rugged crossroads
a memoir
For My Clan
Preface

*Rugged Crossroads* is a memoir. It is divided into four parts each with about two chapters within them. I must say, that despite the length of this piece, I am not yet satisfied with its entirety. Each chapter within the parts can be viewed as a different scene within the entire story, a story that happens to be mine. These chapters, or rather, outtakes come from a sea of 23 years of memory and experience. I have learned that the whole story cannot be adequately depicted given my current abilities as an undergraduate student and Bemidji State. I am looking forward to my Master’s studies to either rid myself of this project or improve it. Also, I have come to the understanding that although I believe this thesis is complete enough to satisfy the requirements of any given Creative Honor’s Thesis or Senior Project; it is not yet a book. Thus, my discomfort.

With that said, I would like to explain for a moment the structure of this piece in more detail as it was decided upon with much care and attention. It can be seen that the “story” begins with a dedication. This dedication is specific to my origins and history. I say *For My Clan* rather than to my family, because that seemed too specific. I wanted something more general that encompassed more than just blood relatives. The family I refer to is broader than the standard stereotype of a nuclear American household.

This preface comes next because I want to orient the people feeling obliged to read further.

The first three parts of this tale are devoted to the extraordinary individuals that compelled me to write *Rugged Crossroads*, exposed through my interpretation and experiences of
them. Along side of this journey into what seems to me ancient history, is a simpler adventure, a spring break trip to Sedona, Arizona. It is my hope that, that story line acts as a checkpoint to help push the story ahead. I attempted to coordinate that plot line with my childhood development as to keep movement within the piece, and show the many faces of the narrator, which happens to be me.

Part 4 will feel uncomfortable, and it is supposed to. The structure may feel blurred. I hope it feels blended. I think of Part 4 as similar to an estuary where a river dumps into the ocean. Fresh water blends with salt, a smaller world becomes larger. One story ends, the journey to Sedona and back. But with that story also ends the persistent string of memories, the story of my youth. It changes from recall to reflection and introspection.

There is poetry in this memoir. It is placed intermittently throughout the piece. I use it as a tool, much like a tuning fork. I want my readers to hear a particular chord, feel the particular emotion I give more obviously in the poem, and let that place them into the proper state of mind for the beginning or ending of a section. As a better poet than non-fiction writer, I also saw this as a way to showcase the poetry that ultimately led to writing this memoir.

One way to look at Rugged Crossroads is as one would view a musical piece, like a symphony. The parts are like movements. Each section will have a different feel and pitch. My attempt was to ultimately create a kind of harmony between the high notes (humor, colorful imagery, and tender memory) and the low notes (ugly truths and blatant retelling) of one young woman’s account of a piece of American history people don’t often feel comfortable talking about.
Author’s Note

My mother gave me a diary when I was about six years old that was yellow with a carousel horse on the cover. Over the years, my writing changed from scribbles on pink pages to doodles in corners of my notebook in elementary school. As the times grew more difficult, the volumes of writing increased. The journals became complicated and full. Soon, they would become books with half written stories. Regardless, just by jotting down the meanderings of my mania, I had become a historian of my own experiences.

I rarely look back into those ramblings because they are just thoughts. They are indecent and unprocessed, and usually fleeting. It took a tremendous amount of practice to try and make them into something bigger than a sob story. I wanted to make something ugly, artistic. I may have failed. Regardless, writing *Rugged Crossroads* simply had to be done either way.

It seems that writers are at times considered self-centered. This is true. And since I cannot speak for all, I will speak for myself in this case. I write about myself because I know more about her than anyone else does, making me an expert in the field of my own thinking. Just like anybody.
Heavy lulls this wild thing inside.
A burden of a hundred pages fold.
A mighty labor soon
of a twenty year gestation.
Brewing and building,
block by block,
and particle by piece.
My belly big
and heart round.

Too heavy has it come,
to carry on my back or in my guts.
It has weighed too heavy for my feet.
My knees now buckle.
And every stride is labored
until I liberate
this portly grub.
A gift
or parasite?
But a tribute to every rugged crossroad
and every digested loss.
All birthed by a pen.

I am free
only when these impish tales,
leave port to burn
or sail,
under the hornet sun.
Finally to float
or sink deep beneath
the briny waves.

In this last trimester,
I work hardest not to fall.
As to miscarry this,
would be unpardonable.

—Literary Pregnancy
Part 1
Chapter 1

I like trains. Trains run parallel to the happenings of this life. They are a consistency, something that stays the same. They look the same, act the same, and sound the same, no matter where they are. Sometimes a person can be lucky enough to see the same train miles away from where they first saw it.

I like to spot trains. I like to spot them and count their cars. Watch as orange or red engines with their white headlights charge forward into the night. Driven. On course. Unstoppable. They never let little things like pebbles or branches get in their way.

*I am a train.* I thought as we blasted ahead on the interstate in the lipstick-red Yaris. It was only partially damaged by the doe we clipped in southern Iowa at about 2 A.M. the previous day. It happened next to a snow drift that covered a corn field. Poor deer. But she didn’t stop us for too long, we were still on course. Driven. Unstoppable. *Like a train.*

I stared out of the tinted window at the train slipping behind us as we chugged along the highway cutting through the length of New Mexico heading West to Sedona. I thought about the day before as I watched the train roll behind us. I looked out the rear windshield. I looked back toward Colorado and missed the foothills and the mountains.

I thought of going back home on my own terms. I thought of what it was like without them. I thought of Wheat Ridge and Anderson Park and the multicolored ducks that fought the slow current in Clear Creek, as they zigzagged upstream then let themselves drift back under the bridge that lead to the Green Belt. They did this all day, looking for bugs and easy meals, and fish to say hello to.

So, I thought of fishing. I saw myself as a little girl, chubby with red ringlets in hand-me-down clothes standing on the
dilapidated dock that jutted out into the pond I used to think was a lake. I stood there with a bit of fishing line in my hand with a chunk of bacon tied to the end. My mother was on shore chatting with a church member smoking a cigarette, looking my way only when I shouted, "I got one!"

I pulled an ugly eight legged clawed critter from the urban pond. It was a brown and red crayfish and she must have been proud.

I thought of that town, and how small it seemed some twelve years after moving away. That world was small. When we came up over the hill on I-70 looking for the exit onto Kipling my heart rate quickened and bile welled up from my stomach into the back of my mouth. I had carefully premeditated each part of what I thought I needed to do that day in Colorado twelve years later. I had a number of check points I felt I needed to see, just to see if they were still there. And they were. And they hadn’t changed except for feeling empty. The streets were as I remembered them, but the air was heavier because of the thoughts that seeped in through the car doors. I remembered family.

I thought of my mother and of roses. I needed two yellow roses. I drove to King Soopers, where I hoped they still had a flower shop. My pace was quickened some because I felt exposed. I had never taken anyone home with me. I had never shown anyone the place I had come from. I felt vulnerable. I felt nude. I didn’t want him to think of me any differently. I was partially ashamed of my modest upbringing. It seemed so different than his.

I hurried, and paid cash for the flowers. I was exhausted and wanted to be out of the car. I wanted to stop driving but I wanted more to get out of that town as quickly as possible and escape to the mountains. I wanted to stop remembering, but wanted to see a few things first. We got into the Yaris and drove only a few blocks to Glory of God Lutheran Church. A courtyard of memory awaited me when we arrived in the parking lot. I stared for a moment up over the steering wheel, my hands glued there until I pulled my white knuckles down to my lap. I closed my eyes. I breathed. I unwrapped the flowers from the tissue and took out two of the twelve yellow roses.
I latched the car door behind me, but when I stepped out onto the pavement, I was a different person. I was eleven again. It was a different time and I was wearing a lavender dress covered in flowers.

It was August of 1998. I was in the church that had baptized me and taught me that god was a genie. It was not my community but hers, my mother’s. I went to Sunday school because she taught there. I went to Wednesday night services during Lent, because it was a free meal and she was tired of cooking. I went to bible camp, because she didn’t want me to see what she was becoming. I sang solo’s in the children’s choir because she sang to us while we sat on the brown carpet in front of her when she sat on her bed with her guitar. We, my sister and I, twisted our fingers through the carpet fibers as she strummed the old steel string that now sits in my living room, rarely touched. She sang at church next to me as I would fall asleep with my head in her lap. She wouldn’t get up when the minister told her to get up because she didn’t want to wake me.

It was August of 1998. I was in the courtyard of the same church staring at two hundred and fifty lavender balloons. I matched them. I wanted to be them. I wanted to be able to speak with her the way she said that the balloons could. She told us that if you tie a message to a balloon and let it fly free it would find its way to her. An angel would catch it from a cloud and deliver it to her. She would read it. She never told me that angels couldn’t catch.

It did not seem like a celebration to me, but there was cake and there was coffee, and there were balloons. I don’t remember if I cried that day after I sang. I remember only my father and the image of my soccer team in uniform in the fourth or fifth row of the church. The stained glass windows seemed too festive, but I refused to wear black because her favorite color was purple.

I flashed back into the present. I was almost twenty-three standing with tissue in one hand and the two yellow roses in the other. I looked at the brass placard on the altar. Lana Jean Dennison. I located the tile below and thought of the can of ash that was just half of my mother. I wondered where the rest had flown to after my sister and I released them from above timber line
a few thousand feet higher than Elk Park. I wondered if the note I etched into the side of a down Jackpine with the sharp edge of a rock was still there. I wondered if hikers ever wondered what it meant.

I was nearly twenty three again. I could feel that same liquid buried in my chest. It was sunk deep like water in an old coal mine. It sloughed when I coughed. It squeezed and wrung my lungs like a dirty dish rag. Dirty water climbed into my mouth. It was metallic and tasted like blood. Grief still tasted bad. I looked down at the tissue in my hand.

I remembered the dirty tissues that she had used, that covered the coffee table. They were covered in Technicolor mucus. She folded them over and over, reusing them once or twice more than she should have. Bits of lung sometimes left her chest and ended up in those tissues. Three and a half years she coughed up her lungs.

It all started with lumps though. The first one snuck into her breast. It was biopsied and it was benign. I learned from this, that breasts are lumpy and benign things are not bad things. The next lump moved up her fair body into the side of her neck. It was small so she didn’t go to the doctor. She didn’t want to hear what he had to say, so she waited.

I was seven. I sat with my grandmother and sister in white sterility for the first time. A hospital. A graveyard. A place that smelled like chemicals and old people. The chairs were strait-backed. There was a bank on the side of a hall and they were covered in vinyl. They seemed like the rows of benches at a train station. I waited for a train. We waited for the ride.

A doctor approached us. His shoes squeaked against the polished floor. I don’t remember his face, just his feet. I stared at the tile when he moved toward my grandmother. I don’t remember the conversation they had or the look in my grandmother’s eyes, but I remember the word malignant. Malignant was not benign. Malignant was bad. So, I cried. The tests began. It was February and I was a second grader.

It was craft day and my mother had Lung cancer. I learned that cancer was much like the stuff of bad dreams. It loomed unnoticed like monsters under beds or in closets then snatched you
up. Monsters weren’t real. Cancer wasn’t real.

My friend Lauren’s mother was helping me with a project, and she asked me about my mother. I said plainly, “She has cancer.”

I went back to my crafting. I learned that day how society reacts to a seven-year-old who says such things. Her posture changed, she stood up straighter. Her hand went up to her mouth and her head bent down. Lauren’s mother was pretty. She had brown hair and light eyes, probably blue. Her eyes looked sad though, and she said nothing. Her lips tried to smile at me, but couldn’t. She put her hand on my shoulder, gave a little squeeze, then moved away not knowing what to say.

I liked to watch people. I learned a lot from faces. Words typically eluded me when I was that young. I remembered too, later that year at parent teacher conferences when my mother had to meet with Mr. HATCHEN because I was struggling with reading. I had a crush on him. He was funny and had kind eyes. I was fat and very angry. At the conference I sat in a little desk, the classroom pet (a blow up stegosaurus) hung from the ceiling across the room. I fiddled with a pencil pretending not to listen, but knew what they were actually meeting about. Mr. HATCHEN touched my mother’s arm, bowed his eyes and tried to smile, but couldn’t. He knew she was dying, but pretended that the meeting was about something else. He must have said, “Lana, your daughter has been drawing ladies that seem to have giant breasts.”

He showed her one of my drawings. It was a piecemealed image of a woman in a frilly gown drawn astutely with magic markers. I interjected, and corrected them.

“No, those are puffy sleeves, like the ones on wedding dresses.” I hope they laughed.

My grandmother was a seamstress. It was not uncommon that I would attempt to design my own versions of the dresses she made. I liked puffy sleeves and thought I was clever. He thought I was inappropriate.

After the meeting, I went with my mother to yet another office. I sat in the waiting room. A comfortable place only if there were a sufficient number of brain teasers and magazines or fish
tanks. Next came the tubes, the needles, the pokes, the prods, the fluids, the tests, the bile, the vomit, the shit, the tears, the blood. Then came the pills. Then came the vocabulary, like MRI, CAT SCAN, chemotherapy, radiation, IV, seizure, GAMMA KNIFE, halo, screws... Terminal.

After a slew of tests and after my mother’s eyes were black with tears as she puffed the end of a cigarette at the dining room table, I was sad too. I buried my head into her stomach and held her. The doctor gave her six months.

I wouldn’t believe it. I couldn’t. It was impossible and contradicted everything I knew. Therefore, I reasoned the doctor was wrong and god would fix everything. I believed in an all-powerful, man-god that looked like Santa Clause in a white robe. I believed in prayer. I believed that if you pray, and pray hard, you will get what you pray for.

So, I prayed hard. Each night, as I was afraid of sleeping because it was riddled with night terrors that would wake me up, I would lay frozen and shivering in a pool of cold sweat unable to scream. I would pray as to avoid those dreams. I was completely convinced that I alone could save the world, most importantly my mother. I structured my prayers from the most general things to the most specific. My hope was that if I prayed for the things outside of my life and my family first, god would realize that I cared for more than just what I wanted. I prayed for the world. I prayed that the war would end. I prayed for the children in Kosovo who, at Christmas time we sent shoe boxes filled with yo-yo’s and crayons. I prayed for the stars. I prayed for the moon. I prayed for my school, my soccer team, the sick people at church, that my stuffed animals would come to life, that my grandmother would be happy, that my dad would love me, and that my mother’s cancer would go away, and that the bad dreams would stop. God was a supplier of endless gifts and when beckoned, would answer exactly.

These prayers were silent and lasted for hours. Sometimes, I would repeat them. I would go on tangents and stare up at the ceiling of our condo at Ptarmigan, lighted by the blue night light my sister hated, but I was afraid of the dark. I was afraid of my dreams. I didn’t want to sleep and I didn’t want the demons to
come out of my closet when my sister turned the light off.

The dreams had started the year before as did my fear of water. An IMAX film at the Denver Museum of Natural History plagued me for the next decade. I was a sensitive child to begin with, had balance issues, and a sensitive stomach. I had anxiety and was preoccupied with what elementary age children are preoccupied with when their worlds are falling apart. The film attacked my balance.

It was a film about sea life. The creators had attached a camera onto the back of a seal as to get a better understanding of deep water and the daily routine of sea lions. The seal took us deep into a green kelp bed, spiraling round and round in a roller coaster ride, up and down into the depths. I was nauseous. The next clip was about ocean predators. The screen flashed to an image of a three-story great white shark with big pink gums that gored at the bloody corpse of a sea lion. I was traumatized.

After my mother’s diagnosis the dreams worsened. In her single motherdom, and as a liberal woman anyway, the observations of what my sister and I watched on T.V. were less of a priority than her working two jobs and fighting cancer. My older sister liked horror movies. I watched them too, and then I would dream about corpses in our yard.

It was a big yard, almost like a park; shared by all the families that lived in the little boxes they called condominiums. The tennis court was surrounded by raspberry and chokecherry bushes. It was in this yard that my mother was my mother and my friend. Despite her sickness she would play catch with me and kick my turquoise and pink soccer ball back to me.

One Colorado winter, when the snow was thick, and my mother in a fit of wanting to forget, tore us from the television after a T.V. dinner of turkey and mashed potatoes, had us put on our hats and mittens and go outside into the snowstorm. The flakes were fat and stood out against the night sky. They were wet and easy to build with. We built a snow cave and threw snowballs at each other, crawling in and out of our makeshift igloo laughing as families are supposed to. My pink fur coat was soaked. Her face was smiling. Her eyes were the same color as mine, but her hair wasn’t red anymore.
Things changed. It must have been the next winter that I was outside playing alone, making inventions out of coffee cans, panty hose, and snow shovels. I excitedly traipsed through the screen door of my grandmother’s house and let the door slam behind me. I was snow blind and sun burnt. I excitedly looked for my mother, looking for my winter playmate. Grandma shushed me. Mom was sleeping and didn’t feel well. Again.

Over the next years, a series of ugly metamorphoses occurred. Her hair went from long and red to bald. She had a nicely shaped head though. She would have me tap it with a baby brush to stimulate hair growth, some grew back. The fuzz on her scalp was very fine and dirty blonde like a baby’s. It was a small triumph. For a while, she wore a natural hair wig as to lessen the transition for her Sunday school students. She didn’t want to scare them. As time went on, her skin yellowed and she became forgetful. I was often forgotten to be picked up from school. I would wait by the pine trees or roam the playground. Throw rocks at the foursquare black top, or cry. I wondered if she had gotten into a car accident. I didn’t blame the medications or the brain tumors then; I blamed myself and was convinced that I had done something wrong for years.

Solitude was part of my childhood. I lived a large part of that time in Colorado in a cardboard fort my mother and cousin, Dennis, made me. It was formed by refrigerator boxes and thin pieces of balsa wood. It was held together by duct tape and staples, something I wished I could use to repair my mother. It was inside that refuge that I sat at a child-sized folding table with a reading light and got lost in stories about dragons, elves, and trains. I didn’t like where I was, so I imagined I was someplace else.
Chapter 2

I realized where I was. I shook the ashes out of my head and looked up at him. He held my hand and I left the roses on the red brick tile. We were still at the church. Only a few moments had gone by, but the rush of memories flooded my body. It always did. Whenever I returned to that place, it was a tsunami that hit me square in the chest, it was harder to breathe. I swallowed the lump in my esophagus and climbed back into the Yaris. I was frustrated because I couldn’t remember my mother before she was ill. What she looked like, or how her voice sounded. I debated for a while whether or not I wanted to take our glum tour back passed the first house I ever lived in; the one on Beach Court.

I have only hearsay about the things that went on inside that brick house. The rest are fractured recollections that are now recounted by my sister. The cream colored carpet of that three-story world on Beach Court was home to a number of steps I don’t remember taking. There are only a few I can actually recall for myself.

As I dug the Burt’s Bees out of my pocket and drove toward the Lutheran Hospital to drop off the remaining ten roses, I laughed at the image that popped into my brain.

I was alone in our upstairs bedroom, probably only three or four years old. I was sitting cross-legged between our double bed and K-mart set of dressers. I had my little back leaned against the flowered bed cover, admiring my new treasure. I rolled it around in my hands. It was a jewel. A prize. A symbol of femininity, just a step shy of lipstick and fashion. It was a piece of normal childhood. It was a tube of grape Chapstick that was too large for my hands. Beneath the sparkled cap was a tower of waxy purple, hardly natural. I put it to my lips. It was sweet. It tasted just like
the grape soda my mother used to buy for me at the grocery store—my favorite next only to strawberry cream. I licked the purple. I licked it again. I took a bite. Then another. And another. I ate the entire tube without regret. It was delicious. I left only an empty plastic cylinder for my mother to find, although she never did find it. Immediately after finishing, I remember her coming up the stairs to gather me up for our next errand. A whoosh of arms and a blur of red hair picked me up. She smelled like smoke and flowers and we were off to somewhere. I don’t have an image of her, just a ghostly loving figure big enough to make me fly.

I recalled another day, a year before or more, but still all a blur. I was on another outing with her. The object was to obtain signatures.

I held her hand. I had to reach up to clasp my pudgy fingers around hers. They didn’t stretch enough to reach around her palm. They were cold. I saw wood around us. It was more yellow than brown and I would guess it was pine lacquered with some bright industrial stain—government approved. I sat on a hard bench, my feet didn’t touch the floor. It must have been wood too. There was a flag. We were in a formal building. My mother went to a window and spoke to a faceless person.

“Divorce papers,” a voice said.

I reasoned I was at the courthouse with my mother as I tried to string the fragmented memories together. My mother looked content. She was smiling. It was the kind of smile I see other mothers smile when they are telling their daughters and sons about undesirable but important life lessons. It was the same sort of smile mothers use to trick babies into eating creamed cauliflower, false and almost mocking. I imagined a generic soccer mom endearingly looking at her offspring with an open mouth shaped like an “O”. She made her eyes wide. She scooped out a disagreeable and unsolicited dollop of pureed hell onto a spoon and pretended it was a cargo plane. She told the child to open wide. She said the plane was going to land. She excited the babe with an epic adventure about the Red Barron, thus the child experienced a false sense of security. Opened its mouth as she was about to dish.
At this point the child had three options. Swallow the nasty shit, spit it back out, or purse its lips so close together it never had a chance to get in.

I had just returned to the Yaris after having a conversation with a nurse and dropping off the left over roses to the oncology ward. I was looking for the rocking chair I had donated to Lutheran Hospital when I was eighteen. It was the one she had rocked me in. I was slightly relieved that the hospital was under construction and the chair with a placard of their names was in storage and that the chapel was being remodeled. I didn’t know if I could stomach seeing much more.

I crawled into the passenger seat. I was quiet. My lips were pursed, and I kept a stiff upper lip. I stared ahead. He kissed my cheek and we left Wheat Ridge.
Part 2
Chapter 3

Our eyes were heavy from the driving and near misses of the night before. Our bellies were sick from too much coffee and from the greasy apple fritters and long johns we had devoured earlier that morning, on the all important stop at Wenchel’s. I couldn’t call this a vacation.

I took pleasure in watching as his eyes widened when he looked West toward the mountains. I adored those peaks, but it was a familiar sort of love. That sort of love, was the kind of deep love that comes from experience and challenge. The kind of love a person can see when an elderly man with a balding head takes the hand of his silver haired wife, and walks with her slowly or kisses her.

The love I saw in him for the mountains was fresh and new. It was the kind of love that could remind old sweethearts where they began. His admiration for those ancient peaks covered in blue spruce and naked aspen reminded me of my old love for that place, those pretty mountains, and the old canyon road.

Because of the unpredictable weather, we decided it would be better not to take the canyon route that wound its way up the elevation toward Idaho Springs, our next stop. The winding two lane highway was unforgivable by its nature alone, bad weather made it lethal. It took the same swings and sways that Clear Creak did. But when ice welled up from blizzards that whited-out the world, semi trucks ended up on the banks of the river fished out only by chains and tow trucks.

As we sped up the newly forged interstate toward the Indian Springs Hot Springs, I thought about the road we didn’t take. I thought about the many times I had ridden in a car with someone up that canyon to get to, and from the house perched on
East-First-High-Street in Central City. It was a ghost town filled with broken down Victorian homes and phantoms, and newly industrialized casinos. It was a strange juxtaposition of remnants from the pioneer days and gold rush to the weekend getaway it became for snowbirds and eager tourists.

It was the second red brick house I had ever lived in. There was black rod iron railing along the steps that led up to its front doors. There were two doors, one for carrying the wife over the threshold and the other, for carrying out the corpse bride. We used the one below the sign that read Belford House. In the two winters I spent there, the snow plows loosened the railing at least three times and left it to swing unhinged from the steps.

I remembered the house well. The dining room was adorned with pink or rose colored wall paper. I could smell the dust in the cracks between the boards of the wood floor and feel the dampness of the mold in the walls. I felt the openness of the vaulted ceilings and remembered the chandeliers that went on and off without flipping any switches because of faulty wiring or poltergeists. The house was at least a hundred-and-twenty-years-old beginning to be reworked only after my aunt and uncle diligently strove to make it a home for my sister and me.

I don’t think it was my time for a home. In the months after my mother’s death the world became a finger painting. With my hapless whims and emotions of every color, I splotched at a dirty canvas. I was reckless and passionate. My young hands could not make the movements elegantly and I could not make the experiences beautiful. I stumbled angrily through the summer that became a blur and rebelled at the ruins of my shattered world. Everything I knew, everything I believed, and everything I could previously fathom—was made illusive and unclear. Nothing made sense. I felt the laws of the world had betrayed me.

There wasn’t enough time to settle in before things changed again. My aunt and uncle, who was my mother’s brother, needed work and that was not to be found in Central City’s ghost town. They needed to relocate. I refused to move. I had wrapped my sassy thirteen year old roots to the rocky Colorado soil and held on to the gravel as tight as I could. Like a pine tree that clings to the edge of a cliff, I was stubborn and precariously oriented, but
immovable.

The summer before, as to help relieve the transition for the tribe involved in caring for the survivors of my mother’s death, my sister and I rotated between three households. Grandma’s house in Wheat Ridge, Dad and Grandpa’s house in Lakewood, and the Belford House in Central City.

It was a strange thing to spend so much time with my father. He was previously a burly figure that showed up only at Dennison family Christmases, or dropped Easter baskets between the screen doors, or sent birthday wishes, or kissed my mother’s cheek when he saw her. He seemed kind enough, but I didn’t know him.

I really met my father for the first time just outside the double doors that lead to another sterile hallway. I stood there, eleven years old in the courtyard of St. John’s hospice with more on my mind than most fifth graders usually had. I ran my fingers over the petals of roses and marigolds and the green leaves that jutted up around snapdragons and tulips. I liked the way they smelled and how the leaves were cool regardless of the hot August sun. I stared into the faces of stone angels that could only cry when it rained and wished I could be as strong as they were. I looked into another statue’s face. It was the face of the Virgin Mary and wondered if she would be my mother after mine was gone.

From behind me, I could feel movement and I heard the strike of a match or lighter. I heard the doors quietly latch. An arm and a large callused hand put a little weight on my shoulder. He knew I was crying. I tucked my head into the space between my father’s big belly and chest and he put out his cigarette and wrapped around his other arm and held me.
Chapter 4

I could feel the air change even though the windows of the car were closed. The gassy putt-putt of the metropolitan suburbs capped Denver and its surrounding parts in an ugly haze on summer days. It was early spring though, and the gaseous dome wasn’t visible. The shift in environment or the shift in surroundings always led to a shift in perception. That change had the same effect that was produced by clouds rolling out of the sky to leave a yellow sun to hang free in an ocean of blue. It was a shift from stifling urban anxiety to quiet calm each time the putrid air lifted about halfway up the canyon. The smell changed from rust to leaves and pollen. There were times it made me sneeze. I breathed it. I tasted it. We were nearly to Idaho Springs, but I was still thinking of the leaves and pollen.

I thought again of the emerald stems in the courtyard with the stone angels and the Virgin Mary. When I entered the garden at St. John’s, I had felt the same way I felt that moment in the Yariss. The change in the air was an escape and refuge, paradise after purgatory.

At the hospice, the scent shifted from the toxic aroma of synthetic life where tubes became veins, and bleach cleaned up after death. Like leaving the city, a dead place, a place of concrete and stone, and households, and monotony, leaving the confines of St. John’s felt the same. The air became free of apathy and free of dead things. Bees tickled the mums and occasionally there were caterpillars that nibbled at the milkweed.

Inside the double doors, on the left side of the hall was a room that housed dozens of stuffed toys, and flowers, and a little
girl. I never stared in, but always glanced at her on my way to
the playroom that was just across the hall. She looked my age. I
would look away and enter the small room that had become a new
version of my cardboard castle at my grandmother’s house. I
would sit down at a different table, equally small, but covered in
puzzle pieces. I stared ahead at the orange and white fish in the
tank. I would forget where I was, and who I was as I watched them
swim about above their confetti colored gravel. I would watch and
forget that my mother was forgetting who I was. I would forget the
needle that lived in her bruised arm that fed her morphine so she
could dream. I would forget her swollen belly that was large from
the tumor that was eating her liver. I would forget the orange urine
that dribbled into the bag below the afghan that kept her warm.

Then I would remember as I looked down at the puzzle
pieces on the card table in front of me. They confused me. Just like
the pieces of my world, I could not put them together in the way
that fit, so I pushed them around with my little fingers and made
them into shapes that looked beautiful. I would tire of them and
switch my attention to a deck of cards. I would stack them and
balance them, and make them tall, but they were never strong
enough. And I would watch as they crumbled, caving in on
themselves from rouge drafts that entered the play room.

The drafts were small and relatively unnoticeable, produced
by cracked windows that let the stale air inside the hospice rooms,
breathe. The mild gusts didn’t carry out the smell of cleaning
products or hospital food. They were enough only to flicker the
candles in the chapel.

We wheeled my mother into the small makeshift church,
which seemed to be a closet with a crucifix and candles. The
holders where glass and they were red, and the red lighting was
calming. My sister helped her light one of the candles. Then
another and another, and I don’t remember how many we lit or
who all were in the room. We stood as she sat there in silence and
watched the candles burn because there was nothing to say.
I saw the white votive candles floating in the clear punch bowl on the steps in the front of the chapel at Lutheran Hospital. There were red rose petals and a scattered deck of cards around its base. We hung his oversized cowboy hat on the railing and set out two bouquets of eleven red roses and one yellow. They were the same kind of bouquets he had given our mother on our birthdays.

It was not his birthday, but it was almost mine. His service was much different than my mother’s. My sister and I were in charge of music and a good part of the organizing. It seemed overdone and inappropriate despite our efforts. He would not have been happy. He wanted a Viking send off with a boat and a pyre and a lighted arrow to set his corpse ablaze, and send him to a world that was better than the one he knew. Better than a world without his parents. Better than a world without love. Better than the world that tortured him with thoughts. And better than the medication that slowly killed him. It could have been a world with maggots and black dirt or one with redemption but it wouldn’t have mattered either way, as long as there was silence.

And it came. It came the way he asked it to come although it was not the way he wanted. It came because his body stopped. Not from the bullets but from the booze.
Chapter 5

We were at Annie Oaklie’s, the only convenience store in the whole of Central City. It was on the corner at the very end of Main Street tied into a long string of old brick shops and dead casinos. It carried our supplies. Twislers, cream soda, Hershey bar, lottery ticket, worms, and a 24-pack of Keystone Light. Dad paid cash. We got into the van.

We were going fishing up at the reservoir, then we would head deeper into the canyon to get to Idaho Springs to catch a meal at Tommy Knockers and pick up groceries. Timber was curled up in the backseat of the van. Ironically, it had a wheel cover dubbing it *The Family Wagon*. It was another of my father’s eclectic automobile purchases, but it ran well and had a little sink and T.V. set that didn’t work. Dad poured a bottle of water into the sink and Timber lapped it up. It was her water bowl.

Her wolf coat did not handle the heat well and she poked her head between us. Her long pink tongue brushed my bare arm and the leg of my overalls leaving a puddle. I scratched behind her ear and kissed her nose. She looked up at me with one blue eye and one that looked cedar. Although she was not a wolf and just a malamute/husky she acted like one and often ran away, only to return with her coat covered in dirt and blood that was rarely hers. I’m not sure why she came back. Maybe for the same reasons I did. We both loved him.
My sister had been gone to college for a while and the relationship between my father and I was strange. It was strange before, but there were two of us and my sister was older and I felt less alone when she was there, even though we didn’t get along.

I watched my father as he drove, a safe driver, up the road passed the old, gold tailings. His mustache was thick and his beard was still red. His baseball cap covered the bald center of his head and his belly seemed too big for the rest of his body. He was a tall man with long arms and legs and always wore too much Old Spice. Sometimes, when he was trying to make me smile he would role a pack of Winston Lights into his sleeve to expose a drooping bicep with a few rogue freckles. He was tired.

I had the orange and yellow tackle box in my lap and I fiddled with the lures, I caught my finger on a hook and it bled. I put it to mouth and it tasted like iron. The color and the taste reminded me of the house, the Belford House which my father moved into when my aunt and uncle moved out.

The house was lonely and neglected and the care with which had been taken before was no longer given. It was dusty and there was filth. The cats shit on the floor in the bathroom because the box was not clean and the dog would tare open the trash in the kitchen when we were gone. I would walk home from the bus with headphones in my ears and scurry to clean up the trash on the floor as to avoid a fight. I didn’t want to clean the cat box because it smelled bad, and even when I did Snowball wouldn’t use it and Velvet would leave wet black hairballs on the carpet.

When my father returned late from someplace else he would rage. He would walk through the door and see that the house was dirty and he swore as he stumbled into the den and sat in one of the office chairs. I would be curled up with my knees bent into my chest with a book next to the heater because it was winter and it was cold, and that was the warmest place in the drafty house. I felt safer there, in the den, with the bookshelves than in the rest of the house. The house scared me. It was old and looked like the houses filmmakers use in horror movies. Strange things happened in that house and noises bumped and legends lived in the walls.
A little girl had died there. Judge Belford’s daughter had fallen down the stair case. I hated that stair case. My room was up toward the right and I would run up the stairs as fast as I could. Timber would bolt into my room with her tail between her legs, and the cats would follow her in. They all retreated from my sister’s empty bedroom that smelled like dog urine and cat puke. I would near the door of her room and feel that it was cold and I would retreat back to my room too. I would slam the door and be afraid because my animals were afraid.

I left the lights on in the house when I went to bed. I would leave my own light on too, and fall asleep reading or thinking, or crying as I didn’t pray much anymore. My dad would come home or not, and I would know because he’d turn my light off when he went to his bedroom that kiddy-corner across the hall. I could hear him snore and cough through the walls and the doors because they were thin and the ceilings were high, and bumps in the night always echoed.

I was waiting for him, again. We had a date to get dinner together and he never showed up. I waited in the living room. I watched cartoons, and did push ups, did a thousand sit ups, and braided and unbraided my hair. It was after midnight. This night, instead of screaming at me because of the dirty house or reminding me that no one wanted me or telling me of the filth of the world, or shouting obscenities, or cursing me to move out to my grandmother’s house or back with my aunt and uncle because I was unlovable, he told me I was his angel.

I sat with him at the table in the den and watched the tears in his eyes and I wanted to fix him. I wanted to help him be happy and I wanted him to love me. I sat there, listening to him tell me that he was alone, and tell me about his mother, and my mother, and when he talked about my mother, I wept too.

A cigarette was constantly ablaze in the ashtray, and through his puffs he would hack and cough and wheeze then spit a hefty wad of mucus into a Kleenex. I was afraid because his tissues looked like my mother’s tissues.
Chapter 6

We were having another yelling match. It was moving day and we were packing up the shambles of the once proud Belford House into the van to take to Gold Mountain Village, our new home. It was a two bedroom apartment where we would be living from that point on. It was the summer after eighth grade and I was even more of a spit-fire. I challenged every ounce of patience my father never had to begin with. He was manic that week. He was so much nicer when he was depressed. Although it made me sad and worried that he would hurt himself, I wasn’t afraid of him.

Perhaps that particular episode was amplified because of the reasons we had to move, or the stress of moving itself, or simply because I was a thirteen year old girl that pushed his every button. Regardless, it was a bad outburst.

He dug into my core with his words every time he raged at me and despite my efforts to push them out and think only of our car rides, and fishing trips, and science fair projects, and when he said he loved me, or when we’d cook together, I could not keep them away. They hit me square in the face and knocked the wind out from my lungs. I was nothing. I was crazy. I was the reason he didn’t come home. The reason he drank. The reason my mother died. The reason my aunt and uncle moved away. He loved my sister more. He never wanted me anyway. Those were just words honey.

I was thirteen.
I was on the stairs when it happened. Our argument escalated, then peaked. He grabbed the width of my arm with his big hand and squeezed tight. His calluses dug in, and he was stronger than he knew. It hurt and my eyes widened. His other arm swung back. I saw my grandmother look at her ex-son-in-law as he was about to swing.

"Don't you fucking dare."
I looked him square in the eyes as I said that. His were on fire, I'm sure mine were too. I ran out of the house with fingerprints in my bicep, he stormed the other direction kicking the dog out of his way.

The following weeks were rough. We settled into the new apartment, cat shit still on the floor and cardboard boxes still stuffed with video tapes in the living room. There hadn’t been food in the fridge for a long time, and I was hungry.

I woke up late in the afternoon probably about two and stayed in bed until dark writing in my journal, hoping it would change things or make time go faster. I would fall back asleep and was glad to have Snowball on the bed with me. I would bury my face in her fat white belly when she purred, and I was comforted.

I got up only to bike around the gravel back roads, or talk on the phone with my friend from school, but I slept the rest of the time or bathed. It felt good to take a baths. My body was often sore from the lack of movement and lying in bed all day or from sitting for too long in the living room to sit in the recliner and watch Disney movies. In the bathroom, when I undressed to bathe, I always studied myself in the mirror.

I raised my left arm up over my head and could count my ribs one by one until they disappeared underneath the underwire of my newly required bra. My jeans hung low and were baggy, just the way I liked them. And I liked that my hip bones jutted out from the top of my panties. And I liked that my pale skin was stretched so tight over my bones that blue veins were visible. I sucked in and could see my heart beating through my stomach. It rumbled. I stripped and dipped myself into the bathtub and let the hot water run over my face. For a moment, I forgot that I was hungry. I forgot the fingerprints in my arm and that I hadn’t seen my father that day. I forgot that I was alone except for Snowball.
I found a bag of pistachios laying on the table. Overjoyed because it was food and I was hungry, I began to snack. I quickly remembered every uncomfortable truth when I bit through a maggot.

I wanted him to love me. I wanted him to be my father so I had a father, or someone. But I was afraid. I wanted to leave. I wanted to run away with Timber. I wanted to live with my mother who held me, but remembered that she had forgotten who I was and wasn’t my mother for a long time, even before she died. I didn’t want to move away from the mountains, but I was afraid of what I was becoming. It was the fear of what I was changing into, that caused me to make the decision. I was bones, all bones and just a skeleton of a little person that felt empty. I was nothing the longer I stayed. I unhinged. I knew my choice would hurt him and was afraid he would hurt me or himself if I told him I was leaving. I told him anyway.
Chapter 7

I knew when I saw him sitting up on the gurney with his faded beard and yellow skin that it was the last chance I had to say what I needed to. He hadn’t come to my high school graduation, and I reasoned it was because of the distance. Colorado was pretty far from Wisconsin. The calls had lessened and grown quieter and he seemed more and more distant.

*I should have called him more.*

I reached out to take his hand and noticed my forearm was fuller than his. He was bones. All bones. All bones covered in an ashy yellow bag and I could see his cheek bones through his skin. They used to be rosy.

Maybe it was the body bag that rolled past the door of his room in St. Anthony’s or the fact that they had to put Timber down a few days before we got there, that foreshadowed what would happen the following week. I think my sister and I already knew because he looked just the way our mother looked, stretched out with pillows propped behind and tubes dripping drugs into veins. It was what death looked like and we’d seen Grandma and Grandpa Dennison go out the same way. It wasn’t new. Death was still fresh.

He made my sister and me the powers of attorney. I didn’t want the responsibility. I couldn’t believe his brothers hadn’t called us earlier. I felt guilty for placing any sort of blame on them, though. I felt guilty for leaving him four years earlier, and was sad that he wanted to die and that nothing was worth it to stay.

I was legally a woman then. But I was not yet able to see him as anything other than the father I had abandoned.
His youngest brother was the one to find him and said if he wasn't going to go with him, he would call the ambulance. The ambulance came. If it wouldn't have, he would have died right there at the bar next to Wenchel's.

It was not a quiet death. Nor was it as easy as my mother's. There was not table with a puzzle and there wasn't a fish tank, and there was no completed paperwork. I was old enough to understand all the subtleties. There were problems with the insurance and documents. And medications. And he was not stable.

He had a stroke in the night and couldn't speak. His face was paralyzed the same way my mother's used to freeze up when she had seizures. Their mouths both drooped on the side. He was frustrated. There were things he wanted to say, but neither his brain, his hands, nor his voice could muster anything coherent.

We had spoken the day before and said our goodbyes before he lost his ability to speak completely. I read him the letter I'd written. In it, I apologized for leaving him four years ago and told him I loved him as many ways I knew how. I told him he was an eagle in a bird cage, and it wasn't his fault he couldn't get out. I wasn't going to forget to say thank you to him, as I had not known to say that to my mother. All I could muster then, was a note written with magic marker that read: I ♥ U

I did better that time around with my father. And he called me Little One and told me to hush and that everything was going to be alright right after he said his life was just a trail of broken dreams.

He was wrong. Nothing was alright. Nor would it be.

They moved him from hospital to hospital and his condition bettered, then worsened. When they thought he was stable, they sent him to a limited assistance home. He was the youngest there, only 50 or so. My sister and I stayed with him for long hours and we tried to help him eat, but he couldn't hold the water glass. He pressed it too hard against his mouth and the edges split and bled in the corners. He was too heavy for us to lift into the wheelchair to move him to the bathroom.

He was angry because they had resuscitated him. I watched him in the ER when they sucked the brown liquid from
his throat and stuck an air tube in his nose. I watched his body clench every last muscle fiber because the medication they had him on was too much and his liver was already dead from years of medicating his life. After the lithium failed he would repair his world with booze that made things sweeter and cigarettes that left his lungs black with emphysema.

He looked at me across the gurney with a familiar fire in his eyes. It was a similar blaze to the one he had the day we moved out of the Belford House. But this time there was fear, and there was pain. He was afraid. And I was afraid too because I had never seen a body do what his was doing then, nor had I heard anyone scream that way before.

They induced a coma and there was peace in his face. I was glad. It was at the last hospital, the one without white walls, that we all found a little time to rest. I walked up to him, an oxygen mask taped over his mouth and nose. He couldn’t have spoken if he wanted to. But I said, “Hi Daddy.” And his face shifted ever so slightly to mine and I was glad because I hoped it meant he knew me. I reached out for his hand and kissed it, I held it until mine began to sweat. His was already cold. I curled up on the bed next to him and fell asleep. I woke up with mascara trails down my cheeks. I tried to piece it all together. I tried to forgive myself but was convinced, that on some level, it was my fault. I didn’t leave his side after my sister’s plane took her back to North Carolina. I waited for my flight at the hospital that would take me to Minneapolis so I could ride up to Bemidji for finals week of my first semester at college.

I stayed there for hours. I knew it was the last time I would ever see him and I didn’t want to be alone. I was devastated that he was such a beautiful man who was born with a mind that made him believe the world was ultimately ugly, and wouldn’t let him look the other way, even for a moment. I didn’t want to be without him. I didn’t want to not have parents. I didn’t want to be an orphan, but he’d picked poison too.

Two days after I had left Colorado, he was gone.
Part 3
Chapter 8

It was two days after we had left Colorado. It was good to be out of the car and in a place neither of us had been before. The rest of the ride to Sedona was uneventful except for a warning from a rookie police officer about the busted headlight and being a little over the speed limit.

I woke that day to the familiar smell of burning sage. It snuck in beneath the door and into our borrowed room. I woke before he did and studied his face while he dreamed or didn’t dream. I couldn’t know what was on his mind, and tried desperately not to let it worry me. I tried even harder not to ask him. I wanted this to be different, and was trying to make it so. I knew what I was feeling, and it wasn’t new, rather it was fresh. I wasn’t going to tell him though. Too many times had that little word not been reciprocated, and I didn’t want to know if it was or if it wasn’t this time. I was learning to hang less weight on such words, but it was hard and I knew it would trouble me again. I moved closer to him and he wrapped his long arms around the curve of my back and burrowed his face into my neck. The bristles of his unshaven cheeks brushed my collar bone, and I kissed his hair.

He offered a level of comfort I hadn’t understood before. I felt young. I felt like I was my age when I was with him. He acted as a mirror without trying. I could experience him and see the ugly truths within myself and this gave me an opportunity to make them beautiful.
The smell of the sage and the sound of the coffee dripping from the pot in the other room told me to get up but I didn’t get up because I didn’t want to wake him.

Just beyond the wall with the coffee and sage, were my aunt and uncle. It had been quite a while since I had seen either them. I loved them and missed them. And I knew even without seeing them, that my uncle was seated at his computer clipping away at the New York Times crossword puzzle that he downloaded onto his laptop. My aunt was either reading, writing, or meditating about the place and the day or her mind. They were not predictable people, just comfortable in their routines. They were good and I was glad that I could finally be with them in peace, finally as a senior in college. They loved me too, but I hadn’t seen that in the years before when it was the kind of tough love that stung and made me ache.

It was strange to be so far away from our old home near the Mink River Estuary that expelled into Lake Michigan. They still lived there, situated in a three bedroom, single story house nestled into the woods at the tip of the Door County Peninsula. There, in those woods I had sat many times, trying to unravel the fourteen or fifteen years that had happened before. I had tried to experience the present, but always looked too far ahead or too far behind.

They tried to understand me, but I didn’t know how to live in a home that wasn’t obviously in shambles. So, we fought too. I was confused for more reasons than teenage hormones and being the recipient of mean girl drama and falling in love with a boy that wasn’t quite ready for a girl like I was when we were sixteen. It wasn’t easy and I struggled. In the four years I spent with them, I pushed boundaries I didn’t realize I was running into and couldn’t see the world as it really was. I was in a darker place than I had known before. I looked through the obscurest places in my head, and it seemed that around every corner was a cobweb that kept hold in its silk, a memory or words I wanted to forget but couldn’t. And I got tangled in the webs and was forced to stare at things I wanted to turn away from.

I was glad when I moved away into my own set of woods, situated by a different lake. This lake was bigger than the pond at Anderson Park, but a fraction of Lake Michigan. It seemed to
freeze solid when winter came in the Northwoods. I had never driven on ice before and the thought of it always innerved me. And those winters lasted until April when it was still cold but the sun shone.

I was glad that the sun was shining that day in Sedona. I had missed it. The transition from the open skyline of the high mountain peaks in Colorado to the cozy but stifling existence beneath the pine canopy of the Northwoods, was not an easy one. And each winter I spent in the north without the sun grew more suffocating.

The 10,000 lakes helped though. My fear of water had changed to a healthy respect and caution, and the openness of the sky above the precious lakes was liberating. Although the headwaters of the Mississippi were only a few miles outside of Bemidji, I rarely saw them, and I missed the movement. There was something about flowing water that was intoxicating.

I wasn’t the only one who thought so. After we dressed, we ventured away from my aunt and uncle’s rental property. We drove up the hill a ways to catch an Arizona sunrise. There was something to be said about the way the mornings began there. A pastel sun peaked over the top of the red mesas that jutted out from the earth. They were strange statues in the desert, only strange because the light dusting of snow on the tips seemed out of place in such a warm world. In their valleys and outcroppings, were societies that had long ago disappeared. Petroglyphs and pictographs hung on the walls of the old ruins that were already stained by canyon varnish. There was history there, and it humbled me.

As the shade of twilight disappeared, we sat quiet with our coffee and watched Sedona crawl out of bed. A javalina surprised us as it crossed the road not even a block from where we were parked. Another, and another rushed into the backyard of the suburban pueblo across the street to feast on a breakfast of prickly pears. After the world was alive enough, we headed up the canyon in the Yaris again. The fishing rods bounced between us above the center console as we slithered our way up to go fishing on Oak Creek. He had told me in the months before that one of the few
places that made his thoughts slow was when he was thigh deep
in a trout stream with a fly rod in his hands.

When we arrived, he moved down the rocky shoreline
away from me. I sat on the warm red stones and cast my own line
into the fast moving creek. I watched as the worm on the end of the
hook spiraled in circles around itself and quickly drifted in a
direction I didn’t want it to. I grew irritated with the fast pace of
the current as I wasn’t used to fishing in streams, but rather in the
still glacier lakes of the Rockies or from a charter boat with
downriggers looking for salmon in on the Green Bay side of Lake
Michigan.

I caught my hook in a cluster of water weeds on the next
cast and they snatched my tired worm. I looked up the stream and
my attention changed. The way his fishing line caught the sunlight
reminded me of a spider’s web, not only for its color and sheen,
but for the way it was precisely maneuvered. He made the line and
the fly he had stitched earlier that month, dance above the creek.
He effortlessly swung the rod to direct the fly as a conductor would
move his symphony. Watching him was equally as beautiful. He
had stolen the worms by accident. He held them hostage in a cup
that was buried at the bottom of his satchel with his lures and
handmade flies.

I listened to the hush of the stream and watched it break the
sunlight into ripples. The water was clear and the mud below was
red with the occasional fleck of rounded sand that shined gold.

I reached into my backpack and pulled from it a lime
colored apple. I took a bite and its tart juice was sweet against my
tongue. I was reminded of a pleasant place I had been before, a
place where I had been free of ugly things even when they were all
around. I thought of the apple tree in my grandmother’s yard on
Pierson Street.
Chapter 9

I remembered a day, some Colorado fall, when the small green apples were too small to pick but she sent me outdoors with a bowl and told me to fill it up with the tiny sour apples, anyway.

The task was not an easy one. Many had fallen onto the ground and fed green worms, or others were so high up and out of my reach that I had to jump up to catch a branch in my hand and pull the entire tree down toward me so I could steal its fruit. When I let go of the branch, it swung up and nodded as it dropped a few apples on my head. I hurried in again through the screen door. The smell of marshmallows and butter simmering in a pot let me know that Rice Crispy treats where soon to be made.

She bashed about the kitchen with wooden spoons and bowls. I handed her my bowl of apples, she washed them, and showed me how to cut them. She peeled away the tough green skin and let it plop into the sink below the vanilla bean plant that hung in the window above. I looked out the old window toward the pump house and her back yard with the grape vines and four o’clocks. I stood on a chair so I could watch her as she shook the seeds off of her knife. Her hands were steady and she always cut toward herself, but never nicked a finger. She put the small apple pieces into a clean bowl and asked me to get the margarine. She through a few unmeasured spoonfuls into the bowl and scooped out a cup of sugar from the green jar in the corner of the cupboard.

She opened a jar of something I hadn’t seen before. It was the color of glue but the consistency of peanut butter.

“What is that?”

“Lard.”

“What is it for?”
"The crust."

She scooped the lard into a bowl with flour and salt and mixed it until it was a ball. She threw it onto a wooden cutting board covered in flour and took from a drawer a rolling pin. She stuck her hands into the flour on the board and patted the pin then pushed it into the dough.

"Roll it like this, you see?"

I pushed at the dough, working my way from its center out to the edges as she had done.

"Not too thin!"

Our conversations always went the same way. I would ask the questions and she would give me the answers. I would watch as she would do. Then I would do, and she would watch. If I would do something wrong she would show me again. My grandmother was my friend and my mother because my mother couldn’t be.

Growing up, it was grandma who taught me how to cook, and garden, how to sew, and what it was to be creative. When I played with grandma it was always productive. We always made things. She stitched at the wedding dresses she designed and I would string the sequins and fake pearls she kept from the lace into necklaces. As she would sew her carousel horses for the year’s craft show, I would sew clothing for my doll or make satchels for my inventions. She would give me pillows and I would stuff them with the end of a wooden spoon.
Chapter 10

I thought of the Mink River once again as I watched Oak Creek roll by, always changing but both were still rivers, unstoppable and on course.

I had sat on the banks of the Mink River often. It was across the road from their house with the garden with lilies and daffodils, just down the dirt path. I would go to the water’s edge and stretch out under the sun on the broken concrete slab that hung into the shallow waters. Once, I shared it with a pine snake that hadn’t noticed until I woke up and saw a green tail slip into the shade beneath our warming stone. I would let the sun fix me. It melted the ice that routinely built up when I thought about the past and when I dreaded the future. It was a place where I felt nothing but the heat of the yellow sun and could smell nothing other than the green living things around me. When the humid sun grew too warm, I could feel the crystal sweat roll down my temple and the small of my back and leave a droplets on the cement. I caught the faint scent of daffodils and it reminded me of spring and tulips so I thought of our garden and of the times I had spent memorizing the names of flowers and planting petunias and pansies with my grandmother. The cement slab that I let the sun warm me on that day in Door County was much like the one my grandmother and I used to sit on in the late afternoons on Pierson Street when we tried to escape the August heat.

We dug our toes into the grass. It was much cooler than the cement step that had baked all day under the hornet sun. The Rockies were lethargic and slow. It is easily said that the sun was much fiercer in the foothills than it was in the north. It certainly
wasn’t the same yellow ball that hung as a pleasantness in the corner of most Midwestern afternoons. Its job there was to ease midwinter plight. Out West, it didn’t function to illuminate the blue above the trees and paint twilight and dawn with pastel swirls. Its job was to burn. To burn the trees, the grass, the skin, and the paint off of the hoods of old, red Fords. It turned the world brown and made it crack, peel, and flake.

I sat with her on the porch that typical August afternoon with a glass of ice, sun tea, and lemon. Horse flies danced on our toes and feasted on our sweat. They pestered us, and we unsuccessfully swatted them away with our hands. Mine were new and shaky; hers were old and crooked, but nimble. The flies were pestilent and relentless. She cussed at them. I watch her and the bumble bees that suckled from the dandelions speckling the lawn. It was a day like most days, too hot to do much more than sit and wait for the shade of the crabapple tree to cool the house enough to go inside.

I had already inspected her ninety-some figurine turtles that day. It was part of my routine in the summer months to scrutinize each one. I counted and observed them. Lifted each one into my hands and looked into their faces to see if they had anything to say. Many times they did, but it was her that did the talking. Unfortunately, the turtles never spoke to me directly. I often hoped that they had once been alive and found their way from the edges of the world into her house and positioned themselves on her never dusty shelves. They were a collection that had been gifted to her over a lifetime, one by one. Each had a story. Each was testimony to a place she hadn’t been but someone else had.

My favorite replica was one she bought for herself in Hawaii. It was made of shells. One white and five purple. I loved it best for its story. The turtle was plain. In fact, its only distinct characteristic was a pair of crossed eyes that made it seem less manufactured and more as if it had been piecemealed together by the calloused hands of a young, bronzed artisan. I imagined a little boy surrounded by palm trees and sand on some beach, waiting to sell his shell treasures to excitable tourists. He wore Bermuda shorts and a frayed, hemp necklace.

The turtle had moved into her life and onto her shelf moons
ago when she looked much the way I did. Back at my apartment by Lake Bemidji, I kept a black and white photograph of her in a beach chair, in nothing more than a grass skirt and flowered bikini. He face is framed by an orchid. She is beaming, eyes wild, and if it were a color shot her hair would be as ablaze as her smile. It is not so vibrant though. Instead it is a sepia outtake of her at her very finest. I kept it safe on a corkboard above my desk.

A few months before that trip to Sedona I caught sight of a photograph of her and me sitting on a beach at the Sister Bay Marina, with sailboats and yachts behind us. The sky was a sweet lucid blue, her shirt silk and cobalt. Our hair was swept wild from a stray nor’easter, mine was burnt orange, hers silver.

I remembered that trip back to Lake Michigan, a few months after that picture was taken on my winter trip home. She was seated at the head of the table at our holiday feast dressed in an oversized cotton sweatshirt. It was worn. The screen printed poinsettias flaked at the edges where she had once decorated them with sparkled fabric paint. Like her, that sweatshirt had seen too many years of sunshine and weather. That night, as I drove her home from supper, she commented on the number of trees as she always did. There were so many, and she wondered just how the settlers ever made it through the Northwoods. I pretended that the conversation was new, and laughed because I wondered too. I opened the car and she took my arm as I walked her home to her apartment. There were still pansies in her little garden and cloth horses in her window. I helped her through the door and sat on her couch in front of the same television set that showed me Charlton Heston’s Ten Commandments every Easter for as long as I could remember. I still have never made it through the whole film without falling asleep.

I leaned my head into her lap and she plucked at my curls while we watched the news that was turned up decibels louder than it needed to be. I didn’t watch it. Instead, I took in the familiar smells of burnt coffee and cats. I was affected by a familiar lethargy that came from a heater that was turned up too high. I remembered our summer days in the Rockies as my eyes wandered across the photos of bygone family that had replaced the many turtles that were once so predominantly displayed on her shelves.
I studied my mother’s face, and grandfather’s, and wondered if she could remember them any better than I could. Or if they had slipped away. I looked back at the crooked hand playing in my hair and studied the delicate gold ring and tiny diamond that had crafted a valley in her finger from years of over wear. It prompted me back to the photographs.

I realized then that she was not always a short, stout woman with perfect gray curls who never went out of the house without blush or foundation. She was a woman with auburn hair down to her waist and a Bettie-Page figure.

Ten years before, the turtles that sat on her immaculate shelves were a collection of the things she had never seen. Then, ten years or so later, her hair a littler whiter, she displayed a collection of the places that she had been. She exhibited the faces and the times she utterly missed. Images of the people she loved and the people that were lost to us filled her apartment that felt like home only because she was there. Memories replaced her dreams.

It was part of my routine that summer to inspect each photo. To look into my family’s faces and see what they had to say. Unfortunately, they never could tell their stories directly, so she did instead. I listened to her as she described her life in the sand-hills during the dust bowl and watched as the steam billowed up from our cups of hot tea with lemon.

She is gone too and they cannot speak to me directly. But when I look at their faces in old photographs, or remember their eyes, they remind me that every woman is a rose, delicate and sharp, before she ever is wise. I try my best to listen.
Part 4
Chapter 11

The quarter of the lemon floating between the shards of ice in my aunt’s glass caught the sunlight from the screen door. I could smell the rose oil on my neck and it was sweet and things were good. I didn’t want to leave Sedona, but it was time. I didn’t want to venture back to my third floor apartment next to K-Mart where the seagulls were going to nest in the spring. I didn’t want to leave the escape of the south west. Sedona was a place without work, without school, and without the obligations of an undergraduate trying to do too much. It was a place beyond a monotonous reality. It felt a little like home.

I had grown accustomed to a world of inconsistency. And found it hard to trust any place enough to drop my roots. From the prior years and prior changes, I expected to be uprooted around every corner, even now after the changes had stopped. It was strange that I was beginning to have control and I didn’t know what to do with it. I was a woman now, not a little girl loose in the clouds, blown about like a kite. I had some weight, I had some baggage but I was ready to leave it, it was part of me, not me anymore.

We drove back to Bemidji in one shot. We were nearly sleepwalking when we arrived in the Twin Cities and it was a wonder we hadn’t crashed in the night. We were reckless but driven just because we had to be, school and work were calling.

It had been my birthday the day before, and it was not uncommon that it was no different than any other day. No cards or packages. Cards were nice, I liked words but was learning that they were just words, but presents always made me a little uncomfortable. I didn’t know how to respond because I never expected them.
In the Cities, I had time to breathe before jumping back into the life I loathed in Bemidji. I had built it as a distraction from old things. Old relationships, broken love, and unrealistic expectations. To be honest, he was really the one thing that had felt good that year, not just okay. It was tempting to wrap a few roots around him, but I’ve learned that people are too unpredictable to look for home in. I needed a firmer foundation than that, one with stones and rich dirt, but I had no doubt I would find it eventually. And he made things sweeter.

Things went right around me. I had and maintained three different jobs and guided trips as an intern for a charter school, I had traveled and had new friends, and was writing a book, but I expected those things from myself and they didn’t give me purpose. And I didn’t really believe in purpose anymore. Things happened. Things were as they were. Happening for no reason, other than to just happen. I navigated the life I lived, and some would say I navigated it well. I was alive through times I could have not been and I learned to appreciate individuals by adoring their stories. I tried to be good to the people around me. Not to drink too much too often, or to watch the amount of smoke I breathed. And to only unfasten my safety belt after a car is parked and turned off. I knew what not to do, and I knew what I didn’t want. This made it easier to see what I did want. I could have that now, at least in some form. I knew not to take too much.

I wanted to write. I wanted a house to live in, even if it wasn’t mine. I wanted a dog, even if it was borrowed. I wanted to someday see a volcano covered in snow and teach people to pay attention and not take things for granted. I wanted a companion to adventure with. I wanted to be loved and love and not call it that because that is a word that is too easy to say. I wanted to live it and laugh. I wanted to ride a train and watch the trees and world fly past my window and be unstoppable. Driven. And on course.

I am twenty-three years old and I have seen a few rugged crossroads. I understand now that I have been away on a long trip through violet colored mountains and through shadowed valleys that were beautiful and telling. I have decided I have seen enough for the time being. I am ready to go home now that the ride is over. I understand that there is a place for the kind of poetry that
happened when I was younger, but it must be balanced with plenty of sunshine and good weather and new stories.
There is a place for poetry,
   But it is small
   And damp
   And a little cold.
   Walls and bricks
   Green moss
   And breath
   And a cream gray sky live
   Above
The chilly well where we write.
Our laptops are plugged into
Prime roots
And our Bic pens are cheap,
   But functional.

   We live here,
   Among the crowds
Dressed as students
   And bums,
   Thugs and professors.

There are shadows in the alleys
   And we make them dance.
There are bums on banjos
   And we give them stories.
There are men who suck on tall pipes.
   And we hope they find
What it is they're looking for.

   Scope goats,
   And black sheep
We sit on the fringes,
   Up in attics.
   Watching life from rafters
   We gather dust,
   To unearth diamonds.

   Our gems,
Knobs, and gnomes
   Granis and splinters in the beams
Of old farm houses.
   Our gems,
   Colored bits of shells and sea stars
Scattered in beaches
Piled with rounded pebbles and garbage.

There are truths in sunrises
   And uncertainties in the stars.
   Northern lights suggest
That poetry still lives.
   And burnt matches,
   Tattered paper airplanes,
   And children without shoes
   Ask us to write.
We mean something to
   Bars that listen passed
   The white noise
To music boxes and church bells.

-Howlers
Thank you for listening.