

Narrow Doorways: A Personal Recognition of Freedom

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Literary Freedom

Freedom is not an object. It is not a thing that can be picked up and set on the kitchen table. Yet it can be eaten, tasted. Freedom can be worn, a non-visible cloak of confidence. Freedom is an idea. An emotion. A state of mind. Freedom is something that's presence is enjoyed despite, or stolen away by, the beliefs of others. Freedom is a relief. An uplifting of spirit. A liberation. A release from worry and uncertainty.

Freedom is an intensely personal experience, and it is a topic writers cannot avoid. In every genre of writing, in every mode of writing, from classic fiction to modern non-fiction to poetry, there is some element of freedom. The plot or the characters or the central significance will expose a message of liberation, a triumph over worldly oppression. These instances of release are not always born from the obvious and stereotypical shackles of slavery. Often, they come from within.

Emily Dickinson is a lover of life and death. Her poetry expresses a frank acceptance to what is generally viewed as the negatives of living. She writes:

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true—
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe—
The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—
Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung. (28)

In this poem, she admits a dangerous viewpoint; she likes something, something traditionally terrible, because of the truth in the act and of the facial expression. Dickinson allows herself

this opinion where others would shun such personal knowledge. She does not stifle herself, fully accepting the responsibilities of her thoughts. She gives her mind free reign, and it is a revered poet because of that lack of censorship.

Death is a dwelt upon topic by many writers, although unlike Dickinson, many are content only to dwell. Marie Howe considers death in a different light than Dickinson, though still as a sort of freedom. In her poem "Death, the Last Visit," she likens death to having sex. Howe writes, "Locking its arms around you, it will hold you as long as you ever wanted," conjuring a sweet sorrow in readers, almost a happy helplessness. Sex is something desirable to most people, and by giving death that same desirability, it can not be a frightening occurrence. Death becomes a desperate need, and a welcome one. This is illustrated in the line, "It will take you / as you like it best, hard and fast as a slap across your face, / or sweet and slow you'll scream give it to me give it to me until it does." Part of life is dying, and it is a part many people have chosen to fear based on their own close encounters and experiences with relatives. Finding the good in the inevitable is a coping method, and takes a strong mental evaluation. But what more could any person want than to find beauty in the unstoppable? To be able to say, in the face of death, "oh sweetheart, oh holy mother, nothing nothing nothing ever felt this / good" (40). This is true release, and one not only of the orgasmic sort.

A Light in the Attic is a well-loved childhood memory to many. Shel Silverstein writes about topics such as backwards pencils and impossible creatures. He writes of a subtler type of freedom, one nearly every American finds relatable. Silverstein's poem "Standing Stupid" gives a message of laziness. He says:

Standing is stupid,

Crawling's a curse

Skipping is silly
Walking is worse,
Hopping is hopeless,
Jumping's a chore,
Sitting is senseless,
Leaning's a bore.
Running's ridiculous,
Jogging's insane—
Guess I'll go upstairs and
Lie down again. (111)

Being lazy is a privilege and a wonderfully abused one. It is a guilty pleasure, a relatable action, and it is a release to say, "I just don't feel like it right now." Silverstein's poem is a beatific description of a freedom people love to indulge in.

There is freedom in emotions, the negative as well as the positive. Often, people find themselves ashamed of their disgust and anger and hatred. They try to hide these feelings, these bad thoughts. They lie and cover up and suffer because of it. Humans are meant to feel the full range of emotions, and those who accept such publicly unfavorable parts of themselves are freer because of it. Corrine Hanes expresses anger and frustration in her poem "Sunday Morning." A mother is tired, with too much to do while her noisy children and their pets run underfoot. Reaching her personal breaking point, the mother picks up a kitten, previously pissing on her husband's just ironed shirt, and hurls it at the wall, where it crunches and slides broken to the floor. Her children, not longer laughing gaily, leave the room quietly (60). The poem is striking because it is disturbing. It releases a reader's own disconcerting thoughts and opinions about the author and about the poem. And yet, Hanes

wrote and published the poem knowing it went to those negative places. She wrote it knowing that expressing all of her emotions, even the risqué, would be a releasing experience for both herself and her readers.

Personal expression and freedom is crucial in modern nonfiction. Joel Derfner's 2008 publication *Swish: My Quest to Become the Gayest Person Ever* would never have appeared on shelves fifty years ago. Derfner is experiencing fantastic freedom simply by having his book on public bookstore shelves. An out gay man, every one of Derfner's romantic relationships are expressions of freedom, because there are people everywhere who would wish to tie him back, fetter his sexuality, repress his extremely feminine masculinity. He writes in his book:

[B]eing gay affects every interaction in which I take part—just as being straight affects every interaction in which straight people take part. Every human motive is in the end a yearning for companionship, and every act of every person on this planet is an effort to not be alone.” (129)

Derfner recognizes these deep personal truths, and doesn't allow the morals and religious beliefs of homophobes stop him from acting like every other person on the planet. He understands that his sexuality is an essential part of what makes him who he is, and he breaks down any barrier that prevents him from loving men. He sees his quest for love as no different from anyone else's, regardless of sexual preference. He is a man of liberated sexuality and worldly understanding.

An author does not have to tell an intensely long, personal story to express their sense of freedom. The book *How to be a Happy Lesbian: A Coming out Guide* is a how-to manual on being a secure and emotionally comfortable lesbian. It is liberating to learn about the female form, from body language to intimate anatomy, and to understand conversational

taboo topics like vibrators and sex between two women. The authors hope to give their in-depth knowledge to young lesbians, not only to free those young lesbians from uncertainty and shame, but because the authors remember wanting something similar when they were young lesbians. Co-author Tracey Stevens writes in her introduction, "At first I was scared . . . [to write] a book about my life." Ultimately, after much inner searching, she decided that "Life is too short to live in fear of yourself" (1). Not only would every young woman reading the book discover new facets of their lesbian lives, but writing the book was an experience of public liberation for the authors.

Virginia Woolf encountered an intense amount of oppression in her lifetime. While many of her speeches and essays demand women's rights and show negative aspects of a then-current state of affairs, Woolf expresses a different sort of freedom in her piece "The Death of the Moth." The moth flutters against her window still, against approaching death. It raises enough strength to welcome the end of its life on its feet, upright and proud. As death sweeps over it, the moth "lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed" (6). This piece shows a creature giving into the will, the inevitability, of something more powerful, of accepting that helplessness with strength and pride. This is a dignified freedom, a freedom of knowledge and grace and acceptance.

Fiction is a wonderful place to find freedom because humans can be so very inventive in discovering creative ways to restrict it. The novel *My Name is Asher Lev*, written by Chaim Potok, revolves around an orthodox Jewish boy and his driving need for art. Asher Lev's Rabbi tells him, "Become a great artist . . . That is the only way to justify what you are doing to everyone's life" (278). Asher Lev's search for artistic freedom creates rifts among him and his family, between him and his religion. His art is a personal freedom that wounds others, and is unstoppable despite that.

Nancy Farmer let readers experience freedom in a different manner. In *The House of the Scorpion*, there is little freedom to be found, for any of the characters. The powerful are bound by their desperate need to be immortal, while the helpless are bound by not only the whims and machinations of the powerful, but by the lack of physical places to flee. Readers create their own freedom alongside the main character Matt as he reinvents a country, a former dictatorship, into a place of freedom.

Fiction is also a wonderful place to find freedom because so many novels have happy endings and uplifting implications. A series will often revolve around one character inventing and reinventing him/herself, and reinvention is nearly indescribably liberating. Kim Harrison is a master. Her as-yet unfinished series "The Hollows" is exemplar of this. In the seventh book, *White Witch, Black Curse*, Harrison lays out several small freedom-epiphanies within her main character Rachel Morgan. The series spans over the course of several years, and Rachel spends much of her time stressing about the death of her father, the loss of her mother's mental health, the stigma left by a global infection of an artificial virus, and the state of her soul after multiple unwilling uses of dark magic. She spends nearly all of her time looking to the past. At one point, she grows as a character when she allows herself to stop looking backwards, freeing herself from a destructive spiral. She comes into possession of a charm which would allow her to regain stolen memories. Instead of immediately putting the magic to use, Rachel rejects the charm.

Carefully, I set [the charm] down. I didn't want to know what memory was there.

Not yet. I'd had enough of memories. I wanted to live for a while without them,

dealing with the present without the hurt of the past. (501)

The central character continuously learns more about herself and the world around her.

Rachel frees herself from the bonds of the past along with a host of other trials. At the

conclusion of Harrison's seventh "Hallows" novel. Rachel's life has been completely altered since the first book. She is shunned in the magical community, one past boyfriend has been murdered in front of her while another is revealed as a traitor, her pixy roommates are at the end of their life span, and a demon is repeatedly attempting to make her into a pseudo pet. Yet, as she is handed her favorite espresso, "[Her] lips curve up in a smile" and she thinks to herself, "I love my life" (504). Harrison has created a character who loves the complicated nature of her world, who has the freedom to accept the good and the bad and welcome the wild places life brings her. Rachel is the epitome of a free spirit.

It is this emotion that all writers crave expressing in their work, whether that work is fiction, nonfiction, or poetry. It is this freedom that all people wish to experience. Because people struggle to understand themselves and the world around them, struggle to make sense of their thoughts and lives and hopes and dreams, they turn to literature. They are writers who create those liberating experiences or they are readers who pick up a book and relate to the liberating experiences. Literature allows every person to see and feel freedoms they might not otherwise imagine or experience. Literature helps people connect written freedom with their own lives, with their past, present, and future.

Freedom is something I've found repeatedly in my life. When I looked at the work of Emily Dickinson and Marie Howe, I breathed in their acceptance of death. Then I found a way to relate that freedom to myself. I chose to stop seeing my dad's death as a horrible thing that I could never get over, and I have found release in that decision.

After reading *How to be a Happy Lesbian: A Coming Out Guide*, I realized that while I wasn't a young lesbian, I was still a young person seeking guidance. It showed me that the words and lessons within the book were still valid. Derfner's *Swish: My Quest to Becoming*

the Gayest Person Ever showed me a world outside of my little high school, where being gay made sense and didn't carry the weight of uncertainty, where gays didn't have different dreams and personal goals than straight people. My freedom was realized when I began understanding what made me happy, what turned me on, who I really was inside, and what love felt like.

My forays into Judaism were minor and incomplete. While I struggled with religion, I knew many people believed a person had to be born Jewish. Instead, I experienced Asher Lev's life as a Jewish artist in Potok's novel. I followed his journey, and then looked to my own. I discovered my freedom when I realized that I didn't have to be the things my family expected from me, including Christian.

Hales and Silverstein expressed the negative side of emotions and life, while making no apologies. I was greatly impacted by their poetry, and so I looked to my own life and my darker feelings. I confessed my personal opinion of my grandma, washed my hands of a family crisis, and took pleasure in the freedom and relief my honesty brought me.

I loved reading Harrison's work, and had never been more rewarded than when I finished *White Witch, Black Curse*. The main character looked upon her own life—the insanity, the pain, the complicated emotions—and was happy to be alive, happy with her life. She was able to let go of the past and look toward the future. My freedom was a gift, a beautiful one, and I was incredibly lucky to receive it in the form of an old house. It came in the form of the ups and downs of having friends who freely expressed who they were and who happily accepted me for who I was. Living in the house, I loved my life.

My freedom was all around me and everywhere I chose to see it.

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Letting Go of Dad

My dad died in front of me when I was eight.

But before his death, life was good. Mom and Dad required near superhuman endurance to keep up with four active kids with barely three years difference in ages, and yet somehow they found that strength within themselves. Four children is a lot of mischief, and between myself, my sister, and my two brothers, we got into every bit possible. We fought, girls against boys. We played, middle kids against the oldest and the youngest. We had fun, all four of us with each other and against each other.

Wrestling matches were common. Chaos was inevitable. Mom would concede when the boys became too rough, and often my siblings and I banded together against Dad. Smooshed at the bottom of the pile, Dad could only heave breathy laughs due to the weight of four kids on top of him.

Our home was small. A rural cabin, it was not built with the intention of housing a large family. When we first moved in, the living room and kitchen had no dividing wall. Eventually, Dad split the two big bedrooms into three smaller bedrooms. There was the Adult Room, Taylor and Jacob shared the Boys' Room, and my sister Crystal and I bunked in the Rugrats covered Girls' Room. The house may have been small, but the lake in the front yard and the woods in the back yard allowed everyone room to breathe.

Dad taught my siblings and me how to swim in the lake. He would zip under the surface of the water as we attempted to catch him, astonishing us by popping up for air twenty feet away. When Dad was at work and Mom was doing her own thing, my siblings and I spent most of our days in the water, splashing and pretending to be mermaids and knights. Mom gave up trying to lure us from the water our first summer living there. Meals were left

at the end of the dock, and if no one came in to use the bathroom, the septic tank didn't have to be emptied as often.

Despite being curious children, there was one mystery we never quite figured out—the dynamics of poop. When I crouched in the shallow area, slipped off my one-piece and pooped, the poop stayed under the water and no one could tell what I'd done. But when Taylor leaned over the edge of the dock and pooped into the water while we all watched, the poop floated to the surface and drifted towards the neighbor's house. The unknown was continuously entertaining and the four of us tested different theories as often as we felt the urge.

Our family was two children short of a literal Brady Bunch. My sister and I were from my mom's first marriage, while Taylor and Jacob were from their dad's first marriage. But it didn't matter. The "step" title was never used. We were a family because we loved, fought, and *felt* like a family.

I had almost always called him Dad. Korey had been dating my mom since I was a toddler and he was the only male parental figure I'd ever had in my life. My biological father was a navy man and rarely in the United States. The only face I had to associate with him was the hand-drawn frowny face doodled on the inside of Christmas and birthday cards, always there to visually show my child-eyes that he was sad to be separated from me.

My dad was the man I lived with. He worked at a bar, and I spent fistfuls of quarters trying to win stuffed animals out of the machine near the bathrooms. We played pull-tabs and he let me keep the money when I won a dollar. He was also a dad figure because he could be stern. When eggs were scooped onto my plate during breakfast, I was ordered to eat everything, even though I hated eggs.

At the end of August in 1996, Crystal was nearing her seventh birthday. Taylor and I were telling all of our friends we were twins because we were both eight, and Jacob was a lofty ten-year-old. School was looming and the four of us clutched at what little time was left of our summer.

Dad liked to have house projects and was in the process of fixing up our cabin. He spent his free hours after work updating the electrical system, putting in new carpet, and building shelves. As a full-time bartender and occasional golf resort employee and furniture salesman, his experience with hardware was minimal. His efforts were noble and his results amateur. Sunday morning, the 25th of August, Dad mistakenly left on the electrical power to half of the house.

Standing on a small step ladder in the back bedroom and examining the ceiling wiring, a small shock startled him enough that he fell backwards onto the floor. The boys were with their real mom that weekend, but Mom and Dad were going to make up for the loss by bringing my sister and me to Taco Bell for an early lunch. Waiting in the kitchen for Dad to set aside his work in order to drive to town with us, the three of us heard the crash as he fell off the step ladder.

Not terribly concerned, Mom leaned away from the kitchen table and shouted back at him. "You okay? What'd you knock over?"

Silence, and then the pounding of Dad's feet as he fled down the hallway towards us, past us, and out the front door.

Then Mom started screaming. Running outside, she knelt on the front lawn with Dad. Crystal stayed silent and frightened while I called for help.

Hurrying halfway down the hallway to the phone stand, I noticed little red speckles dotting everything. The carpet had puddles, the cordless phone wasn't completely white

any more, and a big, red smear marked up the wall. If Crystal hadn't been near, I would have blamed the unwanted color on her getting into my paint set.

Grabbing the phone, I punched in the numbers I'd been taught. Nine-one-one. It didn't ring. Plopping the phone back in the cradle, I waited a second before picking up the handset and trying again. There was no dial tone. As I set the receiver back down, I noticed that my hands shook and there was red on them.

Hurrying out the front door, I stood on the porch and looked down at Mom and Dad lying together on the ground. Red streaked Mom's arms and legs and face and favorite matching teal shorts and shirt. Her crying made me cry, and my voice wavered as I tried to explain that the phone didn't work.

Cutting me off, Mom's mouth opened and out boiled rage and terror—"Go to the neighbors' house."

Sprinting around the other side of our cabin, I caught the neighbor lady walking down her porch steps. She might have already been on her way out or she might have had heard screaming and still attempted to look casual while checking out the commotion. I caught up to her as she was digging through her purse. She froze when I shouted that I needed an ambulance. After a slight hesitation, she went back inside for a phone.

It's difficult to remain anxious and terrified for long periods of time. After the adrenaline stops pumping, there's an emotional void.

I spent the next two hours in the neighbor lady's dining room, waiting for my mom to stop screaming, waiting for my dad to be okay, waiting for the world to restart. I stared at my sister sitting quietly on the couch, at the white-patterned doilies on every surface, at the picture-covered wall, at the scuffed hardwood floor. I stared out the window at the ambulance in my yard, at the neighbors in the road, and at my mom held up by strangers as

they tried to rinse off blood with lake water. I sat there and stared for two hours because my mind hadn't yet caught up. I didn't know what to think, and so I thought about nothing.

After the accident, it had taken a half hour before someone was able to contact my grandpa and it took him an hour and a half to drive to our house. By then my mom couldn't walk or talk or think or breathe, and Dad was dead.

Sitting in my grandparents' yard that evening, finally able to think, I wondered about death and why my dad had been chosen out of all the dads in the world. I wondered about my brothers; what were they going to say when they found out Dad was never coming back? I knew my family could no longer be the Brady Bunch, but I wasn't prepared for how extensively our family would change.

My brothers weren't allowed to be my brothers after our dad died. Their mom kept them at her house, and they never called. After Dad's funeral, I never saw them again.

My mom gave several explanations to Crystal and me. The boys hated us for being with their dad on his last day alive when the two of us weren't even his real kids. Their mom was mad because our mom played favorites between the boys and had asked for only Taylor to visit on the weekends. Dad's family was offended when, having no money for Christmas presents four months after Dad's death, Mom had wrapped up and handed out some of Dad's personal things as gifts because she thought his family would cherish them.

I lost half of my family, the male half, in the time it took Dad to die. Nothing remained the same. Mom, Crystal, and I moved to a house in the suburbs nearly an hour away. The new house didn't have trees or a lake or open fields nearby. It didn't have grass either, which was the new house's only similarity to our old house. Mom was terrible at growing things, grass included, so the yard was plain sand and patchy weeds.

Crystal and I went to a new elementary school. I didn't know the teachers and I had no friends. When I told the other fourth graders that I had moved because my Dad was dead, they called me a liar.

There was no one to play with besides my sister, and no where to play except for inside the house. So I stopped going outside. I read books and watched TV. And I sat with my mom when I couldn't avoid her.

My mom was the biggest change. She broke. When Dad died, Mom became a thirty-five-year-old child. Instead of taking care of my sister and me, we took care of her. Every day she cried. The cries were not the quiet, unobtrusive pain that some people indulge in late at night. Her husband was dead and everyone had to know it. Mom screamed. Lying on the floor for hours out of every day, she'd kick her feet and punch walls. Sometimes she'd lie in a pile of Dad's clothes while wailing, often holding a pair of his underwear to her face.

Crystal and I switched off dealing with her. I'd sit with Mom and console her or get her water. The next time Mom broke down, Crystal would sit and try to hug her to make her feel better.

Six months after Dad's death, it became an accepted, even tired, routine. The two of us were sitting in the living room, reading quietly as bookish children prefer. Three floors above us the scratchy sob-scream of Mom's voice rose up.

Weary and exasperated, my seven-year-old sister looked at my eight-year-old self. "It's *your* turn."

There was a certain liberty to it. An independence. Mom was annoying and useless, but that meant there was no authority figure at home. There were no boundaries. I dressed in whatever I felt like wearing, whether it was nothing but overalls for several days or a matching yellow sweatshirt and sweatpants for an entire week. The television had no

censoring. With no curfew, I stayed out as late as I wanted. I was independent in a way most kids crave to be.

Friend after friend reinforced how lucky I was that my mom let me do whatever I wished. Seeing the good side of her breakdown, I decided to also see my dad's death in only a positive light. It was a terrible event, but I tried to continuously remind myself of the good that had come from it.

Forced to become a pseudo adult used to taking care of myself as well as my mother, I was mature for my age. Several of my childhood friends fell into drugs, bad grades, and pregnancies. But I never bowed to peer pressure in those extreme situations. I kept my virginity long past many of the girls in my age group. No party caused me to lose my inhibitions far enough where I accepted a hit. And I did every bit of homework assigned, working hard for my straight "A" average.

Without Dad, the family finances improved. A shopaholic, Dad had spent most of the family's income on trivial things, the reason our family of six shared an extremely cramped cabin as our full-time home. After his death, Mom's coherent moments were spent working and saving her paychecks. She was able to fix her credit. Because of her efforts, I spent the next ten years in a beautiful four story home in the suburbs.

Although it was difficult to leave the lake, the woods, the open fields, and the fresh air of the country, becoming an introvert cooped up in the suburbs allowed me to focus on a new love. Books became my everything and that was something I couldn't help but be grateful for, even though that love came at a high price. Escaping into the minds of characters and their worlds opened up my imagination and my dreams.

I understood that my dad had lost his life for me to have these things. But thinking of that August day, I believed he would have been more willing to let go of life if he'd known

everything would turn out all right for his family. I read many books that gave cruel events soft edges and made circumstances seem less harsh. These books caused me to look back on my own past and romanticize Dad's death. I fuzzily remembered him slipping away quickly, and I overlaid his image with a sense of peacefulness. Calm. When he stopped breathing, I decided to see it as a freedom from the weight of adulthood and pain and worry. His death became something beautiful.

In my mid-teens, I finally gathered enough courage to ask my mom about the day Dad died. Nearly a decade had passed and I felt we had both recovered enough emotionally to discuss it. I asked her about certain images of his death I'd blocked out and wasn't sure I remembered properly. What had lingered in me was a picture of him lying on his back looking upwards. All those years ago, I had stood on the porch and looked down at my mom and dad, gathering the words to explain why I hadn't called for an ambulance. I remembered Dad lying on his back, as his consciousness faded into darkness or light or whatever. I remembered that the last thing Dad saw was the sky. Maybe my mom's face as she leaned over him, but primarily the sky. The 25th of August was a lovely day. That Sunday the temperature was in the mid-seventies, the sun was shining, and the sky was a perfect, almost impossibly crystalline blue.

But I spoke with my mom, and my memory was instantly proven to be spotty, like when someone watches a piece of paper burn. You can see parts of the paper blacken seconds before holes appear, but there are so many holes and they widen so fast that it's hard to remember that the piece of paper used to be smooth and white. After I saw the truth of Dad's death, I could no longer remember that day as a smooth, lovely thing.

Dad had fallen onto metal shelf supports lying unused on the floor. These pieces of metal, designed for strength, punched through his back. As he bled to death on our front

lawn, he was facedown as Mom tried to slow the bleeding. His last sight wasn't sky, or trees, or Mom's crying face, or even *grass*.

My dad, a thirty-six-year-old father of four, died face down in the dirt.

My romantic image of Dad's death was shown to be merely a child's fantasy. The fuzzy image of peace and release in the middle of a lovely day wasn't accurate. I'd chosen to remember wrongly, and I lost something at that realization. Suddenly, Dad's death was purely horrible again. Wrapped within the tragedy, I lost all sense of the positive and became sucked into apathy and depression. There was no sense of justice or reason, and it was staggering to realize that *bad things happen to good people*.

And nothing could make the world right again.

Another few years passed after that discussion with my mom. The subject never again came up, because it felt somewhat taboo. I was never scolded or shushed for talking about Dad, but then I never mentioned him and neither did anyone else. Crystal never admitted to having brothers or living at the cabin, and Mom only mentioned love and marriage when combined with crushing disappointments.

The day of Dad's loss became almost dream-like again. It existed only in my mind, an insubstantial, tragic happening that weighed me down. With no opportunity to face the day of Dad's death, I couldn't call upon the positives that originally made it bearable.

Then one day, at twenty years old, I went looking for a misplaced form. It had been mailed to me a few weeks prior and I went searching through my mom's filing cabinet on the off chance that it had accidentally been filed with her paperwork. Instead, I found a folder with the label "Death." Staring at it for several seconds, I checked to make sure no one else

was home before pulling it out. The folder was thin, with only two pieces of paper inside. Both were photocopies.

The first was a copy of a notebook sheet of paper covered in someone's handwriting. Nearly illegible, it seemed to be some sort of letter to God or possibly a bible verse. I didn't recognize the cursive handwriting and replaced it in the folder after only a cursory glance. The second paper was a slightly crumpled copy of my dad's death certificate.

I had never seen this form before. My dad's name, printed under "deceased," made the innocuous form seem surreal. Here was proof of a person's departure from the world, from their family, from existence. It was proof that at one time I did have a Dad.

His death had grown to monumental proportions in my mind. So complex it couldn't be explained simply; so tragic that even extensive explanation couldn't give the slightest understanding. Yet there in front of me lie a form where the question "Manner of death?" had a brisk answer. A small, vertical column of possibilities was listed, and a small, efficient checkmark was next to the word "Accident." The slightly longer question "Describe how injury occurred" had the answer "Deceased fell off stepladder onto floor debris." Quickly said. A simplification, and all true—and yet *not*.

It was an impossibility that this thing, this death, which had haunted my thoughts and emotions for so many years, could be explained in such a simple way. I'd spun in circles for so long—the good and the bad, the positive and the negative, the uplifting and the heart crushing, the real and the fantasy—that I couldn't believe that the story of his death fit on a one page form with my parents' names, some other people's names, and the "method of disposition (check all that apply)."

I finally saw. I saw that Dad's death was going to be as simple or complicated as I chose to see it. It had happened over a decade earlier and no one who had lived through that

day—not my mother, my sister, the paramedics, or the coroner—was going to have seen it and been affected the way I had.

And it didn't matter.

Whichever way I chose to spin the story and my memories, Dad was dead. Every bit of my life that was affected by his death, from my mom's mental state to the place I lived, had already been affected. There was nothing left for that day to touch. Everything that could be altered, had been, because his death was in the past. I had no good reason to continue dwelling. Rehashing his death repeatedly brought no comfort.

Holding the paper in my hands, an official document that told its own story, I had reached an end. I had enough of the past, of looking backwards, obsessing and reassessing.

Opening the folder, I carefully replaced the photocopy. The folder marked "Death," so thin with only two pieces of paper inside, I carefully wedged between the mammoths "Auto" and "Medical."

The filing cabinet closed with a clunky rattle of metal against metal.

I was done.

Colors

Blue, green, red, red, and more red.
All swim, spin, and swirl
around me.

The colors hurt and I can't see past them, because
my eyes are closed.

Sun glistened blue of the lake,
no longer pure. The deep,
wild green of tree leaves,
no longer safe.
The red, red, red is
sinking
in.

My mind spins and circles. My
senses leave me. I wish for it to be earlier.
Before
I heard my mom
screaming.
Before I watched the red
splurt
from my dad.
Before I lost something most children
don't realize

they can lose.

I see it in
my mind.
But only there,
because Dad is long gone.
And so is the blue, and green, and
red.

It is done.

Coming Out

I didn't realize I was bisexual until I said it out loud.

Growing up, I never thought about my sexuality. I had crushes on boys just like the girls on TV portrayed, just like my friends expected. I noticed the girls too, but what unpopular, insecure, and jealous girl didn't? I even dated a boy in middle school.

His name was Tim VanBlaricom. Tim was a skinny boy with wild hair, big teeth, and a loud personality. We didn't have much in common, but we knew each other and at twelve-years-old, that was more than enough. The two of us would hug awkwardly in front of the school bus at the end of the day, faces red as we tried to ignore the jeers of our classmates. We kissed once on a dare, a small peck as we temporarily stopped bouncing on Tim's trampoline. He was my first kiss.

Tim was made fun of, daily, for being gay. He denied it, always, every time. "Look," he would say. "Stephanie and me are dating. I can't be gay." Ten or fifteen minutes later, when the teasing still hadn't stopped, Tim would stop trying to reason with his tormentors. There was always more disgust than anger in his face when he squinted and shouted, "Shut your face."

I didn't think much about it. Yes, he talked like the gay guys on TV. Yes, he was thin and girly. Yes, he paid more attention to how he looked than I did. But he said he wasn't, and I left it at that.

I knew, even then, that it was strange that Tim and I barely touched. Middle schoolers were not innocent and many of my classmates hadn't been virgins since elementary school. But I never wanted more from Tim. I was happy to let things between us stay as they were.

We dated for eight months and parted amicably. Before we entered high school, he began admitting to people that he was bisexual.

When I reached tenth grade, Tim was still the only person I'd been in a relationship with. I didn't have the energy to spend on dating. I was fifteen years old and every day was a challenge. My mom and I had issues. We would get into screaming fights that didn't quite end when I ran to my room and locked the door behind me. Instead, I would sit and listen as she picked the lock, ready to take the fight beyond words. School took its toll on me as well. I was desperate for a continuous 4.0 GPA. I had random crushes on guys, still noticed the girls, but dealing with my mom and school was primary.

Sitting in my guidance counselor's office a few weeks after Christmas, she tried to help me cope.

"What do you think your main issues are right now?" Mrs. Nelson questioned me. "What's the main thing stressing you out? If I know what it is, we can work on lessening how much it's affecting you."

I sat facing her without actually looking at her, my hands clasped and tucked between my knees. Instead, I looked at the books on her shelves and the family photos on her desk. She had kids my age and I frequently wished this petite woman was my mom.

I stuttered and blushed when I talked about how hard my classes were and how I didn't always get along with my mom. I threw the minor, daily annoyances at her, hoping she'd find one of them to be my main issue. I continued talking for nearly an hour without actually saying anything. But Mrs. Nelson was a patient woman and continued to prod and push.

"I just want to help, Stephanie. I don't judge," she assured me.

Silent for a moment, I tried to find the words to express what was wrong when I wasn't sure I knew. Groping about, I finally blurted, "I think I like girls too."

For several seconds, I was almost confused. I hadn't been thinking *anything* like that. That idea hadn't come from me, because I crushed on boys. I had hetero fantasies. But the words were out of my mouth and it felt like there wasn't any air in my lungs. It felt like I had sat down too hard on a soft couch and "oophed" all my breath out—nothing in my mind beyond sheer surprise. Everything inside of me had gone still, frozen, before rearranging all the parts that made me who I was.

Mrs. Nelson didn't recoil or flinch. She simply began handing me brochures for the school's Gay Straight Alliance group. Its members were small and while there were several gay kids in school, the only out kid actually in the group was Tim VanBlaricom.

Just like that, I was bi.

Discovering yourself is a big part of teenage years. Understanding my sexuality helped me be aware of who I was in other areas too. I started coming out of my shell. Before, I was the quiet girl in the corner who blushed so hard she nearly cried when a teacher called on her. I was outspoken, I did silly things in public, I wore skirts that showed my legs. I stopped holding myself back.

Before our senior year of high school, Tim outed himself as completely gay. This sent out waves over our school. He'd been so certain, so insistent, that he liked girls, even after he admitted to liking guys, and his abrupt change reflected on the other out kids in school. People started looking at me, a former girlfriend of Tim's, and questioning whether I was on a bi-now-gay-later plan. If I was just a sex-greedy lesbian or a confused straight girl. And I started questioning it myself. Maybe there was no such thing as being bisexual. Maybe there was only bi-curiosity, just confusion. The only thing I knew I could do to cement my sexuality, be certain, was to date, but dating was already a struggle.

As overdramatized as the problem had become due to television, I had strong emotional barriers holding people back. Something internal blocked me from getting close to people, from opening myself up. I saw my exchanges with people from a distance. I interacted with people like they were distractions. I wasn't sure I'd be able to date and find my true preferences if I couldn't even find people I wanted to spend time with.

Over the next six years I had a variety of short flings, but few lasted more than one or two dates. I was inevitably repulsed when the guys tried to eat my face. The girls I dated labeled themselves as bi and all followed the popular definition that bi equaled slut. Their over-the-top promiscuity turned me off quickly. I figured I was getting the duds of both sexes because the good ones, the dateable ones, somehow sensed my emotional distance, my internal separation. It was the people focused on the body who came my way because it seemed like that was all I was interested in.

I finally found the answers I wanted through two different relationships—one with a man and the second with a woman.

Rusty Lee Anglin was perfect for me. He even had a poetic name, something that I frequently raved about. It was southern and French and it was a name I would remember if I saw it plastered across a book cover. Rusty always blushed and with a pleased smile said, "Everyone else thinks it's a hillbilly name."

He was a big guy, 250 pounds plus, and I loved that he was a quintessential linebacker who acted like a teddy bear. Rusty was soft and sweet. He wrote poetry and loved babies and rescued kittens. He wasn't afraid to express himself in sweet manners because he was essentially a large bundle of soft emotions. As cheesy as his text messages were, I had my favorites.

I almost didn't get his most romantic note. I had been having problems with my phone for several days. I could hold my phone in my hand, ask someone to call me, and then stand there next to them while their phone rang several times before directing them to my voicemail without my phone ever ringing. I didn't realize I wasn't receiving texts either until he mentioned something.

"So, did you like that poem I texted you?" Rusty sounded—almost uncertain, even a little hurt.

"What text?" I asked. "You texted me a poem?"

"You didn't get it?" He was smiling now, more confident in himself. "I was a little surprised when you didn't answer me back. I was expecting at least a pleased 'awww' from you."

"Text it to me again. Please? I can't believe I didn't get it!"

When I opened his short little love text, I couldn't imagine having missed it, missed the loving message he was trying to tell me. His poem read:

Let the world stop turning. Let the sun stop burning. Let them tell me love's not worth going through. If it all falls apart, I will know deep in my heart, the only dream that mattered had come true. In this life, I was loved by you.

I was delighted and I immediately texted him back with the requisite "awww!" He loved me and few things were more uplifting than knowing someone loved me.

I'd received love letters before. They always made me tear up and feel amazing for a good week or two, and while I felt similarly with Rusty's notes, his love messages weren't what made me love him back. Part of it was his ability to throw himself into everything he did, from weeding his garden to loving me. There was no holding back. I knew he was something special when he described working at an auto shop.

He was a manager, but he would still slave over cars with his co-workers on slow days. Everyone working in the auto stores, rival branches or not, knew that Rusty was the guy to talk to about cars. But I loved his ability to break stereotypes. Standing over a car, greasy faced and wearing a tool belt, Rusty could be acting like a limp-wristed fey or debating Shakespeare. It was his unexpectedness that showed me I could love him.

Before his silliness, his sweetness, I was standoffish to all my dates. Rusty was the first suitor to lower my guard. He was so unabashed about loving me, about being who he was no matter who was watching, that I couldn't help but love him back.

Allowing myself to let go with Rusty, truly my first love, was the reason I fell so hard for my girlfriend Charlotte. My barriers were down, I missed feeling close to someone, and she blindsided me.

I'd known her for a year, just a friend of a friend. Short and petite, she combined her doll-like features and natural orange hair with punk t-shirts and vibrantly colored tights. Quiet but opinionated, she was just as involved in the world of literature classes and writing workshops as I was.

We focused on our common lust for Madonna, at first. The two of us spent hours watching Madonna touch herself in music videos, fell asleep during movies starring Madge in skimpy clothing, and gabbed about the crotch shot covering the album of one of her CDs.

Most people experience giddiness with new relationships; Charlotte and I were generically sappy. I would hold myself back from texting her "I miss you" after not seeing her for two hours. Meeting up with friends, I'd hear that Charlotte had to be held back from texting me that same message. I spent every moment I could with her. My friends felt

neglected when there was no place I'd rather be than spooning with Charlotte on the top bunk in her dorm room.

One day, after twelve hours of watching movies, talking, and getting to know each other mentally and physically, Charlotte and I found ourselves lying on my futon. Both wide awake at four in the morning, our minds were on hold as we lay there and *felt*, as we let our emotions sweep us along like a large wave, as we drowned in gratefulness and contentment and awe.

Slowly, I moved my head off the pillow and onto her chest. I stayed there for several seconds before I heard it. Against the utter silence of my dorm room, without the sound of traffic or talking or music, was the loud rhythm of her heartbeat. Closing my eyes, sucking in my breath, I lay still. And kept listening.

I'd never listened to the sound of another person's heartbeat before. That wall was there, and I'd had problems with physical affection even from my friends. Things had still been so new with Rusty, my wall barely lowered, that I hadn't allowed him close enough to experience anything on a truly deep and lasting level.

Lying there, focused completely on the sound of Charlotte's life, I was whole. Rusty hadn't allowed me to hold myself back from him, and I found myself unable to hold myself back from Charlotte. I couldn't imagine *wanting* to hold myself back from her. Everything felt perfect—I was on a high I'd never reached before.

I knew that without Rusty and my love for him, I never would have found Charlotte. And I had loved Rusty. Ultimately, not as much as I loved Charlotte, but there was nothing about our time together that I regretted. It was the two of them, my experiences with both of them, that shaped me. My time with Rusty and Charlotte proved to me that, no I was not a

lesbian, nor was I completely heterosexual. I wasn't like Tim. There was no bi-now-gay-later plan for me.

Exploring

Sitting on the window seat
in my new bedroom,
in my new house,
I see all my old things—
shoes, alarm clock, TV.
Posters decorate the walls,
at least a dozen.
I'm uncertain about my oldest.
It's a PlayGirl poster.
The nude male model
has a thong tan line.
His biceps are massive.
On the floor beside the poster
is my bookshelf.
Contrasting the model's sleek, muscled curves
are the slender line of new books:
"How to be a Happy Lesbian" and
"The Whole Lesbian Sex Book."

Finding Religion

I was baptized Lutheran. My grandma sang in her church choir, and I occasionally attended services with her as a child. Boredom drove me to fidget and aggressively page through the Bible stashed on the backside cubby of the pew in front of me. During my early teenage years, my mom entered a devout stage. She coerced me into attending Wednesday night youth sessions at her church "Lord of Life." The loud Christian rock band and sea of unfamiliar faces gave me headaches.

Church brought me no joy. Every attempt to attend services was entered into with awkwardness and dread. As peppy and welcoming as my fellow churchgoers were, I didn't fit and didn't want to.

Part of being a teenager is living through years where nothing makes sense, and at the time, religion certainly didn't make sense. I didn't understand where I belonged or what I believed in. It's difficult to figure out who you are inside when you've only recently realized that, in some things, there is a choice.

In my friends, my family members, and the people giving religious sermons, I had seen something I envied. All of them had found a sense of belonging, a place they seemed to fit, and I very much wanted those same things for myself. I wanted to have utmost faith in something, because I wanted that uplifting certainty that I saw in deeply religious people. I wanted to *know* the answer to religion and to what happened after a person died, not just contemplate different theories in a wishy-washy manner. Christianity had been dismissed as an option at an early age, so I began looking at other religions.

Many aspects of my daily life became opportunities to study religion. I watched every religious television special I stumbled upon while perusing through the TV guide. Every

essay assigned in my classes became religious research assignments. I took myself to the places where I knew I'd find answers.

In a residential neighborhood in Minneapolis, there was a mosque. On a tree covered intersection between two roads, it sat on the well-shaded corner. It was an old house and it had been painted an odd color, the oddity of it more memorable than the actual color. Aside from the sign in the front yard which had the typical church line about living life a certain way yadda yadda yadda, I would not have guessed the small, one story house had anything different on the inside than my own home.

As I walked up to the house, I noticed how cared for it seemed. The grass was trimmed and the crumbling sidewalk was neatly swept. Inside the front door was a large, rectangular entryway, and the great number of coat racks and shoes cubbies were all full. A shelf, set higher than my eye level, held spare scarves. A woman's hair was to be covered when inside this building, but I decided to keep wearing my hat instead of the scarves offered.

Past the entryway door, the inside of the house froze me. The dark, normal coatroom had not prepared me for the rest of the house. The one large, central room had a domed ceiling and it, along with the walls, was dyed gold. Swirled, delicate designs painted the room, some forming what I assumed to be Arabic words, and some twisting and dipping in seemingly frivolous patterns. The plush carpet was a bright red detailed in more gold, creating a pattern I knew from my text books pointed toward Mecca. Aside from a podium, there was no other furniture in the room. Aside from me, surrounded by several dozen men, there were no other women in the room.

I was led to the other side of the building, and there I discovered a small nook, distinctly separate from the central room. Here sat several women, the back entryway into the

house, and a staircase leading into the basement. I sat near a black woman dressed in Muslim fashion—a long, loose, robe-like dress with the only skin showing on her face and hands. Her head scarf was a pretty pink and blue pattern. She sharply ordered her children to stop squirming or go downstairs and then smiled at me.

We sat together and watched as women entered through this back door, some with children, some stooped with age, nearly all heading immediately into the basement.

“There’s a camera facing the podium,” said the black mother whose name I’d forgotten. She pointed at the electronic device unobtrusively mounted on the wall in the main room. “Many of the women who come here aren’t comfortable being around so many men who aren’t family, so they attend services downstairs. They watch on a monitor.”

I was as antsy as her children, palms sweaty and face flushed red, but she didn’t comment on my unease. She confided in me: “I don’t mind sitting up here because I haven’t always been a follower of Islam. Born and raised an inner city Minnesotan. But I made a lot of wrong choices in my life. When I converted, I had two babies and was pregnant with a third, all from different men, not a one of them I was married to. But Allah—God—forgives all mistakes made before you become a true follower. None of the women here look at me like I need some shame, because they understand it happened before I figured things out.”

She explained that she liked covering up in the Muslim way. “It’s protection here, not oppression. In truth, I feel bad for the girls out there, their bodies pasted all over billboards. Unlike them, my body is my own and not just any person on the street can see it. Men see me only for my mind this way.”

Looking out at the crowd of men, all drifting into even rows, each man stood within his own red square on the patterned carpet. A few boys claimed their own squares of carpet

next to their fathers. "This is a wonderful place," the Muslim woman ended with. "I hope you like the service."

The service started quickly and with little fuss. The talking simply died out as a man approached the front of the room. The man who spoke into the microphone at the podium had a heavy accent. I vaguely remembered hearing mention of a guest speaker and as my ears tuned out much of his lesson against wife beating, I wondered if he was actually visiting from the Middle East. The room became an odd dance. As a whole, the group of men knelt, bowed, turned their heads, and recited their prayers in near unison.

Walking away from the service an hour later, I was left with awe for the building's beauty and the conviction held by the people within. Fascinated and curious, I nonetheless knew I was no Muslim. I didn't want to cover my body, even for my own good. Attending services in a basement held no appeal to me. And despite my interest, I had been bored out of my mind during the service.

I'd discarded Christianity, Islam held no pull, and I was still religiously ambiguous. Then in my high school English class, our teacher assigned an in-depth project. We were to research a topic, interview knowledgeable people on the subject, write a term paper, and present everything to the class. My friend Sonja and I decided to team up. After my idea of bondage sex was dismissed as a topic because Sonja logically pointed out a lack of possible interviewees, I convinced her that we should cover Buddhism instead.

We read books, looked at websites, and made several appointments with Buddhist groups in the area. Sonja and I met first with a man living in what seemed to be a Buddhist halfway house. Every person living there was college-aged or only just beyond. Sonja took

notes while I allowed myself to be distracted by the random resident who repeatedly walked through the living room—and our interview—wearing only a terrycloth robe.

Next, Sonja and I met with a Buddhist couple, the first multiethnic couple I'd ever seen. He was Asian and she was white. Her ten-year-old was at a friend's house for the evening. The three of them shared a small apartment full of green figurines, red knotwork, and statues of a squat little man. Sonja once again took notes and before we left, they gifted us with a book they believed would help us understand Buddhism a little more. "The Tree of Enlightenment" did not end up being a valuable resource to our paper, and so it was abandoned on my cluttered bookshelf at home.

Our final interview took place in the attic of a Buddhist temple/Zen meditation center in a house facing a small lake half a mile from the Minneapolis airport. There was a ceremony taking place downstairs for followers of traditional Buddhism. People sat along the walls in a single row with their legs folded in the lotus position. Incense smoke coiled thickly near the ceiling and a low chanting was the only sound aside from the footsteps of Sonja, myself, our guide, and two other religiously curious people as we crossed the room and walked up the stairs leading into the attic.

Sitting in a circle, the five of us spoke about Buddhism. Sonja asked her routine interview questions, and then our guide said we would finish the session with meditation.

"Relax. Sit in whatever manner is most comfortable to you. Close your eyes. Count. Any time you think of something, anything concrete, push that thought from your mind and start counting again from one." His voice was soft as he mentioned we should not get past ten. Our interviewee held a small silver bell in his palm and said, "I will ring this bell in a half hour and that will be your signal to stop."

Annoyed, my first thought was that this next half hour was going to suck. Then I began counting. *One . . . my arm itches . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . a plane just flew overhead . . . one . . . two . . . I can hear Sonja breathing . . . one . . . ding!*

I opened my eyes. The people around me were shifting, stretching muscles. Sonja rubbed at her face, wiping away sleepy grogginess. Was that a half an hour?

Walking to the car with Sonja, something within me felt right. It was calm and soft. The air outside felt bright and there was a lightness to it, as if gravity wasn't quite resting on my shoulders. I wasn't worried about anything—not my class project, not driving through rush hour traffic, not getting accepted into college. I was empty inside, but a *wonderful* sort of emptiness. It was the perfect blankness of a new sheet of paper, beautiful and with the potential of being filled with something amazing.

It restored me. That blankness, which whispered possibilities and future, was something I thought I'd lost with the revelation of my dad's death. The meditation gave me back a level of purity, even innocence, that I had thought hopelessly burned.

It was a precious feeling, one that lingered within me for the next several weeks. Standing in the front of my English classroom with Sonja and presenting our paper on Buddhism, I remembered the soft, calm emptiness that the meditation had freed within me. But the research and interviews had taught me something else—as much as I welcomed that feeling, that didn't make me a Buddhist. Meditation could be completely separate; Buddhism was more a way of living. To me, the guidelines on how to treat people, the teachings, and the lack of a “God” figure, all coalesced into more of an abstract philosophy and less into a religion.

The meditation had felt—right. But I was a very cynical teenager, and ultimate enlightenment seemed too farfetched.

The summer after my senior year of high school, Mormons knocked on the door. Theirs was a dangerous job. The last time my mother caught Mormons on our property, there was swearing, screaming, threats, and destroyed flyers—all on the part of my mom. The Missionaries just ran.

But this time I answered the door. The three young men were friendly and non-threatening. They told me about why they went door to door, and how their faith affected their lives. We discussed their version of the afterlife, because every religion seems to have a different form. They told me about the prophet. Unlike Christians waiting around for the return of Jesus, Mormons believed that person was already alive, spreading God's messages. Right that second.

It was an incredible thought. Someone was claiming to be a prophet from God and had somehow convinced this entire faith of his credibility? How could I *not* be taken in when he had such validation and proof?

"Okay, how about this." The young man speaking was very earnest sounding, which made his otherwise homely features more attractive. I gave him my full attention and we held eye contact. "This is something only you can decide to believe in. Only you can know if you feel the truth of God's existence inside yourself. How about this: tonight, I want you to pray. Pray to God. If he answers, he's real and listening. If he doesn't, well, then, you'll be vindicated that there's no God meddling about. No matter what happens, you'll know."

I had just been handed a Book of Mormon and assured them that I would pray when my mother realized something was odd about me spending an hour at the door with several strangers. While I fended her off, the three men barely in their twenties beat a hasty retreat like the confident warriors of God that they were.

After they left, I held the Bible in my hands and flipped through the tissue thin pages. I wasn't truly looking at the blue cover or the printed words inside. I was thinking about being certain; I was thinking about no longer being agnostic. A sharp envy twisted within me when I saw the absolute faith of others, and more than anything, I craved finally knowing.

I didn't pray that night.

I sat on my bed, just a mattress on the floor, and pulled my blankets around me, surrounded myself in them. Crouched in the dark, I remembered prayers as a child. They'd always been minor prayers, even petty prayers. *Please God, let tomorrow's fieldtrip to the amusement park go smoothly. Please God, make sure my first day of middle school doesn't suck. Please God, get O'Brian to like me back.*

My childhood prayers hadn't been answered, but I rarely thought of them the next day anyway. I'd always felt those type of prayers, just like the prayers of football players about to start a game, of someone hoping to find that perfect pair of shoes, were the sort of prayers that wouldn't be answered even if there was a God. If there was a God, that God would be dealing with disease and missing children and war. Why would God care if I got a boyfriend or a football player won a game when there were so many things more important?

But if I prayed to God asking for answers like the Mormon man had pressed me to do, it would affect me on a much larger scale than nearly any other prayer I had ever made. It wouldn't be on the same scale as world hunger or deep poverty, but it wouldn't be a throw-away prayer, easily dismissed as unimportant. I would see the world differently, think about situations differently, spend my time in places I didn't normally frequent. Religion could change everything.

I wasn't certain I wanted to change. If God was really listening and he answered me, I would be absolutely faithful. I would attend church, study the Bible, and make all of his teachings an essential part of me. I would have faith. But I liked who I was. I was busy enough with family matters and class assignments. Why would I want to force in religion as well?

There was, of course, the possibility that God didn't answer and my personal views would change little. I would be gifted with knowledge, freed from worry and internal debate. All good things, but I couldn't be sure which answer I would get if I prayed, and I was hesitant to take the risk that it was an answer I wouldn't like.

The next day, one of the Mormons called me. He asked how everything had gone and inquired if I wanted to attend a sermon at his church. I tried to explain why I hadn't prayed, my reasons and internal debate. He accepted my rationale and made no attempt to argue with me or force me into attending his church. As we hung up our separate phones, his last thought ran in my mind. *Coward*. He didn't actually call me a coward, but I could feel him thinking it. And I knew I had been. I had been afraid of receiving something I wouldn't like, and I ran away from that possibility.

I spent the next several years as an agnostic, and a semi-content one. Nothing was going to force me to change my mind except for myself, and I was no longer interested in seeking out the answers. I entered college and endured many rigorous debates. I walked past the campus church every day on my way to classes. I listened to my Catholic best friend pray for my soul. I set aside the seriousness of the topic and began expressing humor in religious differences, whether or not anyone else appreciated that humor.

One evening, my best friend was talking about her family. Her little brother was soon to be baptized.

Jolting upright on the couch, she looked at me and gasped, “You are baptized, aren’t you?”

Her hair was only mussed from lying on the couch while we watched TV and chatted during commercials, but combined with her wild eyes, I suddenly saw her as the classic church do-gooder. I thought it was hilarious—and so I refused to answer her question.

“Anie,” she breathed, her voice hushed. She rose with the answer I’d meant her to find, that I had not been baptized, and her expression of horror was both sad and entertaining. She was tightly coiled with tension and fear for two days while I cruelly kept up the joke. I listened half-heartedly while she raged about hell and purgatory. I steadfastly refused to allow her church to baptize me, instead offering her examples of all the things I did every day that would send me to hell anyway.

She didn’t cry when I confessed that I had actually been baptized, but from the relieved and furious expression she wore for nearly a week afterward, it had been a near thing.

I experienced an epiphany my junior year at the university. The second revelation of my life, it was unexpected and beautiful.

I was working with a professor who was presenting on her recent sabbatical. A group of fellow students and I were only doing small things like purchasing food trays, writing invitations, and receiving guests the day of the professor’s lecture. We weren’t particularly interested in what she had to say about her sabbatical, but we couldn’t turn down her plea for assistance, as much as we may have wanted to with finals week looming over us.

Surprisingly, her lecture pierced me. I hadn't expected it to when, in the beginning of her speech, she mentioned a couple Biblical quotes. For me, when a Christian saying passed through any room, it would be tuned out, no exceptions. Sitting next to the Deans of the university and several students I was only half familiar with, I was anticipating an hour long wave of things I didn't care about, and her intro initially confirmed that feeling. But I tuned back into her speech when her words began revolving around the question of what it meant to be an artist.

Believing myself to be an artist, both through images and words, it was a topic I held interest in. I sat straighter in my chair and focused my gaze on the professor standing at the podium.

"Art is an essential. It is my very life. My world revolves around metaphors and images of fancy." The professor's voice was soft, and I was lulled. She was describing me as well as herself. I found myself smiling in her direction and nodding to her words.

"And I told myself, I knew, that if I ever couldn't find a metaphor that fit, if I ever ran out of words to describe something, then I could turn to God, and he would be my art. He would be my words," she said, her voice imbued with conviction. She stood facing the windows and the spring sun made her blond hair glow. She smiled serenely at her audience at me when our eyes met.

*Your conviction
was the
complement
of the professor?*

That was when I knew. It was sudden and intense and impossible to dismiss. I knew that if there was a day when I ran out of metaphors, when I ran out of words, then I would kill myself before turning to some imaginary figure in the sky. I knew this with every part of me, wholly and completely, just as the professor knew her faith in her god.

For another half hour I sat and basked in my revelation while the professor talked. A sense of rightness filled me up and cemented my discovery within me. I continued to smile at

her as her lecture moved in a new direction, because I felt like she has presented me with an amazing gift. I hugged her at the end of her lecture because I was indescribably grateful for what her words had opened in me, despite knowing it was not the reaction she had been aiming for.

During her lecture, I became an atheist. And I was liberated.

Rejoice

It's an up and down sort of thing—
A backwards and forwards.
Figuring out what's right and wrong.

Really, there's so much to choose from:
Christianity
Islam
Buddhism
Mormonism
The world

Everyone wants you on their side,
Thinking like them,
Believing in their histories,
Their proofs.

Knowledge is power,
And you want it.

But it has to fit,
And when have you ever fit?

Think—
Long and hard.

Decide—
Or don't.

But be free
And rejoice in
Whatever choice
You make.

Deliverance

I didn't love my family. Truly, it was a harsh thing to say, but honesty couldn't always be pretty.

My mom's family, her parents specifically, were hard people to love. They gave me kind childhood memories, but when I was old enough to be aware of their personal views and past actions, I didn't care for them quite as much. They had good qualities, like most people, but the bad outweighed the good. Humans are full of contradictions.

As a young girl, I often spent weekends with my grandparents. It was an hour drive to their house. Woods encroached on the end of the block, and the buttercup yellow paint on their house shone from between the trees. My grandpa had a passion for wood carving, and so the paneling of the house and garage was covered in large, painted butterflies.

Grandpa was a large man. His plain blue jeans and flannel shirts stretched to encompass his bulging beer belly. In the Korean War, his army truck hit a landmine and flipped over, landing on top of him. He'd worn a leg brace since before I was born. Grandpa was a terribly grumpy man, but I remembered him eating popcorn, cornflakes, and ice cream, playing video games, card games, and darts.

Grandma was also solidly built. She painted ugly paintings and plastic statues that were her main gift on every holiday to family members of every age. Grandma's lips would pinch when I insisted on eating with one foot on the kitchen table, but she was willing to spend hours hopping from one garage sale to another. Unlike Grandpa, she cheated at cards and had to be watched closely.

My grandparents argued, bitter and sharp. Married for decades, none of their five children remembered them loving each other.

"Why don't they get a divorce?" Looking at my relatives, all with several marriages, the question came easily to me.

"Too much work," my mom answered, shrugging. "They'll live with each other the rest of their lives and hate it, because they're too lazy to call lawyers and divide their stuff and find alternate places to live."

My grandparents' anger was prevalent, but as a child, it never mattered. Their home was a good place, and the fighting wasn't something I gave much thought to.

Before I knew what modesty was, my grandma would help me bathe every evening. As she tried to towel-dry me, I'd escape and run down the hallway naked. Grandpa was always in his armchair facing the TV. When I'd get into the living room, I'd plop down on the carpet next to him and steal from his bowl of popcorn. After Grandma caught me and stuffed me into a nightgown, she'd make several more bowls, and the three of us would watch *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* and *Walker, Texas Ranger* until I fell asleep.

Their yellow house was surrounded by gardens. Grandma spent much of her time caring for her flowers. There were red roses by the front door, orange carnations in the back, and purple johnny jump-ups everywhere in between. The property line between my grandparent's house and the house behind it was lined with lilacs, and when the first bloom came, Grandma would send my sister and me around the block with gift bouquets for every house. When the spring season was too early for flowers, Grandma would set out plastic blossoms.

Grandpa shared his box of cornflakes with me in the mornings. He used the same blue bowl every day. Mine was the generic white that Grandma had a dozen of. He'd leave out the container of sugar on the kitchen table between us and I'd pour in enough to create a white sludge at the bottom of the bowl. After I'd eaten all the flakes, I'd eat the sludge all by itself.

I enjoyed life with them then. The time with my grandparents revolved around the smell of Grandpa's cologne, the taste of sugar sludge, and the feel of the sunshine in Grandma's garden. It was a pleasant surface, and as a child, that was all I needed.

As I grew up, I heard the stories. I found out the other side of the man who taught me to ride a bike and the woman I baked cookies with.

When I reached a double digit age, my mom began telling me about sex. She warned me to wait when she shared her first time with me. The backseat of the car, the pain, and a boy she didn't love. And she described to me how, when her mom found out she wasn't a virgin, Grandma beat her black and blue. Grandma screamed at her for being stupid, and demanded to know why she'd do something so horrible.

"Sex is bad! It hurts! There's no point unless you're trying for babies. Are you trying to get pregnant? You're only fourteen! Why would you ever *want* to have sex?"

That story also taught me a lot about Grandpa.

As the years passed and I reached my mid-teens, my mom warmed to the subject of sex. At length, she'd talk about her experiences—mostly the negative ones. When Mom and her sister were molested by her aunt's husband, she told Grandma. And Grandma didn't believe her. My mom was called a liar and an attention seeker to her face. My mom's aunt stayed married, and my mom's molester stayed protected.

I couldn't help but put myself in my mom's place. If a man held me down and touched me, made me touch him, would my grandma look me in the eyes and say, "I don't believe you," or "You already act like a slut with your short skirts; you wanted it." Would she continue to invite that man over for dinner, give me updates on his family and health, mourn him after his death as if he were a good person? She had done those things with the man who

sexually assaulted my mom. What would make a situation involving me any different? How could I trust Grandma, knowing that she wasn't on her own daughter's side, a woman she raised? My mom had her safety violated, and I couldn't depend on Grandma to protect me from that same violation.

Everybody makes mistakes and forgiveness is important. I forgive people after they make mistakes because they recognize those missteps and resolve not to repeat them in the future. Grandma did not believe she had made a mistake. Decades passed, my mom and aunt grew into adults, and Grandma never apologized, because she continued to believe that her daughters must have gained something with their "lies" against her brother-in-law. Because why else would they accuse a man of something so horrible?

When I was fifteen, my grandpa passed away. Cancer had eaten away his lungs; although, doctors couldn't tell if the cancer had killed him or the chronic pneumonia his lowered immune system had left him with. His last two years were a pained struggle of hospital visits and oxygen tanks. And then Grandma was alone in the yellow house at the end of the road.

The first thing she did was paint it blue. Bright, eyesore blue. That color did more than kill the home my happy childhood memories took place in. The color marked the murder of any possible future happy memories in that house. When Grandpa died, I lost a little of my innocence, opened my eyes a little wider than they had been. I saw that I really didn't mind that Grandpa was dead.

In the year after his death, Grandma frequently ranted that Grandpa was still visiting her. Her children, my aunts and uncles, all nodded and commented about how wonderful it

was that Grandpa lingered and “watched over them.” During one of the last holiday visits I spent with my relatives, they asked my opinion on the matter.

“I think that each and every one of you is stupid and selfish,” I said. “Grandpa still lingering? What a horrible thing to wish on a supposed loved one. Stuck on Earth and forced to watch your family go on without you. Watch as we sell all his shit at garage sales, as we ‘enjoy’ holidays without him, as we gossip about the time he beat up Aunt Patty.”

My family was upset at my words, my blunt phrasing, but I was too disappointed in them to care. The only good memories about Grandpa happened when I was a small child or when he wasn’t talking. He did nothing but fight with Grandma and act like an oversized, grumpy bully. But now that he was dead, suddenly everyone missed him and wanted him to “watch over us?”

My mom tried to calm me down, tried to talk it out with me. “Now that Grandpa’s gone, Grandma’s the only person in that big house. She’s just trying to feel less alone,” Mom reasoned.

“Why? They never even loved each other.”

Mom thought about it, and then spoke haltingly. “I think . . . I think, in the end, they did love each other.”

I shook my head, physically rejecting her words and any possible love between Grandma and Grandpa as his life came to a close. “What a stupid time to decide you love someone.”

My mom only shrugged and so I let the subject go.

Without Grandpa’s negative presence around to distract me, I became much less tolerant with Grandma. I couldn’t help but notice, and be pissed off, by all of the little things.

When I was twenty, my grandma turned seventy-five-years-old. I couldn't imagine having lived for three-quarters of a century. The weight of those years was mind boggling to me and I began thinking about what my life would be like if I had lived for so long. I began thinking about the kind of person I would be with so many experiences to call upon. Then I compared that image with my grandma.

When I had lived for the majority of a century, I hoped that I didn't act like a child.

I understood that my grandma was from a different generation. She had been raised to depend on others, taught that childlike behavior would be acceptable, even expected. But I could see how she used it, a deliberate manipulation to get her way. It angered me because I could see the fake behind her eyes.

My sister was nineteen-years-old and when she wanted something, she'd pull out her "pleading puppy eyes." It was always for small things. She wanted to eat at a restaurant I wasn't in the mood for or she needed to borrow ten bucks.

My grandma used those same eyes. I'd look at her, seventy-five-years-old and using a childish, semi-comical expression. She'd also only pull out her "pleading puppy eyes" for serious things.

Grandma moved into my mom's house for about a month the year she was seventy-five. She was sick, pneumonia, and didn't want to sit alone in her house. My mom struggled to take care of her—Grandma's only unemployed child, the responsibility fell solely on her. Grandma was moved into my mom's bed. Grandma's clothes filled my mom's closet and the dresser and shelves became instantly filled with all of the food my mom hand carried to her. Grandma was treated like a queen—my mom's bed was her throne, my mom's TV was her scepter, and my mom was her all-purpose servant.

Grandma wasn't polite about any of the help she was receiving. She'd bitch if my mom left the house. When my sister tried to walk past the open bedroom door, she was ordered to fetch things in an expectant tone. In the month Grandma lived in my mom's home, the words "thank you" did not once leave her lips.

She became angry that I wasn't also at her beck and call. I worked nights and slept during the day, and the few hours I was home and awake, I avoided her. I saw and heard how my mom and sister were treated. While I tried to reason with myself that Grandma was just a scared old lady and that was the reason for her foul temper, I still saw no reason to subject myself to her presence. Being sick and old wasn't a reason for rudeness and ingratitude.

Grandma tried to show her displeasure by informing my mom how displeased she was with me.

"She's being mean. I'm not giving her a Christmas present this year," Grandma told my mom.

Mom came to me with the news several days later, her voice hushed so that Grandma stayed asleep and my mom could keep what little free time she still had.

I was shocked at Grandma's pettiness and told my mom so. "I'm not a Christian and Grandma knows that. I've never made Christmas presents a requirement in our family and I strongly feel that they shouldn't be used as something to show favor or disfavor. When I give people presents, I do it because I love them and I can take joy from their pleasure. Grandma hands each grandchild a twenty-five dollar check and acts like she put a lot of thought into it."

I was unspeakably incensed when, the next morning, Grandma came to me and, using the "pleading puppy eyes" that work so well for my nineteen year old sister, said, "Don't you love me anymore?"

I am not a person that takes away my love when annoyed. Love is a permanent thing. I will always love Rusty, the first person I had a strong relationship with, because I can remember why I love him. I would never dismiss his passion for flowers and the hand raised roses he grew just for me, no matter how many years had passed since I'd gotten them. But I couldn't make a parallel with my grandma, because I had never loved her in the first place. Childhood memories of her spending time in her garden were no basis for love. Her flowers had little to do with me; I was only the errand-girl who delivered her hard-work as presents to other people. Where I had nice words from Rusty, I could only remember snipping and criticism from my grandma.

I could only remember the time Grandma screamed cuss words at a black woman in a parking lot, calling her a stupid nigger, when my sister's best friend Ali stood beside her. Ali, one of the sweetest people I'd ever known, was black.

In my mind rose the sound of my grandma's disgust and horror when a man asked to pray for her health, and his method of praying revealed he was a Muslim. Grandma's absolute certainty that she had to hang an American flag over her door the next morning to show that she didn't have terrorist affiliations only exemplified her ignorance.

Her absolute belief that every gay man needed to be put down like a dog because at some unavoidable point he would have sex with an infant infuriated me on a level so deep that I almost couldn't stand to look her.

I couldn't like a person of her character, much less love her, family or not. I was involved in Grandma's health only because my family was and because at that point she lived in the same house as I did. When she asked whether or not I still loved her, I could only shrug, walk away, and hope she stopped talking to me.

My mother focused much of her life on her mother and everything revolved around Grandma as she grew more and more sick. I could only laugh bitterly as, when Mom became ill and began vomiting from a severe bout of food poisoning, Grandma declared she was in perfect health and was moved back into her house by the next morning, ending her month long reign in my mom's house.

Still, my mom drove to Grandma's house almost daily. She helped Grandma to doctor's appointments, picked up her medication, and cleaned her house. And six months later, with Grandma still sick, Mom was wearing down. The stress was falling on her as the only unemployed child, but now, Mom was unemployed because she didn't have time to look for a job. Her finances fell to the wayside, her job searches nothing more than fantasy-laden dreams.

Every conversation Mom had with me became focused on Grandma, and so I tried my best to help carry her, listen to her worries and fears. Over everything, every word, gesture, and doctor's appointment, was the question, "Why is Grandma not getting better?"

And then finally there was an answer. Sitting with my sister at lunch, the two of us talking about nothing, she said casually, "Oh, and Grandma's got cancer."

I felt like I had stepped onto a roller coaster. My stomach lurched and the sound of harsh wind and grating metal-on-metal filled my ears until I could hear nothing. My mouth gaped in an expression of half-terror and half-elation. I sucked in my breath in a desperate attempt to hold onto the moment, because suddenly, I felt so good.

The limb weakness and reoccurring pneumonia was all based on the fact that Grandma had lung cancer. We knew what was going on and would soon have all the knowledge necessary to deal with it. Grandma could get chemotherapy, get better, and I wouldn't have to

think about her anymore, or Grandma would get worse, die, and *I wouldn't have to think about her anymore.*

Suddenly, I was crying. I was not going to be eternally struggling to help my mom deal with an old lady with bad health. I wasn't going to have to constantly deal with Grandma's bigoted comments or the fact that she protected her child-molester brother-in-law.

My relief overwhelmed me, because I came to the realization that I was nothing like my grandma. Unlike her experience with Grandpa, I would not discover love born through guilt as Grandma's last days approached. I had always known that I didn't love her, and no personal trial was going to "make me see the light."

I knew myself and my feelings. And I was proud to stand by my initial emotions when I heard that she had cancer. I had found deliverance in my emotional understanding.

Little Old Lady

It's hard to dislike someone.
Harder still when that person is family.

I'm the bad guy.

She's just a little old lady.

What's wrong with me?

I remember the nice things.
The gardens and garage sales.

I remember the sexual exploitation.
The nasty, racist, homophobic comments.

But she's just a little old lady.

Raised in a different era.

And she's dying.

I've been taught to forgive and forget.
Savor what time there is left.

But she leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

And I don't like her.

So why shouldn't I find deliverance in her imminent death?

A Home

I was not a social person in my youth. Growing up, I rarely slept at friends' houses. Throughout my K-12 years, I attended a mere half dozen slumber parties, most of those birthday parties thrown by casual friends. I was never more than an after-thought invite, included because excluding me would make one less guest at a blowout bash.

I never minded the small amount of invites, because I didn't particularly like staying at other people's homes. It felt strange to sleep and shower and go to the bathroom in an unfamiliar place. The bathroom door could be locked, but I'd still be weighed down by the possibility of some strange adult accidentally coming in. When I slept, my shoulders tensed up, a turtle-like gesture of stress that wouldn't actually protect me from the strange place and however many people had keys to get inside.

My mother's house was the place I felt most comfortable in. My room was in the basement, three floors below my mom and sister's bedrooms, and I decorated it however I pleased.

The house wasn't mine though. When you own something that can be locked, a safe or a car or a house, you get a key. And you can always get inside, because it's yours. In the ten years I lived at my mother's house, I never got a key to the front door. My mother never said, "No, it's my house and I won't give you a key." I simply . . . never received one.

Being locked out sucked, not that my mom ever did so intentionally. When I was fifteen, my sister and I got off the school bus and walked to the front door only to find it locked. It happened to be January and the coldest week of the year, with temperatures in the negative twenties. By the time the two of us found a neighbor who would let us use her phone, we couldn't feel our fingers. Our mom drove home from work immediately to let us in, but after that, I kept a basement window unlocked and rigged the screen to pop off easily.

Moving out of my mom's house was a big deal, a drastic change in my life, but I lived in the dorms my first year of college. Yes, I had a key, but so did the other girl who shared the room with me. I had two RAs telling me when I could have my door open and how loud I could have my music. The room wasn't mine.

Then I moved into a house, the Honors Residence on campus, during my sophomore year at the University. Everything inside created a claustrophobic atmosphere, from the cramped hallways to the narrow doorways to the dozen people always running around inside. But for such a small house, it had a surprising amount of space. Five bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room, laundry room, dining room, game room, and kitchen all fit into a house that looked cramped and old from the outside. The flaking paint job and serious spider web problem gave the house an abandoned atmosphere. But the purple front door and overgrown landscaping felt like mine just the same. I even had a key.

Truly, it wasn't my house in the literal sense—I was only one of many renters. But living somewhere for an extended period of time can give a person a false sense of ownership. For almost two years it was my home, my go-to place at the end of the day.

Technically it was an on-campus residence building like the dorms, but it never felt like it. My housemates and I figured things out between ourselves. No one insisted we shut our bedroom doors after one in the morning because *every* person in the house would still be laughing away when the clock hit 3 a.m. If someone was blasting music someone else didn't like, that person would put on his own loud enough so that he didn't have to hear it. Problem solved.

Living in the house was hardly 24/7 smooth sailing. Some days I wanted to strangle my housemates and other days I wanted to strangle the university employees in charge of the house—whether because of overly intense political discussions or the price of toilet paper.

But there were more days when I couldn't stop laughing as I played video games with my housemates. More days where I sat on my futon and enjoyed the silence.

Somewhere along the way, the house became my home.

Homes are private places, not just where people keep all of their material objects, where people sleep at night. Even people living with a spouse or children are able to find personal time, to relax the barriers held in places every time they leave the house.

Few people are capable of going into public places—the mall, an event, work—and not change who they are, even on a small scale. When I worked at a gas station, my nineteen-year-old co-worker Chris was very careful to hold himself back from saying certain things while at work. It was not socially acceptable to talk about how bang-able a customer was, and so that comment was held back or restricted to certain ears. In order to keep his job, he had to project a respectable mien to both customers and managers; he had to censor his thoughts and emotions.

A black teacher from my high school spoke in an educated manner and his speech wasn't any different from my white teachers. But when that black teacher visited the convenience store I worked at on a weekend with a few buddies, his lips were slinging out gangster Blackenese just as casually as his friends. No matter which way of speaking was more natural for him, which way he spoke while he was in his own home, he felt the expectations of society pressing him to talk a certain way.

I let societal expectations steer me when I was in public. More often than not, I dressed up when I left the house. Whether at class, at work, or at the mall, I felt more comfortable knowing I didn't look as if I just rolled out of bed. It didn't matter if my pants were too tight around the hips or my shoes were giving me blisters, I felt better knowing I

didn't stand out in a negative way. But when I got home, I immediately kicked off my heels, wiggled out of my bra, and put on pajamas. While I did try for colors that somewhat matched, I didn't otherwise put very much effort into how I looked while at home. Sweatpants, a t-shirt, and loudly colored socks made up my outfit of choice—but only when I was home.

My home was where I was completely free—completely me. I could let loose, let it all hang out, and there were no masks. I said the bad jokes that crossed my mind, I used terrible grammar despite my English degree training, and I wore only comfortable things. My home, the gray house at the end of the block, became the first place I met with people where we were all open. All ourselves, without the fronts we assumed when in public.

And it was perfect.

Sitting in my bedroom on the second floor, the sounds of moaning drifted through the floorboards. Thumping music interspersed the giggling. Setting my homework to the side, I decided to go make a polite inquiry.

“Why does it sound like you guys are watching porn in the living room?” I called from the stairwell.

“Because we kind of are?” floated back to me. Laughter—from more than one male voice—punctuated the comment.

I stood silent, still just out of sight on the stairs, unsure if I should gracefully retreat. Despite living with four boys, I didn't understand the male sex. Did my housemates and their friends use porn as a bonding method? If so, would their only female housemate's presence detract from that experience?

“You can come watch too,” Sebby sighed. “It more a movie than porn.”

Laughing, Michael shouted, "*Zombie Strippers*. Whoohoo!"

The stairs creaked loudly as I descended them. Turning the corner, I saw three of the boys interspersed around Sebby's computer. "It's a movie?" I inquired hesitantly.

"With lots of boobies and stripper shoes," Sebby tossed back playfully.

Settling myself on the arm of the couch next to him in full view of his laptop, I smirked. "Yay. I love boobies and shoes."

Watching the low grade film, I found myself glad I'd discarded my homework. It was a Saturday night, and I felt like I deserved to have some fun. The surprisingly scary zombies, all topless and still working as successful strippers, made for an intriguingly intense conversation among the four of us. The boys were all suitably impressed that I was neither squeamish nor prissy and that I would understand their manly humor. I felt accepted into the group, despite differences between us larger than gender.

It was an open, fun, strange evening. And it never would've happened if not for my little white house.

Soon, everyone living in the house grew comfortable enough to be insulting. We said whatever crossed our minds because it was our house and we wanted to act like the assholes we knew we could be. It helped that we knew everyone else was going to understand the remarks as mostly stress relief or boredom or incomprehension. Most conversations included snippy comments that were more humorous than hurtful. When someone jokingly tossed out, "Everyone knows bisexual people are undependable," I could laugh because I knew that, even if they truly meant it, they didn't intend to hurt me. They said what was on their mind, were honest, and weren't going to shut out any rebuttal I may have had.

After attempting to spend another Saturday night alone in my room working on homework, I looked up to a pounding on my door.

Peeking his green-topped head through the doorway, Matt asked me, "Are you masturbating?"

Raising an eyebrow, I gave up to focusing on the textbook open on my lap as I replied, "No."

"What are you doing then?" Still wavering in the doorway, he didn't look ready to leave me alone.

"I'm doing my Honors homework. We've got a paper due soon." I'd been semi-looking over my notes with the TV on in the background. I'd seen every episode of *World's Wildest*, but it was better than the other reality show alternatives.

"I hear the class you're in is easy. Though, my Honors class has a term paper due soon, too. Monday, maybe? I haven't started it yet," Matt muttered unapologetically. "I'm probably going to get a 'D' in the class."

I rolled my eyes at his lack of drive. "Sucks to be you. I'm pretty sure I'm getting an 'A' in my class."

His voice grew high pitched as he accused, "You're an overachiever!"

Taken aback, I recoiled in bewilderment. "Because I do all the assignments?"

His was absolutely certain that, yes, doing all of the assignments did make me an overachiever. That firmness withstood my query, "Um, this is the Honors House. Aren't we supposed to do our homework?" Our loud discussion eventually gained the attention of several other house members, and soon I was soundly booed into silence.

I was all right with the outcome. I'd laughed out of pure incredulity, my housemates had laughed at their own absurdness, and I'd had an enjoyable pseudo-argument.

Living together, seeing each other every day, having different personalities, we got into fights. Every healthy relationship has fights and as little fun as they ultimately are, they were necessary. People get angry, and if it happens at work or in the classroom, it's a struggle to express that feeling. It's inappropriate or unprofessional or rude; it's just not done. At home, a place where there were no masks, that anger could be safely expressed.

The house had a dishwasher, which was awesome. Five people and their live-in friends created at least two loads of dishes per day. If the dishes did get done, we knew that, more than likely, Marc did it. He didn't use more dishes than anyone else, but he was neater and more responsible than the other boys.

After six months of living together in the house, he felt his constant work with the dishwasher was unacknowledged. Marc felt used, so he bitched me out for not doing the dishes.

"How fucking hard is it to fill the dishwasher? It takes like five minutes. Why do I always have to do it? You don't do a goddamned thing around the house." Marc was pissed, and understandably so. He shouldn't have had to be the only person dealing with the dishes. I just didn't think that other person helping should be me.

"Fuck off, you asshole," I spat out bitterly, slamming the door to my bedroom. Marc was a philosopher, and so he had no qualms about reasoning and arguing for extended periods of time. I always got too worked up, too angry, and ended up storming away without explaining myself properly.

I was offended that he chose me to single out. That he believed I did nothing. Marc was right that I didn't touch the dishwasher—but I also didn't cook. I ate pop-tarts for breakfast, had lunch on campus, and made only microwavable things for dinner, if I ate dinner

at all. In a week, at most, I used a few plates and basic silverware, as opposed to the pots and pans my other housemates used to cook every meal from scratch.

And I did do a household chore. I weekly took out the recycling, often filled to overflowing with empty soda cans and crumpled newspapers. I hated lugging the giant bags, almost bigger than I was, through the snow covered back yard and into the garage. It was a chore that I never saw anyone else do, but I did it because it was necessary and I recycled more often than I used dishes.

The next day, still angry but having thought out a response, I spelled out my reasoning to Marc. Then I said, "If you don't want to be the only person always dealing with kitchen stuff, than stop doing it. The other boys will figure it out when they run out of dishes."

Scowling at each other, both of us still upset, we agreed to disagree. Marc continued to think of me as a lazy bitch as he filled the dishwasher, and I loudly called him an overly-industrious asshole as I sat on the couch and firmly didn't help. But we both got to say our piece, and there was no editing involved because we were both in our home, both expressing our opinion, and both comfortable doing so.

There were more ups than downs, but both combined easily into an atmosphere of family. We were all at ease with each other and came to love everything about the house. The walls creaked and groaned under even the lightest step or gust of wind. Someone had spilled jelly in the refrigerator, let it drip onto every shelf, and then allowed it to harden. The laundry room had a permanent pile of wrinkled laundry that no one would ever claim. Spiders huddled in every corner, and a layer of grime coated every surface.

But I walked through those narrow doorways and opened myself up. I let myself love the campus, my work, and the people I came home to every day. The house was the only

place I ever wanted to be. My housemates became central to my life. We helped each other with homework, ordered pizza together, and spent our weekends together. The boys became judges about the "douche" level of the people romantically interested in me. I would bring my dates to the house, sit next to them in front of the fireplace, and whisper in their ear, "It's just you and me and my four roommates."

I had found a place where I fit in, and found people who were honest and real about who they were inside and how they acted around me. I had found a home.

Through these Narrow Doorways

I've lived in the little gray house at the end of the block.

Seven people can fit into the upstairs bathroom at one time;
Although, a couple people will have to stand in the bathtub.

There's room in the driveway and alley for six cars to park comfortably,
But if I see a red one, I know Cody is fucking home and nobody likes him.

The gas fireplace is wonderfully warm even if it's a waste of electricity.
I shouldn't lean on it though, because my shirt will melt to it.

Five housemates and all of their friends dirty a lot of dishes.
Marc is the only person who admits to knowing how to turn on the dishwasher.

Drinking alcohol at the Honors House sets a bad example of student life.
So if I have a really bad week and pass out before dusk, I'll be made fun of for forever.

The house phone has an old school ring, and if it rings, it's for me or it's a solicitor.
Don't answer.

The floors don't have carpet and my heels echo like gunshots.
The boys sleeping in will be pissed if I tromp around over their heads.

Everybody's a smart aleck.
And it's home.

