

Honors Program

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Reckless

Creative and Professional Writing

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Artist Statement

I have not always known I wanted to write, but I have always written. Throughout my life, I have always been introspective. I am always in my head. My high school English teacher had this mantra, "Good writing starts with good thinking." I cannot seem to forget this saying, partly because she said it so often, but more so because it made absolute sense to me. I knew right away that it is inherently true. I cannot stop thinking and analyzing and figuring out why anything is the way it is. Writing is the tool that helps me understand everything. There have been other endeavors which I considered, but none have ever stuck and I always come back to writing. Basically, I am a writing major because I just can't help myself.

Last year, I took a class in writing creative nonfiction. At first, I didn't know what creative nonfiction was. I did not believe there was much of a difference between fiction and nonfiction, because I believed an author must somehow know about what they are writing from real life. This seems ridiculous to me now. Of course there is a difference.

From my class, I learned that creative nonfiction is honest writing about real life. There is no changing an event that ends badly or boringly. There is no embellishing of character traits. Creative nonfiction is about showcasing real people and real moments, no matter what they look like or how they sound.

When I looked back on all of my old writing, I realized I had always been a nonfiction writer. Even when I was asked to write fiction, I would just write a story from my real life instead and call it fiction, which was why I had never understood the difference between the two genres. Upon this discovery, I thought back even further to high school and even middle school

and found out it was the same then, too. I have been writing creative nonfiction forever. It has always been how I understand my feelings about events in my life.

In my creative nonfiction class, we were asked to think about the question, “Are you your brother’s or your sister’s keeper?” It was a perfect subject for me, because I believed that I was my sister’s keeper, and I had a lot I could say about it. I made a list of all the memories I had that I always thought were important and that I thought should be explored in my paper.

I wrote each story separately, and then connected them together adding moments from my current life in between them. As I wrote, I didn’t know where the piece was headed or how it was going to end. I just kept writing with the feeling that it would work itself out. When I felt like I had completed it, it turned out to no longer be an address to, “Are you your sister’s keeper?” My paper had transformed the idea, and it showed me aspects of mine and my sister’s relationship, and of my life that I had never realized before. The piece turned out to also be about my family and my home and even about me alone. It was an enlightening experience, and represented everything that writing is to me. It was emotional, it was hard work, it took a long time, but the result illuminated what I had never understood before. It was not just some college paper I wrote for a class. It was worth something to me as a person, not just as a student.

I said that I have always been a writer, but the truth is I wasn’t until I wrote that piece. I had never produced something that meant that much to me before. I had never worked that hard on a piece before. I had never taken that many risks with myself before. My work had never made me want to throw up when I thought about how important it was to me. I finally understood how some of the nonfiction writers I admire, such as Augusten Burroughs and Mary Karr, did what they did. Now, I know that if I have that feeling about a piece, it means that I have really written something good. I have done some real writing.

When it came to my senior project, I knew I wanted to include the piece I was so proud of, *Real Life*. When it was work-shopped, I was told that there was no ending in it, and that was because I was still living the story. I decided for my senior project I would just keep building on *Real Life*, and see what would come out of it. I wanted to make the second half about my family as a whole while also focusing on each member individually.

As I had found out from the first half, this initial idea was just a jumping off point. By the end, the paper would turn out to be completely different than what I thought it would be, but that was good. I couldn't know what I was thinking until I wrote it, and I couldn't know what I was writing until I thought it. I started out the same way as before, but I quickly learned that it was the wrong way to go about the new section. Because I wanted to talk about all the members of my family, the list of important memories became very long and complicated. I wanted to talk about memories from childhood while contrasting them with more recent memories, and I also wanted them to tie into *Real Life*. It became clear that I was trying to do too much for the body of work I was supposed to be building. I was planning too much, and I wasn't letting my writing just happen. It took me a lot of failed beginnings to finally move forward.

Trying to make everything fit together drove me crazy, so I put *Real Life* aside and ignored it, and just started writing new material. I realized that I had been trying to write a second essay when really I just needed to rejuvenate my writing as a whole. I had been trying to explain my whole life to myself. I was trying to cover every family member, and trying to plan stories to answer why I am the way that I am when really what I needed to do was write. I needed to just build on the writing that I started the year before.

After I set aside my old work and started writing new pieces, I discovered it was much easier to express myself without being bogged down by the thought of everything being perfectly

cohesive. I would start with a single subject like my mother, and it turned out to be something I really liked and that said a lot without me having to go through the struggle of forcing my writing to say a lot. When I wrote *Real Life*, I wrote under the impression that I was showcasing my sister. I didn't really intend to show much of myself, but some of me just came out in it. I discovered how to let that happen again when I temporarily let go of *Real Life*.

It makes complete sense in retrospect. I just needed to let go of the idea of creating "a project." As I said, writing is my means of exploring my feelings about my life and surroundings, and thinking that I had to write a certain way smothered my outlet. Once I wrote my additional materials, I realized that everything did fit together cohesively. I didn't write absolutely everything, but I did not need to.

When I finally had all of my pieces finished and polished, I worked with my advisor to put everything in an order. Reading through the entire reorganized piece proved to me that all of my work fit together just fine. It had never needed the big makeover I thought it had to make everything puzzle pieces. Any way I organized them would have worked. I just had to figure out the best way.

Although I am done with my senior project, I know I will continue to develop my future work around it. While it does not have a definite "end" right now, it is a completion of the work I have done in my college career. In creative nonfiction, time is important. These past four years have not been enough time for me to fully complete this project. I do not know when I will finish it to my satisfaction, but I do know that I am completely invested in doing so, and I am happy about this. I need time to be able to be honest. The reader will know something isn't right if a piece of nonfiction leaves something out. I don't want to be able to write a piece in a few days. My best work doesn't happen like that.

As for my future, I always say I didn't go to college to make money. I didn't major in writing to make money, of course. I never wanted to invest my time in college for something that I didn't care about and enjoy. While I may never make a professional career out of writing, it is what I love to do and I consider what I learned in college to be very valuable to my life.

Reckless

I. Youth

I got the pass to go talk to them in fourth hour, much to my dismay. I had Herr Bloom for fourth hour, and being as he was the one who caught me, it was slightly more than uncomfortable. My three-day suspension was over, which meant it had been three days since Caitlin and I had been busted with booze at the school bonfire. Now that I was in school again, I had to do a bunch of shit to get things “back on track,” as they put it.

Sighing lightly, I grabbed my books, and ambled off down the hall. As I walked, I went over the night again in my mind. We drank before we left like usual, but also like usual, we hadn’t had enough. We decided to bring some along, which was, quite possibly, the stupidest decision ever, but we weren’t really taking the time to think things through. In a way though, I was glad our chaos had finally spiraled into the public eye. It felt like it had to happen sometime, and now we could move on. I had learned *my* lesson anyways: never get caught.

As I entered the office doors, the smell of coffee and copy paper slapped me in the face. Getting sent to the office was a new experience, and I didn’t really know the procedure. I handed my pass to the woman at the large secretary desk, and said, “I got this pass, where should I go?” She took the note and examined it.

“Follow me,” she told me in a pleasant, empathetic voice. We made our way down the hall, entered the library, and went into a back room.

This is a strange place to get yelled at, I thought. At least that is why I assumed I was there: to get yelled at, and to sign some junk. The secretary left me there and warned me that they would only be a minute, as if I was going to pull out my hip flask and go to town.

“Great, can’t wait,” I said to myself.

Just as she promised, two men came into the room and took seats across the table from me. This was a bit dramatic. I was but a fifteen year old, delinquent girl, and they needed two adults to give me the business? Talk about overkill. My mind buzzed, but I managed to curve my lips out of a straight line and into a smile to show them I didn’t care how many of them there were. Bring in the principal; bring in a whole crew of C.I.A. members for all I cared! I was not going to budge. I wasn’t saying nothing.

One of the men I recognized as our school’s police liaison officer. I wanted to inform him that I had filled my quota on yelling for the next millennium, so he needn’t bother. I assumed he could relate to filling quotas. I had no idea who the other man was. He was young looking though, maybe twenty-five. He had a cocky air about him too, as if he knew he was really good at his job.

The officer began to go over the report he had of the “incident.” Good, no yelling, I thought, relieved. The officer looked like he wanted to be there about as much as I did, which was another thing we could relate upon. He droned on, and I daydreamed about us becoming good friends. Maybe after this little powwow was over, we would go for a drink and giggle over the irony.

“...and you were caught with this bottle of vodka...,” he finished his summary and extracted a familiar looking water bottle from his bag.

“Yep, that’s about it,” I concluded with a nod. Except it’s not vodka, it’s Bacardi Razz, I thought to myself. He made me sign a ticket and some papers detailing my community service and then left.

Then it was the other guy’s turn. I smelled an interrogation was afoot. Bring it on, asshole, I thought. I sat back in my chair, arms folded across my chest, a symbol of teenage hostility. He rearranged some papers and then examined my pose with a stupid smirk.

“Pauline, my name is Dusty,” he began. Ugh, I thought. I’d sooner refer to him as Master. He probably thought Dusty was a fun and informal name he could use to convince kids he was their friend. It made me want to gag. I clenched my jaw in response.

“I’m not an officer of the law, although I do work closely with the liaison officer and the school. I’m just going to ask you a few questions that I hope you will answer fully and honestly, because I have a feeling you don’t want to be here much longer.”

“Well deduced,” I said after a moment. “Fire away.”

I did want out of there. I wanted to know if Caitlin had already gone through this or if she was waiting for her turn. I wanted to make fun of the situation with someone. All of these adults treated everything so seriously; my young mind craved a more flippant atmosphere, stat. If cooperation was my golden ticket, I was willing to set aside my insolence and answer any question he asked, except the incriminating ones of course.

“I’m not going to beat around the bush,” he started, and I couldn’t believe he just used that phrasing, but I let him continue uninterrupted. “From whom did you obtain the alcohol?”

“I’m sorry, but I won’t tell you that.”

I had anticipated this question. It was what everyone wanted to really know, but I thought it was beside the point. Who cared from where or whom I got it? There were plenty of

persuadable twenty-one-year-olds around. I could have stolen from someone's garage, or a friend could have taken it from her parent's liquor cabinet. Who were these grown-ups trying to kid? Alcohol was painfully available, and hardly the worst thing I could have done. Maybe if I had gone to the bonfire and shot up heroin, I could understand this reaction.

Dusty frowned at me but I stared him down, and I guess he knew I wasn't going to sing. He wrote a few notes and then looked at me with a grave expression.

"Why have you started drinking, Pauline?" I was a bit shocked by the concern in his eyes. He made alcohol sound like a career everyone embarks upon eventually. I pulled my brow together, placed my finger on my chin and pondered. Why had I started?

I thought of the past Fourth of July. I had woken from a summer slumber and gone out into our living room. The house was quiet and the daylight streamed in through the high windows. My sister, Celia, and her friend were sitting on the couch. When I joined them, Celia looked at me seriously and said, "Pee, it's time."

So I started because it was time, according to my sister, and she must have been right because I proceeded to drink the day after that, and throughout the rest of the summer. I realized that answer would not suffice my new friend Dusty, so I replied simply. "Something to do, I suppose."

At this Dusty let out a sigh and looked at me like I was a lost cause. For a moment I was almost offended that he hadn't tried harder, but his defeat meant I got to leave so I stayed quiet.

He asked a few more questions, which I mostly answered, and then he released me. I was so exhilarated about getting out I threw up my arms and shouted, "Freedom!" and then did a few disco inferno jabs in celebration. I heard the librarian, Mr. Mohabir, shush me as I motored out of there, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. I was fifteen.

When we could, Caitlin and I would find someone to buy us a bottle, usually Razz, but we occasionally switched it up. More typically however, we just relied on the steady stream of booze that came through my house. My parents drank Seagrams whiskey and typically bought upwards of two of a couple bottles a week, so we just stole from them.

“Is he gone?” I asked Caitlin as I stood on a chair in the kitchen. I had pulled a chair out of the dining room and placed it in front of the tall shelf that had the booze on top. My dad was running up to the local grocery store, and it was the perfect opportunity to “collect” before my mom got home.

“Yep! Just pulled out of the drive-way,” Caitlin sang to me from the living room where she was watching out the window. I grinned as I filled the empty Nestea bottle we used to store our stolen goods. Iced tea is the same color as whiskey, so if someone did end up seeing us with it they wouldn’t think twice.

I always enjoyed being sneaky. It was exhilarating, and I was good at it. Stealing booze, sneaking out at night, hell, even putting the presents under the tree for my little cousins so they would think Santa came made me giggle my ass off.

For a while my sister and I would alternate collecting from my parent’s bottles so it wouldn’t be obvious that some was missing, but eventually we got too greedy so we had to start diluting the supply a bit to forge the level of liquid.

Just as I popped the pouring cap off the bottle so I could add the water, Caitlin’s phone rang. From the look on her face I knew it was her dad and I knew our plans of drinking for the day were ruined.

“Fucking a, this sucks,” I said after she informed me her dad was coming to pick her up. Caitlin’s parents were so strict and hands-on. I hated them. I wished all parents were like mine.

My mom had me when she was in her late thirties. My parents had already raised my older brother and sister who were sixteen years older than me, and when Celia and I came along they were basically over childrearing. I found it unjustified that my friends all had gross young parents who were into rules and treating their kids like children. I wanted to protest against them, fight for my friends’ civil rights. It was wrong to make your children take showers or come home before nine on a school night or do their laundry for them, just plain wrong.

I couldn’t blame Caitlin though. I was just pissed that my hopes of drinking that day were snatched out from under my head like a pillow at a sleepover. Sure, I could drink our collections after she left, but I wouldn’t. I didn’t think drinking alone was fun.

I woke up the next morning half an hour before my alarm went off and I was still in a bitter mood. Then I realized it was Thursday. It was my favorite day of the week and I was all solemn.

But it doesn’t have to be this way, I thought.

My weakness for spontaneity and sneakiness invaded my body like a parasite choosing its next host. I switched from conflicted to elated within a few seconds. I walked confidently out of my bedroom, down the hallway, through the living room and dining room, and into the kitchen to pop a single piece of bread in the toaster.

I was going to drink before school, but I wasn’t going to do it on an empty stomach. That would be insane.

I was so excited as I prepared the drinking area of my bedroom I kept having to stop and let out short bursts of laughter. My dresser was in my closet and I usually set up a little bar on it

when drinking in my room, because then, if my parents knocked, I could simply close the closet door and there would be no paraphernalia in sight. Closet Bar, happy hour: 6:30 to 7:20 a.m.!

It was much less suspicious than struggling to push cups under the bed or juggling a bunch of books while trying to hide a bottle behind them like an animal. I felt like a clever flapper girl during prohibition carrying her booze to the speakeasy in a coiled garden hose.

Two more, I thought when it was time to go. I casually tipped back a shot, swallowed, and chased with some berry punch. Then I tried the other.

“Don’t think about it, don’t think about it,” my head chanted as I struggled to choke it down. When I was finally able to swallow, it came right back up. A classic sign that I needed more time, but time I didn’t have. I refused to spit it out, forced it back into my stomach, and then grabbed my bunk-bed for support as I regained my composure.

When I got to school, I went straight to the library where my friends and I met every day before class. Woowee, I thought as I slid into my chair across from Caitlin. This was the best decision I had ever made. Caitlin looked at me and knew right away.

“You are a disgrace,” she said, grinning at me in envy. “She’s wasted,” she explained to our other friends. By that time, they were used to me and Caitlin’s antics, but I could tell from their faces they were rather uncomfortable. Tone especially.

“Yeah, we know, we can smell her,” Tone said judgmentally. I knew they were worried I was going to get them into trouble. I didn’t see how they would get in trouble because *I* was drunk, but, also because I was drunk, I didn’t really care about their fears. I wasn’t going to let anyone ruin my good time.

By third hour, I realized the one downfall to my brilliant plan was that I couldn't drink anymore once I got to school, so I got really tired. I decided that next time I would just bring some with me.

Stumbling into Physical Science, I fell into my desk and laid my head on my arms. If Ms. Pratt had a problem with me, I was ready to tell her to fuck off. But she didn't.

II. The Spiral

Going home from college used to be very exciting for me. I almost resented school merely because it kept me away from home. Nothing made me happier than walking through the door to my house again and feeling like I'd never left. Now, feeling like I never left just makes me sad. Nothing changes there, and when I return, it's like I haven't changed either. I mean, I still love my home, but recently I have become aware that it is a toxic place for me to be.

Despite the fact I would rather be somewhere else, I truly do love my family. There is my dad, Paul: high school drop-out/golfer/flower child. He is a hippie in the sense that he once lived in a commune, still smokes pot on a regular basis, plays the guitar fairly well, and hates his job. He makes granite counter tops and lifts freakish amounts of weight in granite every day, and it scares me. Then there is my mom, Lynn: nurse/alcoholic/empathy addict. She tells me to be respectful to veterans before she passes out upside down on an easy chair. Her job makes her stressed, and she thinks picking up sticks in the yard is a really important chore and is upset that no one in our family does it so she has to. And then there is my older sister, Celia: hardworking/underachiever/high-maintenance/addictive personality. Her idea of a good time is snorting prescription pills off of a hardcover book, forcing her boyfriend to say I love you, and watching movies we've watched all of our lives like *Overboard* and *Matilda* until we pass out.

We all drink, though. I drink. I don't know why. I drink because it's something to do? I drink because it's a day to celebrate? I have no idea. I mean, I question why I drink, because questioning it is the healthy thing to do, but that's the only reason I question it. I drink because it's regular. It's just what we do in my family. We "sedate," as Cee most recently put it. We don't care with what, really. I can draw my own distinct line. I would never do meth or heroin or acid. I guess my dad draws the line after prescriptions now that he's old, and my mom draws the line at booze, but she's also on antidepressants. Celia, however, doesn't have a line. Cee doesn't think she has a problem. Her philosophy in life is to do whatever she wants whenever she wants. She drinks and does drugs to "reward" herself. So she can have fun. She doesn't need to stop. She has never needed to stop.

It's not a question. I love my sister. So much that I can't imagine life without her, and when I say that, I'm not being cliché. I really cannot imagine life without her, because she's older than me. She is my life in a way, and there's no getting out of it. There's no thinking involved. I don't have thoughts like, "Oh, me and my sister are so close. Look how close we are, I love her, we share clothes." No. It's an automatic relationship, which, really, can be nice and horrible.

Once, when I was younger, I stole some cigarettes from my grandma. People who smoked looked cool to me, and they still do I guess. I don't smoke, though. But Jack, from *Titanic*, lying on his back blowing smoke up at the night sky looked so attractively contemplative. And Veronica Sawyer, from *Heathers*, lighting her cigarette off the fire from the bomb that her boyfriend blew himself up with, and then walking down her school hallway,

smoking it with the unpopular girl, was probably the most badass thing I'd ever seen. It was so very, as the Heathers would say.

So, when I got the chance, I snagged a couple of my grandma's Misty 120s. I would light up when I was waiting for my friend on the tennis court at school, or when I was reading a book in the park. I thought it made me look like a question. People would see me, this person who looked so wrong smoking and wonder, "What's her story?"

I had turned fourteen the previous fall, and my dad had bought me a drum kit for my birthday. When it was finally summer we moved the kit into the garage. I loved it. It was my own little space for my one person band.

I hadn't smoked at home, not really because I was afraid of getting caught by my parents, but more so because there was no public there to witness me. But playing my drums along with Rancid and the Ramones in my own little studio while smoking was just too awesomely stereotypical to resist.

I had only stolen four cigarettes from my grandma so as not to arouse suspicion, so I would only smoke some of one at a time, and then put it out and save the rest for later. It was the essence of cool, I know. But, in my own defense, those Misty 120s were some long sonsa'bitches, and I was a novice; I probably would have puked smoking a whole one.

I held my half-smoked smoke between my lips while I rocked out to a quick ditty with some heavy bass drum. Up to this point, I hadn't really been inhaling when I smoked. But, when I got to the end of the song, I was a little winded and then it just happened. I was like whoa, and I started to actually feel cool instead of just pretending. I started to feel like I was an actual smoker, because my chest began to hurt. I inhaled a couple more times, and then boldly walked out of the garage, across the driveway, and into my house.

As I passed my sister's bedroom, her door was open and she called, "Hey!"

I backtracked down the hall, leaned against her doorframe, and, holding my cigarette at my side, said, "Hey." Cool as hell.

At this point in our lives, Celia and I were not best friends. We had been as kids, because she was only sixteen months older than me, but, as we grew, the meaning of those measly months changed. She reached adolescence first, and wanted her own life. I was just about to start high school in the fall, and she had just gotten her first boyfriend. So, I had been without her for a few years already, and as I stood in her doorway with my cig, I took extreme joy in her dropped jaw and unblinking eyes.

"What's up?" I asked, unable to control a huge grin and an excited laugh.

Then, if possible, she looked even more shocked, and pointed at me as if to say, "Everyone look!" She gasped, "You're stoned off of that cigarette, aren't you?"

Then it was my turn to be aghast. I looked from her to the thing in my hand, and, shedding my suave façade, asked, "Am I?"

She started laughing and said, "What the fuck!"

And then I laughed, too.

I identify this moment in my life as the point where our sisterhood started to change. As I look back, I realize that me smoking that cigarette of my own volition changed Cee's mind about me somehow. Or it made her remember me? Or maybe it introduced me to her again. I didn't care about the "why" at the time, though. I was just ecstatic that my best friend wanted me around. I didn't dare question anything. I just went with it.

After two emails went unanswered, I decided to call my parents a couple of weeks ago. I know I don't call as much as I should, which is a cliché, but there it is. Truly, I usually just don't have anything to say. I don't tell them about my classes because they wouldn't understand, and dorm life is just too dramatic to be interesting. There really isn't much more to say. And, let's bare it all, my parents don't do very good phone in the first place. One time I called my father and said, "Just got done with my last class of the day, thank god." And then he paused a moment and said, "Yeah, it's cold here too."

It's like communicating between worlds. Nothing translates properly. My family is the world of home. Bemidji is the world of school. Home is the past, school is the future. Maybe it's more like talking through time. And I can't tell the people of the past about the future, or it could screw things up or something. *Back to the Future*, anyone? I don't want my parents' heads disappearing from the pictures above my desk.

So, I finally called my father, and right away he led with, "I have some bad news, should I tell you? Well, I guess you have the weekend, so I guess I can tell you..."

I began to pace my dorm at this, but I automatically knew nothing really horrible had happened. I mean, the worst thing that could have happened was someone died or was sick and I figured, in that case, someone would have called me long ago. Anyhow, I couldn't think of what the next possible thing would be that would truly affect me, so I wasn't too worried.

"Well, Derek left Cee," he said simply.

And I followed that with the typical you-just-heard-something-you-can't-believe thing, and replied with, "What?" Like I didn't understand, but I totally did. "That's fucking crazy. Do you know why?"

“I guess he hadn’t been nice to her in a long time, and last weekend she kind of called him on it, and he basically said, ‘Fuck it, I’m leaving.’”

“Oh, shit.” That news did affect me and I really was worried. It is not often that I am emotionally surprised, but this was a doozy. “She can’t be alone.”

Another trait my sister happens to possess is dependency. She needs someone, and has said so herself. She needs someone to tell her she is pretty and someone to want her and someone to fight with and say, “I love you,” and someone to hold her hand in public. She needs a boyfriend. Unfortunately, her boyfriends are always people who hate doing all of those things, but even then, she’s okay because she has someone.

I hate this about her, and I understand why her boyfriends hate it because she is dependent on me as well, and it absolutely disgusts me sometimes. When I was younger I liked it though, because it made me feel important. I felt like her rock, and I still do, well, I still am.

At the beginning of high school, I started making dinner on a regular basis. I made a lot of rudimentary meals at first, like spaghetti and hotdish. I enjoyed it. It was part of a nice routine. My dad liked it too because it meant he didn’t have to cook, and we were all thankful that my mom always got home from work late, because she was horrible at cooking. She once put noodles in chili.

I made chicken patties and French fries for dinner one weekday. I tossed them in the oven and set some buns and ketchup on the counter. When everything was done, I called to the rest of the house, and then took my plate into my room to watch T.V. My family observed dinner at the table for about a month when I was six, but I think my parents got different work schedules or something after that, because we all just forgot about it.

It wasn't too long after I had sat down on my bedroom floor to watch *The Simpsons* that I heard raised voices in the living room. My mother was saying something like, "Damn it," and there were a lot of urgent sounds, and then, before I could even unfreeze, there were footsteps. My dad fast-forwarded into my room, told me that Celia had swallowed a bunch of pills, they had to take her to the hospital, did I want to come?

I shook my head no. He pivoted back out and down the hallway, and I followed. My dad took a hysterical Cee under one arm and ushered her out the door with my mother closely behind.

Before the door closed, I heard my mother say, "This was really stupid of you."

And then my dad stopped and turned back to her and said, "Don't tell her that!" But to me it sounded more like, "Why would you say that?"

And then it was quiet. The air pressure from the door closing carried away all the sound, and it was just me breathing for about a minute. Then I turned and went back to my room and picked up my plate of chicken patty. I walked down the hall and picked up my father's untouched plate from the couch, and my mother's from the coffee table. I went to the kitchen and dropped them into the trash can. There was no point in saving them. Who would want to eat left-over chicken patties that already had ketchup on them? No one.

I hardly ever cry. And when I do my face gets really messed up. The skin under my eyes feels like cotton balls got stuffed under it, and snot gets made by the waterfall. I don't know how or where it gets produced, but it just diarrheas out of my nose. My lips stick together with tacky spit, and I just hiccup and hiccup and can't stop. It's gross.

After I dumped our sad dinners, I started crying about Celia, and then every time I had been pissed off or sad since the last time I cried joined in. I knew she wasn't going to die. I'm

an optimist like that. When bad things happen I can tell right away whether the worst will follow. But even though I knew the worst wasn't going to come, it was one of those times when I could excuse myself and just cry away.

I walked around my house and cried in every room until I ended up back in the living room. Then I lay down next to our family dog who no one was very nice to. She was kind of pathetic and an easy scapegoat, I'm ashamed to say. I cried next to Flicka and tried to hug her but she just lay still, and then it ended. Any more sobbing would have been forced.

With my eyes dried up and swollen, I went into my room, watched some more T.V. and went to bed.

I can't remember who told me what happened or when, but I know Cee and her first boyfriend, Joe, had broken up. Then, I guess because she didn't want to live without him or because she didn't want to live with hurt feelings on either side, she went into our kitchen, grabbed the bottle of ibuprofen from the cupboard, went back into her room, and swallowed the whole thing. Then she called Joe and told him what she'd done, and he said she should go tell our parents, and then she did, because she "fucking loved that kid" and "always did what he told her to do."

Two days after the hospital had made my sister drink some stuff that was like tar that quelled all the demons in you, I was back at school. I didn't tell anyone anything because she had asked me not to. In the lunch line, her friend Christa approached me and asked me to tell her what had happened, and I said that Cee had just taken too many pills by mistake or something stupid like that.

A long time after, I found out that Christa had let herself fall out of a moving car on the exact same day Cee had swallowed all of those pills. They were attempted-suicide buddies. How adorable.

When I do go home for breaks, Cee and I spend as much time together as we can, or as her work schedule allows. We have “our days” together whenever possible.

We get together around noon and eat ham toast. Then Cee says, “Shall we?”

And I say, “Yes! I’m ready.”

We go into the kitchen and Cee grabs the bottle and I grab the cups, and then we have a few drinks while we watch a *Wonder Years* marathon and discuss what annoying things our parents have done lately. Then we go play outside for a little while. When it gets to be about half an hour before my dad gets home, we clean the kitchen so we can at least say we did that.

Then my dad gets home and he’s so psyched to be off work he has this huge grin and he exclaims, “Hey, girls! Oh, I see it’s cocktail hour!”

He fixes himself a whiskey water or a vodka tonic, depending on the season, and sits down with us. We talk about his day and our day, and he tells us any weird things going on with extended family or any crazy things my mom has done when we weren’t around. Then he leaves and watches his sports shows on some other T.V. in the house.

Cee and I watch nostalgia movies until about an hour before my mom gets home, at which time we start dinner. I have moved on from chicken patties in my culinary prowess, but if I’m drunk I try not to get too complicated lest I burn the clam chowder or something.

Once dinner is done, my mom gets home and we all eat around our extremely long coffee table. Well, my mom and my dad eat dinner, and Celia and I have what we like to call, “drunk

dinner.” It’s when we eat just enough dinner to provide a nice cushion so we can continue drinking for as long as possible without getting too drunk or too tired.

Then, depending on the mood my mom is in, we either retreat to the basement or stay upstairs and drink and watch *Antiques Roadshow* or something with them.

My mom is in a bad mood if she comes in the door, sets down her purse, and then has whiskey for dinner accompanied by comments like: “Oh, you’ve been drinking all day again. Why didn’t you wash the walls?”

She’s in a good mood if she eats something, then starts drinking, and sits with all of us while saying things like, “Boy, am I glad to be home. Thank god that’s over.”

Eventually my parents go to bed, and then Cee and I go downstairs, if we haven’t already, where we listen to music and either sing or talk depending on our mood. Usually around three or four in the morning, we can’t go on, so we get ready for bed.

Getting ready for bed means going to the bathroom, laying down the downstairs mattress, picking out a movie to fall asleep to, and then setting out giant cups of water for ourselves for when we wake up dehydrated in the middle of the night.

Then we lie down and talk. Sometimes Cee cries. Sometimes we laugh. Sometimes Cee falls asleep right away, and then I just watch the movie.

After my dad told me that Cee’s most recent boyfriend, Derek, had left her, I was scared. I wasn’t scared she was going to try and off herself again because I just knew she wouldn’t. I was more just scared to talk to her, which was a new feeling. I was scared of the state she would be in, and how I wasn’t going to know what to say. Not to mention, what could I really do for her if I was four hours away? But since I knew it happened, I felt like I had to call. I decided not

to ask any details though, and to just ask how she was doing in her present state. She eventually just came out with the details by herself.

She was staying at home of course, because not only was being at her apartment too painful, but she can't be alone. And I was happy about that, because if I couldn't be there, at least I knew my parents were.

"It's just messed up when I see someone almost every day for six years, and then all of a sudden I'm not even allowed to call him," she said to me.

"Yeah, you know, I can't even imagine..." I trailed off, because I had no idea what the fuck to say. Honestly, I hated Derek. I kind of always had, but could never let it out because she loved him. I told my dad though and he kind of agreed, because really, Derek was an asshole. He was mean and he brought out the worst qualities in her, and I really hoped they'd never get back together.

She went on to say that the days right after it happened were just a sequence of her going upstairs to sleep and then going downstairs to sleep. She told me she didn't call me because she didn't want to think about anything, let alone talk about it. But she was going to work again, and the day we talked was the best day she'd had yet.

I was deeply relieved to hear she was getting through it, but at the same time I was skeptical. I didn't want to think of it as too good to be true so I didn't, but it was still strange and hard to believe. Not to mention, living with my parents, no matter how dependent you are, can still be extremely depressing. But maybe she was stronger than she used to be. Maybe, because I wasn't there, she was more independent. I hoped she was, at least for her own sake.

"You don't have any heroin, do you?" I asked, because I care.

"Well, yeah I do, but don't be upset, Pee. It's not that bad."

The first time Celia told me she had bought some heroin my mind immediately returned to high school health class. Marijuana is the gateway drug they said, and at the end of that driveway or hallway or whatever that gateway opened to was heroin. It was the drug on top. It was the worst thing someone could do. It was the end of the line.

After she seemed relatively okay when I spoke to her on the phone, I thought more about the drug gateway. I remembered being a teenager and thinking that it was a lie, because I had smoked pot but I wasn't running around looking for crack. I found smoking and drinking to be too exceptionally wonderful on their own, so why would I ever need anything more?

But then, from my phone call with Cee, I realized that the drug gateway thing was true. It never meant that right after someone smokes pot they immediately turn around, huff some aerosol, down some Percocet, and shoot up. The gateway means you become opened up to a lifetime of exponential need, and that eventually you will need too much.

It has taken Cee ten years to arrive at the top or, more so the bottom, I guess. From her first drink at thirteen, and now to her first snort of that desert colored powder, she has fallen, fallen, down, down, and I know that I am not far behind her.

Sometimes I think about how long my family can go on like this. We probably all secretly do. Even Cee must think about it deep down. None of us will ever voice it though, because that will mean we all will have to give up our addictions. It scares me to think about the inevitable outcome of it, but being sober almost scares me more.

And how can I tell Cee that she has gone too far when I refuse to tell myself? That is my family's great conundrum. We all look at what messes each other are, but we can't say anything because then the other person could say, "Why should I stop? You should stop."

III. Going Back

Jan. 2011- I feel no different than I used to. As my car winds down the familiar exit, I feel like it has only been a couple of days, rather than a year. Everything looks the same on the highway. I pass the same old gas stations and car lots. The odd cluster of RV dealerships pops up out of nowhere and provides the same ironic curiosity. How the hell do they all stay in business so close together?

Once Hanson Boulevard is looming in the distance, all the places I pass suddenly turn into little charms on a bracelet. My memory of the time we went out to eat at Famous Dave's is now a souvenir: a little, silver rack of ribs jingling against other charms on my proverbial wrist. I roll my eyes at my own nostalgia and covet it at the same time. I hate how I am thinking of the past as the past. I hate how this shift has occurred without my permission. My mind has gone ahead and realized I will never eat at Famous Dave's with her again. None of anything with her will ever happen again. I hate how I have to accept this.

Finally, I am off the highway. Driving is stupid. I can't remember if the speed limit is forty or forty-five. That weird liquor store goes by and all of sudden I am on a road in the middle of the woods and it is like the city is nowhere.

Driving over the railroad tracks, I place my finger on the screw holding up the sun-visor for good luck. It is an old habit from my youth, one of which I do like religious people believe in God. It does not make sense whenever I truly think about it.

When I pass Sand Creek Park I remember myself at seven years old, and I try to pretend everything is regular. I pass the barber shop. In the window is the blinking scissor sign that's blades open and close constantly as if people are there all night and day, waiting to cut hair until

the sign burns out. Connected to this is Jensen's: The Store, a sad store. I have not frequented it since I was quite young, not since Cub and Rainbow and Target and Wal-Mart became serious business. I think of Jensen's as a childhood place I know and love, but in reality I have forgotten it almost completely. Still, I pretend.

I look to my right as I pull up to the University Ave and Foley crossroad where I have to turn. Next to me is Donut Depot which used to be Dunkin' Donuts and next to that is Bromley Printing which used to be the library. These places I remember vividly. I eye them warily as I finally succeed in my right turn. If I could go back in time to absolutely pilfer one public building, it would be that library. Its books and children's fiction decorations would be mine.

I see the church sign. Any of the three streets after that take me to the house. Dogwood Street Northwest is peculiarly set. There are three roads you can turn down on Foley to get there. Dogwood lies at the end of all of them, crossing them like a bunch of Ts. To go down the first road would mean a view of the park. The second would end in view of the neighbor's house, and the third would end in a bend of someone's house we did not know. Whenever we came home from somewhere, Oma would tell us about how there was only one survivor of Princess Diana's car wreck and he was the only one wearing a seat belt, but when we got to any of these three streets it was okay to take off our belts because we were home. Princess Diana could not be killed on route to Dogwood Street NW, nor could any of us.

Jan. 2010- It was an important time. Celia and I took shots in the basement before we left my parent's house, but I didn't know why. I remember getting there and taking off my shoes like usual. I was wearing socks that my cousin, Amy, had got me for Christmas. I hardly ever talked to Amy, but that day she walked over and hugged me. I was unreceptive to anything, so I

hugged her back and acted like all was well and good. I acted as if Oma was there and we were having some sort of get together and Amy was just being more friendly than usual.

Walking into the kitchen where I would normally be top dog, I took the countenance of a neutral party, a guest. “Oh, what is this? Good dip. The cocktail sauce is empty.” Impersonal meat and cheese trays lined the counter. My cousin, Jackie, had ordered them from a deli. I had never seen a dish prepared outside of that kitchen grace its counter before. If I had hosted the get-together, and especially if Oma and I had hosted, I would have rolled those meat slices myself. The foreign fixings seemed to push me from the room. I could not be around them and I would not. They said something I didn’t want to hear. I headed through the dining room and into the bathroom.

There I was in the only room left in the house where I could be alone. It was a place where I could make my mind believe that everything was the same and I was just in the bathroom. Everything in it remained the same, I guessed because everyone still had to use it. Seriously, I could have done it. I could have tricked my mind and I wanted to desperately, but I knew better. I couldn’t possibly try to impose the old as the new, because then I would have had to think of my Oma still being here. I would have had to pretend she was in the living room for god sakes, and after my pretending I would have had to deal with it not being true.

I pulled my flask that Chevy got me out of my pants. I kept it between my panty and my hip. Unfortunately, it was made of metal. I tipped back as much as I could, but by god, it was 98.6 degrees. My body had warmed it and it was awful.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I avoided the mirror and sidled off to a cupboard, the one that had been Oma’s. I looked for her perfume bottle, which I knew wasn’t there. She had thrown it away after it was gone. She hadn’t realized I would want it later.

For the rest of the evening, I had this feeling like I was an unwelcome guest, even though Oma's house was my home. I felt like I had left the house to go to the store and when I was out the other residents of the house had taken all of my things and put them into a locked room that I wasn't allowed access to and then they pretended like they were just trying to keep it all safe. I didn't understand what the feeling meant, so I comforted myself with the thought that my stuff would be there later. I could just put it back later. Everything would be in its rightful place next time.

I left the house that day not realizing I was never going back. That is what wakes are for. You're supposed to say goodbye. I didn't understand that time was important.

Jan. 2011- I drive slowly down the wintery suburban street encased by houses I know, but of whom I know no one. The trees in the yards hang over the street, a beautiful yet perforated shelter, like those ones of my Minneapolis neighborhood where me and my mom and dad and siblings had lived until I was six. The similarity disturbs me. To me, Minneapolis means the past. It means not my life anymore. Minneapolis is a feeling of long lost magic of which I can only slightly recall, and am unable to further remember. It is a place I pretend I am still deep-seededly connected to, but which I actually know nothing of anymore. I didn't think that feeling of foreign remembrance would ever occur someplace else, but here it has come and infected Coon Rapids.

Reaching the end of the street, I take in the house. There it sits same as always, but now it has a yellow sports car in the driveway. It looks ridiculous like something not from this world, something that doesn't belong. There is a stranger visiting who needs to leave.

I awkwardly pull the truck in front of the house, and park it in the spot my mother used to use. The spot seems like part of the property to me and I feel weird sitting there as if the truck and I are in the middle of the yard just hanging out. I tell myself this is still my place, my home. How can I possibly see it any other way? How can I possibly cross the lawn and approach the door as if I'm not supposed to be there, as if the front step doesn't recognize me, my weight, my presence?

I worry slightly about whether the tires will be able to gain traction on the ice on which I have parked, but it is more just a general concern that passes an instant after it occurs; I don't really care if I can't leave. For a while I just stare at what I know, at what is still the same. The flower garden boarder sticks slightly out of the snow, the same curtains are pulled in the bay window, and the left side gate is closed and locked. The front door light, however, glows a fake looking yellow in the daylight. It's ten o'clock in the morning. Jak would have been home by now, and he would have turned it off.

May 2010- A few months after the wake, I started to realize what had happened to me. My Oma, who raised me, who I loved more than anyone, had stopped living. She no longer existed. She was nowhere anymore. Her life was over. My life with her was over. I realized this, but I didn't really get it.

I went back to her house as soon as I could sneak away. I didn't want anyone to know about my expedition. I don't know why. My Uncle Jak, who had lived with her, was selling the house. He had already moved in with Jackie, so the house sat barren of its inhabitants and innards, a showroom for prospective buyers.

I had parked one house down, in front of the park. As I walked up the small hill and onto the front yard, I stopped at the for-sale sign and took the brochure out of the realty box. There on the paper was a small picture of the house in all its glory, an eligible bachelor if there ever was one. I folded it up and put it into my pocket without reading what it said.

I felt exposed in the yard, so I walked to the park. Oh, the good ol' park, it had hardly changed at all. The only change in over a decade was a new paint job on the big curly slide. I could remember when they first added it to the playground. Oma took Celia and I outside one night after my dad dropped us off. All we had to do to see the park was look across the neighbor's backyard and there between the trees was a white mass, the slide of all slides. Right beyond the playground was a hill leading up to a small wooded area filled with oak trees, and right between the hill and the playground was an opening to a long, thin grassy field. It was like an alley way, but with grass. Along this alley way sat all of Dogwood Street's backyards. Most of them had short chain-link fences with gates, including ours. I walked down to our house and let myself in like it was any other day. I walked right up to the sliding-glass door and peeked inside. The small kitchen table had been left behind, but other than that everything was gone. I could picture strangers coming in and sitting with the realtor at the table having a discussion like they were in an office or something.

Turning away from it, I sat myself down on the stoop and decided it was time.

I have this thing about crying, which is that I never do it, so whenever I let it come up a little bit, my body treats it like a drug. For once, it is not me poisoning my body, but my body poisoning me. It's kind of beautiful in a way. Finally, there is some retaliation. My body spends its life fighting against everything that is done to make it weak, but every once and a

while, when I just can't take it anymore, it seizes its moment and empties until there is nothing left.

I started to sob. It made sounds like the ones that come out of children who are at the exhaustive point of their tantrums. I didn't care I was in public. I almost wanted a neighbor to ask me what was wrong, or to call the cops even. "Yes, hello, there is a girl collapsed at the empty house next door. Could you come and deal with her?" one would say into the phone, while twisting the cord around a finger in discomfort. Then the cops would call my uncle and my cousin and everybody would show up at the house. Cars would fill the driveway, and I would sob and scream at them all, and blame them for everything.

I left the house that day having said goodbye to it, but only to it as a house. Everything the house meant was already gone. I had missed its passing. There was nothing I could do.

Jan. 2011- I feel dumb sitting out in the car. I just want to go inside for a while. It is all I want or could ever want. I wonder if anyone would let me in if I asked, but that seems like the beginning of a horror movie. Then again, I'm just a young girl. Who would possibly feel threatened? It's probably a bad idea though. It wouldn't be what I want anyways, which is my house. I decide I might as well just do what I came here to do.

Opening the cab, I get out onto the street. It is a street I've walked a hundred times to the park, to school, everywhere. I remember the summer I was six. A squirrel was run over a few feet from where I am standing. His carcass was an object of curiosity for all of us kids in the neighborhood. We examined his remains with interest. I don't remember why it seemed so exciting, but I guess because it was right there, in front of our houses. We could get right up close and truly stare for however long we wanted. Eventually, it got run over so many times its

form became indiscernible, and then winter came on and we all forgot about it. In spring, I remember seeing this splotch on the road once the snow had melted and thinking the squirrel was still there. At least, whatever shred of a living creature that could remain. I'm not sure if it really was the squirrel, though.

On the way to the house, I had stopped and picked up a small pot of poinsettias. I did not think there would be any left in the store because it was January, and most people bought poinsettias before Christmas. Fortunately, there were still a few small pots in a cart. I picked the least sad one, and congratulated myself on saving it from the destiny of the other Christmas castoffs.

Holding it in one hand, I walk up the driveway. I can't help but feel suspicious, I look around and see no one, but I know from experience that that means nothing. Anyone could be watching. I want it to still feel like my second home. The home I spent half my childhood in. I wish I was as comfortable as I felt I had the right to be, but I couldn't hide it from myself. Setting the flower next to the step in a hole in the snow, I allow myself a few moments.

"I miss you, Oma," I say.

As I drive away, I think about the people in the house finding the poinsettia. I wonder if they will take it in, and let it live. I wonder what they will think when I do the same thing next year. Will they remember how last year they found a poinsettia on their doorstep? I wonder how long it will take them before they pinpoint the date the flowers arrive every year.

Pulling out on Foley, I desperately wish I could stick around town. I wish I could spend my whole day going everywhere that reminds me of her and my time here. Thinking logically, I realize this would take more than a day, and I had to get the work. I just didn't have time.

IV. My Mother

Christmas

My mom comes downstairs and lies on Celia's bed, and it's strange to see her there. I wonder if she has ever lain there before. We were going to go to the movies because it was the only place open, but then Celia and I started pre-gaming and then we just wanted to keep drinking so we called the plan off. Cee, my mom, and I decided to watch a movie in Cee's room instead.

So, here we are: my mom lying on the bed in her robe, and Celia and I putting together a puzzle on the floor while discretely taking shots. We don't want her to have an exact idea of just how fucked we are. Her drink is on the nightstand next to the bed. I hear her occasionally lean forward to take sips.

"What's this?" she asks, breaking the silence, and I look behind me to see her looking at the nightstand. I look there too, and then I understand. When I look back to her, she is staring at us expectantly. I find a nice spot on the ground to examine and grin to myself. I let Cee answer the question.

"Oh, nothing," Cee says and I give a small snort and, like that, the matter is settled. We continue to puzzle and watch the movie.

I know my mom knows what a bong is. If she had been suspicious of things that went on in Cee's basement room before, they were now suddenly confirmed. That was enough, I guess. Now she knows. We don't need to discuss it. She isn't going to preach to us. We are adults, and she doesn't bother with us anymore.

Morning

I am on the living room couch when I hear her alarm go off. It's the same alarm clock she has always had, and I appreciate that she never switched to one of those new ones that makes that god awful beep-beep-beep! I listen to the sounds of her getting ready. They are the deliberate noises of someone who knows they have to go to work. I lie patiently on the couch and wait for her to discover me. I hope I don't startle her. I hate startling people.

"Have you even gone to bed yet?" she asks me in reference to my being awake at six in the morning. I tell her that I have, but I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep. She seems to accept this, and goes into the kitchen to make coffee. I remain where I am because, despite my mind's inability to fall asleep, my body seems like it's in full REM.

I wonder if she believes me about having gone to bed. I know she doesn't trust me. I wonder when she stopped trusting me, or if she ever did. I did weird things as a child, like fasting until she forced me to eat a sandwich, or pretending to pee my bed so she would have to change my sheets, and I remember the feeling of her looking at me. Her head would always cock to the side, and I felt like she wanted to say something but she never did. She just changed the sheets.

Now I tell her things sometimes and I watch her face. She doesn't understand. She looks through me, stuck in her head, trying to comprehend the meaning of what I said. I watch the corner of her mouth flinch, unable to decide what emotion to convey. I watch her give up and look to the side, waiting for me to read her and give what I said some sense. Is it possible to be on such different wavelengths with someone that it sounds like they are speaking a different language?

I watch my mother move about the house. Eventually she comes back into the living room, and sits down on the big chair across the room and watches the end of *Curly Sue* before she has to leave.

She is in her light green scrubs. She is wearing make-up, and she is wearing her wig. My mother is a hairless woman. I never think about her having hair, or what she would look like if she had hair. That would not be how my mother looks. In fact, I wish she would stop wearing her wig. I wish today she would finally be like, "Fuck you, society! I don't need to wear your wig!" and she would be the confident, zealous woman I always wanted to look up to. Instead she paints her face and puts on her wig like a clown instead of a nurse. It makes me sad. I wish I could give her the strength she needs but I don't think she'd get it, so I just tell her to have a good day when she leaves instead.

Past

I once walked into the living room in the very early morning to find my mother face-down on the carpet. It had been a particularly hot day summer day, so I'm guessing she passed out dehydrated after drinking all night.

I don't remember how old I was, but I know I wasn't scared. I walked over to her, crouched down, and shook her. It's funny to think about now. I was a child but I was so matter-of-fact. I was like, "Mom, get up. You need to go into your room now."

She woke up slowly, but quickly caught on to the situation. It was all muscle-motor memory. Her mind's reflex kicked right in without her having to think about it and she said, "Oh, okay. It's just so hot out. The floor is so much cooler."

She knew to be embarrassed so her mind covered for her automatically. I put her in her room and set a glass of water on the dresser.

Her Shoes

I crawl into my mother's bed, because she has the best mattress in our house and she isn't using it at the moment. She stayed a night at my brother's, and the room I once called my own no longer suits me. It is morning and I couldn't take the harsh sunlight coming through the living room windows because they beat my eyes and brain into purgatory.

I stare at the bed and memorize its layout before I disturb anything. For some reason, I don't want her to know I was here. I almost feel like I shouldn't be here, but I know that is silly. I push her oversized pillow off the bed and replace it with mine. With my head resting on it, I examine the bookshelf that is her headboard. *The Sign Language Alphabet*, *Human Biology*, and *A Horse and His Boy* are what I see first. Why does she have *A Horse and His Boy*? Even in my sleepy state, I realize this book stands out. I would bet a million dollars she hasn't read it, but I can't understand why and where she picked it up. I turn away with my head on my pillow looking up at the ceiling.

It smells like cotton and Barbie clothes in here. It smells like childhood. It smells like my mother. It's what she smells every day, unbeknownst to herself. This is her sanctuary. At least I hope she feels that way. Sometimes I feel like she feels separated from herself when she is here. But this is her room. She couldn't possibly. Shit, look at the place. She has always had this thing where she paints the walls but then she also paints the ceiling and the doors and hinges and doorknobs as well. Her room is yellow and it's like stepping into a giant highlighter. She must be home here.

Rolling onto my side, I see everything she has on her nightstand. These are the things she looks at every night and day. There are two empty glasses on two coasters. There is a six-cup muffin tin behind them that holds bobby-pins, paperclips, and rolls of film. If she were

hipper, I would think she learned this off of Pinterest, but I know she probably got it from *Better Homes and Gardens*.

What a strange thing to experience what she does, I think. This is her life. I feel like, if someone were to stay the night in my room, my bed, I would be completely exposed. They would find out my secrets and know what it was like to be me simply by seeing and sleeping as I do. That is ridiculous though. I curl up in my mother's bed, and decide I know her even less than I did before.

V. Transitions

After my junior year of college, my parents and Cee drove up to bring me home. The first thing Cee did was complain about how long and awful a drive it had been, and then she said, "Where are the shots?"

My dad said, "Geez Pee, you really think we're going to have enough room for all of your stuff when we also have to fit five people in the van?"

And my mom said something conveying how grateful I should be that they were kind enough to come get me.

And then I suddenly understood what people in movies feel like when they don't want their families to visit them. I had never felt that way before, and I became more and more alarmed as I realized I didn't want to leave school, let alone brave the four hour car ride with them.

My roommate, Tone, who was also my friend of sixteen years, was coming to live at my house as well. After Tone and I checked out of our room, we headed toward my mom's red van where my family was waiting for us, and she let out a dreading, "Oh, god."

“I know,” was all I could say. We were both in disbelief that we had to go back. We had to go back home, back to Zimmerman. We had to go back in time. We had to go back to regret and then live there for a couple months. It was one of those times where I felt like I should stand up for myself even if it was in vain. I wanted to say to my family, “You know what? Forget it! I’m sorry you had to suffer so much because of me. Just turn around, go home, and leave me here. I’ll be homeless for a summer, so you won’t have to be so upset!”

But my feet just kept walking towards them anyway and I followed helplessly. I knew I would feel better once I got home, but at that moment something was telling me to grab Bemidji and hold on with both hands until I couldn’t anymore, or until someone chopped my hands off. I didn’t even really know why, but I felt like I was walking the plank.

I felt bad not having a job right away in the summer, but at the same time it was probably the last time in my life that I would have the option of being unemployed, so I decided I should enjoy it while it lasted. Cee was getting me a job at her Taco Bell, but her boss was slow about putting me on the schedule. I pushed away my guilt by remembering that I did kind of have a job, I just hadn’t started it yet.

After my parents went to sleep every night, I would go to the basement, which was Cee’s room ever since she moved back home, and wait for her to get back from the night shift. It was one of my favorite parts of the day, because it was like my parents weren’t home. I could do whatever I wanted, like read or watch T.V., without feeling like I should be doing something constructive. It was a peaceful siesta before Cee got home and when we’d start having fun.

I was settled on the uncomfortable green couch reading when I saw headlight beams move through the window and over the ceiling. Checking the clock, I saw that it was a little

after two a.m. She was right on time. I listened for the car to turn off and her door to close. There was a brief moment of silence as she walked around the house to the back, and then I heard the door open.

I didn't say anything even though the back door opened right across from the top of the stairs. I just listened to her take off her shoes and put down her keys, and then come running down the stairs.

"Hi!" I yelled, as I set my book aside for the night. I was energized. This was my very favorite time of my day.

"Hey," she said, sounding kind of tired. She worked ten hour shifts, so she wasn't full of pep like I was. That would get fixed once we started our night. I turned on a cartoon we used to watch when we were kids, and Cee joined me on the couch.

As per her request, I had a shot already poured and waiting for her. She brought home a pop from work, which we would use as chase for the rest of the night. That was our routine.

After we watched a couple episodes and Cee started to catch up with me drinking-wise, we headed upstairs to the kitchen where we each grabbed a beer and a water. Then, we headed out of the back door into the buggy summer night.

I loved our yard. It was two acres, even though our house was practically right in town. There were woods on either side shielding us from the neighbors, and the end of the backyard was far enough away from the house that those neighbors didn't matter. The front yard ended at the sidewalk and road, which was where Cee and I were headed.

We had been bored one night at the beginning of summer, so we'd decided to play outside. There wasn't enough light to play in the yard, so we made our way down to the street-lit sidewalk. It was there we made up a game called Frazbee. It was basically Frisbee, but, because

it was our special game that we played at night, it needed its own name. As we continued playing night after night, we developed rules.

Years before, my parents had decided our yard need more privacy from the road, so they'd planted a line of trees and a line of shrubbery on the side of the driveway the woods didn't cover. If someone wanted to see our house from the road they would have to look carefully up the driveway.

Cee and I nestled out beers and waters by the tree line, and walked past the shrubs onto the tar sidewalk. We each walked down a bit. I turned and walked down the right of the driveway and she went left. My spot, or where I was best able to catch the Frisbee, was just beyond a crack in the pavement. Cee probably had her own marker, but I didn't know what it was because we always stuck to our subsequent sides.

We started throwing the Frisbee back and forth talking all the while. If the Frisbee went into the street, woods, or shrubs without someone catching it, it was called an Arnie. If you got three Arnies, you had to dig yourself out of the hole by catching three Frisbee throws while in the road. There really weren't any "points" in the game. No one ever won or lost. Whoever threw the last Arnie at the end of the night was the Arnie. It didn't carry on to the next day or anything.

At around four in the morning, hardly any cars would pass by so we moved from the limited sidewalk into the open street.

When you drive a car, the street seems small, because you have to fit your car into one area. You can't just drive into the other lane if you want to, but when you're a person on an uninhabited road you can go wherever you want. There's so much space. We could throw the Frisbee a lot further because we didn't have to worry about it veering to the side and committing

an Arnie. I felt like I was standing in the middle of a pro-baseball field. It's so weird to be out there where the action takes place knowing that you're not going to get in the way, because no one is there.

If a car did come we would warn each other. When we played on the sidewalk we also had a code for when a person came along. If I saw someone approaching behind Cee, or she me, we would say, "I think we need to go inside for a moment," and then we would go hide in the tree line until they passed.

A little while after we moved to the street, I saw the deer. I've always loved seeing deer in residential neighborhoods. It reminds me that the whole world lives together even if we never see it.

I was about to throw the Frisbee when I looked beyond Celia to the streetlight down the block. Underneath the lamp, a mother deer stood with her baby. It was like they were waiting to use the crosswalk.

"Turn around real slowly," I told Cee in a hushed tone.

We watched them casually cross the street and run through Jamal's Field, which was on the other side of our woods.

"Let's keep spying on them," Cee said. We ran into the front yard and over to the fire pit by the woods, and then stopped, standing silently, looking through the brush that separated our yard from the field. Straight from the street lights, my eyes had to adjust to the moonlight. I watched for any movement close to the ground, but they must have gone another way or passed through quickly while we were running over to see them, so we returned to the street.

We played Frazbee until after sunup. At around five-thirty we headed back up the driveway, complacent and sweaty. Our father was just getting ready to leave for work. I made his lunch and then he left.

Celia took a shower first, and while she did I watched an episode of *I Love Lucy*. As I reclined tiredly into the uncomfortable couch, I smiled. I loved how they talked. They sounded like my grandmother did.

I never wanted to go to bed. Going to bed would mean I would have to wait a whole day to feel like this again. I would have to go through the whole stupid day where everything was illuminated, and my parents could see me.

The night was when I could be free. While everyone else lay still and unconscious in their beds like suckers, I had the knowledge that playing Frisbee with your sister in the street was more important.

People thought it was weird that Celia and I often shared a bed during the summer. I never understood why. We were sisters, and it was fun talking to each other until the last possible second before we fell asleep.

As I stood sleepily in the middle of her room debating whether I could go back to bed, I remembered that I had to work at eleven. That was why I was up.

I slowly walked up the stairs while fully opening my eyes for the first time only to have to shield my face with both hands as I passed through the living room and its giant sunbeams. I knew I should also eat something but nothing sounded good. I stared into an open fridge until I forced myself to choose part of a spinach tortilla with ham in it.

After I wrapped it up and took a bite of it I realized I didn't want it at all. I considered the green burrito clutched in my hand. Even though I knew I should eat something to be safe, I forced myself to choke down the bite I took and then threw the rest in the trash. Good enough.

Sitting in the living room, I chugged some ice water and willed myself to get ready for work. It was a slow process that would eventually turn into a scramble, and I knew it but didn't care all that much. There were so many tasks that ran through my mind. All these things that I thought I should do, or all the things that I could do, ran back and forth like black figures through the fog. I held them for a few seconds, but couldn't keep them in my sleepy grasp.

I could only remember the most important tasks I wanted to accomplish. I wanted to do some drugs. I was going to snort a Percocet and take a shot. That was my routine.

I needed to put on my uniform and remember to grab my hat. I needed to remember to feed the cats, and also go to the gas station. I needed to remember to leave on time, and I would, but not before I did what I wanted.

I laid my pill crushing tools out on the table and went to work. Celia and I always crushed our pills on a hardcover book about Anne Frank. A while ago, we needed something to crush them on, and I grabbed Anne off my bookshelf and we had been using her ever since. She was like our friend. When we had pills, one of us would say to the other, "Go grab Anne."

It wasn't like we were intending disrespect toward anything. We just thought it was funny. It was funny that Anne was our little friend and that we snorted drugs off of her face. She provided a service, and we loved her for it.

I took my pill and broke it in half by pressing it against the middle of my palm. Then, laying the pieces carefully upon Anne, I covered them with a dollar bill and crushed them with

the non-fiery end of a lighter. I then turned the lighter on its side and rolled it back and forth over the dollar making sure to crush them real good.

After forming the resulting powder into three separate lines using my credit card, I grabbed my toots and started railing the lines. Celia and I called whatever we used to snort pills with our toots. I don't know why. Usually, my toots was a cut down straw.

Once I had done two of my lines, I headed into the kitchen for some alcohol. We had burned through our vodka the night before, so instead I had to have some of my parents' whiskey, which was fine. Whiskey tasted like childhood to me.

With at least one and a half pills snorted up my right nostril, I scurried out to my vehicle while spitting mouthwash onto the lawn. I had taken one shot to kick my pills up a notch, and I just knew no one would pull me over so I didn't give a shit.

I had been doing this for a few days. All of the sudden I was this person: someone who took to being fucked up before and during work without caring. I thought it had happened all of a sudden, but really I knew better. I had begun becoming this person long ago, but I didn't know why it had happened. I didn't let myself think about the questions because I didn't know what would happen if I found the answers. I didn't know if I wanted to find the answers.

When had I started drinking every day? At what point did I decide a little heroin now and again was no big deal? I tried not to think about it.

Honestly, I was more shocked by how easy it was to get away with it than how easy it was for me not to feel guilty.

Per my routine, I left for work early and really greeted the day in the parking lot across from my work. Everything at home was done in a rush so when I parked in the Ashley Furniture

Store parking lot across from my Taco Bell, I could chug at least five to six shots before I had to go in.

I parked far away from the mouth of the furniture world so it wouldn't swallow me up. I turned off the rumbling of my truck and looked down at the two water bottles beside me. I had no cup holders, which for some reason made me feel safer. To me, the not even half filled water bottle rolling around on the floor looked a lot less suspicious than one in a cup holder, even though on that particular day it was filled with an unconvincing brown whiskey instead of vodka. It slid back and forth while I turned the wheel or slowed down or sped up, as if I didn't care about it at all. If a cop pulled me over, I was able to think about it as garbage. It would be a disregarded piece of trash then, but in the parking lot it was everything.

Don't spit up on your uniform, I told myself. In the morning my stomach was uneasy. It probably should have had food in it. I knew I was still a bit drunk from the night before, so I justified myself in taking the shots. They would postpone a wicked hangover. Plus, it was just plain way more fun to be fucked up at work.

It didn't matter. I wasn't afraid of getting caught with booze on my breath as long as I didn't think too hard about the consequences. Maybe one of the reasons I felt so safe was because I knew alcohol was the least of my offenses. If they caught me drunk, who would care? Alcohol is legal. If they tried to drug test me, however, I wasn't sure what would happen. The worst they could do was fire me, I assumed. They didn't have the power to call the cops and say, "This girl has drugs in her system. Arrest her!"

Anyways, I was willing to bet I could pick up another fast food job easy. I was in college after all, but I did kind of love Taco Bell. Celia had worked there since she graduated high

school, so I had friends in high places and I got along with most of my other coworkers as well. We all had a fun time together.

It would be sad to lose the job, but still, I was willing to take my chances. Actually, I fucking loved taking my chances. A mere ounce of spontaneity was enough to make me squeal with glee, so being reckless and doing things where I didn't know what the outcome would be was almost the most important part of my life. I would lie to anyone and neglect work or any other obligation for that happiness. Usually I would try to do both in some way like go to work drunk for example, but if that was impossible, the obligation would not be the chosen option.

Celia was manager that morning, and the other worker who was there was our friend, so I was able to speak freely.

"I have whiskey throat," I complained as I washed my hands for the first time out of a hundred times I would have to wash them that shift.

"Pee, you've got to be careful with that shit," Cee said, actually sounding bothered. "It's smelly." I frowned at her as she shook her head slightly and started to walk away.

"Duh, I chewed some gum on the way in," I said.

"Well, drink some pop or something," she replied. Who did she think she was talking to? Cee was supposed to be the one person who wouldn't judge me for antics like this. We took shots before work together all the time; why was she getting upset? Was I the wrong one?

I reasoned with myself. Cee was at her job. She was the boss. I guessed did she have to take it a lot more seriously than I did. I decided from then on I would keep comments like that to myself until after work, but I was still left with this unsettled feeling. I realized I was a bigger mess than Celia. I had less going for me than Celia. Not that I believed I was better than she, but she had perpetually just been the less responsible one. Growing up, she had gotten in the

most trouble, and never cared about school. Growing up, I hardly ever got caught, and I had good grades. She was the troublemaker and I was under the radar. She had to go to alternative high school and I went to college. Now that we were adults, she had been working a fast food job for seven years, but at least she was serious about it. I wasn't serious about anything besides making sure I had enough liquor to last me through Sunday.

VI. Family

It's midafternoon and I'm having a few drinks by myself, because I'm bored. I know it's not the best thing for me to do, but I don't care enough to restrain myself.

As I'm about to swallow my shot, I look up and make eye contact with a picture of Oma in the collage above my desk. In my head I think, "Well, there's a reason for you to choke," but I don't choke. I swallow it down like a champ. I know in a few drinks it won't be so easy, but in that moment it's the easiest thing in the world.

Oma only actually witnessed me drink once when I was a teenager. My parents let me have some whiskey on Thanksgiving one year. I have no idea why. I can't understand why, for that one time, they were like, "Okay, drink up, it's a holiday," but that's what happened.

I carried around a mug of whiskey and a glass of pop, and drank like I was accustomed to doing. It wasn't weird for me. The feel of the cups in my hands and the motor-muscle memory to drink from them in chase-shot-chase fashion were natural to me. It wasn't until toward the end of the gathering that I felt the unnaturalness of what was happening.

I was sitting on our living room couch and my grandmother was sitting next to me. She said, "Would you like to come home with me?"

And I told her, "No, not today, Oma."

And she said, "Of course not, you're drunk."

I was a teenager. I wanted to go hang out with my friends after everyone left. I felt bad turning her down, but I didn't want to go stay with her, and I was too stupid to understand the concept of putting someone else's feelings above my own. I was too stupid to understand how important it was to hang out with her every chance I got. I didn't realize how much time there was to be drunk later in life. I didn't realize how it could wait.

Oma died three years ago when I was twenty. Luckily, I was already a champion drinker, so I've been able to keep grief mostly at bay. As time passes, it gets easier, which disgusts me, but I just take that disgust and stick it in the grief box too.

Everyone on my dad's side of the family has strange personalities aside from my cousin, Chris. His family and my family get along best. But my Uncle Jarko is a difficult person. He married a crazy and had three children with her only to find out down the road that the first one wasn't his.

I have a memory from when I was six of my parent's telling me Tina was not Jarko's daughter. We were out to eat at the local bar and grill, and they must have accidentally let something slip about it and then noticed me observing them.

My mom, with her off-putting practicality, looked at me and explained, "Kathy had an affair when she and Jarko were married. Tina is not Jarko's daughter. She is Happy's."

"I know," I replied like it was the most obvious thing in the world, and it really was now that I think back. Tina had the blondest of hair and bright blue eyes. Total Arian race. Jackie and Chris looked completely like my uncle with their dark brown hair and eyes.

"You know?" my mother asked like she hadn't heard me correctly.

“Yeah,” I said as I picked up a mozzarella stick, and bit into it casually. And I did know. I had heard my uncle and Oma discussing it when I was at their house. They probably didn’t think I would understand what they were saying, or that I was even listening, but I was. I remember it distinctly. I didn’t understand what it really meant, but I understood that Tina had a different father than Jackie and Chris. Two of my older siblings have a different father than me, so it was normal.

My uncle was in the Air Force, and after the kids were born, he was stationed in various places in the South. Kathy was unstable and took off, which left my father and Oma to raise the kids while my uncle was gone. When he came back, he lived with my grandmother for the rest of her life.

I’d always thought of him as constantly cranky and whiney, so I always thought he lived with her rather begrudgingly. That he felt he had to take care of her, and couldn’t have his own life. Once she was gone, I found out that wasn’t true. Instead of getting his own life, he moved in with my cousin Jackie and her husband. He never needed to take care of Oma. He just needed Oma to take care of him.

I had spent a fair amount of time with Jackie growing up. She was about ten years my senior, like my older brother and sister, and when I was younger, I thought she was really cool. When I was a teenager I began to notice some idiosyncrasies she had. One time I sneezed when I was at her house, and almost immediately afterward she told me she felt like she had a cold. I also noticed little ways she would try to compete for Oma’s affections with me, because Oma had always favored me because she and I were both smart. I realize now that Jackie probably inherited some of her mother’s crazy.

Jackie's husband, Rob, was your classic lap dog husband. To this day, I have never met a Rob I liked just because I associate all Robs with him. He used to always try to tickle me and give me massages when I was a teenager, and one time he casually felt me up as he put a blanket over my shoulders, but that was the worst thing that happened to me. Another time, we had a family gathering at my parent's house, and he tried to pick up my second cousin, Tyler (Chris's son), by his head, because he thought he was playing around or something. I don't know. There is just something wrong with that guy.

Once Oma was gone, Jackie and Rob basically stopped talking to anyone in the family. My uncle and father call each other every so often, but only because they promised Oma they would stay in touch with each other. Otherwise, we see Jackie and Rob maybe once a year and my uncle maybe twice a year. Jarko hardly ever talks to his son. My dad is more of a grandfather to Chris's kids than Jarko is.

It's my senior year of college and I am seriously considering not going home for Thanksgiving break. I love my life at school so much, and I don't want to go back to the past that is my parent's house. But without me the dinner would be very sad and mediocre indeed. If there is one role I play within my immediate and extended family, it is the cook. In the latter years of her life, Oma taught me to cook almost all of her Eastern European specialties, and I alone am the keeper of her recipes because she never wrote them down.

I know I owe it to Oma and my family to go home and cook for them, so I tell my father I will be there.

Days before break starts Cee calls me.

“So, I have something horrible to tell you.” She doesn’t sound devastated, so I know it’s not actually anything too horrible.

“Oh, god. What?”

She pauses. “Jackie and Rob are coming with Jarko to Thanksgiving.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

It’s a sign. I should have been selfish. I should have told my dad Thanksgiving is a stupid holiday, maybe next year.

I don’t really hate anyone. I stay away from people I don’t like, but that’s about it. If I ever felt true hatred for someone, I think I would kill them. Jackie, and Rob by default, are the only people I have felt something similar to hate for. I’ve considered vandalizing their house a few times.

I do not want them at dinner. I do not want to act pleasant toward them. I want to scream at them and Jarko too, for that matter.

Oma died on New Year’s Day in 2010 at just around one a.m. My family was at our house when it happened. Jackie called to tell my father.

A few days later everyone gathered at Oma’s. Jackie had diligently organized knick-knacks and cheap, meaningless vases, and other junk that bared no real connection to Oma on the dining room table for us all to pick mementos from.

I was completely thrown. Those were our choices? I picked out a few things that I liked or that were already mine. We were informed that the rest of the items we didn’t take were going to Goodwill. Everyone else took one or two things, probably just to have taken something.

As we all stood around gazing at the pathetic debris, I noticed the one knick-knack that actually meant something was not on the table.

“I want the Siamese cat salt-shaker,” I said and everyone stared at me.

“Where’s that?” Jackie asked. She knew nothing. I knew absolutely everything. It was in the cupboard above the fridge next to the ham stand. She didn’t even remember its existence, so I was not denied the cat.

I went through the rest of the house and picked out other things I really wanted. I felt completely devoid when I had to ask my uncle if I could have some of the kitchen supplies. I got the air that they were thinking I just wanted stuff. Anything I could get, and honestly I did want anything I could get when I realized I was going to be regulated, but not because I wanted stuff. I wanted her stuff. I wanted the knife and whisk I learned to cook with, and that cheap blue plastic bowl Oma and I found at a garage sale most. I wanted so much more, but I knew I had to prioritize. What my uncle wanted kitchen stuff for I had no idea and Jackie already had a complete houseful of everything, but I guess she wanted duplicates, or something.

The one thing I went and grabbed without permission was Oma’s cookbook. It was a small, delicately bound book from the seventies that really only held clippings and recipes Oma had copied from magazines, but it was one of the only things that carried her personal scribe.

Once I had it, Jackie stopped me. She said she wanted to hold onto it first. I could only stare.

A couple years before, Oma had started giving me her things. I had all her jewelry, so there would be no squabbling over that because it was already mine. Then, she started asking me what else I wanted, but I never knew. I wanted to say, “For you not to die.”

When I picked up that book, I knew it was the one thing I wanted over everything else. My dad came up beside me when Jackie stopped me. Jarko was at Jackie's side. Looking back, I wish I would have said what I assumed everyone else was thinking. I wish I would have told her no. I wish I would have told her she didn't get to control everything.

"It's okay, Pee. You can have the book back later," my dad said to me, attempting to nullify the situation and to prevent me from breaking. I handed the book over, and could only find solace in the fact that she was not going to get what she wanted from it. She thought it held the secrets. She thought it held the recipes. She knew nothing.

It turned out only the valueless table knick-knacks were given to the Goodwill. All other household items that had use and some financial value were claimed by Jackie to have a garage sale with; to which, she most generously invited my father and I so we could see if we wanted anything else. We drove out there right away.

As we walked up the short driveway that ended in Jackie and Rob's three car garage that was attached to their modern developmental home, I felt like I was walking to wade through the body parts of my Oma so I could save the recognizable pieces before they were incinerated.

The first thing I saw was the small orange kindergarten chairs Celia and I had used as children. I wanted them of course, but I once again knew I had to prioritize. I knew we were only allowed to pick through the items, even though I wanted to go up to her and say, "I'll just take everything, thanks."

The second thing I saw was Oma's old Dutch oven. Jackie, of course, had claimed the new one, but I didn't care. The old one meant more, and I took it without asking. I also grabbed

the ugly ornate glass goblets we had all drank milk out of our entire lives. The fact that they were in the sale only proved furthermore that Jackie's sentiment was not in memory but in profit.

The whole time I had to act normal, as if I wasn't disgusted inside. My dad acted as congenial as ever, not because he didn't care about what was happening, but because that was just how he was. He didn't feel as betrayed by his niece as I did. He did help raise her after all, so he was more willing to see good in her.

"Hey, this is mine," he said from over by the books. I looked back at him and saw him holding a twenty-five cent copy of *Franny and Zooey*. He looked elated. Then he picked up some baking sheets, and declared that no one could ever have enough of them. I knew they were not Oma's, and I liked that he was taking Jackie's own property that she may have made money off of.

I left that day feeling slightly more connected to Oma, but also feeling more disdain for Jackie. I did not see her again for a long time. Eventually, I did get the cookbook. Probably once she realized its only value was sentimental.

When they arrive for Thanksgiving dinner, I am surprised and relieved at how easy it is for me to play welcoming hostess. The shots Celia and I have been downing all day probably help, too. I don't really know why I am so surprised. It makes me laugh a little bit. What did I think I was going to do? Put bleach in their food? Host a dinner and walk around being a total bitch the whole time? No, that's Jackie's job.

Once we are all in the living room, I offer to get my uncle a drink, and as I start to go get it he says, "I see you're still wearing Grandma's watch."

Without thinking I say, "Yeah, I kind of never take it off." As I continue to walk away, I realize I never said that out loud before.

On the morning of her death, my dad and Jackie and Jarko, and probably gross ol' Rob, went out to breakfast to discuss insurance stuff and Oma's cremation. When he returned, he came straight downstairs to where I was still asleep, woke me up, and handed me Oma's limp wristwatch. He told me that once, when Oma was still lucid and we were visiting her, I left the room, and she told everyone who was there that I was to get that watch.

I time the dinner to get done right when we told them to be here in hopes that they will eat and run. Celia comes into the kitchen just as I finish the gravy and we each silently take one more shot before we embark into the dining room where everyone is already at the table.

Earlier, Celia and I found this dried corn cob on top of the fridge that my dad found in a bag of bird food. We thought it was really funny so we decided to make it the center piece of the dinner. If Oma had still been alive, this never would have stood.

"Well, it's easy to have time for couponing when you don't have a job," Jackie says, and then I remember she's been unemployed forever.

"Have you been applying anywhere?" my dad asks.

"I check the boards online every day, but there aren't too many options for me."

I want to judge her for being such a lazy ass and making her husband make all the money, but I can understand her point. If you can, why not, right? And I bet Rob secretly loves going to work to get away from her for a while.

"How's school, Pauli?" Rob asks.

I think, don't talk to me.

"It's good. I love it." I don't elaborate any more than that, and he doesn't ask any more than that. I guess he just wanted to say something. My dad and Jarko start talking about vehicles and I look at the plate in front of me. I realize that, after cooking all day, I'm not even hungry anymore.

I look up when Rob says, "What's this?" He's holding the corn cob.

"The center piece," Cee and I both say, and I laugh a little bit as I think back to when we found it.

"You know, if you put this in the microwave, it will turn into popcorn," Rob informs everyone, and I almost lose it. I avoid eye contact with Cee and squeeze my leg under the table to take my mind off laughing. Was he serious? We all ignore the comment.

In the middle of dinner, I realize Jarko got up to go to the bathroom and he hasn't come back for a long time, and then from the direction of the hallway I hear, "Hey, Paul?"

My dad gets up and walks over there, and a few seconds later yells, "Pee, where's the plunger?"

"The hall closet," I say as casually as possible, but I feel like I'm going to develop an aneurism from the pressure of the laughs I'm holding in. I bite my lip. Hard. I had thought about how this dinner would go a lot, but all of the scenarios I thought up never included laughing.

When my dad comes back, he says, "So, how 'bout those Vikes?" and he and Rob jump into a big conversation right away. Thank god.

After dinner, Celia wants a smoke, and Jackie smokes, too, so the three of us make our way out to the garage.

I am drunk and hysterical from the events of dinner, so once we are in there I start messing with stuff and having fun. I have no idea my parents own a leaf blower nor have I ever come into contact with one before, so when I turn it on I don't realize how powerful it is going to be. The dirtiness of the winter garage flies up all around us and the shock of it makes us all laugh, and it feels good to finally let it out.

We laugh like when Oma was alive. God, it is so much easier to pretend like Oma is still alive, so that's what we all do. At least that's what I do. I don't want to hate. Hating hurts me, so in that moment I just decide to stop.

When it's time for them to go we take turns giving each other awkward sideways hugs, and I want to say, "See you in a year!"

As I watch my family pull out of the drive-way from the window, I feel like I should wish that they had stayed longer, but I just don't. I just don't care anymore.

Oma used to say she was lucky enough to have raised three sets of children. First, she raised my father and my uncle, then my uncle's kids, and then Celia and I. I believe she raised me too. My parents have been there for me my whole life, but no one ever expected anything of me like Oma did. No one has ever cared enough to actually hold me to standards like she did, not even me.

Sometimes, in my head, I refer to her as my mother, and I enjoy it for a moment, but then I realize that means my mother is dead, so I stop.

VII. Grown Ups

When I first got back to Bemidji for my senior year, I didn't know what to do with myself. I felt useless and apathetic and restless. I tried to write, but I couldn't. No book could hold my attention. I couldn't even find joy in cleaning and organizing my dorm room, which

On my birthday, my father called me while he was on his way to the grocery store. I was a bit surprised to see that he was calling from his cell phone, but I could guess why before I even answered.

“I just didn’t want to call when Mom was right there, ya know? We’ll call together later.”

“Really?” I asked. I didn’t want to expect their call, or at least her call. Part of me wished I wouldn’t hear from them at all, but I knew that’s just part of birthdays. As much as the day is about you, you have to do some things you don’t want to, like growing older and talking to your family.

“Yeah, she’s still pretty mad at you for that night you got back from the fair. She complained about it last night when she was drunk. Honestly, I’m kind of sick of hearing about it. I said to her, ‘Why is it always Pee? Why aren’t you mad at Cee and Dan?’ And she shut up after that,” my dad explained.

“Oh? She didn’t have a rebuttal to that bout of logic?” I asked in mock surprise.

When he tells me these things he doesn’t know what he’s doing to me. He doesn’t understand. I hide it well. I have accepted that my mother does not think much of me. I’m used to it, but sometimes when I hang up the phone, I can’t help but think about how no one would ever want to hear that, and why doesn’t he know? Couldn’t he just spare me something I would never find out about if he never said anything?

“You know, it would probably all go away if you would just humble yourself and apologize,” he said.

“Fine,” I said, even though I knew I wasn’t going to, and not because I was too proud. I would apologize to her, gladly even, but when? We hadn’t spoken in a month. I hadn’t talked to her, and she had definitely not talked to me.

When I hung up the phone I allowed myself a moment to admit that it bothered me. I acknowledged that I had cried on the inside for about a second before squeezing my phone a bit tighter than necessary as I carried on the conversation.

I was not going to call her out of nowhere and come right out and say, “Sorry for that night. I somehow mysteriously sensed you were mad at me from four hours away, and I have been racked with guilt ever since. Forgive me, it was all my fault.” I was not going to do that.

My dad was right: it was always me. If anything was wrong with the house or our lives, it was because of me. To her, I was always an ingrate. I never had a good enough job. I was lazy, and I alone, out of everyone in our family, drank too much.

It wouldn’t matter if I apologized for that one night.

All I did that night was be too loud while my oldest sister and her children were spending the night. It was a typical problem at my house. I’m not proud of it, but Celia and I got loud sometimes. My mom would come downstairs and tell us to shut it, and then we would try to be quieter. I felt bad when I thought about it later, but somehow it always managed to happen again. I just didn’t understand why her hatred was directed solely at me.

Celia and I and her boyfriend, Dan, had come back from the state fair, and had some drinks in the basement. We did this almost every night minus the state fair part. That night we started listening to music, and we got loud and she had to yell at us twice.

I don't remember what I said, but I assume it was the typical: "Okay, Mom. Sorry. We'll keep it down." I'm sure if I had said something really horrible I would have heard about it from my dad, or even Celia, because my mom talked to her about me too.

I think this time was different because my nieces were the ones she was worried about waking up, but they didn't even wake up. Only my oldest sister was kept awake, and she wasn't mad at us.

The next morning my mom went to work before I got up, and that afternoon my dad brought me to Bemidji. I felt bad that our last conversation had been one where she was angry at me, but I never thought she would carry a grudge. Cee and Dan lived there, yet I, the one four hours away, was the person she was still fuming at a month later.

My dad did end up calling me a couple hours later to wish me happy birthday for a second time. It was for the first time as far as my mom was concerned. When he handed the phone to her, I was ready for anything she had to say to me. Actually, I wished she would say something to me and tell me she was pissed. I wished she would have said anything besides what she actually said.

"Hi! Happy birthday," I heard through the receiver. Then she asked about my birthday plans, and discussed a family visit that would take place sometime in the next month.

"Humble yourself," my dad had said, and I tried to, but I didn't feel proud. How could I apologize when it didn't even seem like there was a problem? There was no way she had told him to tell me she was mad so she wouldn't have to. She probably didn't even remember what she had told him.

I just couldn't do it. I was sorry my family had to hear her complain about me all of the time, but my apologizing wasn't going to stop that. There would always be something, so I did the selfish thing. I didn't have to deal with it, so I didn't.

Every time I try to come up with an explanation for my relationship with my mother, I end at: she doesn't make sense. Sometimes I think she is mad because she doesn't want me to end up like her, but then why wouldn't she be nice to me, or do something to change it?

One time, I was riding in the car with my father on a trip home from Bemidji, and he turned to me and said, "Do you think other people are affected by your mother's drunkenness like we are?"

It sounds like a serious question, but to us it's casual. My father and I are the laidback members of my family. We do not let much bother us, and we are able to keep ourselves together when we actually do get bothered. He doesn't need to explain to me what he means by "drunkenness."

"No, I don't think it's the same. They don't experience her at home. The unhappy her," I reply.

"But Monica and Derek avoid her phone calls, you know. I've listened to her talk to them at night when they actually do answer, and a lot of times she's so drunk she hardly makes any sense. She just babbles like, 'Rah rah rah.'"

We laugh at this, because we can both hear her babbling in our heads. We can't help it. It's funny.

"Yeah," he continues, "she gets all pissed off when they don't answer her calls, and I'm sitting there like, 'Can you really blame them?' But that's the thing, she doesn't understand

because she can never remember what she said to them the last time they picked up. The other weekend Monica calls her and says, ‘What time are you coming to pick up the girls?’ And Mom was like, ‘What?’ She totally forgot she told Monica that she would go pick them up that day.”

“Oh, my god.” I shake my head while keeping my eyes on the road. We both laugh lightly for a moment.

It makes me kind of sad that my older brother and sister avoid my mother’s phone calls. Their children are basically her life. She talks about them nonstop. The grandkids, talking on the phone, and watching *American Idol* and other shitty shows like that are her life. I understand why they don’t answer, though.

I think my mother is very unhappy. I don’t know why she disapproves of me over Celia, but I guess if bitching about me behind my back and criticizing me helps her, I will let her. She can have that, I guess. I’ll take that for her.

Saturday morning shifts at the front desk in my building were not my style. I have never been a morning person. My mind just decides not to hear my alarm in the morning, so I usually don’t wake up before nine. Luckily, by some miracle, the only time I was scheduled to work Saturday morning, I was able to drag my carcass over to the elevator and ride the eleven flights down to the first floor.

Collapsed in an office chair with my head resting on the desk, I watched half a dozen college students walk in and out of the building never looking my way.

Good. Keep on walking, I thought. I didn’t want to have to deal with anyone, not that my job was the least bit taxing. Still, I preferred not to do the menial tasks that made up my job description if I could help it.

“No, mail hasn’t arrived yet,” and, “Go ask your R.A.,” and, “Just bring it to security,” were my most common phrases. People thought that, as a front desk worker, I was supposed to know a lot about the workings of the building and the events on campus, when really all I was qualified to do was give people their packages and tell people where the closest available bathroom was. Mostly, I just delegated my responsibilities to the higher-ups.

Unfortunately, the worst part about working the front desk in my building was the R.A. staff. They were all really friendly with each other, and they thought of the front desk as their hang out, even when a non-R.A. was working. I hated it. They would hang around for hours talking to each other when I just wanted to be by myself.

On the Saturday that I opened, a girl R.A. who had learned my name, much to my dismay, came down and sat across from me at the desk. She talked to me for a bit, and asked me questions to which I made sure to only answer with single words, hoping she would understand that I wanted her to leave. She did not of course, but luckily I was saved when her parents came and knocked on the glass door of the foyer.

Springing up from her stool, she rushed gleefully over to them. Once they had walked over the threshold, she threw her arms around them both and shouted, “I missed you so much!”

The display of emotion made me more uncomfortable than I had been before, and I realized it was because I could not imagine doing that when my parents came to visit me. I didn’t understand people who had good relationships with their parents, especially their mothers. I realized I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt the need to throw my arms around my parents because I had missed them that much.

It wasn’t like my parents didn’t love me, but even thinking about the word love in terms of my parents made me come up short on the definition. We loved each other in our way, but

whenever we parted from one another I always just hugged them out of obligation. To hug them felt natural of course, but I simultaneously felt like I was hugging strangers. I felt like we all had feelings that we had been holding back from telling each other for a long time, and when we hugged we were just thinking about those secrets instead of how we loved each other.

Sometimes I think it's just me. Maybe I'm the only one with the disconnection. My father loves me, but he loves Celia a bit more. My mother loves me, but I think she is extremely sad and doesn't have enough confidence to fix herself. And I love them, too. I just don't want to be around them.