ABSTRACT

NIGHT IN THE NORTHWOODS
AN ASPERGERS PARENTING JOURNEY

by Pamela K. Fisher

This first-person, disability-parenting memoir tells of raising an intellectually gifted child on the autism spectrum. The book explores the theology of place in shaping both the inner and outer landscapes of characters and the spiritual role of nature as space for solace and reflection. The text's imagist approach sets memory against nature images to create porous stories of people and place. The narrative style draws from lyrical creative nonfiction to capture the aesthetics of autism and the sense of disequilibrium that threatens to engulf the family. To amplify this sense of disorientation, and the rote rigidity of autism in relationships, the permutations of nature are juxtaposed against the rigidly observed provincial traditions of a small Great Lakes town, rooted in communities tightly bound over generations. The book reflects on the decision to continue with a high-risk pregnancy in light of high probability for disability, and the autism markers that go missed and undiagnosed.

NIGHT IN THE NORTHWOODS:
ASPERGER PARENTING TALES

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

by

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2013

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PART I Night in the Northwoods

Prologue: Thin Places in the Northwoods

Each August we left the muggy Shiawassee River valley where I lived and headed to the lake. There was a stranger in those woods. One who had known me since the day I was born. He held the key to my identity, an identity my mother kept hidden all the years of my childhood -- so well I convinced myself he had ceased to exist.

In the rear view mirror of knowing, those childhood summers have taken on a surreal greenish-yellow Polaroid cast. Then, I hungered for the normalcy of our neighbors in the new tract ranch homes with split rail fences and faux wagon wheels and living rooms with pseudo-colonial braid rag rugs and maple colonial furniture. Each summer the suburb emptied out when the factory shut down to retool. Our neighbors strapped coolers and lawn chairs and luggage to the racks atop the General Motors wood paneled station wagons, bought with their factory worker discounts, and headed up north.

We too drove north. In that small, close cottage the first years after my mother and stepfather married, we were all on uncertain footing with one another.

We rode all afternoon stuck to the seats, my sister elbowing me aside to get the first glimpse of lake. Scrambling over one another, Linda and I tumbled from the car, racing to plunge our city-soft feet into a spring fed brook that ran alongside the cabin, a childhood first rite of summer marking baptism into a new season of life.

During the days we belted "Why do stars fall down from the sky every time you walk by," singing to the Carpenter's *Close to You* on our new transistor radio until the teenagers smoothing baby oil tinted with iodine on their legs moved their towels down the beach. At dusk, when the fish bit best, we practiced casting for bluegill off the dock across the street.

One morning, we didn't clear out of the cottage fast enough and found ourselves the targets of the Coach's famous flying fastball. Perfected during the college no-hitter he'd pitched. Skittish around balls I dodged as they whistled by, smarting into my child-sized mitt.

"Hustle! Reach for it," our stepdad barked in a voice honed on whipping the teen boys of his championship team into shape. It made us jumpy. I often wished I could simply drift away on that clear cold stream amid the hot stinging words.

We stayed far from the perimeter of the cottage. For hours my little sister and I walked the sandy stream chasing the flickering minnows. One very hot afternoon our stepfather called us. The smack of the baseball slapped in leathery echo from the wood's edge as he threw it into his mitt, impatient, then angry. Co-conspirators, we lay down in the stream, flattening our bodies against the creek bed. His hollering diffused underwater, the liquid rush filling our eardrums. Only our noses and mouths were visible as the bone-chilling current washed over us, fanning our hair out in mermaid fashion. We had been reading *Little Mermaid* that year.

My sister and I pretended to be fish, making fish lips at one another under water, waiting for gills to pop out. If I thought like a fish long enough would my legs turn into fins, would my skin turn to silvery-blue scales?

"What if we can't hold our breath that long?" asked Linda, slightly more practical.

Nervously I eyed the culvert pipe. What if I got sucked into it and out to Hubbard Lake? Linda's lips turned blue, her teeth chattered. Numb, I popped out, my skin tingling like soda pop in the warm air.

"Goddamn it all to hell!" the Coach bellowed from the cottage. How we clever mermaids laughed, ducking below the water to drown out our laughter, blowing piscean bubbles into the water.

At night we fished off the dock, calling out constellations, where science and mythology converge: Jupiter or Zeus, Venus or Aphrodite? The conquering Romans renamed the Greek gods: Aphrodite was rechristened Venus and Zeus became Jupiter, as the Coach who claimed my mother erased my given name, LePley, from our birth certificates. Mother's carefully guarded secret.

Much later, I learned that the father I thought long dead vacationed across Hubbard Lake in those summers.

I wrote many stories in the Northwoods. Stories in which I did not have to play summer softball but went to arts camp and belonged to a family that listened to classical music, like me. I wrote the truth of my life decades before I came to know it.

Or perhaps I merely excavated truth in this thin place, where it was waiting to be found.

These thin places are old, an old idea of an ancient people. In 500 B.C. the Celts discovered monuments to the earth's thin places, dating back to 2,500 years before their arrival in Ireland. Their oral history and folklore describe them as places where the fabric between the other world

and this world is so thin, it is permeable. There, one might pass between two worlds and discover hidden truths.

That green tendril truth unfurled into my consciousness in my sixteenth winter. I presented my birth certificate to the DMV for a learner's permit. "Why is it dated six years after the birth date on your application?" the clerk asked, suspicious.

I'd been pestering my mother for months to produce it. But she was an artist, loaded up on Valium in those days. By afternoon her eyes had a watery, vaguely there look, as if she too were submerged to drown out the Coach.

"Well, where is it, my original birth certificate?" I asked on the drive home, dread twisting inside of me. I was not who I thought I was. Like tumblers in a lock, fragments of memories fell into place.

An October wedding, the rosebud corsage pinned on blue velvet jumper. My beautiful, exotic olive skinned mother in her brown suit in First Presbyterian Church chapel, a church where I learned I had been baptized Pamela LePley four years earlier. A dark paneled office where a black-robed man behind a desk asked questions.

"How did you register me for kindergarten?" I asked.

"It was the 1960s, no one was divorced." She shrugged maddeningly, as if it was a small detail of little consequence. "Your Dad and I thought it would be easier to just use his name until the adoption was finalized. It seemed like the best thing for all."

"Which dad thought that?"

"The only father you've ever known," she snapped.

"And, whose fault is that? Did he want to know me -- what is his name, and mine?"

It was the beginning of our estrangement, her betrayal shook the core of my identity.

I found the answers in a bundle of old letters, with California postmarks at my grandmother's, house, where I had lived until I was five.

My father had disappeared from my life about the time JFK was shot. The day a boy my age saluted the caisson of his dead father rolling by, I reached out to touch my grandparent's black and white TV to pat the boy's cheek. Perhaps those two early memories fused, my absent father dead too.

When I faced the hidden truth, the truth I had guessed summers ago in the Northwoods, and met my father at age 18, I learned that he had summered across the lake from the cottage in mermaid country. We might have stumbled upon our dad as we bought Pixie Stix at the corner store, a store so old the boards in front of the counter had smooth deep grooves worn by generations of bare feet and sand, maybe my dad's feet.

Why had he left me? How did one simply leave a child, two? My father drove a friend's car out west one fall and decided to settle in California. He said he had hoped my mother would relent and join him. But, he met with an accident on the California Coastal Highway, stepped on a downed power line that left him in a coma and near death. Surfing had saved his life he said, made it possible to walk again. After a long rehabilitation he found my mother had remarried, terminated his parental rights and given his children another man's name. The hidden truth of the thin place.

The lake where my unknown father and I vacationed, Hubbard Lake in Michigan, is most certainly a thin place. A place in the Northwoods where a little girl buying a Pixie Stix might have broken the spell that separated her from a long-lost father.

There is yet magic in the woods, the land still speaks undiscovered truths.

I can yet conjure the musty cabin scent and the hooting, howling forest sounds seeping through the screen on cold black air. Our flashlight cast spectral shadows onto the woods startling the night creatures as we walked back from night fishing. In the wild place the constructed world falls away and other realities are imagined, perhaps truer realities than we know. The Northwoods was one of the last places of my childhood governed by magic. There, I rewrote my own story and incanted the truth into being.

During the years to come when I question again my identity: daughter, wife, writer, and mother to an unusual child I will look once again to these thin places for truth.

Up north Jack pines jut from the hillsides in sharp triangular relief, backlit by long licks of blue lake. Earth breathes hope and solace in the whisper whir of cicada and soughing bough. And incense, the warmed pine resin, rises holy from woodland altar's forest floor.

Chapter 1 Lake Michigamme
Hemingway Country

Although it was only August, deep in the Northwoods of the Upper Peninsula autumn bit the air. The Lincoln-log porch of the lodge we were visiting was built when Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders made the wilderness fashionable, in the style of the great Adirondack retreats. It smelled sharply of pine pitch, resonant of the testosterone-charged rusticating of another era.

Stuffed cougar and coyote crouched on the split log steps, ready to pounce. A ten-point buck cast a wary eye on them from the three-story river rock fireplace. The swamp salvage cedar chandelier twisted in a rictus that cast a shadow on the three-story gallery. It was a little gruesome. Our daughter thought as much.

"It looks like the monster trees grabbing at Snow White as she runs away in the forest." At age six, Alyssa was a Disney devotee. She would have worn her the Ariel *Little Mermaid* bride gown or Princess Jasmine *Aladdin* harem pants costumes to school if we let her. She knew all of the songs by heart and belted them out into her Fisher-Price karaoke microphone. It was tough to keep her in batteries.

Big on fantasy, she liked the Great Lakes folklore and mythical stories I told her from my own Michigan childhood, although there weren't nearly enough princesses to suit her literary tastes. And Longfellow's Indian princess Hiawatha was a shade too grim.

"Seriously, no Disney princess ever died," she had snorted. It would be wise perhaps to wait a few years to relate Hans Christian Andersen's ending of *The Little Mermaid*.

"Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox could fit in here," Alyssa said of the cavernous hunting lodge. The timbers ran the length of the massive lodge and it took six Finnish woodsmen to log them. A century ago lumberjacks felled its timber under the old growth canopy where little sunlight reached the forest floor. Things ran in mythic proportion in the Upper Peninsula, immortalized in Longfellow's legend of *Hiawatha*. In the 300 million acre

Hiawatha National Forest 500-year-old pine trees grew to 100-feet tall. Tahquamenon Falls plunged six stories, just one of 150 waterfalls.

These were the deep woods Hemingway pined for in Paris, the cathedral quiet of the forest. The Big Two-Hearted River of the *Nick Adams Stories* was set nearby in a national forest a camper could wander for days and encounter only elk, black bear and timber wolf.

My first up north summer was on a lake a day's walk from Hemingway's fishcamp in a rustic old family cabin. We drove all afternoon in our big blue Pontiac, stopping at the Paul Bunyan statue and a trading post to buy beaded faux Indian belts and maple sugar candy.

There were several family cottages in my childhood: Houghton Lake, Pretty Lake, Hubbard Lake. But I had my favorite. Each evening, after our favorite up north card game of euchre was over, I listened to the burble of the stream and imagined myself floating down it and out to Lake Huron. Every time I play the game, decades later, I hear that stream. I heard it all through the school year through the drone of fluorescent lights and multiplication tables. Knowing it was there, waiting for me each summer, made school endurable. Like Hemingway's Nick Adams, I've returned to forest waters throughout my life to center.

Afternoons my little sister and I walked the sandy stream trying to catch the flickering minnows, and leapt out shrieking when a larger fish swam by on its way into the lake. Velvety moss grew on the mucky bank and ridges of sand on the clear creek bottom rubbed against my feet. My heart raced, my head ached from the cold springs, but oh, it was marvelous.

Before we left Lake Macatawa to drive up north, I had waited for an early pregnancy stick to show its colors. A faint, barely discernible positive took shape. Perhaps. This time I thought I would not be so quick to say anything to my husband, or to my daughter who wished for a brother on birthday cake candles each June. I held this small *perhaps* close.

All the same, I passed up the Grand Traverse Bay winery tasting rooms. It was early autumn this far north, the woods ablaze. We had driven into the lodge on a rutted road deep in the forest, at first a great adventure. But a few miles in we had seen not another car, nor camp. More miles passed and the forest road showed no sign of habitation. It got dark quickly deep in the woods and the light was going. Terry and Alyssa had voted to stay the well-marked route in unfamiliar territory, but surrendered to my nostalgia trip. There were no tents, sleeping bags, nor coolers of food. The landmarks were entirely unfamiliar; I hadn't been up in these remote woods in 20 years. I pored over the atlas of Michigan, marking our progress with lakes and waterfalls on the

map. Another mile on the dirt two-track, a doe crossed our path, a pair of tail lights loomed ahead.

At Highway 28 and Alyssa begged to stop at Da Yooper Trap. A sign promised "The World's Largest Chainsaw." Inside, raucous accordion music played, the store smelled of cedar trinket boxes, leather Minnetonka moccasins, birch bark miniature canoes, horehound sticks, maple sugar leaf candy. In the shake of a leaf, I too was six again, a déjà vu trip back in time to the roadside trading posts that once lined Old 23 North bisecting Michigan, the magical highway up north. My daughter and I bought matching beaded Indian belts.

I exhaled as we arrived at the Cahodas Lodge, a 1920s fish camp. On our trip through the Keewenau Peninsula, I had fallen violently ill. It began as a Volkswagen Bug-sized moon rose over Copper Harbor, the color of a blood orange. We had stopped on the craggy cliffs shivering in the night air, an E.T. moment with Alyssa silhouetted in front of a magnificent moon. I had not slept that night, perhaps it was food poisoning from the Cornish pasty, perhaps not. We had lost a baby the previous fall, and although the doctor had said it was nature's way of ending a defective pregnancy, I determined not to get my hopes up this time. I'd waded through two seasons of gray leaden emptiness, feeling as ashen as Seney, the burned out Upper Peninsula town Nick Adams passed through on his way into the forest. Hemingway wrote a clear, cold river watering the soul of Nick Adams. I hoped the forest would offer what I needed to try again.

Twenty years later I could still conjure the delicious chill of arrival night at our Pretty Lake cottage when we opened the shutters and the hooting, howling sounds of the forest crept in on the cold night air. We were given strong warnings about the many black bears foraging this time of year. We screwed up the courage to leave our windows open at night. Could the bears smell us, tear down our screens? Each childhood should include a summer to grow brown, skip lunch and eat berries, to vibrate with a universe of wilderness like primal Pan-children.

"There are no words that can tell the hidden spirit of the wilderness, that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy, and its charm," President Theodore Roosevelt said when founding the National Park System. A sickly child raised in New York City, he recognized the essential

connection between wilderness and the health of the American psyche. Raised in two of the most densely populated cities in America, I did not want my daughter's character shaped by the domesticated landscapes of suburban tracts and tan bark cushioned playgrounds. I wanted her to feel herself expand amid these three million acres, and to understand her larger place in the world.

Lake Michigamme was mirror calm, the deep dark of ripe blueberries. Shoreline hardwoods ringing the lake blazed against the jack-pines and red pines. The waves rang hollowly in the dim mustiness of the boathouse racked with rows of red wooden canoes, heady with the smell of diesel fuel. We loaded Alyssa into a rocking outboard and pulled away from the dock, ripples pinging against the metal hull to the buzz of the old Evinrude outboard rudder bucking under my hand, familiar.

Skimming over the indigo surface, I made for a tiny cluster of islands in the middle of the lake – some so small they held only a solitary one-room cabin. There were no bridges stringing the islets together; the only way in or out was by boat, or snowshoe or snowmobile in winter.

The wind rose as the sun sank, churning the surface of the lake. We banged across the waves, hunkering down in the hull against the stinging spray. The sky grew leaden, wooly. A biting wind gathered and the hull boomed like a kettle drum pounding into the waves. My hands grew icy and wet, my arms aching from steering and Terry took the rudder. The Cohodas Lodge dock didn't seem to be growing any closer as we pressed on against the high winds.

My daughter huddled low in the hull, an orange life jacket puffed around her like a Dayglo marshmallow, her fingers blue with cold, their white tips gripping the edge of the boat. Doubt was plainly written on her face, her forehead creased she scanned our faces, seeking reassurance that we knew what we were about. Do we?

Pragmatic, Alyssa preferred to do things in measured orderly ways, to know what was coming. I wanted her to know that some of the deepest experiences of life have been those that appeared out of control.

Eventually we banged and clattered against the dock, shivering. She hopped out of the outboard as if she couldn't get out of the boat quickly enough. "I think we almost capsized," she announced to the innkeeper, eager to tell her tale from the safety of inside, where flames leapt from the stone fireplace and gaslight lanterns washed warmly over the solid pine walls.

"Tell me about it," the innkeeper said, offering her a warm cookie.

"The waves splashed at me over the side of the boat and we were tipping sideways," she chirped, melted chocolate chips smeared at the corners of her mouth.

I think of myself at her age, a born raconteur relating to the other second graders my calamitous summer vacation water skiing episode. Our ancient Evinrude motor cut out on a lake not far from here. Paddling astride the bow, Uncle Eugene sang us in, two scared little girls bundled in musty orange life vests. I got a lot of mileage out of that.

"Really? It was kind of rough today."

In the morning only the spiked tops of pine trees swam above the lake, the surface blanketed in thick whorls of mist. A loon called out from underneath it, its cry echoing over the lake.

Downstate, we stopped at Old Mission Peninsula. I wanted to shoot the sunset for a travel article. I chased the sun as it edged into Lake Michigan, skipping the ridge top road over the spine of the 18-mile long arm reaching into the Grand Traverse Bay. The Jeep engine whined in protest.

Scraped by the glaciers that carved out the Great Lakes, the land was fertile at the 45th parallel halfway between the North Pole and the equator. Vineyards zig and zag, stitching the hillsides like rickrack. While the wines are mediocre, the afternoon wine-tasting crowds are robust.

The horizon flushed mango, the sun's warmth bleeding away. The convertible plunged into a shadowed valley. Blinking I rode back up a warm sunlit slope. A cherry blushed bay emerged from the dip in the road. A hand-painted sign warned "Road's End" swung from a roadside asparagus stall. The road ran out where the glacier melted, leaving Lake Michigan.

Mission Point divides Grand Traverse Bay into East and West Bay. The 16th century voyageurs canoed the 10-mile width of Le Grand Traverse, the Great Crossing.

The sun edged lower and I missed the turn for the Old Mission Lighthouse. In the waning sun the signs had grown difficult to make out. Back on the sun-warmed crest the lay of the land was

clear again. Around the next bend was a definitive “Road Ends” sign, apparently, a different matter from “Road’s End” altogether.

Just beyond the sign, a lighthouse of white clapboard rose from the sand dunes. At the Ice Age meltdown the receding glacier scattered rocks in the waters off Old Mission Point. It looked like an old one-room schoolhouse crowned by an octagonal leaded glass tower to warn Great Lakes schooners long gone of the rocky shoals.

The sky was warm and ruddy, the dunes cool underfoot. Wincing, I waded into the clear cold water, ankle deep a good 20-yards from shore. I stood on Ice Age glacial litter and the sun dropped into Lake Michigan, the day ending where the glacier stopped and the road ends.

Chapter 2 The South Shore
Northern Lights Omen

The day the northern lights arrived we saw an alien green light on a sonogram technician's screen, a pulsar of light. The Japanese saw the aurora borealis as an auspicious sign. Couples pilgrimage to Alaska to conceive under the Northern lights, invoking the lights to bestow a uniquely gifted child. Raised on omens, I hoped the Japanese were correct. The Vikings saw the spirits of children who died at birth dancing in them.

Folklorists credit country people with preserving the old ways and tales and Great-grandmother had spent her girlhood in the French countryside near Lyon. Although two cultures and three generations separated us she had imbued me with her Gallic superstitions. I hoped the northern lights showered favor on the pulsar of light I had discovered was growing in my womb that afternoon at the doctor's office.

I hoped the light would not go out, as it had the last time.

Foreigners in a strange land, the grandmothers came to believe that inexplicable forces controlled things great and small. Great-grandmother's gnarled fingers repetitively worked black rosary beads, a silver icon medallion warded bad luck. They could not afford much more of it to leak into their lives. Grandma was 12 when she left seventh grade to work as a bookkeeper in a factory to support her Lyonnaise mother who did not speak English. She continued to toss the salt over her shoulder, a nod to Provencal superstitions.

Flashlights bobbed around the banks. Neighbors carried children wrapped in blankets to catch this once-in-a-generation sight. The houses around the lake were darkened, watching. The pines jutted from the banks in sharp triangular relief, backlit as the northeast rim of the lake glowed. Small waves beat a swishy rhythm washing ashore. Green gold light bled through a tear in the black sky. A small wind blew across the surface, the northern lights undulating in stereo, firmament to lake.

Across the solar system they stormed riding intense blasts from the sun’s surface. This was the cosmically fantastic scientific explanation. Blown across the galaxy on gusting solar winds,

the North Pole drew down the aurora into the Earth's magnetic field like a giant tractor beam. Supercharged atoms and molecules collided in the heavens, exploding.

Sky and lake rippled into one another, phosphorescent watercolors. We were swimming in light, eddies and currents. The gilded ribbons of light waved green, and finally streamed crimson tongues of fire. A sign from porous heavens that all would be well?

At 12 weeks we readied to tell our family and friends, but our doctor advised consulting with one more expert. At 17, weeks we learned why. The perinatologist was grim. Why had we let the pregnancy get this far? There was not one good probable outcome, certain complications and a probability of birth defects. There was not very much time to do something; he seemed to think that this was a foregone conclusion. That I would do something. My husband was shaking his head, amusement playing at the corner of his mouth, watching me.

"And what if I don't," I asked. "Do anything?"

His eyes widened and he looked down, leafing through his lab reports officiously. "That's not an option. You've got a tumor." He appealed to Terry with a *We're in this together, right buddy look?* He gave me an indulgent now-now little mother look. "And you've got more than yourself to think about, what about the other child?"

"Could I make it through the pregnancy?" I tilted my head appraisingly, counting down the weeks until we were in the clear from birth defects, cerebral palsy.

"Another 20 weeks? Not likely. The pregnancy hormones fuel tumor growth. Rapid growth. It will crowd the baby, stunt its cranial and organ growth."

"How many weeks do I need, for the baby to have a shot?"

His mouth settled into a bloodless line. "You need fourteen more weeks to be in the clear, maybe twelve. Anything under 28 weeks and you're looking at possible blindness, cerebral palsy." He waved a hand at me dismissively, as if I were a reckless child trying a parent's patience. "Developmental disabilities common to underweight preemies."

"So if I hang on through March 1, we're in the clear?" I was bargaining with him, bargaining with God.

He looked at me as if I hadn't heard him clearly. "By no means." He gave my husband a 'we'll talk in private later' look. Pure fury surged through my veins. He seemed to scent the chemical change in the air, as if my rage were olfactory. "The tumor is near the femoral artery and there are serious risks for you as well. We can't biopsy it while you're pregnant." He shook his head as if I were wasting his time. He stood up.

"You'd better make the appointment quickly to take care of this. There isn't very much time."

"We'll be in touch," I nodded, not meaning a word of it.

Chapter 3 Key West
End of the Road

A wicked westerly wind swept in from Chicago off the big lake on All Soul's Day drifting wet shaving cream dollops of first snow in front of our garage, whiting out the rows of Bush-Quayle yard signs along South Shore Road. At sunrise we burrowed two tracks through the drifts from the garage to the road to make a run for the airport. By sunset we had traveled to the southernmost point of the United States, to join revelers on Duval Street in Key West celebrating the Clinton presidency. It would be our last big trip before the new baby and the safety of the fourth month of pregnancy dawned.

Driving down the Overseas Highway, just west of the Gulf Stream churning between Cuba and Florida, only the Gulf of Mexico stretched before us. It was like sailing on a great expanse of bridge. Hundreds of feet below, small flat skiffs dotted the lime Kool-Aid colored water; fishermen poised with bonefish spears on their bows.

Built by wreckers, brigands and blockade runners, Key West had been isolated for centuries until 1912 when a railway linked it to the mainland. But nature seemed determined to disconnect it from the mainland and some folks there preferred it that way. In 1935, a Category 5 hurricane swept an entire train of WPA workers off the tracks and into the ocean. While the remnants of the railroad trestles still stood, replaced by the Overseas Highway, the Keys remained island out-posts. Key West's end-of-the-road sensibility drew literary escape artists like author Ernest Hemingway, painter Winslow Homer and a large gay community throughout the 20th century. I too was driven to the end of the road, distancing myself from the conformist cultural expectations of a clergy wife.

As we changed planes on the flight down, I had fainted in the airport. The bed rest of a high-risk pregnancy loomed in the last trimester. The doctors had assured me I would not make it much past year's end on my feet. Urgency to board the last plane had pounded in my chest in Atlanta, to flee to the end of the road in Key West. I unwound as we drove deeper into the Keys.

Each mile marker on the Overseas Highway took us farther from the mainland and the warmth of the wet breeze unfurled the bands squeezing the breath from my lungs.

I had felt as if I were holding my breath since we moved to the provincial West Michigan community. The Sunday blue laws, the legalisms born of Calvinist indoctrination, the many oughts and shoulds left me biting my tongue. Members of the congregation Terry served were not allowed to drink alcohol or smoke, and while I was not doing much of either the prohibitions still rankled. Gender roles were rigidly prescribed, and dutifully adhered to. Few women of childbearing age worked outside the home, most of them raising large broods of four plus children.

Terry, who was raised in a small town, understood the rules, while I had never lived in a small town. "So, how do you like Holland after San Diego?" nearly every townie we met gushed, awaiting the reciprocal gush. Seriously, how did they think we liked it? It was cold and dull, every restaurant smelled like smoke, the economy chronically tanked with the fluctuating fortunes of the automotive industries, and the town shut down on Sunday. Every restaurant,bevery grocery store and gas station.

Each person we were introduced to seemed to know quite a bit about us: where we'd moved from, the town our parents lived in and where we had worked. It was disconcerting to be a topic of conversation by strangers. "Everyone knows your business in a small town," Terry laughed. "There's not much else to do but talk about people. Get used to it."

I could not.

This knot of regret had tightened ever since moving day in San Diego. I had been teaching Creative Direction and copywriting to artists at the Arts Institute of California in La Jolla. I enjoyed teaching, and Mission Beach, but Terry's two-year interim pastor job had been up that summer and he had not found anything else.

"Are we really doing this?" I'd called out to Terry as he poured out the last of the rum and Kahlua we'd bought on spring break in Cabo San Lucas. I was guessing we weren't going to be drinking six-pack buckets of Pacificos and lime and dancing on a table anytime soon. I picked up packing tape from our empty townhouse. The movers had come in the morning, while Terry took a long awaited call for a La Jolla Church job he'd candidated for.

"You are kidding!" I had heard him say with a choked laugh as he answered the phone. "The movers just left with our furniture in a van," he'd said, in a choked laugh without humor, hanging up. "Man, what timing. They want me to interview -- after months of badgering them."

"The movers couldn't be more than 30 minutes out of town, do you want to call dispatch?" I had asked, only half kidding. I did not want to cross back over the Mississippi River, something I had vowed not to do.

Like many Midwesterners in paradisiacal places, during our first Southern California days a current of guilty dread descended as I drank my morning coffee, barefoot on the third floor deck next to a rustling palm tree top. I would breathe deep, read Psalms and watch the tourmaline waves at the end of our sandy court trying to pinpoint the source of my anxiety.

We children of GM factory towns are always waiting for nature or the wrath of God to smack us sideways with a blizzard, plant closing or layoff lest we lose sight of how tenuous life is. Mission Beach was a mañana kind of place. In short, it felt too good. My stoic Presbyterian Calvinist roots were firing up my neurons, warning "nothing that feels this good can actually be good for you."

I pedaled to my daughter's preschool on my beach cruiser bike. Each afternoon she nodded off on the way home, the rhythmic rubbery squish of sand under the tires and the white noise of surf set her bright pink, ping-pong ball of a baby helmet bouncing against my back. At age three, Alyssa had been less charmed with beach life. She scuffed her sandaled feet as we walked up the lane to the beach, and sounded the alarm early and often that we'd best not miss *Reading Rainbow* nor *Mr. Rogers*, "the friend." Even as a preschooler she was the voice of reason and responsibility. We began to wonder if perhaps she was right on the nights the surfer's shacks on our lane belched pot smoke and Bob Marley. No one slept until a waterfall of Pacifico beer bottles clinked into the trash can at the night's end. It was probably the right thing to do, move to a more affordable place and perhaps focus on free-lance writing I had thought, or have a baby sister Alyssa had suggested. I was dubious, I just wanted to body surf and write.

Scooping up the last streamers of the packing tape, I checked the upstairs, where a red balloon souvenir from dinner at our favorite beach restaurant floated in the empty bedroom. A cheer and applause went up from the beach. I stepped onto the deck with the red balloon.

"Pam, you okay?" Terry called up. I heard his tread on the stair, his arm circled my waist. The sun dropped into the Pacific and the wind picked up bouncing the red balloon, carrying the Mediterranean scents of cypress and the white waxy natal plum flower. "Send it out with a prayer for our quick return," he said, with a squeeze. I released it and it sailed east over Mission Bay at the end of our last day.

Within weeks of the plane touching down on the Lake Michigan shore, our daughter was a convert. She loved that dinner arrived on the neighbor's table at 5:30 p.m. promptly every night and dads rolled into the driveways at 5:15 p.m., that town mommies spent days scrubbing their kitchens "Dutch clean" and wiping spit off of big broods of blonde babies. It seemed as if the mandate to go forth and populate the earth rested personally on the Calvinist chosen, the "elect" as they called themselves. Settled by a shipload of Dutch Reformed settler families, who fled the Netherlands when 18th century reformers grew too liberal, our newly adopted hometown on Lake Macatawa revealed her cultish quirks before the Mayflower truck arrived.

Our first Sunday, Terry had fired up a borrowed lawn mower. It quickly died out, hushed by a gaggling chorus of goose-honk-nasal-whine, peculiar to the indigenous Great Lakes Accent, "Oowww, we don't deww that on Sunday." A cluster of neighbors descended to chide us, detailing the town's Sabbath behavioral code, a Calvinist legacy of legalisms: don't wash the car, mow the lawn, go shopping, or play tennis. Although Alyssa was a convert, I was looking for the escape hatch before the moving van had arrived.

Chapter 4: The Narrows

Shooting Stars & Signs

In February, I felt an unmistakable bite. Contractions. We had memorized the list of complications for preemies at 28 to 30 weeks -- blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy. But not 25 weeks. We knew that the survival odds were only about one in two. At the hospital, I was surprised to find myself wheeled up to the labor and delivery unit. I had been on bedrest since January.

"How long will I be in here today?"

"Oh, until we stabilize you again," the nurse said brightly, evasively. "All of the baby monitoring equipment is up here."

My veins seemed to ice up from the inside out, pumped with the magnesium sulfate to slow labor, steroids to speed the baby's growth, calcium channel blockers to relax the abdominal muscles. The nursing staff had begun to congregate at the nurses' station outside my door, whispering and looking rattled. Someone walked over and closed my door.

The fetal monitor thunked faster, and the next contraction broke and held its grip longer. I pushed it away, drank long draughts of air, pushed oxygen into the clenched muscles. Terry and I timed contractions, three minutes apart, two, four.

An off-duty sonogram technician arrived to estimate birth weight, measure the baby's organs, to calculate survival odds. He asked a question that I did not catch.

The nurse nodded. "The air transport team is on standby to airlift baby."

To airlift the baby to the nearest neonatal intensive care unit if delivered. I considered that my baby might die in a hospital an hour away and I would not be there to hold her, or him. Terry would fly out on the helicopter with the baby, in the event it did not survive the flight.

"Terry get me to Grand Rapids to a NICU, I want to be with the baby."

"Pam, it's too risky to move you in labor. The cervical fibroid is near the femoral artery."

I shrugged, not following. My vision had grown blurry.

“It’s probably not going to be a routine delivery.” He picked up my hand, kissed my fingers curled around his. His voice had taken on a grave but gentle pastoral tone. “There could be serious surgical complications.”

I struggled for air; the IV drip had triggered my asthma. “I’m having a hard time breathing.”

The nurse nodded. “The drip relaxes the smooth muscles, pulmonary function too. Every hour you hold on surfactant is pumping through the baby’s lungs to prepare it to breathe. But, we have to stop when your oxygen levels, or baby’s heart rate, drop too far.” She cracked the door and called out the door, “Is the daughter here yet?"

“You must think this baby is going to arrive tonight,” I laughed, looking up to meet Terry’s eyes, to see the anticipation. His eyes were fixed on the middle distance. The nurse’s eyes filled with tears, she covered her mouth and ducked out the door. It took me a moment to put it together.

They weren’t sure I was going to make it either.

They brought my daughter in. Her face was small and pinched as she pressed it next to mine, taking in the steady thunk, thunk of the baby’s heart monitor, the seismographic needle tracing surging contractions in counterpoint, the IV tubing in my arm and oxygen tubing up my nose.

"Look Lys, I have something to show you. Your brother's picture." I held up a print of the sonogram. They had wanted to calculate his birth weight.

"A brother!" she chirped, "I knew he was. I get to name him an A name. We should have matching names." I buried my nose in her nutmeg hair. "Alexander. Mom, he should be Alexander. It's almost like Alyssa."

My lungs burned with the drip, my oxygen levels continued to fall, and although I argued, they disconnected the IV.

The contractions slowed, grew farther apart, then, nearly disappeared. "Sometimes that happens," the nurse nodded. "Cortisol from stress can accelerate contractions."

At 1 a.m. I finally drifted in and out of sleep. "Good night Alexander," I whispered. "Good night my boy."

The star showers arrived the second week of August, amid the dog days. We waited for the first clear night of the Perseid meteor showers, heralding summer's ebb. One night after the 11 o'clock news anchors signed off we pulled lawn chairs across the still–warm pavement of the driveway. The chaises left tracks like sleigh runners in the dew sheen rising from the cooling earth. We creaked as we settled flat on our backs, sinking into the webbing to stare up at the skies, waiting.

Born at the sun, shooting stars began their journey to earth when earth intercepted their orbit. Drawn and pulled, the comets changed their course, rushing to earth at 1,000 miles per minute — a speed that would take you from Paris to New York City in under five minutes.

But a comet's journey ends before it arrives on earth. The size of a mere grain of sand, a comet only becomes visible upon striking the Earth's atmosphere. Then, in a flash, it vaporized.

"Do you remember the last time we were out at night, watching the sky?" I asked. Terry's breath was slow and even, I wondered if he too had fallen asleep.

"Mm-hmm. The northern lights."

The sonogram pulsar of light had arrived, an anti-climactic birth, with the exception of an emergency surgery on my tumor on the baby's second day home.

"I think you're just angling for some extra sleep," Terry teased as I nursed the baby one last time before surgery. He held Zan in one arm and wiped his eyes with the other as I was wheeled into surgery. The tumor was close to an artery, and I'd been advised to make final arrangements and leave a letter for my daughter when she grew up. We did not breathe easy until the tumor biopsy came back negative.

Labor had begun St. Patrick's Day morning. After months of contractions I missed the signs until my water broke. Forty-five minutes after we made it to the hospital, our son arrived on earth, breathing on his own. Two months early, he weighed over five pounds. 'Miraculous,' the doctor had declared.

Our son was released from the hospital tethered to a heart monitor. Its tiny light flickered with each breath. At first the flashing blue pinpoint of light kept us awake. When he forgot to breathe, the monitor swiftly blinked red, like an ambulance. After 30 seconds, the alarm shrieked

like a smoke alarm. The blue flash of his steady even breath pulsed on the ceiling, oddly hypnotic.

When they disconnected him mid-summer, I had awakened, seeking the reassuring pinpoint pulse hovering over the bassinet on the bedroom ceiling. When I looked up and saw only darkness, my eyes dilated with fear, my fingers reaching out for the rise and fall of that small chest. Our sleep was tentative and each night I waited in a state of suspended animation, stilling my breath, straining to catch the baby's soft breathing.

We did not yet know what complications his early arrival at 31 weeks might bring. There would be many markers preemies must pass, would the baby hear and see normally, sit up and crawl and walk? We watched for signs.

We listened to the white monitor noise of baby breath, waiting in the silence. A deep, expansive cool rose from the lake, water slurping at the banks. A screen door banged. The crickets slowed and one by one the lights went out in the windows of the cottages. The darkness was broken only by a small crescent moon, a good clear night for star-gazing. The first falling stars streaked the sky. Like snowflakes they fell, white and cool against the dark black.

PART II The Desert

The Drums of El Niño

Three days before Christmas the drums of El Niño pounded as we drove home up California Coastal Highway 1. We had traveled 2,700 miles west from the Great Lakes across the country, into the prairies and plains, over the Rocky Mountains, through the red sculptured rocks of Arizona to the Grand Canyon, and down again into the desert glitz of Las Vegas out to the Pacific Ocean.

Summer's end brought a wistful round of goodbyes from the South Shore cottagers we'd come to know each summer. They would return in May for Tulip Time, but find us, one of the few year-rounders on the lakeshore, gone. Since kindergarten, my daughter had been deeply caught up in friendship's first bond with the little girl next door, delighting in the first love outside of family.

Each night of that last Indian summer, from the kitchen window I caught sight of the two, next-door best friends, Alyssa and Kristin. Up and down the little knees pumped, swooping and soaring. Up went the titian head, down came the golden one. Swinging and smiling they twirled their hair. Anxiously my daughter would look up at the kitchen window from her perch on the swings, catching my eye, faltering and biting her lip, her trajectory dropping a bit.

When September waned and the evening shadows grew long, the two little girls would alight, pausing on the ground. They'd wrap their arms around themselves, shivering against evening's chill, unwilling to surrender the end of one more day together. She would beg an extra half hour to play and I held off dinner, granting this small concession, a stay of parting. I too was not ready for this season closing in on me.

Not yet I murmured against the ripening autumn darkness. The breathtakingly brief northern summer. The gently graying hair of my lover. Let me swing and soar and hang suspended in this moment. To run barefoot and brown-limbed while the earth is green and warm.

In this place where it began with Alexander, the Northwoods have continued to speak across the years to me – of nature's wild strangeness and our place in it. Words of comfort, and solace.

Like smooth acorns dropping on the forest floor in August, heralding autumn, there were small signs scattered throughout Alexander's toddlerhood that we would, in retrospect, see as autism markers. The ungerminated nut of an idea that something was not quite right. A call from preschool when he did not respond to his name at age three. A fantastical three-foot tall paper sculpture of Tatooine, Star Wars rising in the middle of our living room floor. He labored for four hours, balancing each paper tower just so. We marveled that a three-year-old could so fully plunge into his art that he scarcely looked up at us. He waved me off when I coaxed him to stop for lunch. Like the gentle thump of the first acorn, this small child's perseverance with art and his immersive hyper-focus were the first tangible sign. Perseverance, a word meaning both dedicated effort and obsession. Merely a marker of one more family artist? Musicians and writers, we understood such things. And we did not think it strange. In retrospect, I am not sure if our own eccentricities and artistic sensibilities served to "norm" Alexander, or confuse him. We too wrote and composed long into the afternoon and evening. We all simply found our very being in creating, and I suppose we did perseverate, obsess even over the words or guitar bridge.

It was not the first time we would think or hear the word perseverance, not by a long shot. Eventually in this new place, as season-less seasons came and went, we would grow anxious. Dimly aware something was amiss as he swung himself into oblivion, hair flying, unaware and uninterested in the children on the ground below. The same swing each day. Up in the clear, crisp sky he laughed, unaware, carving a line of gold through the sky, his blond head glistening, soaring the bonds of earth's gravity. In his own orbit.

As we left the interstate highway we got a fog-shrouded glimpse of the ocean at Moss Landing, but we could hear it thunder the entire way. Alexander startled, his fringe of blonde hair shaking as the boom-boom-boom echoed like canon. His brow furrowed, his face crumpled and Alyssa crooned to him in the backseat. "It's okay baby brother, it's just the Pacific Ocean saying 'welcome home Fishers, it's been such a long time'." Terry grinned from ear to ear. He had wanted to live in California since his parents moved there in 1971 while he was in college.

Just past Ana Nuevo, the largest northern elephant seal breeding colony in North America, we got our first indigo splash of ocean. The El Niño Pacific Ocean currents had stirred up mammoth waves, twenty to thirty feet tall at Mavericks surf break in El Granada, the tiny beach village of 5,800 just 20 miles south of San Francisco. As we neared our new house, hundreds of cars lined the highway, spectators lined the beach, binoculars trained on the ocean. The world's big wave surfers had discovered Mavericks surf break, some of the mightiest waves in the world, reaching 80 feet. Professional surfer Mark Foo caught an 18-footer and died the next morning and the sport of extreme big wave surfing found its California epicenter. Danger made it the Mt. Everest of Pacific Ocean surfing. I had often rushed home to body surf in San Diego after teaching; clearly Miramar Beach was not the place for it.

That first night, we rolled out the sleeping bags in the log-timbered loft to a foghorn's melancholy cry, the blue-white flashes of the lighthouse revolving in our window. We fell into an uneasy sleep to the thunder of Mavericks pounding rhythmically on the sand.

Chapter 5
Lake Tahoe Reverie

The March Alexander turned three the lemon tree in the yard erupted in white blossoms in the spring rain. They exploded like fragrant popcorn just as Alexander erupted in a flurry of words, hundreds of them every few weeks, delivered in his halting stutter. As summer neared the unpruned tree was bowed under the weight of bushels of peppery tart Meyer lemons and his tongue bore increasingly strange fruit.

Six years later a Stanford neuropsychologist would label this deluge of words a tell-tale savant characteristic of many Aspergers children. A toddler's brain is wired to prune the flowering of overabundant neural pathways for greater efficiency. For some reason, his had not. Synapses popped, messages traveled down neural routes evolution decommissioned millennia ago. With more brainpower firing than his co-processor could efficiently manage, words tumbled out of our toddler word savant like California's El Nino rains that spring.

He relished the sounds of these new words, unleashing torrents. "Considering the circumstances" was a favorite. Fellow toddlers in the co-op preschool edged away from him, skittish, with that uncanny ability of tots to scent an aberration of nature. We shrugged, chalked it up to two writer parents. Our home was adrift in words, the kitchen table littered with manuscripts, blueline galleys of the magazine we edited, and theater programs and press releases for the theater openings I reviewed for a San Francisco newspaper.

One Monday afternoon as I tapped away on deadline, Alexander toddled over to the kitchen counter bar and asked, "What's oral sex?"

I lunged for the TV remote and saw the Clinton impeachment hearing filling the screen. A storm of wailing and roaring erupted. Roaring was Alexander's new expressive mien, straight out of his current favorite Disney movie.

"I'm going to miss my show," he hollered when I flipped President Clinton off. "Want to watch my show. Turn on DW and Arthur!" Red with rage he shook. Recently, unpredictable or

abrupt shifts in routine equaled meltdown. By now children were afraid to sit next to Alexander at preschool, edging their little story hour carpet squares a safe distance away.

I popped in Veggie Tales and pulled the pocket door to the kitchen counter closed with a slam. He jumped, blinking rapidly, over and over, a startle reflex to unexpected stimuli that would dog him long past the developmentally appropriate age of one. I hunkered over my blueberry iMac, guilty tears filling my eyes. Like Virginia Woolf I was desperate for a room of my own in which to write. A storm of chaos brewed inside him, spilling over into the house.

One afternoon Terry and I set up the tent to air out after a camping trip to Emerald Bay at Lake Tahoe, a mountain lake the cold clear of a turquoise cat's eye marble. It had reminded us both of the waters off of the Sleeping Bear Dunes in Michigan. We had intended to take the tent down after sweeping out the sand and drying the lingering dew of the Sierra nights from its folds. My daughter pleaded for a camp out slumber party with her girlfriends from Redwood Camp in the Santa Cruz Mountains that weekend and so we left it up.

Sunday found me frayed, pressed upon by polite small talk. Two church services plus coffee hour added up to four hours of answering for my husband's feminist leftie theological leanings, accompanied by me nodding vacantly, smiling and placating. I zipped open the tent to sweep out the Oreo and Doritos detritus, to pull the tent stakes and stow it for the season. The tent smelled faintly of campfire and mosquito repellant. I lay down, pressing my cheek into the red plaid flannel sleeping bag, something tight and knotted uncoiling, releasing tears of frustration.

Camping in Tahoe, the tent had been a zippered place between worlds where Zan sprawled beside me for an afternoon nap, flushed in the hot Sierra sun, smelling sweet and damp of sunscreen. When the shifting shadows on the tent awoke him each afternoon we'd head back down to the lake to float in a raft, the glacially ice lake slapping on the plastic boat bottom. Each morning I woke up surrounded by the puppy-quick breathing of sleeping children and clatter of the tin coffee pot. I'd curled against the bundle of my children's warm small bodies, my nose cold in the mountain morning air cut by the sharp smell of coffee and the hiss of Terry slapping a blueberry pancake over on the camp stove.

I bought my first tent and my own camping gear my senior year of college. It was the tent where I got knocked up, six weeks into my second marriage. By Christmas Terry's parishioners were counting and speculating; we had eloped two months after our first date -- partially because

my mother refused to attend my wedding if my father flew in from California, she had not seen him in 20 years, but mostly to avoid the 200 Presbyterian parishioners angling for wedding invitations. The day we'd announced our engagement that August, after just 12 dates, I'd overheard several girls who had known Terry since their teens at the coffeehouse he managed, and sang at. I was trapped in a bathroom stall when they entered. "I mean, who *is* she, really? I heard she was living with some guy before this. I mean, she's not even a virgin."

"Guys always go for that kind of girl," one of them said, snorted. "Did you hear Julie's boyfriend broke up with her while she was in Kansas and took Pam to lunch to ask her out?"

There was a bitter laugh. "Jason asked her out too, and that was after we had been dating for nearly a year and *then* he told me he's not physically attracted to me. What was he waiting for? I'm almost 30." I held my breath, standing still, silent in the stall until they left.

We eloped two weeks later, stealing away to marry in the garden of a French country restaurant near Cincinnati. Planning the ceremonial celebration was a lovely secret between the two of us. Our two best friends met us for a surprise champagne dinner and I turned up wearing a vintage Gibson girl gown carrying a dozen ivory roses. A sly crescent moon winked from the elopement announcements, a ladder and a bridal bouquet on the window sill. We mailed them the next day from our honeymoon in Glen Arbor, Michigan. We staked a privacy claim to our wedding, the beginning of an oh-so public life together. We put on a good jovial front, but we have always been more private than we seem, letting few folks in.

Ten months and one day after our wedding, and nine months after our first camping trip together, Alyssa was born. The Lake Tahoe trip was the first camping trip we'd taken since.

The week without cell service had given us the space to weigh another job Terry had been offered. Driving out of the Sierra my cell phone had blinked furiously. A church board member had gotten wind of the job offer from a gossipy parishioner at the new church, and demanded we cut short our vacation to take an immediate meeting. At I-5 we considered driving straight down the coast to our parents in Santa Barbara to avoid a vacation hijack, rather than risk unloading the camping gear and getting entangled.

We stole into town the back way around the church, furtively pulling our car into the garage just a few blocks up the street. Terry and the kids napped while I pulled beach towels from the dryer in the garage, repacking. The front doorbell rang. The front door lock turned in the deadbolt.

"Terry, Pam, are you guys back yet?" the voice of a church board member called out. I froze. Steps resounded throughout the living room, moving closer and closer, deeper into the interior of our house. My chest tightened with fury. The front door closed, the deadbolt turning again with a click. "Call as soon as you get in, we need to meet ASAP," said a note left on the kitchen table. We turned off the cellphone. Once again, we fled the parishioners. I no longer even felt safe from them in our own locked house.

On a later camping trip at Yosemite, a bear snuffled and circled our tent. Its fur brushed the canvas, just a hand's breadth from us, as it circled and circled seeking the entrance. We'd yelled and clung together, cleaving to the fiction that we were safe inside the flimsy nylon fabric. The thwack of a tranquilizer gun took down the bear and a park ranger carted the cub off.

Outside of my backyard tent were the hundreds of prying eyes, the clergy fishbowl, weighing and judging me and those dearest to me.

Our first Sunday back in town, I found respite in the woodsmoke scented nylon fabric. The tangible hickory aroma of sanctuary, improbably within the thin fabric of my backyard tent. The billowing tent breathed in the wind and my constricted chest opened. Drawn inland by the simmering East Bay hills, it flapped in the late afternoon winds off the Pacific Ocean like a live thing, ready to take flight. There, I felt lighter, filled with oxygen. As if I could sail away.

The scritch-scratch zipper of the tent screen door flap came to signal two hours of solitude in which to write. This tent became my place between the worlds, neither outside nor inside. A solace space. One afternoon I brought my laptop out to the tent. "Where's Mommy, where's Mommy?" Zan demanded of Alyssa.

She knew, but I had sworn her to secrecy that I might write in the tent. He would ask the same question, over and over. Through the open patio doors I heard his feet patter across the hardwood of the living room and down the hall, searching. I knew he would do this over and over, tirelessly.

The tent stayed as the apple tree in the back yard ripened. One late September afternoon the thunk of a falling apple startled me, the tent season drawing to a close. Another litter of feral kittens was born in the brambly border of hedge and brush between yards. The apples fell faster each day, a cluster of rotting apples surrounded the old tree and their honey-thick sweetness drew the buzz of bees and a flutter of birds. By October the tent's maroon roof faded pink.

Not once did my son look for me in the tent although many afternoons he wandered into the backyard to play. Just an arm's length away on the patio I could hear him talking to his Fisher Price roly-poly people, pushing the little plastic cars up and around the ramps of the parking garage through the thin fabric. The tent, in his mind, existed only in Lake Tahoe. Out of context, autism blinded him to the idea that Mom could be in the tent, in his own backyard. Locked in the categorical contextual rigidities of Aspergers, he could only conceive of our family inside a tent at Lake Tahoe. And so the tent came to exist outside of place and time for me. A way to disappear into the woods each afternoon through the tent flap, where outside the sierra pines soughed and the campfire snapped. A sabbatical space where my writing room billowed and breathed in the winds off the San Francisco Bay, far from the eyes upon us.

Chapter 6
Starry Night

Kindergarten had not gotten off to an auspicious start. On the fifth day of class we found Zan in the principal's office. His pudgy fingers clenched the arms of the chair square in front of her desk. He had never sat across a desk from anyone in his five-years. Rage stained his cheeks, the rubber capped Keds thudded against her desk from the too-big chair. His eyes darted around the office, an animal cornered, weighing the flight odds. Then he spied us.

The trouble began on the fifth day of class when his classmates were called up, peeled off into three groups and marched away from one another single file to a classroom across the playground -- California district-wide class consolidation. Fat tears plopped down my back when I picked him up at school. "Won't I ever see the dazzly teacher again?"

For the next two days he had fixedly circled the school grounds at recess, seeking out the kindergarten class he was certain he belonged in. As if he had wandered out of one reality and somehow wandering through the right door would put everything aright.

Terry and I were too quick to congratulate ourselves on Zan's transition to kindergarten. Each of the first four days, he had fiercely squeezed the second-year teacher with the sparkly eyes as he left at noon. He transformed into a dinner table raconteur, recounting passages from the Vincent Van Gogh book she read at mat time. Each afternoon he scribbled orange-yellow Sunglo stars onto a midnight blue sky with an artistic fury evocative of Vincent, pressing the Crayolas down to flaky wax nubs in a four-hour homage to *Starry Night*. One morning, he rolled it up in his backpack. "Teacher can hang in it next to her desk -- by the other *Starry Night*." It was still in the backpack when he came home the fifth day.

"This is not the first time this young man has run out of his class this week," the principal said, opening a file. Zan had a file. His sister had made it to middle school without a single visit to the principal's office, or a file. We were on new ground here, but about to get familiar with every principal in every school he would ever attend. Mutinous, he gave his head a shake, clearing the too-long blonde bangs from his eyes.

"I was trying to get back to Miss Hall," he shouted, snaking across the seat of the chair. He appealed to us, pointing at the principal. "*She* says I'm going to stay here until I say sorry for hitting the stranger, and I'm not! Strangers are not supposed to touch little kids."

"We do not hit adults ever," the principal admonished.

"What stranger?" New faces, I knew, gave him trouble.

"There was no stranger, a teacher's aide, a seasoned aide, asked him to join the other children for mat time -- twice -- and he shouted at her," the principal said, with emphasis.

"He doesn't recognize faces very well," I stumbled apologetically. An inability to recognize even familiar faces with ease can be a marker of Aspergers autism. It was one reason adrenaline coursed through him, fight or flight a cortisol flooded brain signaled, because that face is not familiar. And when you cannot read facial expressions, things become exponentially more difficult. But we had not learned the source of his distress yet.

"Each child gets a 30 minute art block, and he was the only child not finished --- who refused to finish." She leaned over the desk pointing at Zan, the kindergartner who would not yield. "And, she asked you a second time to put the macaroni down and join your classmates"

I thought of the long afternoons of *Starry Night*, the Tattooine Towers, 3-foot white paper fantasia. How frantic he grew when pulled from an unfinished project, unraveled really. No, a 30-minute art block might not suffice.

"He has been in a Montessori preschool, children choose the pace of their own projects, perhaps the new rules confuse...".

"Don't you say my sorries," he flashed, turning on me.

She raised an eyebrow as if to say, that child is trouble waiting to happen.

"And, he ran out of the classroom, compromising student safety," she said punctuating it.

"I was not done with my art project," he gritted out, narrowing his eyes at her as if she were particularly stupid. Her nostrils flared. "And, the stranger touched me, and then another stranger grabbed me on the playground!" He was incredulous, aggrieved.

Her eyes swept over me, dismissive. "Young man when an adult asks you to do something," she drew herself up to the full weight of principal authority in her chair against this child who would not yield,

Zan's eyes went charcoal, flat. He panted, drawing shallow breaths. He stretched his toes, pointing them toward the ground, tapping around to feel the floor. His eyes shifted, seeking an

exit. Flight it was. He was going to make a break for it. "I told you I couldn't stop, I hadn't finished you IMBECILE!" he shouted, roaring like a dragon.

He tumbled to the floor and fled, Terry stumbled out the door. I thought I might cry -- of embarrassment or confusion. The footfalls came to a stop and Zan's sobs echoed through the Lysol-swabbed halls, muffled into his dad's shirt. I wished I were right there too, pressed up against Terry's flannel chest. "She said I had to stay here until sorries. And I am not sorry and then, I could never be able to go home with you but just stay here forever and ever."

"No, no, Zan," Terry crooned, kissing his head. He appeared outside the door, Zan in his arm. "C'mon, let's go back, you can sit on my lap the whole time."

"No, I am *not* going back to *this* school, *she* might not let me come home. She said I could not leave until I said sorries. You said the rules are yell if strangers touch you and run away. As *fast* as you can. Those are the rules." Zan lived for rules, he was an enforcer who memorized them to the letter. It would take a while to convince him this was not always the case: at school strangers touch you and you do not run away.

Situational contextual rules did not compute.

Terry ducked his head into the office, "Hey, we're going to call it a day here, he's too far gone for this to be productive."

"We are *not* done here," the principal raised her voice, insistently. Terry's eyes narrowed, putting his paternal blinker on. He was adept at handling volatile people; church boards are volatile by nature -- throw together Jesus, money and church polity and the predictable result is mayhem. He hitched up his messenger bag, quite finished. "I think we all need to take a deep breath," he said.

"You can take a couple of days and think about it. He will learn the consequences, and apologize before he returns."

Zan stared straight ahead, his eyes glassy. He had retreated inside himself, there would be no words for a long while. But his art would tell the whole story. We would read him on the raw red sienna flakes, the inky scrawls of turbulence in his skyscapes. They should let autistic kids name crayons, they know the color of rage and confusion.

This was not Zan's first run in with a teacher he considered unreasonable. The previous summer a vacation Bible school teacher turned up at Terry's church office, recounting his

witchery and incantation, much to the terror of the other preschoolers. "That child is surely demonized, calling on the powers of hell and darkness," she had huffed.

Terry had shrugged, and brought him home. That afternoon I leapt from my chair as a thin voice keened, hissing on the sibilants, snakelike "Oh my prince, now you shall know the powers of hell and darkness." There stood Zan, his arms raised heavenward in front of the TV mirroring Maleficent, his head thrown back, roaring, transformed with his favorite villain into a dragon. Damn Disney. *Sleeping Beauty.* He cackled and howled, wild with demonic glee. I held my sides on the couch gasping with laughter. Sometimes, autism was just plain funny. And sometimes, it was just so emotionally exhausting you have to laugh, because you're tired of crying

Uncontrite, Zan confessed to scaring the bejesus out of his vacation Bible school classmates but the outcome delighted him: removal from the purview of the thin-lipped, tightly wound teacher. Parroting movie scripts is one way Aspergers children decode language scripting, by adopting a movie or TV script and pegging it to an emotional inventory. This catalog of memorized emotional scripts serves as a coping mechanism to communicate emotions.

While I was content to let the Bible school teacher rest smug in her conviction the devil has taken hold of Zan, I wasn't so sure about kindergarten. During his three-day suspension Zan cried out each night from troubled dreams, "I want to go home, go home!" As we held him, he clutched my robe, crying, "Don't leave me there, don't leave me." Over the weekend we drove him by the school, intending to stop and play on the playground to desensitize him from unwarranted fear. But it wasn't unreasonable to him.

"A child does everything for a reason," his psychologist would tell us a year later. "It makes sense to the child." This child was uncertain that we, the most powerful adults in his world, had the power to ensure he would return to our home each night and protect him throughout the duration he was in the school's care. Each time we drove by the school he panicked. We called the district superintendent, explained the misunderstanding, the disbanded classroom and his continued search for the other teacher.

Terry called the principal. Zan would not be returning. At age five he needed a fresh start. Alyssa thought it was funny.

"Seriously, who needs a fresh start at kindergarten?" She had a point.

But Zan enrolled in a new kindergarten across the street from his dad's church office. They walked up to school after powdered sugar donuts each morning. And each day, as he left school,

he hugged the smiling kindergarten teacher. Soon he was telling her about Vincent's ear. One morning he unfurled his own *Starry Night* from his backpack, and presented it to her to hang in the classroom, as she had no print of her own.

Chapter 7
Highway to Hell

There was a knck at the door one spring afternoon followed by an impatient second rap. Alexander did not look up from *Magic School Bus.* He had burrowed into the blue plaid couch cushions, and was sunk deeply into the spine as if trying to disappear into it. He said the weight of the cushions on his arms and legs made him feel better when he got home from school. He often did not move or speak for hours and seemed unusually frazzled from being jostled and barraged by the high voices ringing through the halls. We'd had his hearing tested when the teacher complained that he didn't listen, suggesting it was most likely ADD, attention deficit disorder. "He probably just needs to be medicated."

"The lights buzz so loud and the voices all sound like one big noise," he said, explaining that he couldn't pick her voice out from the other ambient noises.

"His hearing is perfect, no sign of hyperactivity either," the pretty Asian doctor said, peering into his ears with the otoscope. He flinched, blinking rapidly, mechanically, until she stepped away. She had not noticed. We had chosen her as Alexander was less skittish with young women, more apt to let her examine him although he had balked at taking off his tee shirt and refused to let her tap his knee for reflexes.

"Are you sure everything is okay? He melts down pretty fast, and he gets these stomach aches, and he doesn't seem to have any friends."

In truth, he had not been invited to one of his classmates' birthday parties this school year. It seemed that Alyssa had gone to a birthday party or sleepover nearly every weekend in first grade. Of the ten invitations we sent out, only a Montessori preschool pal, Margarita, had RSVP'd to his sixth birthday party. We settled for a play date with cake.

She shrugged. "First grade is a difficult adjustment year -- the longer day, the more structured academic coursework."

He was still was unresponsive when called upon. He was such a contrast to Alyssa who practically percolated on the way home from school, while he had retreated inside of himself further this first grade year.

I opened the door to find a man I did not recognize shaking a paper in my face. "Do you know what this is?" A dull red flush stained his cheeks and stale cigarette smoke emanated from him. I took a step back, feeling in my pocket for my cell phone. Just past the gnarled knuckles of the Joshua tree, I saw my neighbor across the street look up from planting begonias, startled at the force of his voice. He had a tarry brown mustache sticky with nicotine, his face stained a mustardy shade achieved by decades of smoking. Wearing a mushroom brown-gray shirt, he was dressed like a gas station attendant. But his short sleeve shirt was not pressed with creases nor emblazoned with the flying red horse patch of a gas jockey. He had a disheveled air and I started to close the door.

"Do you know what I found in the wastebasket at school?" His eyes were flinty.

"What school?" Was he a janitor at one of the children's schools? I looked over at the couch where Alexander was still buried in the sofa. What could that boy possibly have done now to provoke this stranger?

Last week the first-grade teacher he called Miss South-*worst,* instead of Southworth, had summoned us from work to once again indict our young repeat offender. "Do you know he actually told a classmate with leukemia she was going straight to hell?" That got our attention.

The teacher had told the class this little girl was very, very sick and asked the class to send cards to the hospital where the six year old was undergoing treatment. The day she returned, Alexander, determined not to waste a moment more, brandishing the Baptist evangelism techniques Sunday School had indoctrinated him with.

"You need to be saved *now*," he had told her with great gravity. "My Sunday School teacher says people who aren't will be separated from God forever. And that means H-E-L-L. We aren't supposed to say it because it's a swear."

I had instructed him not to swear when he pronounced "the queen mother of all bad words" in the post office, the f-bomb ricocheting off the metal mailboxes. He had pried the taboo word out of his fourth grade reading buddy, older readers assigned to help younger kids with difficult words. I was pretty sure these were not the words the school had in mind. His filter was not

great. He could not seem to apprehend that not all words work in all circumstances, with all people.

Now school officials were beginning to turn up at our doorstep. "Oh geez, what has he done now?" I asked, not really wanting to know. I was worn out from an afternoon at the San Mateo School District psychologist's office, visits that began after what Terry and I had come to call "the highway to hell" incident. We could laugh now, but had to fend off a bigot bent on tarring us with the brush of evangelical zealotry.

The school counselor had summoned us to a meeting with the principal and teacher. She noted Terry's occupation as minister on her case record form. "We sometimes see this in children from strict religious homes." She shook her head with an affectation of grave concern. "He definitely has behavioral issues."

"You've met him twice?" I asked.

She was on her guard. "I observed him in the classroom."

"He's easily agitated," the teacher added. She was a reading specialist and perturbed that Alexander had not learned to read. She cited the benefits of Ritalin for young boys on numerous occasions.

"It's quite obvious he is one *very* angry young man," the therapist said. She leveled a meaningful gaze at Terry, "Clearly, he's learned it somewhere."

The principal, a young mother who attended our church looked startled. Gentle to a fault he struggled to muster indignation when one of the children deserved a time out. Terry cast in the role of bellicose father? I winked at him, fighting down laughter. "Yep, Terry. You're angry, that must be it."

I had injured her pride and she rounded on me, flashing, "You *religious* people, you never think *you're* the problem." Terry looked stricken at her accusation. "He has some deeply situated anger issues, and in my experience that comes out of the home environment.

"We *religious* people? Just how are religious people different?"

I knew what she meant and calculated the cost of setting her straight. I sensed something was indeed wrong with Alexander. Might she conduct educational testing to discover the source of his anxiety? I doubted it, as a journalist I read people for a living. I was pretty certain she possessed neither the experience or perspective to look further than her own prejudices would allow. The reputation of this man was at stake and she possessed the power to dispatch Child

Protective Services to our door. I volleyed a parting shot, knowing this was on the record, that minutes and notes were taken and filed as a matter of record. If she rose to the bait, I could disarm her. "If you suspected we were angry Hindus or Jews or angry Muslims would you voice that?"

She looked confused, but she took the bait. "I meant those *born again* Christians."

"Well, you must be right on target, because we are definitely that." I knew what she meant but I had wanted to hear it, for the record.

She looked furious, but kept quiet. The principal looked pale. This was her first post at the brand new school. "Okay everybody, let's take it down a notch and reconvene." Terry said not a word until we left.

"Geez Pam, did you have to go right for the kill?"

"Wake up Terry. That woman was fired up to send CPS to investigate. She thinks you're hell-bent on beating righteousness into Alexander. To her, we're the religious right, the enemy."

We got off rather easy. CPS did not turn up at our door. She assigned Alexander to therapy one afternoon a week with district psychological services. Kate, the educational child psychologist assigned to his case, discovered he could not read faces, vocal inflections and other contextual conversational clues. She had not yet seen another case like his and believed it to be just one piece of the diagnostic puzzle. Each Tuesday she worked a flip chart of 26 cartoon facial expressions with him.

He pumped his fist with recognition at the wavy mouth line and raised eyebrows, and wide eyes. "Angry!" he called out.

"Worried Zan, that one is worried. How about his one?"

"Mad, really mad!" he called out, victorious at the one raised eyebrow and furrowed brow squiggly lines. Alexander was undaunted. "Give me another!"

"How about puzzled, do you see how it could be puzzled?" she coached.

I wondered how to explain away whatever it was Alexander had done now. Odd that no one from the school had called ahead.

"Him?" the man snorted. "I saw *her* throw away this honors certificate, in the wastebasket on her way out of the awards assembly." The man thrust the paper at me, awaiting some vindication. I smoothed out the crumpled paper on the hall table. *Abbott Middle School honors awarded this day to Alyssa Fisher*, the certificate was signed by the principal.

"She seems like one troubled girl." He drew himself up. "*I* retrieved it."

"What awards assembly?"

"You're that kind of parent. You don't know how lucky you are, half of these middle school kids are trying drugs, drinking. You don't even know your kid is getting honored." He shook his head, taking in the spindly geraniums trailing flakes of flamingo pink leaves across the porch I had not swept that morning and the sad unkempt evergreens of the parsonage. I felt the weight of his judgment.

Where had I been as she crossed the stage to pick up her the award? With Terry and Alexander at the psychologist's office. That day we had learned of a Stanford researcher performing studies with other children who also could not distinguish facial expressions and had difficulty recognizing faces. "Face blind" his psychologist had called it.

The guy in front of me shifted, surmising I was not about to invite him in. "I've been teaching 30 years and I know the signs of these troubled kids," he began officiously.

Alyssa? This dutiful big sister who read to Zan as he struggled to sound out the words, letters that only looked to him like shapes: triangles, mountains and sticks with circles. Last weekend this 13-year-old skipped a slumber party rather than entrust her little brother to a babysitter, because he had been waking up with night terrors and she did not want to leave him with a sitter.

"Kids from troubled and broken homes get eaten up at high school. Is *Mister* Fisher at home?"

Anger, righteous anger, had been building at this school district for two years. They had shuffled Alexander to three kindergartens in three weeks, tagged his confounding condition "developmental delay," a term that encompassed Downs Syndrome, retardation. A tag dooming him to special ed, the short bus, a life on the margins of society. A tag that I was certain didn't fit. And now this stranger on my doorstep, who wasn't even the teacher of one of my children, tagging my daughter as troubled, and Terry and me as negligent.

"I'm that kind of parent am *I*? What kind?" my voice rose. "The kind who has been sitting in an office watching my six year old sort through flash cards of facial expressions trying to figure out what mad looks like." I advanced on him through the door and he stepped back, assessing the unhinged look on my face.

I wanted to yell. I wanted to laugh. And most of all I wanted to throw him out. This was what anger looks like.

"Alyssa is about as far from troubled as an eighth-grader can get, a 13-year-old who just got back from spring break service project; she camped in Mexicali to feed street children and play puppets with them. She has the lead in her school play." My eyes blazed. I was pretty sure I looked as deranged as he had a few moments ago. "And, she's up at junior high Bible study at her dad's church three blocks away if you'd like to tell *Mister* Fisher how troubled she is."

"Does the school or the district know you're here, on an uninvited home visit?" I advanced on him. A child of teachers, a grandchild of teachers, I knew this educational world of bureaucrats well. And I knew this guy was himself in trouble, had crossed a line.

He took a step back uncertain, as if he'd lost his footing, turning away as if to leave.

"I thought not. Well before you leave, you can rest assured I'm the kind of mom who carts her kids around to play practice, choir and youth group, *after* she makes sure the homework gets done, which is why she's an honor student, you ass."

Alexander's head popped up from over the couch. "Ass!" he crowed, jubilant. "Ohhh, you said a swear, I'm telling Da-ad."

I shot him a smile.

"Mom, you looked really mad."

"Yes, Zan you're right, *very* mad."

He was still whispering *ass* under his breath when Terry walked in. He laughed, silently, his shoulders shaking, eyebrow raised. *What?* he mouthed.

I shook my head. "Don't even ask right now."

"Do you think something might be going on with her?"

"She is the least of our worries." Terry brushed off the question, loading glasses into the dishwasher.

Alyssa had dismissed the teacher's home visit. "That guy is a nosy luh-ooser," she caroled, rolling her eyes. "Seriously, he came to the house?" She seemed impressed with herself, to have drawn a random teacher's concern. "And Liana and Jennifer got the real certificates worth

having for straight 4.0. Believe me, a 3.5 isn't anything to get excited about in Silicon Valley." Her best friends were both children of dual-career Asian physician couples. Their parents had them enrolled in high school calculus classes at age 12, and tutored them for hours each week. Not exactly something that was likely to happen at our house. We had been so pleased she had chosen them when we moved to the San Mateo school district in her fourth grade year; they were quiet and studious, and their parents were as conservative about parties and boys as we were. But maybe the pressure of running with that pack and of playing second fiddle to Zan's increasingly frequent meltdowns was getting to her.

I had come to think of her as predictable, unshakable. She ran like clockwork. On time for everything she grew a little frantic if we didn't drop her off a bit early for extra-curriculars. She worked ahead on homework assignments because she hated to get a problem wrong and wanted to be assured of extra time to sort it out. It had seemed normal to me, exactly as I remembered myself at that age: anxious to do everything just so, desperately unhappy with an A- or B+ or not winning the solo parts in choir or lead in the musicals. But it had all spun out of control for me when I was just about her age.

In my ninth grade year I began blacking out from anxiety during opera competitions, murmuring the tessitura my coach had taught me over and over, panicked I'd forget. Each time I sang, the anticipation of another anxiety attack set my heart beating lopsidedly, as if there were a bird fluttering against my rib cage, trying to escape. I too had had a younger sibling with a learning disability, and I felt double the pressure to perform where she could not. In a three generation teacher's household educational performance counted, for a lot. The blackouts began the year my little sister was hospitalized. By my sophomore year in high school, I weighed in at 88 pounds.

A bookish solitary child I cast a bubble of quiet, a perimeter around myself. I sealed out the supernova of my brightly beautiful, neurological tangle of a sister colliding spectacularly with our stepfather. My childhood home was a place of combat training where I learned to tune out exploding shells of a frustrated child and tightly stretched mother.

I loved my sister fiercely, yet the things that came naturally to me: academics, a loving home and professional growth have continued to remain beyond her grasp. She dropped out of high school at age 17, and like our mother became a mother at age 18. She divorced three times. The

difference between the two of us, born of the same teen parents and raised in the same home environment, is all in the neurological wiring. She, like my son, is not neurotypical.

"Is she really the least of our worries?" It seemed small, but recently she had tidied up her room, usually carpet bombed in tulle, Mary Kate and Ashley videos, *Baby Sitter's Club* paperbacks, nail polish bottles, CDs. I missed the bright chaos of that frothy girly magpie nest.

Terry snorted. "Please. This is Alyssa we're talking about. She is so diligent. She tossed the award certificate because it was just photocopied, didn't you hear her?"

Terry could usually read her. They were two peas in a pod, pragmatic and no-nonsense. But I was uncertain. She had begged us to let her apply to a Christian school her church friends went to. She said she didn't want to deal with the drugs and alcohol and party scene that was already emerging in middle school. Terry was all in; I was reticent. I wanted to see her land at a great University of California, Berkeley or UCSB, not a provincial school with chapel and dress codes. She was already pretty sheltered as a pastor's daughter. Would she be able to hold her own at a major university campus if she didn't do public high school? I did not want her world to narrow, her vocabulary to shrink to religious platitudes, but in the face of their shared determination, I had caved against my better judgment. They were always so in sync.

"I think I should take her to Paris with me on my 40th birthday trip." I was going in late March to visit our French cousins. And, she had been taking French, while my vocabulary was limited to the kitchen curses the grandmothers had exchanged.

"What?" Terry stopped loading the dishwasher.

"It will be a great graduation from middle-school gift and besides, she can meet her cousin Elsa, who is also thirteen." We would have nine days to figure out a foreign country, navigate DeGaulle and the Metro, the franc, and one another.

I would have nine days to broaden her world from beyond the boxes of honors student, sister and daughter. A box tagged troubled, or dutiful or diligent. I wanted her to be free to write her own tag. We left three weeks later.

Chapter 8 Paris

La Bonne Femme

As soon as the wheels were up the Air France flight attendant bent her sleek chignon to offer a flute of champagne. The faintest whiff of rose and jasmine, *Joy* by Jean Patou I thought, rose from her Hermes scarf, a jaunty dash of orange and blue against the pencil skirt blue suit. She clipped up and down the aisle in black calfskin pumps 3-inches high. This must have been what flying was like back in the days of white glove trans-continental table service. "Non?" she said to Alyssa, who looked all of 12. I laughed and shrugged the Gallic shrug of my grandmother.

"Really?" My daughter's eyes widened.

"It's France, Alyssa. All children are allowed a sip on occasion. And this is an occasion."

I had booked this trip to Paris to inoculate her with arts and culture, fashion, and champagne against evangelical provincialism. I had winced at the modesty code for girls at her new high school, where immodest dress earned detention and insinuation was woven between its midriff, bodice and hemline directives that the budding sexuality of adolescent girls was responsible for inflaming the lust of teen boys. The code instilled in young women that the best way to ward off unwelcome advances was chaste dress.

My daughter was modest to a fault, donning a tee shirt over her simple Speedo tank, a customary at the summer church camp she had attended since third grade. This was not a custom at the Presbyterian church camp I'd gone to; in fact my girl pack sported the tiniest string bikinis our mothers would let us buy and gone streaking our last summer camp in eighth grade. That spring break she could not be persuaded to jettison the tee shirt ballooning around her at the San Diego beach resort pool. I hoped she'd grow out of her Amish phase, relish her body.

I struggled with the toxicity of oughts and shoulds impressed upon her by our faith culture, too often separatist, us against the world. Withdrawing from secular youth culture and plunging ever deeper into evangelical culture seemed a sure-fire way to stunt flourishing womanhood.

My vision of the good woman, *la belle femme*, didn't always mesh with the church's vision. Providentially raised out-culture from the colonial legacy of the austere Puritans, my French

family was unburdened by American prudishness. My mother went off to design ads each morning, first at a downtown department store and later at an ad agency. French Grandmother was earthy and practical about the body, she thought a little décolleté was a good thing. I wanted my daughter to rejoice in sensuality as another expression of the feminine spirit, not taught to be intimidated or averse to her own sexuality. I saw vibrant faith, feminism and healthy sense of embodiment co-existing.

As a woman, it was a struggle to maintain my role as writer, lover and friend against the tidal pull of disability caregiving, mothering and clergy marriage. In her emergence into young womanhood, it was time for Alyssa to learn. And in the process of showing my daughter how to revel in femininity's essence and gravity, perhaps I would find it restored in myself. At my nod the attendant handed Alyssa champagne.

We were about to enter a world both foreign and familiar. Women on the streets of Paris would speak the tongue of my grandmothers, smile with the knowing sherry eyes of my beautiful olive-skinned mother.

"Unbelievable, Mom. Giving me alcohol to drink in public." She sipped self-consciously, making a show of wrinkling her nose as if she didn't really like the taste. She did. Our family ritually popped the cork on Christmas Eve and celebrations. My grandmother insisted there were fewer alcoholics in France, which I wasn't so sure of. Americans were not at all sensible about it. A sensible mother understood that prohibition only heightened the allure. By the time a child went off to college, presumably awareness of how much alcohol they could handle had sunk in. Gallic common sense.

"*Ferme la bouche*," I chuckled. "*Tai tois*."

"Nice, Mom, nice. Shut up?"

I had learned a smattering of French from my grandmother, who mothered me from the age of one. My two-week old sister and I moved into her home after my mother left our 19-year-old father. Mother's exotic Sophia Loren looks had landed a succession of promising suitors. First came a law student that all three of us came to love, but the judge, his father, forbid postponing law school to marry. Mother could not wait for him to finish law school. My grandfather had fallen gravely ill with emphysema and she was struggling to support us all.

Twenty years later at my grandmother's funeral, something felt torn and raw inside when I saw him again, the attorney in charge of her estate. In that moment I felt four years old again. I remembered sitting on his lap as he read to me, how good and glamorous my mother was in her halo of perfume and orange Tangee lipstick going out with him. Even though I was burying the woman I loved most in the world that day, it seemed that all would be well as waves of warmth and safety and sadness swamped me in his hug. Perhaps it felt like father-love, but I wasn't sure. I hadn't really known it. By age four, I had lost two father figures. I did blame my mother for that. And I was not ready to give a third one a shot, perhaps I never did. My heart was broken, not quite whole until I met Terry, kind and wise.

On the rebound, she married a hale-and-hearty coach after a summer courtship. I think my mother, who never attended college, was impressed by his education. Both of his parents were teachers with graduate degrees, my new step-grandmother was earning a PhD at age 50 at the University of Michigan. The Coach also had a bright 3-bedroom ranch in a new suburb. The ranch with a split-rail fence must have looked like the Promised Land to my divorced, 23-year-old mother. It seemed hardly fair to blame her for marrying him. Her own mother had dropped out of school in eighth grade, when my great-grandfather was killed in a coal mine, to support great grandma Meme, who did not speak English.

She had wanted to go to college, but her parents thought it was a waste of money on a woman who was just going to have babies, and suggested she take night art courses at the community college. So my mother got pregnant at prom and left home for Michigan State University triumphant, as an expectant 18-year-old bride. It had proved combustible. Married student housing, an infant, followed by another child, had simply done in the teen father with a full course load and teen mom struggling to manage a baby while pregnant. She returned home 18 months later with two babies.

My mother had dreamed of being an artist, but she would never attend college, or hold a passport. Her world had shrunk to the size of her womb and then the size of a childhood bedroom, with two cribs wedged against the walls. When one returns home as an adult, a childhood bedroom always seems a size too small, but she must have felt positively squeezed. And she could not have known how little room the new stepfather had in his heart for her two first-born daughters when his own two arrived.

Although the Coach adopted us, he did not extend his paternal support to our college educations or weddings, as he did to his own daughters who were not the target of his seething rage. Each time he lashed out at my little sister, my heart hardened. During our teen years we began to yearn for a father of our own. Grandmother gave me his last known address in Santa Barbara when I was sixteen years old. My letter, the first words I'd ever written to him, found him in Europe, where he'd been traveling for several months. It did not occur to me that people did that, simply went to Europe. Our family vacations were all drivable; the Coach would not fly. When I got my dad's first letter, posted from Salzburg, I determined then and there that I would be that kind of person. The kind of woman who simply went to Europe because she felt like it.

When I graduated from high school, I learned that the stepfather who had adopted me had not made provision for me to go to college. With a bitter smile, my mother suggested community college night school. It was the first time I realized that her thwarted ambitions had metastasized.

I had actually gone over to the community college and stood in line to register for some classes, because I did not know what else to do. I fled and called my dad in Santa Barbara who flew in to arrange to bring my sister and me back with him. It was the beginning of the end of my relationship with the Coach. My mother called me ungrateful for his charity, for providing us with a home.

The generational toxicity of this culture, a contagious impoverishment of spirit, terrified me and I fled it. This was the world of women I did not want my daughter to come in contact with.

It is hard to imagine that my mother and father were just four years older than Alyssa when they became parents, that my grandmother was Alyssa's age when she left eighth grade to begin supporting her family. I was the first woman in my family to earn a college degree. I wanted the world for my daughter, a wide world. In Paris I wanted to give her a slice of its pleasures. And perhaps reconsider the compliant caretaker role as the sister of a disabled bother that she slipped into, even as a very young woman.

I did not want her to surrender her life so easily into the service of others, but to claim her place in the world as she moved into womanhood.

After a decade of wandering the Caribbean, Hawaii, Florida Keys and even Eastern Europe, Terry and I had reverted to the family road trips of my childhood, limited to California beach resorts and mountains the last five years, not exactly a bad place to be stranded with a travel averse child. Within the last year Alexander had suffered severe stomach cramps of anxiety each time we took him to a restaurant, or any crowded public space.

The first Sunday at Terry's church in Menlo Park Zan's eyes rolled like a nervous horse as we were ushered into a long pew in the sanctuary of 1,200. When the massive pipe organ filled the room and shook the floor, he had reared and bolted. Instead of maturing, he seemed to grow more skittish with each year. While Terry was content to read and study at home with Alexander, Alyssa and I itched to go into the world. I had begun to take her with me to the theater on evenings when I critiqued a show she might enjoy, *Cabaret, Les Mis, Mamma Mia,* and she had grown interested in a career in the arts. While Terry and I still did date nights once a week, courtesy of Alyssa babysitting, it was growing impossible to go out together as a family. A week together abroad stretched before the two of us girls.

The reality was somewhat different. We were two hours into the 11-hour flight when my ears began ringing. I gasped for air gulping waves of Old Spice emanating from the soldier traveling home next to me. I fumbled in my bag for aspirin and blood pressure medicine but passed out. I came to and found Alyssa going toe to toe with the chic flight attendant wearing a Chanel lacquer red mouè of irritation. Either my old nemesis the panic attack was back after 25 years or I was having a heart attack. For the first time, I sincerely hoped I was just having a panic attack. What had I been thinking bringing a child 5,831 miles to a foreign country alone, a country whose language I did not speak, whose currency I could not figure out?

"Her hands are really cold, but she feels hot."

"Non, non. It is not hot," the attendant insisted. "Just 22 degrees celsius."

"Look," Alyssa set her jaw. "My mom needs a glass of water for her medicine and to lay down."

"C'est impossible. Full flight"

"Have they turned the oxygen down too low?" I ask. "I have read..."

"Non." she sliced the air emphatically. "They do not do this."

At that moment I began hurling into a paper bag and the soldier leapt out of his seat, nearly knocking over the flight attendant. She gave us a chuff and steered the soldier off to first class.

"Geez mom, way to go. Puking on Air France and pissing off a French stewardess. She was so ticked."

"Darling Lyssie, no one gets pissy like a Frenchwoman, period."

"You don't have to convince me, Mom. I've seen it often enough," she raised an eyebrow.

We laughed and I lay down, Alyssa plying me with sips of cold water as the cabin cooled. I dozed on and off to find her blueberry, almond-shaped eyes watching me, concerned. Throughout the night she laid her cheek on mine, checking my temperature as I had checked hers as a little girl. I had taught her these acts of kindness and care taking. But Terry had said the thing that attracted him most was my womanliness, could I teach her that? We woke up as the sun crept into the cabin over the Atlantic.

Alyssa proved to be an intrepid traveler, herding us through customs at de Gaulle. She batted her blueberry eyes at the custom's officer, pleading for him to put the first stamp in her passport. "Nine Rue de l'Arcade" I told the taxi driver, again and again. Yet he would not move until Alyssa laughed, "*Neuf*, Mom, *Neuf*." He drove us around the Arc de Triomphe when Alyssa said this was our first visit. She braved the irritation of Madame manning the hotel front desk. Every line of her compressed lips spelled out her displeasure that Americans had found her little 20 room economical $110 three star hotel on the Right Bank two blocks from Fauchon Chocolat and the Madeleine. She treated us our second moué of displeasure in 24 hours, apparently reserved exclusively for Americans abroad, and reluctantly handed over a key with a ceramic tag the size of a macaroon.

"Quelle heure est le petite déjeuner s'il vous plait?" Alyssa asked. Madame hotelier narrowed her eyes. She persisted.*"A notre chambre, à dix heures. Merci*."

"What was that about?"

"I told her to send up brioche and coffee to our room tomorrow morning at 10 a.m."

We threw our suitcases on the bed and leaned out the French doors to get a good look.

My grandmother had promised to bring me to France one day too when I was ten years old. She had been leaving for several weeks to visit the cousins in Paris and Lyon. Marie-France and

her brother Eric, the children of her mother's younger sister, came in those years often in July. She cooked them the food of her childhood: steak seared in a cast iron skillet dredged in peppercorns with steak frites and bitter coffee with fine powdery grounds lingering in the cup. She seemed like a different woman, her hands fluttered animatedly and her eyes grew bright, darting about like a busy wren as she tittered a stream of Lyonnaise French.

She returned from France a different woman too, smelling of Lanvin perfume and wearing a silk scarf cleverly knotted. She brought home Limoges china and redecorated her house that winter in a decidedly more stylish fashion. She had died before we could make a return trip together. At her funeral, I promised myself that one day I would make the trip and light a candle in Notre Dame in her memory. That day had come.

"It's my hair!" Alyssa said upon seeing *La Belle Jardiniere* in the Louvre. The guidebook tells us it is perhaps Raphael's finest Madonna and thematically linked to *Madonna of the Goldfinch*. Many were painted with the same rosy bronze hair that shot through my daughter's hair in an amber flare. It appeared one December night in a comet-like burst of warm gold. In my arms she had thrown back her head, crowed in triumph and then let out a small shriek revealing a shot of bright apricot flaming out of her head. Alyssa and I spent the day looking for women with that apricot flare, made a game of spotting Renaissance redheads in the Louvre, Titians and Botticellis, and Raphael too. We had found another Raphael Madonna, the *Blue Diadem,* a young mother watching her baby's face in sleep. She looked contented, simply mother delighting her baby. I had not been cut out for motherhood and it took me awhile to come to terms with it.

"See, we're curvy like the Venus de Milo," I laughed pointing to the goddess in the sculpture gallery. "My favorite is in Rome, Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus."*

"Maybe we'll go there next year," Alyssa offered expectantly.

"Right. How many 40th birthday trips do you think I get?"

"Well, did you think it would take this long to get here?"

No, I had thought it would take 30 years to make the trip Grandmother and I had planned.

I hoped Alyssa and I would journey to Rome to see Botticelli's goddess of love perched on the edge of the clamshell as if she might take flight. Her hip length hair trickles between her fingers, coppery tendrils curl around her torso undulating in the Mediterranean breeze, hair the shade of Alyssa's. The gods of the wind Zephyr blow over her and a daintily clad maiden offers covering to Venus, but it's clear she would rather stand naked on the cusp of her shell showered in rose blossoms. And I hoped my daughter would linger on the half shell for a while enjoying the rose petals.

I am drawn to return to Notre Dame over and over during our week. It helps that it is in the middle of the Seine and each time we cross from the Left Bank to the Right I arrange to pass by it. There is something of Grandmother in there, in the flickering novena prayer candles, in the elderly ladies in the blue and white polka dots dresses working rosary beads like the strand I found in her jewelry box one day. She was no longer Catholic, it had been my great grandmother's. Raised Presbyterian, averse to the cult of the Virgin, I had been taken aback. "You mean you pray each little bead to a woman, not God?"

"Yes, we pray to a woman. But she is the mother of God."

"Can she tell him what to do?"

"Well, I don't think exactly that."

I liked the idea of praying to a woman. I had often wondered why all spiritual heroes were men: Moses, Jesus, David, the apostles, the prophets.

"Some people think she hears a mother's prayer best, because she herself is a mother."

In the dark cavernous cathedral, built 1400 years ago, I felt the presence of my grandmother. *I miss you so much, I wish you could be here with us.*

But I am. I am.

I stood there with tears running down my face for the mother I had lost. Alyssa snuggled into my side. I kissed the coppery head.

"Are you sad because of your grandma?" Her eyes were wet too.

"No one ever loved me quite the way she did."

"I know how that feels," she said smiling. She kissed my wet cheek.

"Come, I want to light a candle for her." As I lit it I thanked her for teaching me to mother, to give of myself unreservedly and fully to this little girl who would soon be a woman. And I prayed Alyssa would not leave me until she too had stood on the cusp of womanhood, steeped in its fullness. That she would savor her moment in the rose petal shower.

"Watch over her Gram," I prayed, and blew a kiss into the flame dancing in Notre Dame.

Postcript to a Prayer

In Alyssa's sophomore year of college her boyfriend flew in from Boston for Thanksgiving. He was an art major and sculptor from the Berkshires, homeschooled and tie-dyed. He had never been away from his family for a holiday and was insistent that canned green beans swimming in canned mushroom soup topped with Dhurkees' onion bits were traditional. Alexander dubbed him the caterpillar for the bushy beard that snagged onion bits when he ate.

He returned the next summer for her 21st birthday. We had bought a $90 bottle of French pink champagne. Alyssa had picked it out "in memory of our France trip and to match my hair." The caterpillar downed his in one chug, bubbles trickling out the side of his mouth and into the beard. Terry toasted the young woman she had become and wiped his eyes. Her boyfriend offered a toast of agreement that she would make a fine mother of his children. Alyssa looked uncertain. I opened a second bottle of cheaper champagne and asked how would that fit in with her plan for graduate school? He had just graduated from college and wasn't sure that the extra cost of her graduate education would make sense for their family. He would like to have his children while they are yet young. He told us he was thinking perhaps four.

My head snapped up alert, my eyes hard and birdlike. I suggested he find a job first. The would-be fiancé proclaimed he fully supported Alyssa's career as he intended to stay home with their four children and sculpt. Terry suggested such a serious discussion be tabled in favor of lighting the birthday cake. Yes, yes, let's not spoil the dinner, Terry and I had chorused. The would-be fiancé looked wounded, noting that most girls would consider it an honor to be

proposed to by him on their 21st birthday. He was, after all, in a popular campus band that might go out on tour. He never returned.

The flickering flame of my prayer in Notre Dame had been answered. Perhaps by a mother who heard a mother's prayer best. Alyssa decided to linger on the half shell. She made it to graduate school. And the experience of caring for a disabled brother had not tipped her into the waters of marriage or motherhood before her own moment in the shower of rose petals was over.

Chapter 9
Diagnosis

After the Dot-Com bust, a celebrity pastor arrived at our Stanford neighborhood church fresh on the heels of his blockbuster self-help inspirational book, laced with pop psych platitudes and corporate jargon. The church elder board was in need of a cheering up, about $20 million in annual giving had evaporated with the bust. Perhaps they thought the hale and hearty brand of bucking up Celebrity Pastor pedaled would do the trick.

He fancied himself a Silicon Valley player; he did “face time” with parishioners and “took meetings.” He wanted his staff "to get on board" and “dialed in.” Groomed in a mega-church the size of a small town, Celebrity Pastor brandished industrial rust-belt management techniques and set about freshening the talent pool.

Terry's boss, an old friend, assured us we were under the radar on this. I hoped so, Alyssa’s senior prom and graduation were yet 10 months off. The guys had always wanted to work together, and Terry had declined a job that paid $20,000 more six years earlier to do it. But while Terry was at a conference, the old friend soberly fixed his eyes on me one Sunday from the pulpit announcing in a pained voice that he was "going to have to make some choices this week that, frankly, I never saw coming." His brown beagle eyes drooped, pooling. My eyes narrowed, I wasn’t buying it. I had seen it coming.

It had not exactly been a great week. The neuropsych at Stanford had spent just a few minutes with Alexander to arrive at his diagnosis. "I don't like you," Zan had announced, as if discovering something interesting.

The psych studied Alexander's flat eyes, the folded arms, then Terry's face.

"I don’t like you a bit and I am leaving now." Alexander jumped off the couch.

The psych looked nonplussed, and continued to write. "I'm finished with him, but would Mom and Dad stay a minute?" Terry led Alexander out to the waiting room and returned.

"Pretty clear case of ASD, Autism Spectrum Disorder."

"But you haven't reviewed his school psychology test file," I protested.

"I don't need to spend any more time with him. The flat affect eyes, lack of variation in vocal tone, inability to read facial expressions and social cues. We see hundreds of children just like him here."

"Is it genetic or a disease?"

"Unclear. Recent studies have examined a genetic variation that may trigger autism when exposed to a virus, could be auto-immune function." He continued to make notes, tilting his head to gauge our reactions. "Is he hypersensitive to stimuli -- sounds, smells, touch?"

We nodded. He ate only three foods: ramen, macaroni and cheese and plain spaghetti. The lunchroom smells made him sick. He ate in a classroom alone at school. He jumped when touched unexpectedly.

"Sounds and sensations are magnified many times to him. A jostle in a hallway feels like a shove. The hum of a fluorescent light is like an electric razor buzzing."

That must be why he covered his ears when the organ played at church, hugged himself tightly in the mall, stiffly dodging people as if caught up in a game of dodgeball. "What's causing the night terrors? He seems to be awake, his eyes are open, he's talking but he is still hallucinating, or dreaming."

He nodded, shrugged. "Sleep disturbances are common in neurological disorders."

"Any idea why his neck ticks?" I asked. It wagged like a tightly wound metronome, mostly when he was anxious.

"It takes these children a lot of psychological guarding and effort to navigate a day at school. The tic is an anxiety response from sensory overload. He's doing all he can to manage the stimuli of a very chaotic environment."

I thought of my mother who blinked like a high-speed camera shutter shooting a race. I thought of my sister's rages, night terrors and sleepwalking.

Terry had set his jaw into a hard line. Belligerent. He looked belligerent. "We don't know anything for sure, yet."

The psych lifted an eyebrow, a furry comma crowning his tortoiseshell glasses. "Why do you say so?"

"He's only nine. He's just having a rough time in school right now."

He was. He was two years behind in math and four years ahead in reading and writing. He did not have a single friend. He could not ride a bike, nor a razor scooter. He was face blind, could not seem to read the expressions of real people, although he was skilled at reading the emotions of cartoon characters and anime.

"Alexander will always have a rough time in large environments. He can't read faces or vocal inflections." The doctor sat back and watched Terry fixedly, while I mentally sifted through images of hand flapping, spinning children squawking. That wasn't Zan. I pushed the idea away, and felt a surge of relief. This guy hadn't even seen Zan's IQ profile or the WAIS or Woodcock Johnson tests the school had sent over with his referral. Maybe Terry was right.

"Are you certain?" I asked.

The psych nodded and opened the test file we had brought. He scanned the tests, jotted notes. He scribbled two names down and handed them to me. "Some parents have reported success with behavioral therapy, but Alexander is a very late Aspergers diagnosis. Most of those children begin autism intervention as preschoolers."

"Are there many?" I had not known anyone with Aspergers.

"Depends on the region, there are autism clusters in some parts of the country. Silicon Valley seems to have a disproportionate number of cases, but that's good for you. Many specialists practice here." He looked up now and again to study Terry, making notes.

Silently, I willed him to help me ask the right questions. I faltered. I could not breathe.

Terry continued to watch bikers on the campus trail out the window.

I pulled out my journalist's notepad, rubbing the familiar slim cardboard cover, willing it to put me on auto pilot, asking the dispassionate questions of a journalist.

"What interventions will be needed?"

"Many, and they are expensive, $7,000 to $25,000 a year depending on which ones your insurance covers. The Menlo Park school district is perhaps the most well-supported in the state and other than pockets of the East Coast, in the nation. You'll be able to get occupational therapy, adapted phys-ed, counseling." He handed me a list of four specialists. Terry did not

acknowledge the note, and continued to look out the window at the campus. I had one more question and I was not sure I wanted to learn the answer.

“Do any of these kids leave home?”

"Some do. Many go on to finish high school. Some even go to college. Few seem to drive, because of the sensory stimuli overload." He looked at Terry. "You’ll need family counseling. The odds aren’t in your favor. Although there aren't many statistics on high functioning autism families, only about one in seven marriages with an autistic child survives the diagnosis. And it will probably grow more difficult as he faces greater developmental challenges. There are many co-morbidities -- OCD and anxiety disorders are common."

"Will he ever live independently?" My stomach was sinking faster than on the Thunder Canyon roller coaster at Disneyland.

"This is ridiculous," Terry said abruptly. "We don't even know for sure what's going on with him. He is only in third grade. He's got his whole life ahead."

Had, I thought. Had.

"Once you've seen him a few times," Terry began.

"Mr. Fisher, I don't need to see him again. He needs other interventions. Alexander needs to see these therapists.” He held out the note again.

Terry did not take the note. He turned toward the door, went to collect Alexander. I took up the note.

"Do we tell Zan?"

"It's up to you when to do that." His eyes were warm, but I did not want his pity. "He's a very bright boy, even for Aspergers. And take heart, most of these children are exceptionally bright.”

The morning of the layoffs, Terry's paycheck had not turned up in our checking account. I held my breath all day, waiting for the call. By the end of the day nearly one-third of the staff had been summoned to HR, 40 were laid off. But he was not. At the end of the day Terry was

called to a surreal version of *Survivor* council fire, a gathering for the staff left, those not voted off the island.

Later that night he opened his direct deposit paycheck receipt to find a live check. It was his final paycheck flagged pink. Old friend must have changed his mind at the last minute, when I played the autism card after church.

"You called it babe," he said, shaking his head. He held me tight. He did not let go. I felt his cheek, warm and wet and I did not let go either. I did not know if the tears were for the evidence of his friend's betrayal in a pink slip or Alexander's autism, or relief that I had done what he most certainly would not have. I was simply glad his arms were still around me, his tears running with mine.

Alexander's autism had saved the day, saved his dad's job for the meantime, saved his sister's senior year of high school. I hoped it would not cost us our marriage.

Chapter 10
Pajaro Dunes

I slipped out of the office into the clear California sunshine cut with the scent of the peeling eucalyptus trees at the edge of campus. After nearly a decade in Menlo Park, I still found the lemon-jello quality of morning light startling. It was an unseasonably hot March day and a tangle of shirtless undergrads with painted chests stood knee deep in the fountain tossing a frisbee. I spotted my best friend's leonine mane of hair and 5'10 frame. The image of this Amazonian woman rose from the fountain spray like the lusty flaxen-haired Norse valkyrie Freyja, goddess of fecundity, sexuality and war.

"Bad-ass scenery," Liz whooped across the fountain, grinning appreciatively.

I returned a small tight nervous smile, looking around to see if any of the hawks were watching from the Hoover Tower on the Stanford University campus where I worked. I had been hired to edit a book manuscript after the newspaper I worked for was sold.

An air of pervasive paranoia hung over the tumescent tower, like smog. I told her it was teeming with Secret Service staffers ushering ancient uniformed hawks out of black limousines. Perhaps they were peering down at us as if we were prey, unseen through the tinted glass, in their Republican red ties and pressed Brooks Brothers suits. The Republicans could run a covert operation out of the Hoover. I considered the possibility that paranoia was contagious.

"Perhaps they are!" she erupted, tossing her hair and laughing. It felt good to laugh at lunch at a sun-showered cafe table, away from the high security cameras, the suits and sunglasses brigade. I told her about my first week in the Hoover, populated by the "paperwhites," those who were once relied upon by presidents and White House cabinets. Men with papery-thin skin yellowing like dried up narcissus petals stretched across dentured skeletal jaws. All day they milled about the Hoover's halls in search of their former significance, adrift in a geopolitical landscape they did not understand.

"Sounds seriously screwed up," Liz said, heaping jalapeños on her sub sandwich. "What's the book you're editing about?"

"Big guns and the Red Menace."

She erupted in laughter. "Not exactly cultural criticism."

My regular job as an arts and culture writer evaporated with the sale of the San Francisco Examiner. My 20-something newsroom colleagues had scattered to toss colored powder at one another in India or cavort on a moonlit Thai beach at the New Moon Festival. With a daughter headed to college in Boston the next fall and a son in autism therapy, I was stuck in the Hoover for the summer, besieged by the rhetoric of war both at work and home. Laughing in the company of this good woman was the only thing that got me through days in the airless tower and grim therapy appointments.

Alexander's speech therapists and occupational therapists exhorted us to "attack the neurological cause of Asperger's behaviorally." We could "combat it" with auditory discrimination therapy, sensory integration therapy, muscle tone and vestibular therapy. I was drained by the rhetoric of aggression. Alexander had begun entry into the world of men, of competitive sports and male coaches. I had seven sisters and this world of men was foreign to me. Unexpected touch and loud noises startled him, a startle infancy reflex that disappeared when neural pathways pruned themselves in the second year of life. Alexander's neural pathways were atypical. When the ruddy, bull-necked coach clapped him on the shoulder and pressed him against the brick wall to talk, he panicked and tried to make a break for it. "He was shouting, Mom, he grabbed me and held me against the wall. I though he was going to hit me."

Terry and I emailed the principal and the coach citing the disability accommodations for autistic tactile defensiveness, a prohibition on touching autistic students. The next week was worse. Alexander came home from phys-ed and spent the afternoon throwing up. When he emerged from the bathroom drained, his legs shaking, he told me to stop talking to his teachers. "The coach made us run the quarter mile today, and all of the kids finished before I was halfway around the track. My legs were so wobbly I kept falling."

His new physician at Stanford saw him right away. “It's hard to believe they’ve missed this over the years, but it’s obvious he has cerebral palsy, the classic swing-legged gait that interferes with running." An image of a young adult with CP at church came to mind: he was in a wheelchair, cared for by an elderly widowed mother. He struggled to speak and feed himself.

The doctor read my confusion. “Alexander's is a very mild case. How early was he born, couple of weeks?”

“No, about seven weeks.” The doctor looked surprised. “Well, I was bedridden the last trimester and in early labor, so surfactant developed his lungs early.”

He nodded. “That would explain, many preemies aren’t so lucky.” Oxygen deprivation caused cerebral palsy at birth, often when premature lungs struggled to oxygenate the body, damaging the muscles. The weaknesses in his limbs had produced a swing gait that flung his body from side to side, throwing him off balance when he ran.

"I was running as hard as I could but I kept falling, and the gym teacher sent all the other kids to sit in the bleachers." He drew a shuddering breath, his throat thick with tears. "Mom, it was humiliating. They were laughing, even when I scraped my shins and started bleeding."

"Did you finish?" I asked. "It is important to finish."

"You don't understand anything," he yelled. "They called me pansy-ass and girly man." The coach, he said, had not stopped them. "I just can't run like other kids. The other boys yelled 'get your lazy butt going.' I was trying to pump my legs so hard but they were so heavy."

Terry and had I disagreed about whether or not to discuss the diagnosis with Alexander. We considered whether to spare him the knowledge of yet one more physical disability. I was in favor of explaining to him that he might self-advocate and avoid injury. Terry had been Alexander’s age in the 1950s when boys had crew cuts and just toughed things out. The men in his family called him "Butch," because apparently, his own name wasn't manly enough to suit them.

I emailed the principal and the coach to set up a meeting. I was pissed. This teacher had made my sport of him, turned my son into an object of ridicule to make an example of laggards, to toughen him up. It was fourth grade, the time they began making young men out of them. This physical education teacher had studied exercise physiology, hadn’t he seen the child’s struggle,

the obvious signs of cerebral palsy? Terry sighed. "This is only going to make things worse, you do not understand coaches."

He was right. Raised by a blustery coach, I still do not understand them. I winced from the post-game fury of a championship loss, the shouting and cursing, the dents in the living room drywall -- a kind of aggression I never hoped to understand. But I got it enough to know that without this man by my side I would not be taken seriously. I leaned into my soft-spoken husband, who held me and agreed to go up to the school to see what might be done.

The coach stopped short of apologizing, but managed to voice his concern about injury liability: he could not be held responsible for the child's safety in mainstream phys-ed. The disability team prescribed adapted p.e. for the disabled. Terry, who lived for baseball and rarely missed opening day had dreamed of coaching T-ball and Little League, turned ashen.

The first morning in the Hoover, the halls teemed with old hawks put out to pasture, former Secretaries of Defense, Allied NATO commanders, five star generals. They favored big guns and big sticks. How they longed for their old nemesis, the Red Menace. They grew up in an era of John Wayne, when manliness equaled firepower.

Liz caught my attention my first semester at seminary. After the sale of the newspaper, I had begun taking classes. It helped to take my mind off of my diminishing identity, without office or title, as stressed out autism caregiver. One class Liz baited the boys dressed like Jehovah's Witnesses on a house call, the clean-cut Baptists who had strayed into our seminary. The visiting professor from UCLA film school grinned as the white short sleeve shirt crowd in ties leaned earnestly in unison to set this woman straight on women's cultural roles, their complementarian dogma firmly in place.

"Oh man, just watch this," my husband whispered with relish. "Pay attention to her, she's usually the smartest person in the room." His eyes gleamed with admiration.

My Freyja friend rising from the Stanford fountain was at odds in a place devoted to studies of War, Revolution and Peace and the military industrial complex. Rather, she did relief work in Guatemalan and Ethiopian AIDs orphanages. She embodied the Nordic goddess, fierce protector of families and children. I was learning ferocity from her in demanding humane and equitable treatment of Alexander. I became downright comfortable with it.

Alexander returned home jubilant from his first adapted phys-ed outing roller skating with a square, closely-cropped woman named Jody. The next session included ice-skating to develop core trunk strength and balance. All spring Terry tried to convince Alexander to sign up for basketball team or Little League.

On the days I was not holed up in the Hoover, Liz and I often wrote at her beach house in the Pajaro Dunes. One day, as I finished editing the manuscript chapter I realized I was finished, for good. I mailed in the manuscript and my keys. I did not return.

Chapter 14 San Francisco Bay
One Way Ticket to the Magic Kingdom

It might have been an omen. Lightning struck our plane shortly after takeoff for Orlando, the seats creaked and swayed.

“Told you it was a mistake to leave California,” Alexander said.

I ignored him. He’d been trouble since he woke up, refusing to pack his suitcase or to get in the van for SFO. Always a skittish flyer, he’d pitched a fit when his backpack set off security lights and alarms. He boiled as they spread the contents of his backpack on the floor and confiscated his scissors and stapler. A second TSA guard had been waved over. She scrutinized our tickets, “SFO to MCO, no return?"

I shook my head, "Our family was transferred, cross-country."

"Step aside for additional screening, sir."

His pupils dilated, he backed away breathing hard, and I had closed in on him and pasted on chirpy mom face, moving him next to Alyssa. Her eyes had met mine in silent asset and she began cooing in a high stagey preschool teacher voice, as if talking to a small or simple child. "It's okay Zan, they just didn't know about your paper sculpture. But we don't bring our art supplies on planes? Okay, brother?"

Now he was in on the game, the cunning spark in his eye as it met Alyssa's telltale. He widened his eyes and nodded, mutely. In the one year since Alexander was diagnosed they had figured out how to extricate him from the tight spots he seemed to wedge himself into. The last time we had flown he had packed a stapler and kiddie scissors into his crayon box, sending the TSA staff at the scanner into a tailspin when his backpack passed through.

"He's just autistic. You startled him. "But it would be best not to touch him."

She waved us through warily.

"You know, I thought about telling that taser-toting rent-a-cop to step away from the backpack, I've got a stapler bomb in there," he said to Alyssa in line at the gate. "Then he couldn't have let us on the plane, could they?"

"Brotherr-r." He leaned into her sideways hug, practically purring. At 18 and 11 they were nearly the same height. She had donned the role of Big Sister with determined devotion from the day he came home from the hospital, dripping wires from his respiratory monitor. Unfazed, she had rocked him, as he flashed and blinked and glowed bluely. I had been reticent to take the tiny preemie out of the hospital, unsure of my ability to keep him alive, tethered to so many devices. Even at age seven, a sphere of quiet meditative calm emanated from her as she crooned to Zan and it enveloped me as well as we shuttled to and from the hospital.

On one visit, when he was still hooked up to a light belt for jaundice, a nurse had jabbed him ineptly and repeatedly in the heel to check bilirubin levels. Alyssa had gone white at his shrieks of pain and when she could stand it no longer shouted, "That's enough. You're hurting my brother!" Nothing seemed to diminish him in her eyes, not the tics, unpredictable panic attacks or anime obsessions. For 11 years she had remained in thrall to this little brother. And in three weeks she was to leave him and head to Boston for four years. At that moment, Alyssa's departure from his life had not registered on him. He was too pissed about leaving Menlo Park.

The armrests rattled as lightning zapped us a second time.

“I think She’s trying to tell us something.”

“Who?”

“God.”

In retrospect I wondered often if he had been right. I believed in a benevolent God, the idea that all things work together for good for the one who loves God. Recently, there hadn't been much good. Alexander had been diagnosed with autism the previous year, and we were leaving California, our parents and six brothers and sisters, the place we'd raised our children. Orlando met us with plagues of biblical proportions. Her sticky swollen skies rained natural disasters, snakes, frogs and tongues of fire.

"It is hot as hell here," Zan smirked as the airport doors whooshed open at MCO, vindicated. "Good thing you don't have metapause." The temperature was 106 degrees.

Orlando revealed her true colors on Friday the 13th when 150-mile per hour hurricane Charley made landfall in Florida. Masts snapped and yachts drifted, ripped from their moorings. Anderson Cooper swayed in the gust as patio furniture and motel signs blew by. We hunkered down at the residence hotel drinking blue drinks. Alyssa and I stole into the courtyard to feel the 100 mph winds, security bustled down the corridor, walkie-talkie crackling. It was less amusing two hurricanes and one month later.

We took Alyssa to college in Boston and all four of us cried on the chapel porch as we hugged goodbye; we cried in Logan Airport eating clam chowder that evening. That night at the residence hotel I opened the closet where her empty hangers swung and found Alexander asleep, his cheek tear-stained, his head buried in the scent of Alyssa's pillow.

The skies of Orlando keened along with us. A Category 3 hurricane, followed by a Category 4 hurricane lashed Orlando over the next 40 days. Twice we approached the close of escrow on our new house, twice the bank ordered another post-hurricane inspection. Alexander took this as a sign that deliverance was imminent.

"Look, we just pack our suitcases and fly back." He spread his hands, matter-of-factly, eager to shake the dust of this place from our feet. There was probably an element of magical thinking: if he returned to Menlo Park, all things would revert to Normal. He would return to his old school and church, and Alyssa would materialize in our old house. "I am so over the creepy Christians at this school," he said, rolling his eyes.

Each morning the headmaster at his private school stood at the front door and eyeballed him, noting the length of his hair, the color of his belt. We had been dismayed we could not send him to public high school, it was rated "ineffective" by the state. You knew a school system was in trouble when the state of Florida rated it an F.

"Well, you cain't jess expect to send yo' children to public skewls," the wife of our new senior pastor admonished. She had turned up at our welcome lunch at the airport TGI Fridays sporting a black moiré taffeta cocktail dress blinged out with a rhinestone pin and matching earrings. Her Elvira-black teased mane and kabuki doll pallor was downright gothic.

“Idn’t she sumpin." Her husband shook his head appreciatively as she tottered in on stilettos Barbie would die for. She did not look like a low-maintenance kind of woman.

A former Miss Florida, she swore by the Atkins diet to keep her figure, and ate steak religiously once a day.

An adherent of “Name it and claim it!” prosperity doctrine, she bought a 5 carat princess cut cubic zirconia, fixed on making a diamond materialize out of sheer force of will, admiring the flash of it under the stage lights as she placed a steadying hand on her husband’s shoulder as he knelt on the platform, arms raised and eyes squinched tight, squealing “Jeee-sus. Juuhh-eezus! Oh heeal us! Huh-eeel” as Miss Florida moaned small sighs into her lapel mike, “Oh yes, Luh-ord. Yes!” Sometimes she’d give a little shiver for effect. Together they cut a telegenic picture of Florida evangelicalism.

The kids had been to Disneyworld once, but had never seen anything like it and were frankly dumbstruck from the first Sunday when a flag team processed up the aisle waving banners. They kept it together until a woman shaking a ribbon wand and tambourines lit out barefoot up the aisle after them. Their bodies shook with repressed laughter, Zan’s leaking out in snorts and gasps. He jabbed me with an elbow and whispered out of the side of his mouth, “Are you getting this -- seriously? This place looks like a freakin' cult."

Disoriented, Terry blinked like a perch thrown on a dock.

"Babe, I have to get him outta' here," I apologized, and hustled out, leaving him alone on the front row.

But Alexander saw the world in black and white. "These people are whacked out. If any of these loony tunes tries to lay healing hands on me I swear I'll report you guys to child protective services, and they'll *have* to return me to California." He believed that somewhere there was some being with the power to right this situation that had gone terribly awry. It took me exactly 12 weeks to figure out it was up to me.

Years later the magnitude of the lunacy we had fallen into was made clear. The pastoral pair eventually got their 15 minutes of network fame when they turned up on CNN processing into court with a diminutive, doe-eyed girl. The FBI wanted to know why a Muslim teen was spirited across state lines, landing in the couple's suburban Orlando home. Bands of prayer warriors with teased hair unleashed a wave of hissing sibilants and authentically Aramaic

sounding words over them as they entered the courthouse and national network news cameras rolled. High drama Dixie style. The sheriff of Orange County, Buddy, would not be persuaded to return the muslim teen to Ohio, in the off chance that the mosque had indeed ordered a mercy killing when the teen had committed to Christianity, as Rifqa Barry feared. This was Methodism in the South. And as Alexander pointed out, we had traveled into the eye of the hurricane, landing ourselves right in the thick of it.

If a peoples' collective belief system is the product of geography, it makes a certain anthropological sense that a magicaboola brew of religion would flourish in Orlando, which draws 37 million pilgrims annually to a mecca of magical thinking, where, "Here you leave today, and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow, and fantasy." The very horizon is delineated by the spires of the Magic Kingdom, the largest employer in town. So, bippity-bobbity-boo Pentecostalism had come to pass as true religion and delusions of grandeur and magical thinking seemed prophetic, visionary. We were frozen chosen Presbyterian, foreigners in a strange land.

Long before the spell was broken we harbored illusions that we might make a home nestled in an orange grove in Belle Isle and breathed a sigh of relief when we signed the deed on the house, conjuring January days by the palm-fringed pool. The afternoon we turned the key on our new home we were driven back by the choking stench. My eyes watered as the sharp acrid odor of cat sprayed carpet drove us back outside.

I sucked on my inhaler as my windpipe swelled and hives blistered my eyelids shut. Terry spent days tearing out four rolls of carpet and pad, dousing and scrubbing the floors with acid; $7,000 and 2,400 square feet of new carpet later I entered our new home for the first time.

The next week the painter opened a closet door to find a nest of black snakes sliced with fluorescent purple. She fled leaving buckets of butter cream yellow paint. We should have followed suit.

The third hurricane of the season, Jeanne, was on the move as our moving van pulled up from Menlo Park. A neighbor jogged over to report a gator on the roadside, fleeing the rising waters. The sound of hammering echoed up and down the cul de sac as we unpacked. We stepped outside to check the weather when the sky darkened. The homes were boarded up with plywood, an eerie post-apocalyptic sight. The palm trees around the pool rattled like bones, the now-familiar whistle of 70 mph winds heralding the hurricane's approach. Feeling like hurricane

veterans we threw our patio furniture in the pool, a trick we had learned at the hotel to keep furniture from flying through the air.

“Do we duck and cover, stop drop and roll? Well, do you guys have *any* idea about this at *all*?” Zan asked. “Today they told us in Bible class how bad the Egyptians had it when Moses and God teamed up against them. What I want to know is what did we ever do to deserve Orlando?"

What indeed?

Familiar CNN flood studs blew about in their Northface slickers onscreen as the lights flickered. I filled the bathtubs with water in the event the pumping stations lost power and water was scarce.

"Umm, mom? There's an entire swimming pool of water out there."

I thought of the snakes and lizards and gators likely to crawl out of the lake on the other side of the orange grove and kept filling the bathtubs.

“Do you even, like, *have* a flashlight unpacked yet?”

The house went black and the throttle and rumble of big-ass ATVs thundered up and down the street in a chain reaction. Generators. When the hurricane cleared, our windows were plastered with frogs.

In November, it appeared the rash of plagues might be over and the most active hurricane season on record in 40 years was finally declared ended. And then one day I woke up struggling for breath and an asthma inhaler. Smoke belched and billowed from the 40 acre orange grove behind our house. The USDA had condemned the grove. We bought the house dreaming of orange blossoms perfuming the air in winter. Reality delivered blight, orange fungal spores blown in on the hurricanes.

Alexander took a look at the blackened smoldering stumps of our backyard orange grove, and brightened. “Frogs, floods, plagues and blight! Looks like we’ll be heading back to the Promised Land soon.”

“Either that or our first-born sons will die,” I shot back.

The next week I flew to Cincinnati and accepted a job.

Chapter 15 Time Shifting
Santa and the Time Space Continuum

The voice mail light on my phone was blinking when I returned to my office after the editorial meeting. "Mrs. Fisher, can you meet with us tomorrow after school? Alexander was caught wearing his cat ears again, no tail this time."

Alexander loved hats. He said they felt good on his head; he also loved Santa. Last year in sixth grade, he'd worn a Santa hat until Valentine's Day. He'd bought the cat ears last month for a Halloween costume, but I'd managed to dissuade him from wearing the tail. Although costume day at school had come and gone, he could not grasp why holiday attire lost its cache after the holiday. He simply did not care what month or season it was, which made some sense. There weren't really seasons where he had grown up, in California, and the months all look pretty much the same too. But he loved the legends and folk superstitions of jack-o-lanterns and trick-or-treating, hanging stockings and mistletoe. So I tried pegging the months to seasons, which seemed to be working.

As the hardwoods in our wooded hollow grew gold, then umber, he became fascinated by the seasonal shifts. At age 12, he had many questions about the texture of snow. He had simply never seen a snowfall.

He was beginning to remember that Halloween came about the time the leaves fell off in October, and we left the pumpkin gourds around for a few weeks up to Thanksgiving in November. "And then, December is snow, for Christmas, right?" he pressed.

After that things got foggy for him. He remembered Valentine's Day came the month before his birthday on St. Patrick's Day in March, but Easter was tough. He wasn't buying my explanation that Easter spun around the spring equinox, originally a lunar holiday celebrating the pagan goddess of fertility Eostre, "Huh, so that's what all the chocolate bunnies and jelly bean eggs are about? A moon goddess?"

"Well, why doesn't our calendar line up with the moon then? Why do we even need calendars?" he asked.

It was a good question, but I was not up to explaining the nuances of the Julian calendar, a feat which had troubled the ancient mathematicians for thousands of years. "I guess so farmers knew when to plant."

"Hmph," he snorted, twitching a blue strand of hair out of his eyes. Since leaving the Christian academy he had let his hair grow out to fit in with the artsy students at the School for Creative and Performing Arts and taken to wearing rock 'n roll tee-shirts his sister bought him. One day he pointed out a girl he admired with blue hair, begging me to try and match the shade. The sink had a bluish cast for a week.

"Okay, I'll work on the months but I am not wearing that dorky watch. Class bells tell us when to switch classrooms, so who needs to learn to read the hands of a clock? I mean, it's not like we don't have digital clocks. And, it's like handwriting," he gulped for breath a sure sign he was launching into a monologue. "I don't know why we spent a whole year on that either. No one will be writing in cursive by the time I'm an adult. You know, I won the keyboarding competition at school last year, I can type 80 words per minute." At age 11 he was nearly as tall as Terry, stumbling over his feet in improbably large Converse tennis shoes toward adolescence. His voice had not dropped and his cheeks were still baby smooth. A good thing, because he was already talking about visiting Santa at the mall again this year.

"Well, adults use them so they know when to all show up to work, or catch a plane."

"People mostly worked on farms until factories were built, so people didn't really use watches until pretty recently, right?"

I hadn't really thought about that. Humans were relatively new to the idea of hours. Medieval church bells were the first communal marker of hours. Even time zones were invented fairly recently, in the 19th century, to avoid derailment with the invention of train travel. Was he just a throwback to a sleepier time when a day wasn't so parceled out, life moved at a slower pace?

"Seems like people went a long while without caring about what month it was or what time of day it was, I don't see why I need to know," he retorted. He was right, time-centeredness and the breaking of it into ever smaller increments had happened very gradually over the millennia. "I can't tell time and I get places." Which was also true, but there was someone else telling time and getting him places, me.

Time has always been a slippery commodity. When I was pregnant with Alexander on vacation in Key West, we passed a clock each afternoon on Duval Street. I had barely glanced at it, caught up in that alpha-wave sand and sun suspension of time achieved during the two weeks a year we moved by our body clocks. One evening as the stars came out over a sidewalk cafe on Duval, it seemed the coconut crusted grouper I'd ordered was taking a very long time. I never wear a watch on vacation, and checked the street clock, finding that it still said 2:40. It had said 2:40 when we came back from the beach that afternoon and I hadn't given it a second thought. "It never changes," I laughed to Terry. "I've been so relaxed I just didn't notice. Guess I'd better put my watch back on, we'll be going back to reality soon. How many days do we have left?"

He shrugged, smiling. "I have absolutely no idea. I don't even know what day of the week it is." He slapped the table, laughed, and ordered another Heineken.

We were in the Zan zone. A time where the days of the week, Pacific or Mountain Standard Time ceased to exist. As it did for Zan sketching through reams of paper, tilting his head to get the angle right. Only the present moment and its pleasures mattered.

Each visit, we relish counting down the mile markers on the coastal highway drive into the Keys as a slow languor steals over us, stripping away our sense of time. Once the highway runs out, the clock winds down and we dive deeply into the moment, blissfully unaware of the next minute, hour or day, what C.S. Lewis had called "the timeless moment," which seems to hang suspended. Was that how time felt to Alexander?

Cruise lines craftily market this zen zone where the frazzled escape deadlines and overbooked appointment schedules, a tranquil oasis of mental space. The Zan zone, the mental space he inhabited naturally.

The neurological network of the brain is amazingly adaptive. Could Alexander's Aspergers, and Linda's ADHD, be symptoms of evolution, the brain re-wiring itself to adapt to technology Rapid attentional shifts were considered "non-neurotypical" when my sister was diagnosed. Yet, her attentional agility was just perhaps before its time, uniquely suited to leap from Twitter, to text message, to email, to friend update. Skipping effortlessly on the pond of thought. Today, the 21st century brain at work is required to simultaneously track multiple conversations and streams

of thought. Is the problem merely that the learning system has not evolved with the speed of the brain? Perhaps the brain adapted to cultural time shifting, or Future Shock as Alvin Toffler coined the ever-accelerating speed of life in the computing age, but the American educational system hasn't retooled from the Industrial Age.

Alexander was wearing the cat ears when he got off the bus. "Buddy, did you have a run-in with a teacher today?"

He nodded miserably. Although nearly as tall as I was, he took my hand, holding it as we walked home, just as he had at four and five and six. "Mom, I didn't know what to do. She started yelling at me, really loud."

"Don't you think it's time to take the cat ears off?"

"I dunno. Maybe." He looked uncertain. "But Mom, I couldn't think what to do when she started yelling so loud." Not having a social script for a situation triggered circular panic thinking which, in Alexander, caused circular pacing. "I got scareder and scareder and walked faster and then she started chasing me down the hall and I was running and I started to cry and ran into my classroom to see if my teacher would help me and then," He stopped in the middle of the street and shuddered,"She grabbed me."

I went cold. Touching an autistic person when they are not prepared can cause panic. The last time triggered neck ticks and night terrors. He had paced his room in circles obsessively; he had not slept for three days. Autism accommodations stipulated that the faculty was not to touch Alexander. This fall I had talked with each of his teachers about touch reactions and autism.

"I yelled 'get off me, get off me,' and tried to throw her off but she was digging her nails into my shoulders. I was so frightened."

At home I logged onto my work account to edit the newspaper copy and found an email from the teacher, detailing Alexander's bizarre behavior during the incident, noting that he tried to hide under the desk as she tried to pull him out. There were several cc's to various administrators.

I emailed the school notifying them of the disability accommodation violation, detailing autistic startle response to unexpected touch, clinically termed "tactile defensiveness," and the

restrictions on touch. I knew the paper trail drill well. We were on our fourth IEP, Individual Education Plan, and understood the legal nuances of the document detailing the responsibilities of the school, teachers and student.

Each time he transitioned to a new grade I had to orient his teachers to the quirks of Aspergers. His first and third grade teachers pronounced him just hyperactive. "A little Ritalin would work magic," they had encouraged. Alexander's doctor quipped that amphetamines would have worked magic alright, probably triggered a psychotic break in a child with Aspergers and an attendant anxiety disorder.

His second grade teacher believed he was conning her; he had entered her class not reading at all but by Christmas was burning through Harry Potter. He had gone head to head with this redhead. We had not been terribly troubled, telling ourselves that a child will learn to read when he or she is ready; he was just more interested in visual art. Yet she liked him, had left me voice mail message filled with laughter. "He told me I better calm down or he'll give me a stroke." In January, she had one. She did not come back to school for four months.

I was concerned that he would feel responsible. I need not have worried. Empathy escapes most Aspergers children, as it did Zan. He was just relieved that the substitute was a young man who told great punny jokes and "wasn't on his back all the time." I advised him not to share that sentiment.

The fifth grade teacher told him he would grow out of Aspergers. "My husband is a NASA scientist and he's a little eccentric himself," she assured us.

The Stanford clinicians who diagnosed Alexander told us there was a significant Aspergers autism cluster in Silicon Valley: men with flat affect, expressionless voices and faces, socially oblivious to others. Indeed, at times it seemed most of the IPO titans we met in the Valley sported an inability to sustain a conversation without launching into a monologue about micro chips, coding, physics, or rocket science. Capable of hyper-focusing for 14 hours a day on an area of great specificity, or perseveration, with little need to socialize, they were ideally adapted to the rigors of the tech cradle of America. It was quite simply nerdville and they were legion.

But, as Alexander liked to say, "We're not in Oz anymore."

He was right, the colorful world of tech savants populated by Aspergians was behind us. We had come back to the Midwest. These were pragmatic, no nonsense folks and they did not appreciate cat ears in November. Usually I could keep the teachers off his case using the IEP to

ward them off. Administrators were reluctant to tackle a well-informed parent with a bent toward disability advocacy, especially one who was a newspaper editor.

The more they let him alone to amble along at his own pace, the better he did. When teachers turned up the heat, or set the clock ticking on a timed test, he flamed out fast and furiously. When a teacher got aggressive with Zan, Terry and I adopted a strategy of prying the teacher off his back with a deluge of developmental research on Aspergers and educational learning modalities and getting him the special education one-on-one support he required for therapy or tutoring.

While he demonstrated extraordinary verbal and writing abilities, in spite of his quantitative learning deficits, he often pleaded to be homeschooled. I suspected the pace and lack of classroom stimuli would have suited him, although I still held out hope he would discover girls and dances and come out of his shell socially.

The autism specialist for the Cincinnati School District recalculated his IQ, which had climbed far above average. She was alarmed, warning it could be a dangerous combination, resulting in depression and alienation. His lagging maturity, interest, and social skills were two to three years behind his classmates. His maturity was equal to a nine-year-old, which explained his determination to cling to the Santa Claus myth. This immaturity paired with extreme intellectual ability was likely to cause serious frustration for him during adolescence. He would be smart enough to know he was not performing well socially, and aware of his lack of developmental interest in the same things as his peers. Alienated, he might make the mistake of using his extreme intelligence as a weapon to equalize the status quo. He had the vocabulary of a college sophomore and an incisive wit at his disposal. I knew from personal experience that nobody likes the smartest girl in class. I had learned it the hard way at just about his age.

The autism specialist recommended weekly sessions with the school speech therapist to work on social pragmatics. I tried to dissuade her, knowing that he was unlikely to find them instructive. He had participated for several years in friendship skill groups in Menlo Park run by a Stanford clinician pioneering a new method, but the special education team was insistent. I braced for a bumpy ride.

"She's an idiot!" he said after his first session. "She pulled out the freaking face charts they made me memorize in first grade. I am not going back there. She has me in this creepy little attic

storage room, it's like something out of Harry Potter. Professor Trelawney's prophecy class in the attic, yes!"

Alexander could smell incompetence and had little tolerance, but perhaps she could talk him down on Santa Claus. It was just November, he was already making lists and writing letters to Santa Claus. I dreaded taking him to see Santa. Mothers herded small children away as my six-footer in a Santa hat animatedly speculated what time Santa arrived from the North Pole and when he would leave to get the sleigh packed up, discussing the time zones, and Einstein's time-space continuum theory of travel which made it possible.

"Well, some things adults just think don't exist really do, like quantum particles." He had looked at me, aggrieved. That was Zan in middle school, veering from Santa Claus to particle waves and quantum physics: incredible naiveté paired with hyper-intelligence. "Do you know that people thought Newton was nuts when he suggested particle waves? Because you can't see them."

"Yeah, it's like God," I said.

He rolled his eyes, he was going through an agnostic phase to match his blue hair. I thought it was funny, a typical response for a pastor's kid, indoctrinated in the church over the years. It had been less humorous when he shared it with his sixth grade class at the Christian school in Florida, on the campus of the church where Terry worked as Executive Pastor. Terry had been a little squeamish, asking him to tone it down. "What's the matter, afraid I'll get you canned?" he cracked.

As a matter of fact, Terry was. Bible Belters took their scriptures literally, and a man who could not control his own children, or their beliefs, was not considered fit to lead. Moving Zan to Cincinnati seemed the least explosive solution for all parties.

Deep in the Southern the Bible Belt Alexander made a stand for gay rights, Bill Clinton and the possibility that God was a woman -- in fifth grade. By sixth grade, few kids would come to our house to play.

"Your parents are probably secret Democrats," one girl shouted in fury, whacking him in the head with a lunchbox when he pointed out she was plump. Aspies are often surprised to find they have insulted people when pointing out the obvious.

"Hey, if your dad called me fat, I'd probably whack him with a lunchbox too," I had said putting ice on his head. By spring he was pleading with me to get him out of Florida.

"You guys brought me to a cult. The youth minister is telling us you don't need gasoline, that a car can run on prayer. Says he drove hours on empty. And coach says fasting is good for you physically *and* spiritually."

Terry and I had argued with greater intensity each weekend I flew into Orlando. The educational environment was deficient, lacking basic special education services. Alexander wasn't receiving the one-on-one tutoring in areas of disability that federal services entitled him to receive. He was slipping behind academically, except in Florida where so few of the students were pushing the AP track of college preparatory studies. It was a far cry from the Menlo-Atherton school district surrounding Stanford that his sister had graduated from. Her classmates worked with SAT test prep coaches at age 14 and the district sponsored a semester long SAT prep course for all juniors. By junior year Menlo-Atherton students were working with college coaches to prep them for essays and campus interviews and AP course tutors. And still many honor roll students with stellar scores didn't get into the University of California campus of their choice. I knew what the competition was like. Florida was no place for Alexander.

Time was ticking away. There were four years to get Alexander primed for college.

The week before Christmas school break the newsroom spun itself into a frenzy. Sleet had begun falling all afternoon turning streets of the City of Seven hills, Cincinnati, into toboggan runs. I thought about leaving early, but by 4 p.m. every highway in and out of the city was at a standstill, backed up for several miles and hours. Even the cellphone circuits were overloaded as stranded motorists called home.

Best wait until the salt trucks got in the game, traffic unsnarled itself. Thick fat snowflakes began falling, two inches an hour the meteorologist said. Outside my 19th floor window they swarmed like bumblebees. Alexander would be excited. I tried calling him on my cell phone, perhaps he'd pick up if he recognized the caller ID but the cell circuit could not complete the call. I went to the newsroom phone and tried again, and left a message to pop in a microwave dinner. No answer. A string of red brake lights glittered at a standstill on the bridges and highways below. The newsroom televisions played live video feed of drivers abandoning snowbound cars

on the freeway, trudging toward exit ramps. At 7:30 p.m. red lines of tail lights finally began moving, the accident bottlenecks loosening their grip on the city.

It wasn't unusual for Alexander to ignore the phone. I headed through the metro department on my way out. The managing editor was huddled around the education desk with two night editors. "Still here?" he nodded approvingly. He'd hired me, liked my work ethic and rewarded me with a $9,000 raise and promotion five months after I arrived; but I worked 60 hour weeks.

"Headed out now that the highways are clearing." I put on my coat.

"Your son make it home okay?" he asked.

"Think so. Why?" He pointed at the Superintendent reading a prepared statement. My stomach sank. Three hours after his bus should have dropped him off, he still had not answered my calls. He refused to carry a cell phone, disliking actual conversations on phones. I had assumed he was sitting by the fire eating macaroni and cheese playing *Zelda*.

"Cincinnati Public School buses are having trouble making it up city hillsides and are able to travel no more than 15 miles per hour. We expect all children to be delivered from their normal bus routes by 8:30 p.m." I hit speed dial home, it rang and rang until I heard my own voice answer the voice mail. Why wasn't he answering? I stopped at the education reporter's desk.

"Has she said exactly how many students are still out on the buses?"

"Couple hundred," the reporter answered. "Is your son one of them?"

"It's looking that way. I'm heading out to find out."

"Got a 'concerned parent' quote for my article?" she quipped.

In ten years in California, I'd forgotten the winter drill. My car fish-tailed along the empty downtown streets and slid sideways back down the entrance ramp. I hadn't put snow tires on my station wagon, nor loaded the back with a shovel and rock salt and it was unable to get enough traction to climb the parkway that runs along the Ohio River. The fourth attempt I slid across the ice-glazed ramp and banged into a guard rail. Terry was in Orlando working, Alyssa in Boston at college. There was no one else to call. I considered parking the car along the side of the road and walking the four miles home, but it would take several hours. I rolled to the bottom of the hill, backed up, picked up speed and gunned it. The momentum carried me up the hill fishtailing wildly and I crested, sliding sideways into the five lane parkway. I exhaled, it was empty.

Nearly everyone with any sense had gone home hours ago. I crawled along at 12 miles an hour, got stuck twice, but rocked the car until it moved. As a teen I'd learned to drive in one of

the worst Michigan blizzard seasons on record, snow didn't usually rattle me but my knuckles gripped the steering wheel tightly each time the wagon staggered or slowed on a small hill. When I came to the hill leading into our neighborhood, even a front-wheel drive running start would not propel the Volvo up the steep grade. I slid into a snowbank, really stuck. But I was nearly there. I walked the last quarter-mile up, searching for the lights of our front porch. My neighbor was shoveling his driveway, and it looked as if good four inches had fallen. My house was dark.

"Have you seen my son, Alexander?"

"No, didn't he come home on the bus -- you just getting home?"

"Yeah, couldn't get out of downtown right away, so I waited it out but he hasn't been answering the phone."

"Yeah, P&G sent us all home when it started at 3 p.m."

Punching the voice mail I turned up the heat and switched every light on, as if beaming light from our house onto the blanket of snow would draw Alexander inside, like a moth. The answering service blinked, I punched in the code to find the six messages I'd left over the last four hours telling him to zap a dinner and call me when he got in. It was nearly 8 p.m., five hours since his bus had left the school just six miles from the house. My mouth was dry, my solar plexus tight. I walked up the street, calling his name, scanning the drifts with the flashlight for his footprints. The streets were hushed in the deep blanket of snow, still falling in fat Christmas card flakes. A few pawprints, but not a single car out on the road. What if the bus had come and gone, and he had simply lost his bearings in the dark? I feared he wouldn't approach a stranger, or have the words he needed to explain that he was lost and had just moved into the neighborhood. Sometimes he just shut down and didn't move. It was 19 degrees out.

This was my second shot at this job. The newspaper had flown me in from San Francisco on a frigid December night two years ago. I did not even have a winter coat, a friend lent me a spring-weight cashmere Anne Klein coat better suited to March in California. None of the California girls I knew owned one, it rarely dropped below 65 degrees. I had shivered in the thin coat walking the two blocks from the Netherland Plaza Hotel over to the newsroom on Elm to

interview, the temperature was 60 degrees colder in Cincinnati. My nose stung in the cold, my fingers were stiff, and my chest clenched and constricted in the Arctic air mass stalled out over the Ohio River valley.

After a decade away, even the smells were foreign. Dry overheated air smelled like an old iron with musty water and the staleness of smoke permeated the carpets. I had leaned out my fifth floor window overlooking Fourth Street to get a breath and watch the skaters on Fountain Square when I recognized the view. The Jazz Age hotel adjoined another notable Art Deco building at Fourth and Vine, the Carew Tower. My hotel room was one hundred feet from my old office in the advertising department at Pogue's, the old carriage trade department store where I wrote fashion copy for ads. I had studied both fashion history and advertising, landing my first big city job as a writer for magazine and newspaper ad copy in Cincinnati.

Each morning at 8:30 a.m. I greeted the uniformed elevator attendant who closed the gate and whisked me up to the fifth floor where I typed rhapsodic descriptions of evening dresses, shoes and designer trunk show collections. At the end of the day I sent the carbon copies in a pneumatic tube with a satisfying whoosh on to the production department. The next morning my writing appeared in print accompanied by a stylish sketch, my induction into the world of ink-stained wretch. The other girls in creative, artists and copywriters, took me to Hathaway's for milkshakes at lunch my first day. I was surprised to find the 50-year-old soda fountain still there in the Carew Tower, although the grande dame of Cincinnati carriage trade department stores had closed up shop in her 125th year. I had a vanilla coke, toasting the vanished Pogue's and the ghost of the college girl who had pounded a manual Smith-Corona twenty years ago upstairs.

I called Terry. "Pam, I can't talk now I'm on the dias at our holiday fundraiser," Terry whispered into his cell phone. "The speaker is about to begin."

"Terry, listen to me, Alexander isn't home. There's a snowstorm and his bus never arrived."

"What do you mean. It's after 8 p.m. -- his bus never got there?"

"Well, maybe it did and he's lost again." He had difficulty with remembering the route home from the bus stop although it was just three blocks away. "The buses were running hours late in

the ice storm and delivering kids after dark. I'm not sure he would have been able to find the house in the dark. Oh my God, Terry." I broke down weeping.

"Go get in the car and *find* him," Terry hissed.

"I can't. The car wouldn't make it up the hill. It slid into a snowbank."

"Well, go dig it out."

"I can't get the car up into our neighborhood, the hill is a sheet of ice. I've been walking the neighborhood with a flashlight to see if he came this way, looking for his footprints but it's snowing so fast."

"This is why I didn't want him up there instead of down here at the church school across the street from my office." His tone sounded accusing. "I wondered if something like this would happen, you work so late."

It was true. I left at 8:30 a.m., rarely returned before 7 p.m. and even at home I often logged on to edit online. And now Zan was lost in a snowstorm at night. I did not know if he was wandering the neighborhood trying to find his way home, or yet on a bus.

"Call the police and report him missing. Be sure to tell them he's autistic and gets easily disoriented and lost."

"Okay, I'll call you back."

"I'm up at the podium next so it will go to voice mail, but I'll check it right away. And Pam, I'm praying."

The 911 emergency services dispatch was overloaded. I got a recorded message. "Due to high call volume drivers reporting an accident should exchange numbers and insurance information if no one has been injured. Please stay on the line if this is a true emergency." How many accidents were there, had his bus been a casualty? I waited and the call clicked through.

"Ma'am we're getting reports that a few of the buses haven't arrived. Call the district, they've got emergency staff manning the phones and can find out if he's still riding a bus."

The harried district administrator reported that all children would be delivered within the hour and to call back if he didn't arrive.

"No, you don't understand." My voice took on a frantic edge. "He has autism. He might have got off at the bus stop but lost his way in the dark."

There was a long pause. "Ma'am all the special education short bus deliveries were made door-to-door hours ago."

"He didn't want to ride the short bus, so we've been practicing walking the route. He hasn't gotten lost in three weeks, but... can you just radio his specific bus to see if it has returned to the garage?" I gave her his bus number and name. I heard her exhale, that must be good. "Yes, that driver is still out on the route. We'll radio to confirm he is still on the bus and call you back."

I left Terry a message. Thirty minutes went by. A perky girl in a Northface jacket reported as video played of a bus sliding sideways on a hill, parents hugging children arriving home five hours late at bedtime. "And after a long night, the last of the Cincinnati Public School buses have safely delivered their charges," she trilled.

I hit redial. "Have you located my son's bus, Alexander Fisher, SCPA?"

"We've confirmed that bus is near the UDF at Mt. Lookout Square, it's having a difficult time negotiating the hills in your neighborhood. And ma'am, he is on it."

"Tell the driver to just let him off at the square and I'll go get him." In five hours they hadn't been able to get him the six miles home. Even if he was just one mile away, I did not trust them to deliver him.

"We can't do that, it's against district policy. The driver is dropping children off at their doors."

"Well, that's a problem, he doesn't know the address yet." He had little sense of time or place and had difficulty remember what state we lived in. To be fair, he had lived in three in the last six months. He had given up on phone numbers long ago. I gave the bus dispatcher both to relay to the driver.

I was standing on the porch when the bus pulled up at nearly 9 p.m.. I held him and cried. "I thought I'd lost you, buddy. I was so worried, this has been the longest night of my life since you were born."

"Mom, it was awful." His eyes were dark, brimming. "The driver was swearing at the little kids who were crying because they were hungry and she threatened to put us off in the dark if we didn't stop crying. She should get arrested or something. She wouldn't even stop for the ones crying because they needed to pee -- and it was like five hours!" Actually, more like six, but he couldn't tell time.

I called the district back to confirm his safe arrival, and to report the driver's conduct. "Well, they're not really trained for this kind of situation," she said. "This is a once in a blue moon kind of situation." I hoped Terry would see it that way.

Terry let out a deep sigh, murmurs of concern erupted from those clustered around him in the background."Well the kid's still got it," I said with a wry brightness I did not feel. "Even from 1,000 miles away Alexander brought the Christian Academy to a screeching standstill."

"Yep, he can." His voice was flat. He wasn't having it, he didn't think I could handle Alexander alone. He was probably right, but what kind of future would he face if we didn't move heaven and earth to give him the best shot at college prep? Next week on Christmas Eve, we headed 13 hours south on I-75 to our house in Orlando. I wondered if Alexander would be returning with me.

"Let me talk to Zan." I handed over the phone.

Terry didn't trust me to prioritize Zan over my work and perhaps he was right. Did I trust myself to make the right choices each night, deadline or Zan? It was becoming clear I could not do it alone, but I did not want to quit and I didn't see Alexander having much of a future in Florida.

"Yeah Dad, I tried to borrow a kid's cell phone on the bus to call Mom but I don't know if I couldn't remember the number or what, but the phone wouldn't work." Well, maybe he did know it and the cell circuits were overwhelmed I wanted to explain.

"Yeah, I know, it isn't working out so well."

I found myself slicing into the lettuce viciously, it shouldn't be so difficult to manage a two-career family, there wasn't anything remiss in being an ambitious woman who liked her work so much it was difficult to leave the office each night. My husband had done it for 20 years, coming home long after the kids were in bed several nights a week for elder and board meetings. But I had been there, working around his schedule. Now, at 40 I felt burning ambition, and he wasn't there for me. Where was the trade-off we had agreed upon as we forged our egalitarian partnership 20 years ago? Its fabric had worn thin with child-rearing, positively frayed with the strain of parenting an autistic child.

Alexander lowered his voice, practically to a whisper. "No, I don't really want to go back to Florida either, but you're probably right." His eyes met mine pleading for understanding, silently.

"Yeah, Mom works so hard." I nodded over-exaggeratedly in comic assent, gave him a tight squeeze and fled into the bathroom to cry. It had been so good to have another person with me in the house these last four months. I hadn't realized how lonely it was to live alone after two decades of family life. Was I going to have to choose: my publishing career or my family? It was

a choice men did not have to make. My favorite time of day was coming home to a dinner table spread with his manuscripts and my newspaper section. Often he would read from the novel he was workshopping in class the next day, and then Zan pointed out errors the copy desk had missed.

Today, though I'd found Alexander in the snowstorm, I had lost him. For the first time this semester his academic identity had been so much more than the just the eccentric autistic kid. He was becoming a writer. So many SCPA graduates went on to impressive college writing programs. The pride he took in his manuscripts, the list of young adult magazines he was preparing submissions to. Lost, all lost. He withdrew from SCPA at winter break.

Chapter 16 Playground Lessons

Push Back

"Mrs. Fisher, Alexander has made threats of violence at school today. Can you come over after school?"

"Alexander? He's never violent at school." Well, almost never. When two fifth grade boys made the mistake of thinking a third grader was an easy target and held him down with a broken bottle, he'd morphed into the Incredible Hulk, tossing the two larger boys off in a spectacular rage. Taken aback, they had hesitated and Zan rushed them roaring, charging like a bull. They had fled. I had not handled that particular incident in the principal's office well, congratulating him for self-advocating, a skill his therapist had been working at with him. No one bullied him on that playground again.

I drove over to Clark Montessori, the school Alexander had convinced his dad, who was still working in Florida, to let him transfer to. He had had it with the Christian academy, the uniforms, the Bible Belt, the daily door inspections of his hair length.

"Can you see me graduating from there?" Alexander had sputtered when Terry resisted. "Like, practically no one goes on to college." Zan had a point, a college prep school it wasn't. It would be difficult to get him into one of Cincinnati's public magnet high schools if we waited a year. Transferring in eighth grade ensured him a spot.

As always, I'd been optimistic at the change of venue. Alexander's three Montessori years had been some of his most productive: the multi-sensorial learning style engaged him on many levels and he found the pace of self-directed learning activities, in which children chose which tasks to work on next, relaxed. Maria Montessori's philosophy is that the child knows what he is ready for developmentally and will naturally engage with it. It seemed particularly suited to Alexander, who was so averse to the rows of orderly desks and jarring learning transitions abruptly signaled by class bells, cultural structural relics from the science of industrial productivity. Montessori instruction took place organically in small learning groups in which students shared knowledge, discovering together.

Clark Montessori sounded idyllic: a camping retreat in the woods kicked off the academic year for student bonding, each class maintained an organic vegetable garden and the capstone eighth grade graduation project was a marine biology snorkeling trip to an Andros Island, an eco-retreat in the Bahamas. By the end of the first week, Alexander leaned into the teacher's tie-dyed shoulder, guard-down. I thought we might have found the ideal setting for high school.

That season of Alexander's middle school years was like a flash flood and it seemed as if we might capsize at any moment. I had been caught up in one on my sixteenth birthday. What looked like a puddle at a four-way stop turned out to be something else altogether. The engine stalled, icy water seeped through the floorboards, swirling around my ankles. The car began to rock off its wheels, caught up in the current of the Tittabawassee River overflowing its banks.

Alexander's emotional capacity depended on my ability to sustain resilience in the face of the many misunderstandings with educators unfamiliar with autism spectrum disorders, a relatively unknown disorder at the time. Sorting out his academic and peer struggles in a highly socialized setting required stamina and the patience to work out IEP accommodations with the occasional resistant teacher. At each new school we must explain the missed conversational cues of expression and vocal tone that interfered with his understanding of instruction and conversation, the extremely literal reading of word exchanges. I was tapped out, depleted parenting alone.

His first semester back in Cincinnati, I collapsed in the newsroom suffering stress heart arrhythmia, and I fainted on days when my blood sugar plunged. One afternoon, I postponed lunch to meet a copyediting deadline. At 1:30 p.m. I began to black out and grabbed the desk edge to steady myself. My boss stood in my office door. My ears began to ring."Excuse me, I need to grab some fruit or yogurt quick."

"No, lunch can wait." He spread his legs and folded his arms obstructing the doorway.

Nauseated, covered in a sheen of cold sweat. I grabbed the doorway and tried to pass. "You don't understand, I need to get something to eat quick." I sidestepped and squeezed past, dashing for the bathroom as my vision began to blur. I slid down the cool ceramic tiles onto the floor,

biting into the peach. My blood sugar leveled out, and I stood up to cold water on my face. My heart thudded against my ribcage fluttering lopsidedly. Arrhythmia.

I lacked Alexander's defensive instincts. How had he known exactly how to handle those boys, was it some mysterious testosterone thing? I had been socialized to be an accommodating girl, conditioning that left me unarmed against workplace aggression. Aspie logic is primal, fight or flight. It does not stand there and smile winningly waiting for an aggressor to give way. Sometimes primal brain, lizard brain knows exactly what it was doing. Steeped in rationalization I on the other hand, was wreaking havoc on my own body. Soaking up the cool of the bathroom floor tiles, I asked myself, "What would Zan do?" I was learning from the wisdom of Aspergers. Sometimes, you just have to push back and sometimes you must run.

"Alexander threatened to blow up the school today," the principal said as I scooted my chair toward his desk. He had been there just seven weeks. I flipped open my reporter's notebook.

"Who exactly did he make that threat to and what was the context of the conversation?"

"I'm not sure the context is significant." He looked sternly over his circular, owlish glasses at Zan. "As significant as the threat. We take those threats very seriously."

I nodded, leaned in, as if I might commiserate. "As do we, but context is important to an autistic child."

He looked confused. "Autistic? We're aware of the learning disability, but he's mainstreamed."

"Many children on the autism spectrum are mainstreamed, some are even intellectually gifted. What exactly transpired with the teacher?" I poised my pen over the notepad.

"Well, he wasn't with his teacher." I was thrown. We had picked this small Montessori setting that he would not have to learn so many new teacher faces. Classes happened in small community learning groups, with two teachers rotating all subjects but Latin and Art. When asked what he'd do if the consequences for not turning an assignment on time were to stay after school to finish it, he told the social worker..."

"Who assigned him to meet with the social worker? We didn't sign off on that."

The assistant principal shuffled through Alexander's file, as if looking for something. "This is pretty standard with a special needs student."

"Proposed interventions must be noted on the IEP, which is a legal document under The Individuals With Disabilities Act. Until we have a chance to review the social worker's training for autism spectrum intervention, please discontinue social worker interventions."

A muscle tensed in his jaw as he noted it, and resumed reading from the report the teacher had filed.

Alexander jiggled his knee restlessly. "And *I* said I couldn't do it because I take the bus home from school," he interjected. The words tumbled out one after another, in a flood. "And then she asked, 'What if your mom or dad had to come and pick you up?' And I told her there's no one to drive me home, my dad works in Florida during the week and my mom works downtown on deadline at the newspaper in the afternoon. And then she asked *again* and I was just tired of her asking the same question over and over."

"And he said he'd just blow the school up," the assistant principal restated.

"She said '*hyp-o-thet-i-cally*'," Alexander bit out the syllables. "*Hyp-o-thet-i-cally*. She kept asking the same hypothetical question over and over and I gave her a *hypothetical* answer."

The assistant principal bristled. "We have to be concerned first and foremost with the safety of other students and cannot tolerate threats of student violence. For any reason."

"It doesn't sound like he was actually making a threat at all, but perhaps an ill-advised response when pressed by a hypothetical question." I tilted my head, kept my voice neutral and analytical. "Not exactly the same thing, is it?"

"He said he would blow up the school," the assistant principal grew insistent. "The school has a mandatory three-day suspension and counseling."

"He gave a ludicrous answer to a ludicrous hypothetical question. Alexander has a psychologist, a trained specialist in autism spectrum children. We are not prepared to have anyone intervene in his treatment, particularly someone without the training to do it."

"That's our policy," the assistant principal began.

"Look, hypothetical simply doesn't compute to a person on the autism spectrum. She pressed and pressed for an answer he didn't have a social script to respond to. So he gave an absurd answer to an absurd hypothetical question." Aspergers could be admittedly absurd, but then again, so could public education.

That month an electrocardiogram discovered a slow Q.T. The halter monitor the cardiologist hooked me up to scribbled in seismic waves every time the boss approached my office.

Anxiety, racing heart, nausea and sleeplessness had dogged me in the three days since the EKG. "PTSD, post-traumatic stress syndrome is triggering the arrhythmia. You need to get out," my internist said. "You've got maybe two more years before the genetics of diabetes wins." I had not passed out from low blood sugar in two decades, since my pregnancy with Alyssa. The pattern had been the same, overwork: ad agency manager by day, teaching adjunct at a local college at night.

"Out of the newsroom -- are you kidding me? I bought a house, my husband works from a Florida office, and I'm raising an autistic son that I just enrolled in a magnet school up here."

"Exactly. Who's going to take care of your son if you land in the hospital?" She handed me a note.

That night I did not sleep for a long while, thinking of Zan coming home to an empty house if I collapsed again.

I'd known my second day in Cincinnati that it was a mistake. The first week of the new year I drove out of Orlando in flip flops and shorts. When I woke up the next morning in Cincinnati, it was 10 degrees and my car would not start. By Friday, I'd calculated it would take less than an hour to load everything at the residence hotel into my station wagon, and in 13 hours I could be sitting by our pool in Florida for breakfast.

The next month both the *Orange Country Register* in Los Angeles and the *Santa Barbara News Press* called, hunting for an experienced arts editor. The O.C. was a step up, a larger paper, and the *News Press* was run by an editor I knew and respected from the Bay Area. Both sets of parents, our sisters and brothers, and assorted nieces and nephews lived nearby in the Santa Ynez Valley. It was tempting, but when Terry landed three interviews in town, I withdrew my name. There would be plenty of opportunities to return to our parents and siblings in California.

Then, an odd thing happened; nearing age 55, not one offer materialized for him that spring. If I could have seen what was coming in the juggernaut print newspaper industry we had staked our family's future on, I would have leapt at California.

That spring of the Michigan flash flood I had climbed out the window of my boyfriend's car, clutching the hood as it bobbed downstream. It was nearing midnight and we had been caught in the spring snowmelt in an isolated area near the country club where we'd had dinner. As the car listed, I began screaming and a pair of headlights appeared. A monster truck threw a tow line and pulling the car through the water. Once again, I was navigating the dark currents of Alexander's autism alone and I was pretty certain I was drowning.

Chapter 17 Mackinac Island
Labyrinth Walking

Alexander grew distraught in strange places. His fingers fretted over a frayed ribbon as we traveled north up the Lake Michigan coast. I had spent the morning interviewing with a publishing house. We were considering a return to the town on Lake Macatawa where Alexander was born. Even though Terry had not been able to find work in Cincinnati, I was reluctant to move Zan again. How unsteadily he transitioned to new schools and neighborhoods.

In California we vacationed every Christmas, summer and spring break at the same family resort in San Diego, across the street from where we'd lived when his sister was a toddler. Some 30 or more trips over the decade. It never got old for Alexander.

He found it deeply comforting to travel 10 hours south of San Francisco to arrive at a place where the drapes and grounds were familiar. The salty soup of kelp drying in the sun at low tide and the white waxen petals of natal plum he repetitively rubbed smelled the same each time. The sensory details of Alyssa's childhood had become Alexander's by default.

Each stay we requested the same first-floor tower rooms we had marked on a hotel map: 105, 107, 109. We learned after he paced the floor of a ninth floor hotel room through a sleepless night until the front desk moved us to the "right" room and our hollow-eyed, haunted boy fell asleep.

His days never varied. He orbited from hotel room to pool, stopping ritually to cock his head and talk to the cockateel and parrots, he knew the phrases they could repeat and offered them up like treats. He'd move on to stare dreaming into the koi pond, as he had been doing since age two. Each year we ate at the same three restaurants. He was not interested in Shamu, or Sea World, or going to the beach.

The summer Alexander turned eight Alyssa wanted to take her new birthday bike out for a ride, but Alexander had not yet learned to ride a two-wheeler. His dad skidded on the beach boardwalk to a sandy halt on the rented tandem bike. Alexander balked.

“I am not getting on that.” He shook his hair for emphasis. “And furthermore, it is the time we go to the pool. We always go to the pool…”

“I never get to do what I want to do, it’s only about what he can’t do,” Alyssa erupted.

“Alright, we get it Lys.” My voice took on a serrated edge. “Zan, just sit on the back, practice balancing,” I coaxed. Each time he yelled to get off. The clock ticked away on the hourly tandem rental. “Hang on Zan.” I pedaled off, Alexander hollering on the back.

"Mom, that is so not cool," Lys shot at my back. I kept pedaling, shifting my weight to keep my balance as he fought me from the back, lurching frantically. Alexander screamed, enraged, as I pedaled down the boardwalk. Bronzed rollerblade goddesses stared at us as they whizzed by. I was that parent, the one who tosses her son in the lake to teach him to swim. But he had missed, would miss, so much: t-ball, scooters, little league, birthday parties, play dates. I wiped my running nose on the back of my hand and Alexander screamed, “Don’t let go! Don’t let go. *Ohmygod* we’re going to die.”

It was so stupid-funny, my shoulders shook with laughter. Was I crying and laughing? Often I felt like both, but that was the first time I’d done it – on a tandem, with a child hostage. Half a mile down the boardwalk the sobbing had stopped.

"This is fun," Alexander said from behind me, quietly surprised.

"It is, isn't it? Do you think we should go back and let them know you're okay?"

"Probably, Lys is going to be soo mad at you. You are so in trouble."

At age 14, Alexander talked of riding tandem bikes on the upcoming Mackinac Island trip. Six years after his first shaky tandem bike trip, he had not mastered balance, or vestibulary sense well enough to ride a bike himself. At least that was his occupational therapist's take on the problem. That night we wondered about the hotel stay as we neared the Straits of Mackinac, a trip we had made when we determined to have this second child. Would Zan sleep or pace?

Though the crossing to the island was relatively calm, Alexander sat ramrod straight in a red plastic seat, clenching his hands in his lap his eyes blinked rapidly as wake slapped the window and the waters of Lakes Huron and Michigan rumbled on the bottom of the ferry.

Alexander could not be coaxed topside as the distance closed on Mackinac Island and the wedding cake white outline of the Grand Hotel emerged from the fog. The catamaran bounced across the waves, pinging tinnily. As we sailed underneath the Mackinac Bridge, one of the largest suspension bridges in the world, he stared straight ahead, as if single-handedly willing the boat not to sink.

From the moment the liveried doorman in a top hat helped him dismount from the mahogany coach and four Alexander was enthralled. The Model-T was banned from the island about 1900 and islanders never looked back, boasting the largest working horse population in the country. The Grand Hotel still operated in Gilded Age style, its staff of 600 surpassed the island's year-round island population.

In the candy-bright confection of a room decorated by Carlton Varney (Lily Putlizer meets dowager chic) Alexander flung open the French doors, and stood at the balcony. He hated balconies, and heights. Yet under the spell of the hotel he walked out to watch freighters pass through the straits of Mackinac.

This was his kind of place. He offered his sister an arm to escort her down the grand staircase in the lobby, whispering as we entered the Salle a Manger. Tuxedo clad waiters whisked by bearing silver domes as an orchestra played. Mannered oldsters toasted anniversaries, strolled the porch as the Mackinac Bridge lights winked on at sunset, and sipped from brandy snifters on the 600-foot long "longest front porch in the world." Honeymooners played bocce ball until it grew too dark and drifted across the lawn toward big band dancing in the lounge -- the stuff of a Katharine Hepburn movie. Life with a script, roles to be played. This he can do.

Our first morning on the island condensation tufts hung on the treetops of the red pine grove where Jane Seymour met Christopher Reeves in the movie *Somewhere in Time,* our favorite cult classic. It was otherworldly, as if Jane might wander out of the mist in full Edwardian dress at any moment. On our way to the wood, we spied a labyrinth, an herb-lined meditation grove.

"Hey, Zan want to walk the labyrinth with me?"

"Sure. Did you know Daedalus was commissioned to build a labyrinth by King Minos to contain the minotaur?"

He had been taking Latin at his Montessori school and reading up on Greco-Roman myths. That winter we painted his bedroom wall midnight blue, and stenciled Latin phrases in gold leaf on it. His eighth grade year had also turned up a school friend, a bookish child whose taste also ran to dead civilizations and Legos. His mother, a professor, had also done her graduate studies in theology.

We wound in and out of the rounds of the labyrinth, our feet scrunching squeakily on crushed shell paths. The scent of lemon verbena rose with our steps when we stepped on the bordering herbs.

The meditative practice of walking the labyrinth is said to induce calm. Concerns of the world and distractions are left the outer perimeter, peace and insight gained on the circuitous path to the interior. Sun spliced the mist hanging over the shadowed grove. Alexander walked heel-toe, heel-toe as fast as he could toward the center, assiduously avoiding the herbal borders. I stepped aside as he passed to exit the labyrinth, breathing the woody green, centering.

American Indians considered the island hallowed. In the Ojibwa creation story, the island was the first land to appear after the great flood receded. Tribal chiefs were buried on the island, to be nearer to the Great Spirit Gitchi Manitou, who dwelt there.

It made sense, the idea that some land is set apart as holy ground, a place to leave the world outside. How good to step outside of time. To weigh our futures, our two careers, our two children. It was the place we had come to consider having this unusual child.

Mackinac Island was a touchstone for us in a nomadic life. It was the only place we had wanted to see before moving to the West Coast three years ago. We had honeymooned here and returned to mark anniversaries, this island felt consecrated and set apart to us too. We never dreamed we'd move back East – much less ever see the island again.

We had made a trip to the island to mark Terry's passage into his forties. Although we had made the straits crossing in early October, we knew the straits would begin to ice over all too soon. By January an ice bridge formed, the only way to get off island when the ferry crossings ceased for the winter. Each year, when the ice grew thick enough, a line of Christmas trees was erected marking the seven miles of safe passage over the Straits, yet islanders and snowmobiles

had plunged into the lake over the decades. But in the winter of 1886, during the building of the Grand Hotel, more than one million board feet of lumber were hauled across the straits ice bridge, a mountain of lumber rising hundreds of feet into the sky, so high it could be seen from Mackinaw City.

We were at our own crossing, time was running out for us to consider a second child. A decade younger than Terry, I had left my twenties the year as he began his forties. I had not given our age difference much thought when he proposed, although I was inconsolable at the idea of marrying a minister. I knew even then I was not cut out to be a pastor's wife. While I sensed the burdensome weight of that role, I couldn't sense weight of time. And yet, it weighed between us. Even our cultural touchstones were different. He entered college in a patchouli fog of Woodstock and war protests. I spent my college years dodging sockless young Republicans sporting Sperry topsiders and monogram sweaters, sloshing Tanqueray and tonic to the GoGos. His 1950s childhood, "Heigh-ho Silver, away!" played out in black and white, mine in a wink-wink retro 1950s nod of Happy Days -- in color.

The weekend of Terry's 40th birthday we had come to Old Mission Point Resort, a place with a curious, storied history. In 1820, it was the site of an American Indian teaching mission; 130 years later a massive, three story wooden teepee made of Norway Pine rose as a world conference center, fulfilling an ancient American Indian prophecy: "Someday on the east end of the island, a great tepee will be erected. All nations will come there and learn about peace." Under the teepee's 36-foot vault we discussed a second child that night.

Our ambivalence had deep roots. Both children of teen moms, our dads decamped when a second child was born to 20-year-old moms. A second child was an event associated with a change in circumstance, most of it cataclysmic. We spent the first six years of marriage making up for our fatherless childhoods with too much responsibility enjoying a second childhood together. A tight little family of three had seemed right-sized and Alyssa was so portable. Hungry to see the world we pledged not to let our stuff own us, or get in the way of hitting the road. Growing up in claustrophobic, Midwestern rust-belt towns we had longed to escape. Like Peter and Wendy in Neverland we road-tripped to Key West, Cabo, Hawaii. Alyssa's naked need for routine and another child to ground us, to tether us more firmly to earth, unnerved me.

“I don’t know if waiting much longer is an option,” Terry had said, soberly. "I'd be almost 60 when he or she graduates from high school, if we're really going to do this."

If we're going to really do this, I thought, peering like a seer into the flames licking the river rock fireplace stones that rose 60 feet up into the pine log-timbered cone of the teepee lobby. Sixty. Twice a lifetime away for me, too far to fathom. I felt the ice bridge of resistance, cold, brittle. Was I really going to do this? Motherhood and certain widowhood loomed under the black ice.

Before our ferry back, we had stopped to look at a silky mohair sweater in an English woolen shop, holding the cloud of cobalt yarn across my body. Huge.

"A baby will fit in there though." Terry's lake blue eyes danced, nearly the same shade as the yarn. He leaned his forehead against mine, and given me a warm lopsided smile. And in that moment, I had seen myself in that sweater, a blueberry bump and flutter of feet like butterflies stirring beneath the mohair. The ice bridge thawed and I melted, falling.

"I am in."

I walked the paths and contemplated the days here the first week of my married life, the weekend we decided to conceive this child. We had passed through so much. "When you walk through the waters, I will be with you. They shall not overcome you," reads the text of the Jewish prophet Isaiah. These words of comfort written 2800 years ago have become my mantra, a litany on dark nights of the soul. Nights when it feels as if I'll be swallowed in deep water.

Can Alexander really do it I wondered, navigate yet another new neighborhood, school? By the time I exited the labyrinth I knew the next bend. Home to northwoods of Michigan.

PART III THE NORTHWOODS REVISITED

Chippewa Point: Looking Back

Lake Macatawa was September silver, the churn and buzz of jet skis stilled. My son banged out the screen door sending the squirrels into a scramble of papery leaves. He kicked at the stack of 20 boxes stacked on the porch, drawing shallow, shaky breaths. His eyes were cloudy and dark, pooling. He had that vacant, anxious look. Lost, deep in the interior. I willed him to breathe slow deep breaths.

"Zan, put your eyes on mine." I offered a conspiratorial half smile as he tipped his forehead, his too-long eyelashes fluttering against mine. The first time his big sister Alyssa had called it out to him at age two, he had crossed the room to plant his forehead against hers, blinking as he looked up into her eyes. I had thought it an odd response.

“Butterfly kisses!” his sister had called out, delighted at the flutter of small eyelashes the size of moth wings on her cheek. How puzzled he was to learn it was figurative, putting your eyes on someone. That was Zan, literal. It had become a family ritual when he was overwhelmed. With his forehead pressed against one of us, his irises fixed on ours, he was usually able to pull focus from the thing that distressed him. He drew a shaky breath, his voice tight and shallow. "I can't, I can't," he called and ran back upstairs.

The anxiety I had pushed aside all summer about this first day of high school returned in late August one day on Lake Michigan. A migrating monarch butterfly dipped, alighting on a batik pareo on the sand. Zan had reached out a finger towards the butterfly, which had mistaken the turquoise fabric for a flower in its exhaustion, after traveling some 50 miles that day. We'd dribbled out the last of a juice box and it looped over to perch, the end of summer on a Thermos cup. The Monarch is the herald of fall and I felt a knot of apprehension at its appearance; my son was about to begin high school in a few weeks.

Monarchs move south as sunlight hours shorten, following the jet stream out of Canada as it dips over the Great Lakes. The Methuselah generation, which migrates, lives seven times longer than 75 percent of monarchs and spends half of its life on a journey of 6,000 miles. Flying 12 miles per hour, 50 miles a day, it travels from Canada to Mexico in about two months, rests a few months and does it again. Oddly, this one had traveled alone. If it survived until spring with 300 million other monarchs, it would return, mature and mate.

So much hung in the balance between fall and spring in Alexander's first year of high school. He had asked me to stop calling him our pet name, Zan, in preparation. His dad talked up the football stadium at his new high school of 2,500. Startled by loud noises and skittish in crowds, he seemed an unlikely Friday night lights fan. Would Alexander make the migration to maturity -- driver's ed, AP classes, college essays and applications, proms? At each developmental mile marker medical and educational experts had pronounced this child unlikely to live, read, drive, graduate, to attend college or live independently. We had ignored these predictions.

"I'm just a slow hatcher," he announced his final year of middle school. We were peering into a nest of three blue eggs in the tree outside our door, looking for chicks.

"A slow hatcher?"

"Something that takes a little longer to grow."

"Like a late bloomer?" The imprecision and nebulous possible meanings of metaphors confounded him, but he was often uncannily prescient.

"Mom, I'm never late. It makes me nervous to be late."

I looked at my watch, as he banged out the screen door again, popping antacids, popping his knuckles.

"Better, Zan?"

He nodded, grim, compressing his lips, and reached out. I squeezed tight and he squeezed back, exchanging the tension as we walked up to the bus stop, withdrawing it as we neared the other teens. The bus pulled up and Zan lunged, holding fast, his breath coming in staccato bursts. "Don't make me go, don't make me go." Two knuckle-bumping bros with buzz cuts and junior varsity football jerseys exchanged sidelong glances and snickers.

"It'll be great, Zan, you'll see."

"What if I don't know you from the bus – what if I don't get off?" Zan could not recognize faces easily out of context.

"I'll just follow the bus until you get off. But just count six stops and look for me."

As the doors of the bus closed behind him, I imagined him squeezing his stress ball reflexively, over and over, to make it through classes. A sign that would mark him as Other. Each year the gap between Zan and the other teens widened.

At Chippewa Point, I stopped and squinted 100 yards across the lake narrows, to make out the dock across the lake where I had once idled summer afternoons. I looked for the picket fence where my kindergarten daughter had stepped off the bus each afternoon.

Oaks still in leaf obscured the grey cottage that we had lived in during those years. I had the peculiar sense I could sail into my past across this lake. To a time before we had learned the word Aspergers, which had come to define our lives in these past 14 years.

This Northwoods lake was the geographical spot where past and present collided. We had come back to meet Zan's future in the place of our past. I looked back 100-yards and sixteen years across the narrows to the South Shore cottage. There, in the years between our arrival from San Diego and our departure for San Francisco, the center of life's gravity shifted.

We had walked the dunes barefoot, absorbing the memory of the soft ridges of sand scraped from granite and worn by freshwater. Pressed my feet alongside the baby's small fat feet into sunlight-warm mounds, laughing with our daughter at the pea-sized toe prints and the way his legs bicycled in the air to shake off the sand. Even then he had not liked strange textures – grass or sand on his skin. Each time the strong wind blew across lake Michigan he blinked owlishly, as if wishing the wind away.

The week we left for San Francisco I had catalogued the sound of the metallic creak of sailboats at anchor and the smell of buttery oaks at the water's edge. Filed the image away to draw out again when anxiety would choke the days ahead, and the ghost of that young mom walked the rooms of the grey cottage, smelling blue fresh water in the night.

Two decades on the California coast had not loosened their gravitational grip: these largest freshwater bodies on earth, the northern lights, the waterfalls of the Hiawatha forest. This land grounded me. I had come home to meet my future, and my son's, in the place of our past.

Chapter 15 Ottawa Beach
Homecoming

"Mom, do I have a suit that fits? Do you know how to order a girl's corsage?" Alexander pounded up the steps banging the screen door. It was Thursday, and he had debated asking a girl to the homecoming dance all week. He had never been interested in going to a school dance before. We had rehearsed scripts over the weekend, but by Wednesday he decided he wasn't ready yet to ask a girl out.

"It's too much responsibility to date a girl," he explained. "You have to figure out how to pick them up, get the phone number or IM and who is buying the tickets." He shook his head, "It's just complicated. You don't understand because you're a girl and you're the one they're trying to date."

"Boy, you aren't kidding," Terry said, his eyes dancing. "Everyone at church was trying to date your mom when I met her, she was the new girl."

"Yep, the shiny new penny." I looked quizzically at Zan. "That's what Lys calls it. You know, how we're always the new kids at school so everyone wants to be your friend to see if you're interesting or have lived cooler places, well at least if you're Alyssa. Me, not so much."

"Maybe you're harder to get to know than Lys, a little less approachable."

"Yeah, well when you're little and adorable, it's kind of like kittens," he shrugged, philosophical. "Everybody wants to play with you."

I hugged him and laughed and he laughed too, flushed with success. "So what changed your mind? Last night you decided you weren't up for it."

"Well, this girl kind of asked if I was going at lunch."

"Does she eat in the library too?"

"Her, the library? No way mom, you can't eat food in the library. I hurry up and eat my lunch and get outta' the gym because it's so loud. But anyway, this girl and her friend said I should go, and I told her I'd been thinking about it and did she want to go and she said m'kay and so I'm

meeting her there before the dance with her friend. But I don't think you buy the friend flowers, just the girl. Right?"

He had caught me by surprise, Terry was giddy. The boys set off in search of a suit, nearly as tall as his dad he had outgrown his suit.

It seemed odd to me. Terry had taken him to his first football game at the nearly new stadium. He spent lunch hour talking to the librarian, "because adults are so much more interesting." We urged him to get to know some other students, but the volume of students at the high school of 2,500 moving through the halls and cafeteria was jarring coming from a small middle school of 350 students.

On Friday night he was a wreck, sweaty. Alyssa had called from college in Boston to give him advice on dance moves and girls.

"Do you have to try to kiss them on the first date?" I heard Alyssa laughing on the other end of the phone.

He opted to skip the football game and go straight to the dance. He shifted from foot to foot, clutching the cellophane corsage box, scanning the crowd with a worried frown. "I hope I recognize her, I don't always recognize faces."

"Relax buddy, she'll recognize you -- you're the only guy out here alone with a corsage." I had adopted an overly cheery reassuring tone and he cut me off with a look.

"Seriously? We have to have our school ID to get in our own dance," a student complained, turned away at the door.

"Hey Zan, did you bring your school ID?"

He shook his head. "Why?"

"I think you need it." His dad headed over to the vice principal manning the door and circled back.

"Okay, I'm just going to run back up Ottawa Beach Road home and pick up his ID badge. Apparently in a school this big they don't want to invite trouble from rival schools."

Seriously? We were surrounded cornfields and rural route roads. These kids weren't exactly Red Sox and Yankees.

"Okay Dad, but really really hurry, it will be super-awkward if she gets here and I can't go in too." He looked at me letting out a shaky gust of breath. "Why does everything always go wrong for me? Maybe she isn't even coming."

The crowds thinned after 45 minutes. He bobbed and weaved, searching each car pulling up, letting out gaggles of girls in evening gowns and cocktail dresses. "There's a girl in a blue dress, do you think that's her?"

"Dunno, never met her." I laughed as he wiped his palms on his pants. She had the bleached out hair of a home dye job, and the tell-tale eyeliner-ringed raccoon eyes of a girl on the way to being cheap. I was glad we were meeting her. Terry made it back just in time.

I heard the boys in the driveway before I saw them. "Well Zan, I don't understand where did your date go?"

"She ditched me once we got inside." He said matter-of-factly, closing the back door.

I hugged him. "Oh buddy, why didn't you call us to come get you?" Who had he talked to and danced with all night if his date went off with someone else? He didn't really know anyone yet after the first few weeks, except the librarian. Terry didn't look too disturbed. When other kids behaved badly Terry usually got ticked. "You kids are creeps," he had scolded some children barring entry to a playhouse Alyssa was trying to enter in kindergarten.

"Wait Pam, you've got to hear the whole story," he smiled. "So Zan, who was the girl you came out holding hands with?" He raised a knowing eyebrow at me.

"I don't really know her," he shrugged, nonchalant. "Just some girl I met at the dance."

"Weren't you bummed out your date ditched?" I asked, concerned.

"Nah. This girl was much more interesting and she asked me to her birthday party next weekend. She's my new girlfriend. Well, I think she must be. She started holding my hand."

"Huh, soo-o what's this girl's name?"

"Well, I think it's Maggie or maybe Meg. It's kind of hard to hear in a dance." He was done, had tuned into his Gameboy to decompress.

"Well, alright then."

"I'm just sorry I gave the other girl the flower. I thought about asking for it back."

"That resource class is a fast-track to WalMart." Zan slammed his backpack down on the kitchen table. "If a kid isn't so smart, 'Big Mac' just finds something to diagnose them so they don't screw up the school's test scores."

Big Mac was the derisive name he gave to the teacher at the resource center, code for special ed. So far, he was not impressed with the school. "Oh, this is just great. Today in resource class Big Mac said 'when you get your factory job' and I said, 'Uh noo-o. My parents will kill me if I don't go to college, well at least undergrad. My sister's a junior and they already want to know what grad school she's considering when she leaves Boston.' And, get this! She said, 'Alexander, you have to have a back-up plan if college doesn't work out.' What? I thought community college *is* the back-up plan for those kids."

Clearly he did not see himself as one of those kids. When she suggested he take shop to get familiar with industrial arts and the manufacturing environment, Terry and I arranged a meeting with Big Mac to let her know he was going college prep, not trade school. "You have to be realistic," she said with a look meant to convey compassion that telegraphed incredulity. "Not every kid is cut out for college. He's already feeling the pressure you're putting on your daughter."

"Good!" I shot back. "He'd better, because he is performing better in several subjects than she did at that age, and she AP tracked all through high school and graduated with honors."

Big Mac looked troubled. "You know, he's not cooperating, he's discouraging the other students. This week he complained that we're just warehousing them here, it's all just busywork, a waiting game where you just wait until you get out."

"Sounds like he's bored to me."

"It's not like he's doing all that well, he needs to be in resource," she snapped. "And he's rude to the other kids."

"I'm sure he is, that's autism spectrum."

"Well, he needs to be more empathetic." I didn't bother to explain to the disability specialist in charge of his education that the very definition of Asperger's includes a remarkable lack of empathy.

Except for the least of these. Alexander had always been peculiarly compassionate with the poor and migrant fellow students. In first-grade he asked me to make two peanut butter sandwiches and pack two sets of lunches when he learned that a classmate whose dad washed

dishes at California Pizza Kitchen did not bring a lunch most days. When the INS raided a local farm where migrant pickers worked and the parents of several classmates simply never came home from work, he was distraught by their grief. Perhaps because he too felt like an outcast. We asked him to be kinder to his classmates and more patient with the teacher, perhaps not everyone had the same intellectual capabilities in resource room.

"That's just what rich people say so that don't have to pay for poor people's education -- all you 'snowflakes,' you take auto shop or metal shop so you can work on an assembly line." He slapped a notebook on the counter, near tears. "And okay, maybe there's some genetics, but it's mostly environment." He was repeating the liturgy to reassure himself that he was not the sum of his classmates warehoused in the resource room, counting the minutes doing worksheets. "And you guys better get me the hell out of this one," he choked out, "because they said 'not everyone's college material, Alexander. They think a factory job is the best I can do."

What most troubled me was that he was not outraged. He appeared to be considering this possibility.

The next week he kicked up his exit campaign in earnest. "Mom, you are not going to believe this," he shouted, his soulful labrador eyes twinkling. "There is a married 14-year-old freshman girl in my dance class!"

"Zan, are you sure she's married, or maybe just pregnant?"

"Both!" he crowed. "She's both!" He gave a wicked little laugh. "You better get me out of there before I get some girl pregnant."

I winced. The fringe kids, the kids all moms worry about, had been drifting over to find him at lunch: the kids with purple hair, pierced lips, and girls with kohl-ringed eyes who already reeked of cigarette smoke. The publishing house where I went to work that fall as an acquisitions editor couldn't have been more different. The editors at the faith and spirituality imprint of HarperCollins Publishing didn't swear or smoke, a jarring leap from the newsroom bullpen where editors swore a blue streak and barked out story assignments to the crackling static of a police scanner. Stories written, filed and edited in minutes. A newspaper was the saw-buzz of a jet ski skimming the surface of a city's violence, robberies, fires and accidents. Every page

changed every day. The publishing house was a barge that looked like it was barely moving. The 2,500 manuscript pages that landed in my office the first month did not return printed and bound for nearly one year. I was maddened, exasperated by the pace. Like Zan, I was bored and counting the minutes.

"I'd rather be homeschooled," he announced near Halloween.

"And exactly who is going to do that?"

"Dad of course, because you have a job and he has a graduate degree. I mean, he is way smarter and more interesting than any of these teachers. Well, except the English teacher who dresses like a hooker, that's how you'll find her at parent-teacher conferences tonight."

"Zan, I'm pretty sure a literature teacher doesn't dress like a hooker."

"You'll see," he rolled his eyes knowingly. "She'll be the one dressed in black fishnets, a mini-skirt, a see-through blouse you wouldn't let Alyssa out of the house in. It's see through! You can see her black bra." He crowed, "Oh, and the black boots with the pencil heels."

"Stilettos?"

"And it's not like Dad has anything better going on."

"Zan, that's just mean."

"Just stating the obvious. He doesn't exactly have anything better to do and it's not like I'm getting a stellar education here."

Chapter 16 Lake Kalamazoo
College Bound

"Do you think I look gay?" Alexander asked one night as we waited for McDonald's to make the plain hamburgers. At age 16 the list of six foods he subsisted on had not expanded in nearly 10 years: macaroni and cheese, eggs, ramen, plain hamburgers, bagels and pasta, preferably plain. He was not particularly interested in food, and it was hard to blame him. The repertoire of menu items he could tolerate had not changed since he was three. Averse to strong smells, spices, gluten, peculiar textures, and milk products, new foods all too often left him stricken by stomach cramps. His doctor suspected food allergies and we began eliminating items from his diet.

By tenth grade, he had grown reclusive, reluctant to leave the house after school. I wasn't sure if it was the pizza and ice-cream parlor parties of junior high events that often found him trapped in a public restroom doubled over and gasping for breath, or social anxiety. His psychologist had repeatedly suggested low-dose Paxil for the anxiety disorder that often accompanied Aspergers, but he did not want to alter his brain chemistry.

He had become something of an advocate spectrum advocate, gravitating to online support groups that resisted DSM IV illness classifications and pharmacological cures for the "non-neurotypical," as online Aspie advocacy groups called themselves. Wicked smart, highly verbal, and tech savvy they found one another online and were mobilizing against the movement to pathologize Aspies.

"They're not always right you know. They classified homosexuality as illness until after Alyssa was born. And that's just stupid. You and Dad have gay friends and they don't look sick to me and neither are we."

What kind of conversations was he was having online, and who might be in those support group forums? Naiveté and an emotional maturity lag of about 24-30 months made him easy prey. He was articulate and funny online, and hyperlexia, an unusual vocabulary for his age,

made him sound much older. Lately he'd been badgering us to let him play mature rated games and see PG-13 movies. He was, after all, chronologically old enough.

But unlike most of his peers, he wasn't interested driving or dating, never went out with friends or invited them over. In fact, he had not made any friends in our two years in Michigan. He said he wasn't interested in any of the things his classmates were interested in, they were boring and he preferred to talk to the teachers, who were in fact quite interesting. Teachers had begun to take to him. He plied them with questions about Plato and Socrates, the Roman Empire, and medieval art history. He was a nerd, a charmingly sarcastic highly verbal history wonk. While his peers gave him a wide berth, teachers gave up their lunch hours to hang out with him; how often did they have a teenager hanging on their every word about the Civil War or World War I?

Did he look gay? "I don't know Zan, what do you think a gay person looks like?"

"Well, the summer ones here are not like the real ones, who have husbands and wear clothes like Dad and live in Saugatuck all year. The summer poseurs wear spray tan and makeup." He squinched up his forehead and thought about it. "Oh and their jeans are too tight and sometimes they start making out on the street. What do they think, no one ever saw that before?" Raised in San Francisco, he found the hyperbolic high-camp queer of tourists odd.

We had moved to a neighboring Lake Michigan resort town over the summer, primarily to find Zan a smaller high school that was more navigable and college-prep focused. At just 250 students, Saugatuck High School was one-tenth the size of the 2,500-student high school in Holland. He was still distressed by crowds and noise. While the academic statistics were impressive, with a 95 percent graduation rate, a peculiarly reactive undercurrent of homophobia ran through its students, who reflexively gay bashed. An administrator explained that it was difficult for some of the less mature teen boys to live in a town others called "the gayest town in Michigan."

Set on Lake Kalamazoo, Saugatuck was a historic gay resort, frequented by artists from the Chicago Art Institute in the late 1890s who established the century-old OxBow artist's community. It cultivated a New England seaside village vibe with its neoclassical Greek Revival architecture and downtown boardwalk wharf strewn with art galleries and yachts. In short, it was the Provincetown of the Midwest.

I suspected we were headed for trouble when he confronted the gay bashers on the bus one afternoon, calling them "hick losers." He seemed particularly pleased, and although we knew he could hold his own, he had unwittingly made himself a target in a very small fish pond. In a village where everyone had grown up together, he was foreign. He sat alone for lunch every day, no one ever came home from school with him. The art teacher said he showed talent, but he continued to plead with us for homeschooling.

"That is so not fair, you homeschooled Alyssa her sophomore year," he said.

"That was different, she wanted to explore a career in the performing arts. I didn't have to leave work to teach her, I took her with me to the theater at night."

"Look, you are a writer, you of all people should get this!" He was infuriated that I was holding a double standard of parenting. And arguably, his need was so much greater. But the truth was, I didn't want to stop working.

"You need the socialization."

"Do you see any socializing going on?" His face flushed a dull red and his eyes glittered with unshed tears. I swallowed. The psychologist coached us not to back him into a corner when he didn't have a social script to retreat, or it would explode.

"Well do you?" he shouted, humiliated by his failure to find even one friend. I knew that each lunch hour he sat alone, the principal had called, concerned.

"I want to be an artist or a writer and there's nothing more I can learn from general education that's going to help me." He slammed his bedroom door and I could hear him sobbing. In many ways, he was right. The educational system was not set up for students of the arts, those shooting for a career in the creative professions.

It was ironic. I was brought in to form an innovation team at the publishing house tasked with generating new editorial. The publisher said his team struggled to generate fresh, trendy ideas that were truly innovative. It seemed peculiar to me that wordsmiths weren't naturals at ideation, research, and brainstorming. Although many of the students I'd taught creative direction and writing to at the California Art Institute had struggled academically, creative play was second nature to them, and they took to it like ducks to water -- with ease and a sense of adventurous joy. By contrast, the Michiganders were downright confounded at the idea of idea generation without editing. It was like the bog hike I'd taken one summer at camp, an uncomfortable and

arduous slog. The children in Western Michigan grew up conditioned to stand in, and color inside, lines.

By contrast, my California-bred child had been creating Van Gogh's Starry Night in kindergarten, and paper sculpture of the penguin from Wallace & Grommet in first grade. His greatest intellectual asset was his creativity. He was a misfit in any American classroom, which is simply no place for artists, storytellers, or keepers of culture. Taylorism, that old Industrial Age urge to scientifically measure and optimize the productivity of a human and standardize to machine-like precision, wrapped its tentacles around public education during the rise of the factory and the high school, in the early 20th century. In 1920, less than one-third of Americans were enrolled in high school and America's factories needed clerks to calculate payroll and invoices. The industrial elite wrested control of local school boards to churn out a steady supply of workers.

Michigan had the highest unemployment rate in the nation and no one could figure out what the problem was. Creative capital was the currency of the 21st century knowledge economy. But Michigan had cultivated minds suited for its factories, minds that would keep the machine running and not gum up the works with odd ideas.

Culturally, everything from the workplace environment, to civic infrastructure to the education system was steeped in the bleak conformity of provincial Dutch Calvinism. It was uncomfortable for all of us, sometimes I felt like I was speaking a foreign language, the language of creativity and ideation. I knew just how foreign he felt here.

Week after week he came home distraught, pleading to go to college, to be homeschooled, anything but the drudgery of timed worksheets and memorized AP tests. In those days of high school, we often said, "If you can just get through high school Zan it's going to be a whole different ballgame." Then, he could begin to develop his strongest skill, his creativity.

By junior year he was depressed and still refusing medication. He rarely left the house that summer. Worried he was developing agoraphobia, I began coaxing him to the beach. There was a strange sense of deja vu as he sat as pale as milk under the sun umbrella reading a book, blinking owlishly, jumping when West wind whistled through the sea grass on the dunes, dusting him with its fine powder.

One late August Saturday I noticed he had not turned a page for a very long time.

"What's going on buddy?"

"Oh please don't make me go back there, please," he said turning tear-filled eyes on mine. "I'll do anything, even go back to Cincinnati, go back to Clark Montessori."

"I'll make you a deal, let me call the college prep school and see if it's still full."

In a class of just 60, one spot had opened up at the charter school. Montessori based, classrooms were set up at small tables for maximum teacher interaction on multi-sensory project based learning. The art teacher wore a ponytail and Alexander considered growing his hair out shoulder length. It was housed in one of the town's original furniture factories; in a town of dour Dutch Calvinists, the opulent black marble and brass detailed Art Deco lobby seemed an unlikely extravagance.

"Well, better?" I asked, picking him up and bringing him over to my office after school near the end of the second week.

"The school seems to be working uncomfortably close to the industrial sector," he said.

"What the heck are you talking about? It's ranked the number two high school in the entire state, 98 percent of all graduates are accepted at a four-year college."

"They talk about turning out independent thinkers with initiative, which sounds all good, but then," he let out a puff of hesitation, "the goal is to really turn out worker bees." He pursed his lips, frowning, trying to get at the root of his discomfort. "It's just that they keep reminding us that it's all so we can get the best jobs at local manufacturers -- I dunno, it's kind of like they think they're a factory too. Cranking out the worker bees. And I mean, we ARE in a factory, but it shouldn't be literal."

"I am not following Zan." I had the suspicion he was on to something. Something I didn't want to see.

"Look, it's like if they don't convince us we want to work in those factories or we don't graduate, go on to work there and help them run right, no one will have jobs, not the the teachers even. So, yeah factories, go there, make 'em work!" He threw a go-team punch into the air, on a tear. "Not me, I am getting the hell outta' this crappy little town the minute I graduate because I want more options than that."

I liked what I was hearing, his ambition had returned and he was envisioning a future in which he thrived. "So what should high school education look like?"

"I mean why are we all there six hours a day 180 days a year while they drone on about the five paragraph essay format. Even creative writing operates like an English class, because it's

taught by English teachers, not writers. I mean it's like you're trying to teach penguins to swim but you've taught turtles to swim and you, the penguin, swim in completely different waters from a turtle -- cold, and a huge ocean not a pond. Why don't they get some real writers to teach that?"

I laughed at the odd analogy of English teachers to turtles and penguins to writers, so uniquely Zan. Why penguins, because we writers are so often off in our own white frozen world of the page? "Well you're preaching to the choir there buddy. I never learned anything about creative writing from an English teacher either. But I did learn about grammar and spelling and literature."

"Yeah-eh," he said sarcastically, "Which is useful if you're in sixth grade. By tenth grade we shouldn't be just learning in classrooms anymore. Everyplace could be a classroom there's all these civic places empty all school day. Didn't you write about that story at your last newspaper?"

"Yeah, about the decline in school visits to cultural institutions since NCLB. We could put classrooms in history museums or theaters?"

"Why are we just sitting there waiting for class to end, waiting to get out of school? Why are we even sitting in there at our age? What if the world becomes the classroom and the science kids study electricity at the power plant and kids into chem and bio spent their days at the water treatment lab, and vet medicine at the zoo or marine biology at the aquarium. The healthcare kids can learn at nursing home as aides, the artists do costumes and sets at theaters or museum exhibits, you keep telling me how the museum is broke because there's not enough taxes to pay for it. And the schools are broke too, why don't we stop making older kids just sit there."

He had a point. Nonprofit arts, culture and civic organizations were a natural learning environment for young adults, but more than that, they would actually contribute by producing something of value. Alexander and his peers were simply weary of sitting at a desk ingesting subjects and learning objectives and spitting out results for data reports.

In retrospect, I am certain we could have shaped his educational experience better. The most significant mistake we made was in moving to a small town riddled with provincialism and an

inherent suspicion of outsiders. Children on the spectrum are Other by definition, compounding their eccentricity with outsider status is perhaps more than they can manage.

Ideally, large metropolitan school districts afford the best autism resource professionals; sadly, none of the districts he attended provided close to the caliber of care and educational intervention that his primary grade schools in the Stanford area were able to offer: occupational therapy for sensory integration, social skills therapeutic groups, adapted phys-ed, staff psychologists for one-on-one and disability trained teachers skilled in autism learning styles. But, there is no doubt he would have suffered greater social ostracization in his adolescence in such an intellectually competitive environment. He simply lacked the social skills currency to be accepted or well liked.

But, a family is a complex eco-system. The needs of every member must be balanced: professional, educational, emotional, and relational. My husband's professional transfers had taken us cross-country four times in 27 years, each time destabilizing several of those areas for each family member. Our child was born into an itinerant clergy family, perhaps not the best situation for a child distraught by any environmental change. A change of school, house, neighborhood, friends and church was simply too much. It was probably too much for most children to manage more than once during their schooling. For an autistic child it was traumatic.

With each move we sought out the very best schools for him, many nationally ranked in performing arts, college prep and community building. Yet, he had explained very articulately the central problem with high school education. You still would not have contributed a single thing societally when you completed thirteen years.

His junior year we flew to California for college visits. He was ready to go home he insisted. But his GPA was spotty, A's in subjects he loved like honors history, AP art and writing and C's in subjects he was not interested in like math. That B average wasn't going to land him in the California colleges he so desperately wanted to get into. His sister, who had graduated from one of California's most competitive high schools and been offered admission at many, flew out from Boston to meet us in Los Angeles over spring break on his seventeenth birthday. We were spending it at Disneyland and visiting Southern California colleges with dual Japanese cultural

studies and creative writing majors: UCSD, UCSB, Cal State Long Beach, San Diego State, and Westmont College in Santa Barbara, where my sisters had attended.

The kids had grown up going to Disneyland, it was just a couple of hours from both sets of grandparents and they had visited more than 20 times.

"It even smells like home," Alexander said sitting in the hotel jacuzzi, he leaned his head back against the ledge. I knew what he meant, that faint smell of desert sand, the dry rustle of palm fronds over the pool deck, the faint minerality of the wind blowing out of the San Gabriel Mountains.

"Brother, can you believe you're going to college?" Alyssa asked wiping wet strands of his shoulder length hair from his eyes.

"Mine's longer than yours," he laughed.

"You're going to have such a great time, parties and new friends, living in a dorm," she sighed with pleasure. "My undergrad years were so good." Alyssa had moved on to graduate school in Eugene, at the University of Oregon.

"But Lys, I don't even like *parties*," he said, shaking his head smiling with the pleasure of being with his Lys. "And can you imagine me in a dorm? I think they could be noisy and you know I don't like noise, at all."

She rolled her eyes at me. "You'll see brother, it is the best time."

At Disneyland the next day they raced one another like six year olds to Thunder Mountain, the Dole Whip ice cream stand and the Peter Pan ride, old favorites.

Cal Long Beach was right off Pacific Coast Highway, not two miles from the Pacific Ocean. "Why didn't I go here?" Terry said laughing as the three of them posed by a dandelion puff water sculpture fountain, the spray created haloes around their heads.

"I know, right?" Alyssa said exuberantly as we toured the art gallery installation. She was studying arts and culture management. "This place has great public space art." Alexander was most impressed by the food court; there was a Panda Express and Taco Bell.

"Harumph, no In-n-Out burger here," he sighed. "Oh well, at least there will be fish tacos in San Diego tomorrow. We were driving to San Diego State University, which Alyssa had passed on.

"It looks just like high school, well not my high school but Alyssa's California high school," he grumped as large crowds of students jammed the outdoor walkways between classrooms.

Some 36,000 students were enrolled, one of the largest in the state. "But I do like the outdoor pool and the Chinese food."

He grew quiet on the drive down to San Diego and it was clear he was disappointed. He brightened as we checked into the Catamaran, the Mission Beach family resort we'd frequented for over twenty years, each winter, spring and summer school vacation break. It was perhaps his favorite place on earth. The two children dove and swam like shiny porpoises in the pool, calling out to one another and racing laps.

"Lad!" Terry laughed as Alexander emerged dripping and shook his hair over him. "Don't get my fish tacos wet, I waited all year for these. So what do you think, should we head over to San Diego State for the afternoon tour?"

Alexander lay down with a towel over his face. "Nope. I just want to eat lunch and sit here."

Alyssa peered under the towel with consternation. Seven years earlier she had pressed me to hurry from California campus to campus on her college search, so eager to begin this next chapter. "But brother, isn't this so exciting -- graduation, college?"

"I'm just so worn out. Do we have to look at another college today?"

"Sounds good to me," Terry grinned, squeezing another lime over the crispy baja fish. "That makes it Pacifico time," he sang out, popping a beer and squeezing another lime into it. "Yeah, California."

"I don't know if I'm ready for college. I don't even drive." Alexander flopped over, his chin in his hands, glum.

"Yeah, what's up with that? I had you driving around our subdivision last summer and backing out and then you stopped when I went to Oregon." Alyssa had pressed Terry, a former driving instructor, to take her out on the road hours and hours a day to practice. Alexander had gasped with panic each time he hit a bump, while the intrepid Alyssa was undaunted when she bumped into cars in parking lot or drove over a curb.

"I don't want to drive, ever." How quickly the mood had shifted from discussing the next stage, his future. A moment ago in the pool they had been little kids again, diving for pennies. The future was a bright found penny to Alyssa, sure to bring good fortune onward and upward toward the next thing, while it was a lead sinker to Zan, pulling him down. One more stage he wouldn't be able to master, like riding a bike, or a razor scooter or driving a car.

A small chartreuse parrot swooped into a palm tree, chirping and rustling atop the red-tiled roof of the San Diego State campus. An indigo tiled Spanish fountain plinked musically. Sun poured over the mission style stucco courtyard washing it in creamy light. Bougainvillea spilled from the corner. I sat down on a bench.

"This might be the most beautiful campus I've ever seen," I said sinking onto a bench by the fountain. "Alyssa, I can't believe you passed on this place. It was almost free with your scholarship and in-state tuition, and you chose Boston and winter!"

"Hey, at least it was Boston winter and not Michigan," she snarked.

She had a point, we had flown out on a day when another 13-inch snowstorm threatened, a regular occurrence in the snow belt where storms stalled out over Lake Michigan, picking up moisture like a hurricane to dump 100 inches of snow on Michigan's west coast most winters. Terry loved to walk out to Big Red, the lighthouse, and watch big ice floes pile up on Lake Michigan near the harbor, mountainous and jagged as the winds howled like a wounded animal. I shivered at the thought.

As Zan neared the end of high school, I thought I might be ready for a change as well. Perhaps a change of career. The downsizing directives under the guise of "reorganization" each October, at each newspaper I'd worked at, were demoralizing -- for the entire team. Reductive in every sense, they were publishing code for shrinking staff, shrinking vision, shrinking coverage. There was no way to maintain the same level, and caliber, of coverage when a newsroom shrank by 40 percent. There were simply 40 percent fewer reporting and editing hours available to do the same job with. I too wanted a more expansive future. At each school, I checked out graduate writing programs; I was not certain there would be much of a future in journalism.

I was in a loopy daze, straggling behind Terry and Zan drinking in the sunshine and floral scents. "Well, I'm sold," I laughed to Lys.

"He's sure not, he told me it looks like a Taco Bell." She raised her eyebrow, gauging my reaction.

"Hey Zan," I called out. "Taco Bell, really?" I pointed out the glass dome over the library, shaking my head.

Terry shot me a warning glance and walked back, sober. "He's pretty cranky. Hates it here wants to go back to the hotel."

"Of course he does, now. He'll get used to it. It just takes a while for him to warm up to things."

At UC San Diego, we met an old high school friend of Alyssa's doing a Phd in microbiology there. "Zan!" Andrew said, giving each one a hug. "College, huh buddy?"

He allowed a small smile, which grew broader as he toured the Star Wars chic campus, surrounded by cypress groves. My heart sank, UCSD was one of the hardest to get into; many 4.0 students with incredible SATs didn't make the cut.

"I could do this," he said to Andrew over a pizza lunch.

The next couple of days at the resort we laid around the pool reading, ordering frozen drinks feeling celebratory that he actually seemed to think college might be manageable. Alyssa's college tour had been a complete bust. She'd shrunk from the cold angular institutional UC behemoths, her heart set on ivy-covered colonial New England village.

It started well enough, my brother-in-law showed Zan his office in the library and we played with one of my sister Kathleen's new baby daughters at lunch in the Westmont cafeteria. Jonathan, my sister Anna's friend who would later become her husband, came down from his office for lunch too. Kathleen, Jeff and Jonathan met at the Presbyterian, Santa Barbara sister college to Gordon, Alyssa and Anna's Boston area alma mater. If Gordon was quaint colonial Greek revival, Westmont was old Hollywood Hills mission chic. The gardens dripped wisteria from pergolas along a path to a chapel in a wooded grove, red-tiled roofs and stucco crawled with hibiscus and star jasmine, it smelled paradisiacal.

When we walked over to see a dorm, Alexander's head snapped suspiciously when he heard a guitar strumming. He recognized the chords to a song we sang at church. His nostrils flared. "And that's why I have no intention of going here," he snapped as two students broke into harmony. "I am not going to a *Christian* school." His tone dripped contempt and the couple stared at him, at his shoulder length hair, the torn jeans, his malevolent glare.

"Oh damn, tour's over Terry," I said, trying to make light.

"Zan don't you think Westmont is beautiful?" Terry asked, stopping.

"Right, place is crawling with a bunch of sappy Christians," he snapped, narrowing his eyes.

"Alexander Kennedy, you are being incredibly rude to your aunts and uncle who drove here today to show you their college. Show some respect please." He had a tight grip on Alexander's elbow.

Alexander clenched his jaw. "Let go of my arm!" He jerked away and walked down the hill. Alyssa looked embarrassed making apologies to her aunts, just a few years older. "I think he's just feeling the pressure of the family college."

By contrast, he adored UC Santa Barbara, its oceanside setting, proximity to his grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins just 20 miles up the hill. "I'm going here," he announced.

"I think that would be great, but we'd better think up a back-up plan because this one's super competitive too."

"Don't you think I can do this?" he looked at me, incredulous.

"Well, I do. But I think it's going to be tough to get in."

"You'll see, I'll get all A's senior year." And he did.

With his eyes trained on California he aced every single class his senior year, passed his AP tests, and nailed the SATs. Yet none of it would be enough. A language learning disability tripped him in Spanish up when no amount of tutoring, special education or Rosetta Stone could power through it.

"We see this often," the Neuropsych said. "Language learning disabilities seem to disproportionally affect students on the autism spectrum. Alexander had worked with an auditory therapist on auditory discrimination, but he simply could not make out the soft consonants of Spanish and his small school offered no substitute.

"You might try a pictorial based language -- Kanji, Japanese perhaps." For two years he'd badgered me to let him take Japanese at Hope College, just three blocks from his high school campus. It indeed was the language for him and when he finally came to it years later, he earned straight A's in that too.

My son made dean's list senior year, but was not sure he could manage his Asperger's and living on campus independently. While Michigan State University had 22 students in its Asperger support program, which was impressive, the resource specialist in autism explained the challenges.

"Asperger students, even our doctoral students, struggle with spatial orientation and frequently get lost on a campus of this size." I knew what she meant. We had missed the first part of the visitation day orientation, lost getting from the parking lot to the hall. "We provide Tower Guards from the honor society to escort students to class the first two weeks to memorize the routes. We've had too many emergency calls from students lost, wandering miles from campus, in tears unable to find their way back. This works."

Terry's face was crumpling. Alexander had reached for his hand, to comfort himself or his dad?

"Also, he may need solo housing. The sensory stimuli of dorm life, the noise volume, can be distressing for our Asperger students. A loud or drunk roommate who keeps the lights on all night or brings his girlfriend home can cause distress and sleep deprivation, and there have been incidents."

"Okay, we get the picture," Terry cut her off, terse. Lately he'd been telling Zan about his own first year at Georgetown College, moving into the dorms, the dating and parties and fun.

"Terry," I had cautioned, "I'm not sure that's going to be his experience, not everything will magically transform because he goes to college."

I remembered when I had been upset because Alexander would not do his homework. "Just wait until his desk gets here," Terry had said. "He'll have a place to do it." Alexander had filled the desk with Pokemon cards and Gameboy cartridges. He did not do his homework.

We began to talk of going together. “But I am so old. Everyone will be your sister’s age,” I protested. “And I have autism,” he laughed. “And everyone will be neurotypical non-Aspie.”

The fall weekend he visited Eastern Michigan University's Japanese cultural studies program, I toured the University of Michigan campus, contemplating applying for a journalism fellowship. When the call came from U of M, offering to fly me in to candidate for the weekend, I was thrilled, and terrified. Over the weekend visit, I met editors at the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, NPR and many others I was too star-struck to recall. There, on the diag, the siren chime of a bell tower called to me, an ivy incantation etched upon red brick.

That senior year as my son sounded out SAT vocabulary words, I crammed for the GRE. We commiserated over our quantitative scores and rejoiced over our verbals. We proofread one another's bios and essays for college applications. We visited campuses and writing programs together and got a speeding ticket en-route to the campus of my father's alma mater, Michigan State, got lost and missed the admissions presentation. We walked the red brick Georgian campus of my top choice. Zan shook his mane of indigo hair. "Too many knuckle-bumping bros," he pronounced.

When the byzantine ways of FAFSA applications proved elusive we texted Alyssa for tech support. At work on her graduate thesis, she whispered from deep in the stacks of the University of Oregon library.

My son and I sweated out spring college acceptance season together. A wave of small envelopes arrived addressed to my Alexander. He retreated silently to his room. On my 50th birthday, I whooped and jumped up and down in the kitchen when the first congratulatory acceptance call came, nearly knocking Terry over in my excitement.

That night I told my book group, we were all working artists: an author, a glassblower, several painters, a designer. "You're going to be a Mod Mom!" Julie crowed. She began reminiscing with her college sweetheart, a pretty brunette and New York Times best-selling fantasy author. Julie was no slouch herself, a fantasy author with a cult following and a former Guggenheim fellow who worked at the Getty. "These well-dressed moms showed up in the back of our classes in the 1990s," Julie explained.

"Was it weird having classmates your mom's age?" I asked, not sure I really wanted to know.

"No way. They were the ones you asked to take notes if you were not in class," her partner said, arching her brow.

Alexander opened the mailbox to find a deluge of rejections that spring. All of the four of the California college declined; foreign language credits were required for consideration. We appealed to disability services, explaining the auditory discrimination disability. They would not consider a disabilities waiver.

The week I was admitted he came into the house from the mailbox, threw a torn envelope on the counter, and yelled, "I must as well just do the retard bus training, I'll never get into college!"

The timing could not have been worse. The county disability services office required a "transition plan" established for each graduating student with a disability. On the dean's list that semester, he sat in horror as the county disability officer explained the 16-week job training camp with mentally disabled teens. A short bus would ferry the retarded, Downs and autistic teens to menial task jobs stacking cans or rounding up carts in grocery stores. In the wake of the many college rejections, it was all too much. "We will not be doing that, under any circumstances," I snapped. "Can you imagine?" I had raged to Terry in the car on the way home, surreptitiously wiping the corners of my eyes. Zan had stared fixedly out the window.

I picked up the torn envelope. We drove six hours down to Antioch College in Ohio when he began looking for back-up colleges to his California choices. The town's artsy bohemian vibe of Berkeley in the 1960s and campus had charmed him. We had driven to his dad's favorite ice creamery, Young's Dairy and ordered shakes and burgers and ice cream cones. While the cows were long gone from the corrals, it had been a golden day, and the campus, which had been shuttered for several years, was in the process of being renovated to reopen.

He was wild with delirium when they selected him for an interview. When he launched into a monologue about swordplay, fencing and his anime sketches and Japanese culture, I had frantically sliced my hands through the air, trying to stop him. He glared and locked his door. I called Terry at work in his Lansing office and whispered, "Don't count on it, pretty sure it's going south, he's having a moment up there." Terry had finally been transferred to a Michigan Methodist congregation that summer, and I was not sure I wanted to take the fully funded fellowship offer in Ohio as it would put us in two states once again. I had not known how good this new beginning might feel at my life stage, but I wanted to share it with Alexander. He would not talk to me about it.

"Am I ever going to get in to college?" I heard Alexander whisper to Terry. "What am I supposed to do if I don't -- what *do* kids do?" We didn't know, we hadn't been those kids, Alyssa hadn't been that kid. It was something that simply hadn't occurred to us.

When Michigan State passed, his counselor was aghast. "I've seen kids with much lower GPAs and SAT scores, it doesn't make sense." His grandfather made a quick call to admissions from Santa Barbara, as a concerned alumnus. They'd reconsider in one year, after he completed general education credits. Acceptance from a four-year college was required to graduate from his high school. These had been the back-up colleges.

"Well, he hasn't any extra-curriculars, except Japan Club and writing, which is pretty much all he does after school, four or five hours a day." His new perseveration was writing, and he had determined to write a novel for his capstone senior project. He had been finishing it over spring term break, a week-long intensive in a one to eight teacher student ratio.

"Now that's the way education should work," he said. "One teacher to eight student. Because let's face it the teacher-student relationship is a joke in regular classrooms, the teacher has no time to talk to you. Crowd teaching complete waste of time, it's why I like AP art history so much. There are, like, five people in a class being taught by a teacher with total mastery of the subject. You want to do it, maybe for a living, and they want to share that knowledge with people who are really interested in using it."

"Well, crowd teaching is economically do-able. They have to up the student-teacher ratio because it keeps costs down, but what about online classes? That could work."

"Look, I'm online many hours in a day, and you know what I like -- immediate feedback. I get to see what people think about something I wrote right away. No teacher can do that with everyone, even online. And you know, it's like the art teacher we want to spend time with people we admire, people you respect. To breathe the air that they breathe."

I was pretty sure he was going to be one of those people some day. How could a college not see this in my son? He loved learning, in the same way these educators did. In the same way generations of us had loved learning.

"Anyway, I hope college is more like term break, if I ever get in. We're out writing in cafes and interviewing people and writing character sketches about people we see in the parks."

"Hey, I'd like to spend the day writing in the park."

"Maybe they'll let you do that in college mom," he laughed. "My mom is going to college!"

Shortly before graduation, Eastern Michigan University invited him for fall semester in Japanese cultural studies and creative writing. I could not stop crying as I stood on my toes to fix the tassel on his cap and gown. "Zan, do you know how many doctors and teachers told us you

would certainly never do this? Not read, not..." I lost it, putting my cheek against his, unfamiliar and smooth. We had made it despite those many dark nights in the Northwoods. Wrestling with the perinatologist advice to terminate the pregnancy. Waiting for the helicopter that might carry this boy away at his birth. Watching a small pulsar of light register his respiration on the ceiling above his bassinet. Wrestling down letters and phonetics over bedtime books in second grade. Fending off the special ed teachers intent on shipping him off to a disability manual labor training camp.

He'd cut his long hair off for graduation. He had said he was ready for a different life and he wanted to look like it. "My audacious, stubborn boy you have done it. Dammit Zan, you did it!" I shouted, jubilant. His sister, who had flown in for the day, could not stop taking pictures and Zan could not stop grinning.

As orientation day neared my daughter returned from Oregon to help us pack for my move to graduate school. On the last day of June, on Alyssa's 25th birthday, we drove over to Ann Arbor where she was interviewing with an arts and culture department at the University of Michigan. We had an appointment to transfer Zan's IEP, and get his ID card at Eastern Michigan across town. He balked at getting out of the car.

"Come on Zan, we're going to California Pizza Kitchen for dinner after this for Lys's birthday. Let's just do it."

They took his photo and gave him the laminated ID badge and printed out a class schedule. "Don't forget move-in day is August 22 and then freshman orientation."

"I'm not living on campus, I'm getting an apartment with my sister."

If she takes the job at Michigan I thought, otherwise she intended to move to Cincinnati with me. "Well?"

"I think they might have an inside candidate, they seemed really interested, but said, they have a couple of other things if this isn't it. Sometimes they just have to interview three. And I don't know if I like Ann Arbor. It's pretty small."

"Well I don't like it here either and if you're not moving here then I am not going here."

"Whoa, hold the phone buddy. Where are you going if not here?"

"The campus is ugly, and I don't want to be at college all alone, I'm not moving without her." His voice broke.

The kids settled into the Cincinnati house as if they'd never left four years ago. "My childhood home," Alexander said.

"You know, let's register him at the University of Cincinnati for summer class," Alyssa suggested. "I took summer classes for credits my junior year. We might want a back-up plan?"

It was a good idea, to try out the college coursework while she was home to tutor him. She signed her brother up for a sci-fi lit class and Japanese. After six years, it was great to have our fourth wheel back. Without her we bumped along.

"I got A's in my first two college classes!" Alexander hollered as we came in one day. "And you can just un-register me from EMU because I'm not going there, I'm staying here. With the family."

Alyssa took me shopping for school clothes, tossing my mom-jeans in the Goodwill box. And then, after 25 long years, one fine September day my children took me out onto the front porch to pose for a first day of school photo. "You make us do this every year," they chorused, laughing.

In that photo, I looked nervous in my freshly pressed white skirt, a leather messenger bag with textbooks slung over my shoulder. My son looked equally hesitant in his first day of college photo, standing between Mick and Mack, two stone lions guarding McMicken Hall at the University of Cincinnati -- the very place I took my last college final, 25 years ago.