, to be streamed live from the Creation Museum in Kentucky, and Nye accepted. Some brilliant Twitter user coined the hashtag #HamonNye. And it was on.

I watched the two and a half hour debate in one window on my laptop and opened Twitter in a second window. In the year since I'd left evangelicalism for more mainline Christian pastures, I'd found an online community of other post-evangelical Millennials, most of whom were raised in fundamentalist churches and educated in home- or Christian

schools. Many of the ones younger than me had attended lectures by Ken Ham as kids. From all over the country, we watched the debate together, commenting in 140 characters or less as we watched.

Watching the debate was equal parts cathartic and frustrating. It was clear from the beginning that Nye and Ham weren't talking about the same thing. For Nye, science meant studying the observable world, collecting data, drawing conclusions, testing them to see if they worked. For Ham, science meant beginning from the conclusion of young-earth creationism and working backwards to create models that supported that conclusion. For Nye, science could use data from the present to make guesses about the past and then verify those guesses through testing. For Ham, anything we might guess about the past is fallible and suspect because we weren't there to witness it, but God was, and He wrote down every scientific and historical detail for us, making the biblical account of creation irrefutable. There was simply no common ground.

Ham was right, though. If our entire religion depended on our believing a young-earth creationist reading of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and something disrupted that belief, then everything else we believed fell apart, too. If I had to read the Bible as a historical and scientific account of the origin of life in order for my faith to work, if it was an all-or-nothing package, then it was vital to find a way to explain away all of science. The Jenga tower of belief was incredibly precarious.

And there we all were, spread across the country, watching the debate together over Twitter: Ham's proof that if we lost young-earth creationism, we'd lose our entire faith. He was right: if we stopped believing what he taught about Genesis, we'd stop believing everything else he said, too. We pulled out one block and the whole tower came

down. The secularists got to us – *the divvil* – and we realized that the Bible couldn't support being made into a scientific, historical document. We stopped believing in young-earth creationism, and we stopped believing that being queer was a defect and having sex outside marriage was a sin and science was the enemy. We dyed our hair and got tattoos and slept around and voted for Democrats. Some of us stopped believing in God altogether; the rest of us had to figure out how to find a faith that was strong enough to bear our doubts: faith without certainty, faith with mystery, faith that didn't always have an answer.

There was a moment, watching the debate, where Ken Ham was describing what it meant that God created the stars, the planets, the heavens, when he said that the size of the universe shows us the hugeness of God. "He made them to show us how great He is," Ham said, "that He is an all-powerful God, that He is an infinite God, an infinite, Creator God, and the more you understand what that means, that God is all-powerful and infinite, we stand back in awe and realize how small we are, we realize, *Wow!*" – and I caught myself nodding along. I remembered standing on the beach one night during a family vacation, barefoot, with the edges of waves swishing around my ankles and bioluminescent phytoplankton glowing bluegreen in the dark water, while the Milky Way spiraled out overhead.

I still believed in an infinite Creator God too – just not in the way Ken Ham wanted me to – I believed in my own tininess, the breathtaking infinity of a universe full of questions. I pictured Ken Ham closing his eyes tight against each new discovery and shouting *I can't hear you!*, and science going *This is so cool!* I pictured the stars singing.

At the end of the debate, the moderator asked Ken Ham and Bill Nye what it would take for them to change their minds about what they believed about the origins of life, the universe, and everything.

Ken Ham said that it would be impossible for him to change his mind, because he believed the Bible was the Word of God and that it clearly explained the answer to that question. "And so, as far as the Word of God is concerned, no," he said, "no one is ever going to convince me that the Word of God is not true."

On my laptop, a friend's tweet popped up: *The opposite of faith is not doubt, it's certainty.* There was so much I didn't know.

Bill Nye said, "We would need just one piece of evidence. We would need the fossil that swam from one layer to another, we would need evidence that the universe is not expanding, we would need evidence that the stars appear to be far away but are not. We would need evidence that rock layers could somehow form in just four thousand years as opposed to just the extraordinary amount, we would need evidence that somehow you can reset atomic clocks and keep neutrons from becoming protons. Bring on any of those things and you would change me immediately."

There was something comforting in Nye's answer – a kind of release, a permission to sometimes not have answers, a permission to ask questions instead. His words offered the freedom to willingly suspend belief, to present myself to the universe not as a period, confident, contained; but as a question mark, wild and filled with wonder.