

giants of the earth

JORDAN HIGH SCHOOL CLASS OF 2017

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*We dress up like prom
queens and strut around
because we are the giants
of the earth and we hold
the world in our palms.*

- SERENA PALMER, "DRESS-UP"

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giants of the Earth

MEMOIRS BY FRESHMEN

IN THE JORDAN HIGH SCHOOL CLASS OF 2017

DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA

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paranoia

ALEXIS PRESCOTT

I.

Thursday, finally. I used to hate that both my parents worked at night. Mom's patients would be coming in soon, so I knew I couldn't call her. She was busy diagnosing sleep disorders. Daddy was at rehearsal, playing beautiful melodies and harmonies on his cello. My brother Avery and I sat on the couch at my grandparents' house, keeping ourselves occupied. I knew Daddy would be back soon, but I still dreaded the few hours I'd have to stay at grandma's house Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday every week. I love my grandparents, but I wanted to be back home watching *Spongebob* on demand. Avery seemed to be enjoying himself playing Mario Kart on his Nintendo DS. I, on the other hand was not. I don't know why it bothered me so much. "Hand me the remote," I called to him in the midst of his game.

"Ugh, why can't you get it yourself?"

I made a smart remark and groaned. My true laziness came out. "Fine!"

I flipped through the channels over and over again. Grandma has basic cable, so I knew I wouldn't have much luck. With boredom swallowing me whole, I sulked and watched my brother shoot red and green tortoise shells at race cars.

"The red shells are the best. They do the most damage," Avery said. I nodded my head, wishing I had something more exciting to do.

“Want to go to the library?” my grandmother asked right as my boredom hit an all-time low. I accepted and asked my brother if he wanted to go. He declined, so it was just my grandmother and me. I shrugged. *More books for me.*

II.

“Be back soon,” I called as we walked out of the door. The light of the summer sky gleamed even though it was evening. I got into the back seat of the rich red Crown Victoria. I longed to be old enough to sit in the front seat. It didn’t bug me as much tonight though, for I was about to have a plethora of books to explore. The Stanford L. Warren Library wasn’t my favorite, but it was close to my grandmother’s house. We approached the library, and my grandma parked across the street near a small, white house. A man and a woman were sitting on the steps of the porch outside their house, taking in the chilling summer breeze.

The car beeped twice as we opened our doors. We walked up the concrete stairs to enter the library. Ten of them. Harsh grey steps, the color of darkness. The cool tone of the concrete canvas washed away any ounce of happiness I could have towards them. The shadiest part of the whole library, they could bring no good to anyone or anything. Through my peripheral vision, I saw no railing, no means of support. Though I had finally obtained a library card, I just didn’t like this library, so I hadn’t used it.

I walked to the children’s section and slid my hand over the variety of books. All different shapes and sizes, but my fingertips still felt the same texture as I stumbled upon each one. Every once in a while a vibrant book cover or an enticing title would grab my attention and I would explore the book, but none of them interested me enough to check them out. I came to the conclusion that I wouldn’t have any luck tonight so I went back to my grandmother, ready to go. I sighed. Of course she was talking.

“Yes, Obama is the *first* black president of the United States of America!” said grandma.

“And it was about time!” the librarian exclaimed. “Yes, indeed! Some fools tried to keep him out of office, but you can’t keep a good man down!” My grandmother continued what seemed to be her never-ending babble with the librarian. I thought people were supposed to be quiet in the library. Although it used to annoy me, I admire her willingness to have a conversation with anyone and make her voice heard, and now I know where I get it from. After a few more minutes, it was time to go.

“Have a good night!” the librarian yelled as we walked out the door.

“Find any good books?” Grandma asked.

“Nope,” I replied.

“Well, how’s school?”

I opened my mouth, but my grandma’s foot escaped from the step faster than I could reply. In a split second, one misstep caused a catastrophic result. In a split second, my life changed forever.

III.

There on the concrete lay her still, bleeding body. Panic arose in me. “Grandma!” I screamed. In that moment I knew true terror. I ran to the bottom of the stairs and my heart dropped; I didn’t know what to do. She was face down, surrounded by a pool of blood. I shook her. The man and the woman across the street ran to us.

The woman whispered “Oh my God” a little too loudly. This was not what an eleven-year-old should hear, especially not now. I was surrounded by panicking adults. Shouldn’t they be the ones remaining calm?

“Get some pillows!” yelled the man to his rigid wife. She did as he said. Her anxious eyes crossed mine, which made me even more alarmed. The librarian ran outside.

“I’ll call 911!” she said. I grabbed my grandmother’s phone and called my father.

“What?!” my father said in disbelief through the phone. “I’m in Raleigh, but I’m on my way.” I felt a short moment of relief knowing

that he'd be here soon, but reality soon caught up with me. Chaos surrounded me and I didn't know what to do. I wanted to make myself useful, but there's only so much you can do when you're eleven. My grandmother, now face up, had her head on a maroon, regal-looking pillow a little darker than the Crown Victoria. She was still bleeding.

I kneeled beside her, held her hand, and still had yet to shed a tear. In that moment, I felt it was no longer okay to cry, or express my fear—not until I could be alone. In her presence, I felt I had to be strong for her.

IV.

This was the first time I had ever been a part of an emergency situation. I've never had to wait on first responders, never had to take any type of control. Before this, if there was a problem, it would be fixed. The adults in my life were my Olivia Popes, my fixers. If something was broken, they'd fix it, no matter what—sometimes before I even knew what the problem was.

Now, the thought running through my mind was: *Why, why are they taking so long?* We must have been there at least fifteen minutes before we got help, or maybe it just felt long. Either way, my grandma was getting worse with each passing minute and there was nothing I could do. Before, I saw her as this strong, outgoing chatterbox who could conquer anyone and anything. But in that moment, I saw a quiet shadow of the grandmother I used to know. The ambulance finally approached the scene, and the paramedic asked my grandmother endless questions.

"What's your name? When's your birthday? What year were you born? Do you know what day it is?" My uncle arrived before my father, and I went to his car. As I watched them lift my grandmother onto the gurney, it was getting harder to hold back my tears. I was alone in his car, and I could no longer hold in my fear for her life. Tears ferociously rushed down my face.

Would she be okay? She was definitely a fighter, but she wasn't invincible. The ambulance drove off and my uncle drove me back to

my grandparents' house, where my father met us. I went home and slept immediately.

V.

"Hey. How are you?" my father asked uneasily.

"Good," I muttered.

"Grandma fractured her nose and wrist, but she's okay."

I looked at him in awe. After all that, I couldn't believe the lack of injuries; I was relieved, but my memories from last night remained vivid in my mind. Agony and disbelief followed my every footstep. Paranoia consumed my days immediately following the event. I constantly feared that my loved ones would slip away from me in the blink of an eye. With every step I took, fear for the wellbeing of my family took over. Over the course of the three years past, it's slowly faded away.

We went to church that morning and then stopped by my grandmother's house to check up on her. I hesitated to get out of the car; the thought of facing her was terrifying, even if she was okay.

"You comin'?" my mother asked. I walked to the door, suppressing my fear. I crossed the threshold and saw my grandmother, alive and well, watching CNN, her arm and shoulder wrapped and lifted up, and a splint on her wrist. She had a couple bandages and bruises on her nose, but it wasn't as terrifying as I pictured it would be.

As she talked about how brave I was, I fidgeted around, attempting not to relive past events. When we drove back to the house, I walked up to my room and watched TV. I no longer felt the need to cry, but I knew things were different. From then on, I've learned to build barriers between my family and me for fear of getting too close and then losing them. Like countries building walls in defense, I prepare myself for the worst. No more crying, just plastering over my true feelings.

where has grandma gone?

ROBIN GRISSOM

Lost in Her Ocean Eyes

I used to like hospitals. I understood why people hated them: the pain, the sorrow, and the death of past visitors made the halls feel haunted, and on most occasions, one doesn't enjoy unexpected phone calls. *Ring ring—Get ready for your day to get about one hundred times worse.* Somehow, inexplicably, I saw past these depressing factors and thought instead of their positive aspects. Like how hospitals weren't just places to lie with eyes locked shut forever, but places to raise our heavy lids with fluttering lashes and take a breath that we thought had been stolen. Hospitals weren't just where people died; they were also where people healed.

My thoughts stirred as we entered the Rex Center's main lobby, the summer heat scorching my bare neck, usually blanketed by ginger curls. Today, my hair hung knotted up in a limp braid across my right shoulder. My jean shorts gave no coverage to my white legs so that the pale reflected off of me like the glaring light of the sun; my red striped shirt that I had worn lovingly for the past three years was beginning to seem a bit old fashioned.

Needless to say, I am avoiding the real issue.

My grandma was in the hospital. Again. The last time I could recall brought me back to when I was just entering my first year of middle school while she prepared for heart surgery. Everyone came to visit her, leaving behind the nauseating fragrance of flowers from

the bouquets that they perched on her room's window sill. On the day of her surgery, the room smelled like Marc Jacob's Daisy perfume had been spilled all over the floor. I still remember the muffled sound of my aunt's crying, but even though her tears pressed at my emotions, I felt calm during the minutes that ticked by while we sat preparing for my grandma's results in the waiting room. And when she got out and everything seemed okay, I thought for just a little while maybe things would be.

Four years later, as we strode down the same eggshell white hallways to her room, I wondered what could have been.

My Aunt Jeannine stood waiting for us with a warm smile, but her eyes reflected how broken she was inside. Not to mention her hair, stolen of its youth and drained of its color, hanging like string down her slumped back. The purple bags that hung under her bottom lashes gave away just how many nights she hadn't slept, and her cheeks were drained of their normal pink flush. She reminded me of a dull penny, abandoned on the sidewalk, left to weather. She had been the one fighting the hardest to keep my grandma going, the one who had gone to every doctor's appointment, sat at the bedside every night at the hospital, and basically lost her mind as my grandmother forgot hers.

An Urban Outfitters bag packed with get well soon card-making materials clung to my wrist. My mom opened the door, while Aunt Jeannine explained to us what was going on. I didn't listen very long before my attention wandered past her to Grandma. I couldn't take my eyes off of her frail body, small and weak. She looked almost like a sack of potatoes lying in a heap on the hospital bed. Her wispy white curls sat matted and disordered on top of her head, and although they normally looked like the puffs of a cloud, that day they resembled the dust bunnies that my mom swept out from underneath our couch at home. Her cheeks, usually spread wide with a smile, instead appeared hollow, as if they had started to sink in. There was nothing to her but rumpled skin and bone, and her hands, which had once been smooth and elegant, had shriveled up like a grapes becoming raisins, and lay just barely peeking out above the indigo blanket that covered her from shoulders to toes. Ev-

ery breath she took sounded like a struggling sigh and her eyebrows were pinched, as if even in sleep she fought against the pain. Pain. I didn't want her to be in pain anymore.

Aunt Jeannine walked around to the other side of the bed and lightly stroked my Grandmother's forehead, whispering, "Momma, Jim and his family are here. You need to wake up." Her shoulders gave a stir and then her eyes peered open. She glanced up at us, and I could basically see the wheels spinning in her head, trying to figure out exactly who we were. Once she had placed us, a goofy grin split her cracked lips.

"Well, hello there."

My mom bent down and in a cheerful voice, like the one she had used with my sister and I when we were little, exclaimed how fantastic it was to see her and how it had been too long and if she was doing alright. My dad, who had been over earlier, called out, "Hello Ma," and snagged the remote from the desk beside her bed, surfing through the channels like a pro, although it didn't matter which one he landed on. As long as it was better than Disney, he could squint and stick his chin up high, as if the anything could hide his mother's flailing, spiraling descent. My sister gave her a big hug, flashing a phony smile. Then she went and fell into a chair in the corner, absentmindedly scanning through her texts.

I greeted my grandmother last. When I leaned over to hug her, I could see my reflection swimming in her ocean blue eyes and wondered if that was how all of her memories were: lost in the middle of the sea. I wrapped my arms around her fragile shoulders lightly, not wanting to break her tiny frame. As I drew back, she smiled up at me as if there hadn't been a moment before worth keeping as much as this one. Suddenly, I was absolutely torn. After mumbling to my mom that I needed to use the bathroom or something I made a beeline for the door. It was a lot heavier than I anticipated, and it slammed shut behind me as I dashed out. I ran down the hall, past the windows, past the nurses in their purple scrubs, past the patients being wheeled down the hall, past everything until it was just me and an empty hallway. Listening carefully, I waited to hear the sound of footsteps or voices. When no one came, I finally caved

in. My knees gave way, and like a crumbling wall, I collapsed onto the floor and began to sob.

I cried over my aunt's filthy hair. I cried over the people who were trapped in all of those hospital rooms. I cried over my pale legs and my old shirt. I cried over the ocean. But most of all, I cried over my grandmother.

Drops splattered against the tiled floor; one, two, twenty. They came in waves, but with each heave, it seemed as though the tears spilled faster across my cheeks, racing to the tip of my chin, hanging until more weighed them down and they fell. I shuddered, rocking myself back and forth, hugging my knees against my chest tightly. I don't know how long I sat there, but it wasn't until I saw someone rounding the corner that I was able to pull myself together.

I stood and ran to the nearest bathroom where I splashed my face with water and waited for the red puffiness in my cheeks to fade. The metal paper towel dispenser felt cool against my hands as I tore out handfuls and wiped the scratchy sheets across my face, then leaned forward and let my forehead roll against its chill side, hoping it would numb out the pounding that rang in my ears. I took another glance into the mirror at the disheveled girl staring back at me. *This isn't who I am.* Hopping up and down a little, I composed myself and walked back to my grandmother's room to finish making her get well soon card.

I don't like hospitals anymore.

Her China Tea Set

Sunlight spilled through the box window above the kitchen sink, bouncing off the red glass bird and reflecting a cardinal on the teal flooring. The square table that engulfed the center of the room had been decorated with a grapevine cloth, like the vine beyond her back porch railing. On the countertop sat old mugs jammed with pens and pencils, saucers stinking of wet cat chow, and a white layer of papers—taxes and bills—thicker than the coat of icing I longed to top my first grade birthday cake. My bags were piled up on one of

the chairs; tucked inside were some books that I could read later to her curious ears, and colored markers that I had gotten for Christmas the year before, half of them already missing.

Mutsy, the wiry gray cat that prowled the house for the longest of years, sat on the table with her nose in the air and her tail flicking back and forth, wordlessly proclaiming my inferiority. Though if I stroked her fur just right, she'd forget all about that. I had just arrived, but already the aroma of freshly cut lemons and White Shoulders perfume had plugged my nose with the familiar and comforting smell of Grandma. Later at home I would bury my face into my shirt to take in one more breath of her fragrance: the light sweetness of her spray that she dabbed onto her collarbone and wrists was flowery yet not overwhelming. And the scent of the sour fruit reminded me of my Aunt's glass of iced tea that I always stole a sip from, her teasing furrowed brows and sausage fingers shaking "no" running my throat dry until I craved more of the cold liquid. For some reason it always tasted better out of her cup.

The house seemed full of memories; not only had my dad, aunt, and uncle been raised as children there, but so had my grandmother. The creaks and groans of the moaning halls weren't those of a haunted house, but those of a long-loved home. She had lived in that house since she was eight years old. That was one of the things that fascinated me most about my grandmother's house—that, along with her collection of stuffed animals.

Her bedroom was full of them, spreading from shelf to shelf, every desk with at least two snuggling beside each other, as if she hadn't wanted any to get lonely. She had puppies, birds, dolls, and bunnies galore. Lions and tigers and teddy bears, Oh my! Their glassy eyes seemed so alive to me when I was a child that I could've sworn that on some nights, when everyone was fast asleep, they would awaken and begin dancing with one another through our midnight dreams.

My grandma had already awoken and was strolling around in the kitchen when my mother dropped me off at nine thirty that July evening back in 2007. My aunt lay on the living room sofa in a heap, her arms and legs sprawled out in awkward positions. The television buzzed in front of her with the annoying high-pitched babbling

of the blonde weather lady, so I did all of us a favor and turned it off. I looked down at my Aunt Jeannine and grinned. Her bottom jaw had slumped down in the night and hung open what looked like five inches. I wondered if any flies had gotten lost in there yet. When a snore began to escape her chapped lips, I nudged one of her flopped-about arms and watched her eyes pop open.

“Why’d you do that?” she yawned. “I dreamt the most amazing dream . . . and I would have kept dreaming it if you hadn’t woken me up!”

“Sorry,” I replied, both of us keenly aware of my sarcastic tone. After she’d fallen back asleep for the second time, I finally got her up and into the kitchen where we joined my grandma. Grandma waddled around the table with a piece of toast clutched in both shaky hands.

“Would you like some peanut butter on this, sweetie?” she asked with a warm and determined smile.

“Sure!” I crowed and pulled out the smooth Peter Pan peanut butter from one of the higher-up cabinets while she laid out a napkin and cut the toast into two rectangular slices. Handing it over to her, I watched as she smeared a flat slab onto each piece and then pressed them together, just how I liked it. Delicious.

By the time every crumb was gone, she had changed from her pink fuzzy slippers and long wispy nightgown into a black and white striped shirt with black pants to match. Her hair curled up around her head like white cotton candy and her coral lips crinkled into a dazzling smile that showed off her shiny white teeth—she constantly boasted about never having lost a single one. I wrapped my arms around her belly and gazed up at her dreamily. Such a brilliant woman deserved more than a granddaughter who waited for her sandwich to be made. I should have been making it for the one who really deserved it.

“Grandma, we should have a tea party!” I gasped.

Her sapphire eyes grew big and her mouth made a perfect “o” as she whispered down to me, “That sounds like a great idea, Robin! We could even use my fancy tea set to make it extra special.” I nodded excitedly, my head bobbing up and down. Journeying into the dining room, she wandered over to a closet that I had never seen

open before. It was white, maybe the only white thing in there, and the walls were all painted a wild shade of fuchsia, matching the table cloth that draped over the dining table. There was enough room for twelve people, but only half of the chairs were out. A cabinet with glass windows displayed elegant plates and fragile dolls, and an eye-catching chandelier hung above us.

My grandmother began to remove tea cups and saucers from the closet, passed them to me, and reached in for more while I spun on my heels to place them down on the table. Soon we had begun a pattern, almost like a rehearsed dance, and all the pieces were out in no time. Finally, I began to curiously examine all of the different items. There was a cup with a dip in the rim and a little handle, next to a baby vase, a broken hole created in the top to slip a spoon in under its lid.

“What are they all?” I asked endearingly.

“It’s a china tea set,” my grandma said. “You have to be careful little lady, this is an antique.”

I had no idea what an antique was so I just replied, “ . . . Oh.”

She showed me where everything went and what I was supposed to put in each cup, but I decided that it would be much easier (and tastier) if we filled the tea pot with milk instead and just put extra sugar in the creamer. She laughed and said that it was up to me.

Finally, the table had been set, the guests had arrived, and the tea party was in action. The stuffed animals sat four to a seat, and my grandma, my aunt, and I all got our own chairs. I scooped sugar out using the little spoon provided and licked it clean. My aunt dumped her own tea into her little tea cup when she thought I wasn’t looking and rubbed her belly with each sip, giving me big thumbs up. I whooped and kicked my feet around giddily under the table, my face split by a grin that reached from ear to ear.

After my sugar rush had gone lopsided, I laid my head down on the table and began gazing admiringly and unknowingly at my grandmother. I ogled over her perfect posture and her lacey fingers that sat politely folded in her lap, elbows far off the table. Her elegance made the room feel weightless somehow, as if she was raising us up with the cheerful curve of her lips and the glow of her sparkling, mischievous eyes.

"Thank you, Robin. This was delightful!" she chirped, even though she was the one who deserved all of the thanks.

Lovely Ladies

The chicken wings on my father's plate had been picked clean, and as he scraped off the remaining meat with his teeth, he glanced at my dish where the charred skin still hung to the bones. I beckoned towards it with my hazel eyes and gazed blankly as his grubby fingers slid the helping under his nose and he feasted on. My grandmother sat across the wooden table, the light spilling from the other side of the kitchen to hide half of her face in shadows. She stared down forlornly at the browning fruit salad that my father had spun together for her that evening. What wasn't on her plate sat on the counter in a massive glass bowl: leftovers, even though we had never been able to finish it all any of the other million times he had fixed the dish. My mom reached for the peas as she washed the air with her sweet buttercup voice, trying to keep our kitchen full of something other than the bickering between my father and his sister. My Aunt Jeannine sucked in the dry air between her and my dad and spat out politics as he shook his head, his mouth too full of food to fire back any nasty remarks.

My sister had stolen away to dedicate the next few hours to the assignments she'd procrastinated on until this dull Sunday night, although she had once always joined us for this ritual dinner. My grandmother and aunt always came on Sundays, although these days they usually joined us closer to eight o'clock even when we had asked for them to arrive at six. My aunt often constructed an interesting story about why they were so late which always made for a good laugh once they had left. But as the repetition of "sorry we're late" increased, my family's patience grew thinner, and keeping score of their new latest time formed into our own little troubled game. They had arrived at 8:10 that night—nowhere near their record of 8:45.

My grandma sat hunched over in her wheelchair, looking as if she was just about to nod off, and I thought back to before her last

hospital trip when we would spend these special nights dancing around the table to the classic love songs created between our two generations. Sometimes, when YouTube kept glitching, we would make up tunes, which were always easy music that she could hum along with as we took small steps back and forth, her hands caught in mine as I held us up and tilted us around to our own beat.

Her laugh came with such ease back then, and these days her voice is always gravely. It jitters harshly when she laughs, like a weak cough. Suddenly, I was taken over by the whim to bring the rest of her night to a joyful finish, since we had been such drab entertainment for most of their visit already. Hurrying over to the computer, I clicked on to YouTube, typing in “The way you look tonight” and up popped the song. I raised the volume as high as it could go. Dashing over to my grandma, I spun her wheelchair around and pulled her in front of the fireplace where we had more room. Belting along with the lyrics, I began to swivel her chair round and round, then pivoted her forward to face me and grasped her delicate hands in mine. Starting deep into her marvelous blue eyes, I sung my heart out to her, watching excitedly as, for a moment, an old spark lit in her eyes. *Yes!* I thought to myself, and kept the melody going. My grandma bubbled with giggles, and when I let free her hands to twirl, she clapped and cheered as the song came to an end and I took a bow.

Ten minutes later when the clock struck ten, my aunt stated that it was about time they headed home. I held the door as they shuffled outside, my dad and aunt having to lift the wheelchair over the brick stairs and down to the walkway with my grandma weighing in the seat. They came out victorious and easily rolled her the rest of the way to the car. I pranced along beside them in bare feet with the cold chilling my toes and biting the tips of my exposed ears, as my hair hung in a sloppy bun on top of my head. When she had been loaded inside my aunt’s Acura, my grandma raised her arms as I bent down to give her a goodbye hug.

“You are such a lovely lady!” she cooed.

“And you are my lovely grandma!” I replied. Then the door was closed, the engine purred, and they were gone down the street. Nothing remaining of them but the scrub marks all around the kitchen

sink from where my aunt had insisted on cleaning after my parents had created such a delicious meal.

It dawned on me as we went inside that come next week we would do the same thing all over again, except I would forget to dance with my grandma and my grandma would forget that we had ever danced at all.

It seemed this was the only thing that could bring her back now, just a short few minutes of spinning around before departing. She'd begin to glow again and shake her hips along to Tony Bennett and my attempts at harmony. But when the song was over and the night had ended, the memory would fade away with it.

Don't Forget to Smile

September fourteenth this year, my grandma turned ninety-two years old. The Saturday sun had begun sinking down behind the trees and my dad, my cousins James and Kelly, and I all aimed our best to sink the ball through the hoop during a fair game of HORSE in my backyard. My cousins are both in their mid-thirties and over six feet tall. Maybe that's why they laughed when I looked up at them and asked to join in, but their mouths formed the shape of the basketball hoop above as I climbed up my back porch steps and took a shot, watching with captivated attention as the ball dipped over the rim, and *swish*.

Kelly's fiancé who happened to also be named Kelly (which creates challenges at Christmas time when we are handing out gifts) and James' "special friend" Tina leaned against the railing for support as they laughed wildly at their sweethearts' dumbfounded faces. Tina and James' daughter, Amya, had rounded the corner of the house just in time to see. Now in seventh grade, she was the closest to my age in the whole family. She looked a lot like her mom: dark chocolate skin and brown eyes, along with straight rough hair that just barely brushes her shoulders. Amya was weak when it came to romance and tough when it came to volleyball, and I loved every inch of her (besides the three that she has already outgrown me by).

Her dimples popped as the ball spiraled out of the net. She cheered and pranced across the half-court, twirling around my not-so-tough competition who stood like statues, still staring with astonished eyes at the backboard. Eventually their trance ended and they returned to the game, lining up to try and conquer the shot, although none of them succeeded. My dad clapped me on the back and turned to smirk boastfully at his nephews. I still lost the game, but it was a good entrance.

My Aunt Lorraine and mom spun around the kitchen, getting everything prepared for the family feast, and trying not to run into one another as they set out the mashed potatoes and tenderly baked chicken on the unusually gleaming blue countertop. Soon, a fresh baguette had been sliced and set out in a basket along with a bowl of green beans buttered to perfection. The two women were the Betty Crockers of their households and had spent most of that afternoon working over the kitchen table with a spoon in one hand, a salt shaker in the other, and laughter filling their mouths.

My mother had on an orange bandana that made her brown hair pop and hid the increasing strands of gray; a smile lit up her sapphire eyes. Her teeth stood out front when she chuckled and my Aunt Lorraine always joined in, the two getting along so well in the other's similarly polite company. My Aunt has a plump face and a crooked nose like a witch, but her heart is as warm and loving as the big bear hugs she shares each year when she comes down to visit with my Uncle Buck. Her once blonde curls now hung in a gray bundle on top her head, twisted back into a ballerina bun, and when she cracked up, the corners of her eyes crinkled and her whooping carried out the closed windows to where only boy Kelly and I remained in the game, shooting for champion title. After he leapt seven feet high and dunked the ball in, I walked away wordlessly with Amya and my five foot three inch shadow following my surrendering stride down the dirt road.

I was the first to spot the emerald car materialize from around the bend of my driveway and come rolling into the last available parking space. Finally, they had arrived. My Aunt Jeannine climbed out first and sauntered around to the other side where she unload-

ed a wheelchair from the back seat, opened the shotgun door, and clenched the wrinkled hand that came poking out. Suddenly, my grandmother's dainty figure emerged as she teetered out and around for a moment before balancing her footing and slouching back down into her wheelchair. Amya and I sped inside hurriedly to call for the others before running back out to greet the two. My grandma's face brightened as she saw us approaching, and she called out, "Hey there, y'all!" her rickety country accent as sweet as the honeysuckles still blooming past their time on vines that wriggled up the tree beside the bathroom window.

After reuniting in the front yard, my father and Uncle Buck swept her inside to the kitchen, finding her a place next to my grandpa. Although he was from my mother's side, he was as loving to my grandma as if they shared blood, and his smile lifted as he saw her enter the room. His white hair, tinted ginger like mine, matched the color of his eyebrows and had been cropped high above his blue eyes. Unlike my grandma, he had lost a few of his teeth (which he had liked to pluck out and show me when I was little), and I could just barely see the thin wire hanging under his gums on the right side of his broad grin, marking the spot where the dentist had "wrenched'm right out!"

Dinner ticked by slowly with family gossip, which I seemed to be the only one to find awkward and way too personal—they hadn't cared about my independence when I was eight, but all of a sudden, they seemed very interested in whether or not I was truly single, or just hiding a secret boyfriend. Kelly, other Kelly, James, Tina, Amya, and I all sat at the counter surrounded by dirty dishes and looked through old photos, their glowing images displayed on the camera that Amya had brought along with her from Georgia. Our group couldn't contain the giggles that bubbled out as we scanned through some of the silly pictures, and it was only a short amount of time before wild laughter played like music throughout the house.

Amidst the lively banter, my grandma sat in silence at the dining table, slouched in her seat. I looked across to her and we locked eyes, yet she didn't make any sign of recognition. It seemed as if she stared straight through me, as if I were nothing more than just

another stranger she might encounter on the street. I smiled, hoping she would flash one back at me, but her lips remained a slim crease, and I turned away. When the plates had been cleared and my Aunt Lorraine's homemade red velvet cake brought out, we stuffed it with as many candles as we could, since there was no point in trying to squish in ninety-two, and lit them up, filling the room with their blaze. We all gathered around the table like moths to a lamp, and slipping in beside my grandmother, I looked down at her small, tired face, illuminated by candle light.

"Mmmmmmmh . . . Happy Birthday to you!" I started, barely noticing when the others joined in, "Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday dear Edith . . . Happy Birthday to you!"

She applauded us as the song came to an end, crying out, "Brava, brava!" but as we continued to stand around her waiting, her voice extinguished and she sat blankly staring back at us.

"You got to blow them out now, Mama!" Aunt Jeannine called out, gesturing to the cake, and my grandmother followed her hand with a confused gaze until she finally noticed the candles still burning.

"Oh," she sighed, and turning to Amya and myself, she questioned, "Do you girls think you could help me?" We huffed up a gulp of air in reply, and in unison, snuffed them all out. The crowd cheered, and as I turned to my grandmother beaming, she smiled back . . . although it never quite reached her eyes. My grin began to slip down, but with strain, I clamped it back on.

"Happy Birthday, Grandma."

Tears of the Pretty Girls

My grandmother's legs were stiff logs as we trudged over the bumpy road to Mellow Mushroom, yet the journey seemed a lot smoother than the rollercoasters we had already endured. The resistant wheels on her chair jerked around and latched onto every bend in the sidewalk, fighting against our tugging and dragging. Although the deformed seat enabled my grandmother's mobility, it took away a piece of her spirit, as if it wasn't as worth it to move on,

knowing that she'd spend the rest of her life relying on the crippled stature of her wheelchair. I stared down the sidewalk to the hustling cars far ahead and the choppy pavement coming around the bend. Although I could see the cracks approaching, they seemed unavoidable, and I could do nothing but try and press her forward.

Her face was ash white and etched with worried creases that night, as if she could tell that something was out of place and she just couldn't put her finger on it. She knew it was something bad though, so for the third time that hour, she cried.

"What's wrong Edith?" my mom cooed as my dad halted the rolling chair, giving her the chance to kneel down in front of my grandmother and comfort her.

With tear-stained cheeks, my grandma lifted her head and sobbed, "I don't know." This was so aggravatingly difficult for her, to mourn over something that she couldn't even remember. And what could I do? Remind her of what had happened? Again? Watch her wail as the memory slapped her in the face? Again? No, I wouldn't be able to meet her eyes if I had to once more tell her what had come of Mutsy. Mutsy, that stupid arrogant, had gone through the slowest departure I could ever think possible of such an animal. She had cheated death so many times that it goes without saying that cat must have really had nine lives. That thing was just skin and bones by the end of her run, yet my aunt's heart was still just as shattered as it would have been if Mutsy had been as plump as a pumpkin when the phone call came from the vet.

Imagine that you were in their position, driving down one of the old streets of Raleigh, passing by a quiet white house, unfamiliar to you, with creaky rocking chairs sitting on the front porch and closed curtains. Suddenly a scrawny skeleton of a cat comes creeping out from the bushes. It shakes with every step and its tail hangs low as if it had surrendered to death long ago, yet death had not taken it in. Looking at it, your chest begins to ache, and without thinking, you stop the car, climb out into this unfamiliar yard, and reach with open arms for the frail little thing. Lifting it into the shotgun seat, you begin to stroke its ears and belly, feeling every rib and every bone as if only fur hung on them. It begins to purr and then, glancing up at you

with melancholy eyes, it lets out the most pitiful meow ever to reach your ears, and you give in. Rushing to the vet, you drop it off and hope for the best as you drive away, although you know the only thing easy for it would be a belated, gentle, and endless sleep.

Neither my aunt nor my grandmother got to say goodbye to Mutsy. They hadn't been at home when a stranger took the cat away and carried it to its final resting place, something my aunt would never have been able to do anyway. She holds onto things already broken with the determination that they lost for themselves long ago. Once we had reached Mellow Mushroom and were just about to make our orders, my dad reached across the table for my aunt's hand and whispered, "Are you alright, Jeannine?"

With that she broke down, her eyes filling with tears and her face turning crimson as she gripped my father's hand with white knuckles and blubbered about the fight Mutsy still had in her when they put her down.

"I just kept calling for her, and I just kept calling," she moaned, "but she never came. The vet's office said that they had phoned me, and maybe if I hadn't been out looking for her . . ." She trailed off, as if another way around it was just too much for her to handle at the moment. The waiter strolled up then, and my aunt tried to conceal her face as she swiped at her soaked cheeks. *Perfect timing*, I thought.

"Do you need a few more minutes?" he began to ask, pushing his brown curls back and nudging his glasses further up his nose, then puffing out an awkward sigh as he noticed my aunt's sniffles.

Balancing her chin in her hands, my aunt took one more gulp of air before replying, "No, I think we're ready. We'd like a Hawaiian pizza for the table, and I'm gonna have a glass of tea with lots of lemons; at least six or seven. My mother here will have a cup of coffee, and black will suit her just fine." She smiled up at him as if the word "fine" best suited her. I hadn't realized until then how good she was at concealing her misery, and after years of being so self-absorbed that I hadn't noticed this mask, it was like removing blurred contacts from my eyes so that suddenly, everything was clear. As the waiter took the rest of our orders she turned and smiled at me, a phony

curve in her lips that just barely wobbled, and as he walked away, it slowly wilted back down.

She forced it back on as our table slowly drifted into silence, and shakily laughed, "I'm amazed she lasted that long anyways."

"Yeah, it was her time," my mom simpered from across the table.

"Yeah," my aunt mumbled, although I almost lost her voice in the noisy bickering from the people around us who were so naïve to the gloom that hung over our family. In that moment, I hated that cat more than I had hated her any moment during the time when she was living. She was to blame for the tears shed over the pineapple and ham pizza, the warm flavor feeling hollow in my belly, and although I was starving, I couldn't seem to eat one bite. Gazing across the table, I caught sight of my grandmother leaning on my father's arm as once again a wave of anguish hit her, and the crying began.

"What's wrong?" my father asked her, and with a quivering drag on her words she answered, "My mother died." This was enough to leave everyone speechless for the rest of the meal; even my thoughts were hushed for a second, temporarily scrambled while I tried to digest what she had said. Now, it isn't like she was inaccurate; her mother is in fact dead . . . It just seemed a little off topic. She was still crying about it by the time we had reached her house. My dad had just rolled her into the back living room where a bed had been set up ever since she got home from her last trip to the hospital, as she can no longer sleep in her own bed because it is too high up for her. As the wheelchair came to a stop next to the television, my dad found the remote and began scanning through the channels, just like he always did when he was trying to avoid his mother's sorrows.

My grandma's whole body shook as she bawled, twisting her shoulders into a surrendering slouch and adding yet another frown to her state. "My mama's dead!" she continued to wail, "My whole family's dead!" I tried hugging her hands in mine, tried wrapping my arm around her shoulder to keep her comforted, but nothing could stop her river of tears. Suddenly, my aunt Jeannine had dropped to her knees and laid her hands down on my grandmother's lap.

"They're not all gone Mama," she said. "I'm still here, Buck and Jim, your sons are still here. Jim's right over sitting in that chair!" she

pointed to where my father sat silently on the yellow loveseat, listening intently to my aunt's words yet pretending to be too focused on whatever image was stuck on the screen. "We're all still here," my aunt continued, and staring deep into her mother's eyes that matched her own, a tear drop slipped down the beauty, uncovered from the mask, and fell down to the dirty carpet floor frosted with gray cat furs. "And we're not going anywhere."

For a few moments, the room seemed stuffed full of the television static buzz. The rest was just silence. Then, "Did you know how pretty you are?" my grandma said, resting a hand on top of her daughter's. At first my aunt was too stunned to speak, but then my mom's blissful giggle flew out, and a slow smile spread across her face as she joined in what was now all of our laughter, including my dad's.

"Thank you," she returned, and my grandma bobbed her head as if her work here was done.

Maybe it was just me, or maybe we all felt it, but for those few seconds that ticked by as we all absorbed her random remark, I had seen a flicker of my old grandma reemerge. The one who had helped me set up the china tea set across her flamingo pink table; the one who had introduced me to all of her large stuffed animals from, Mr. Lion to Berry the Bear; the one who had caught me digging through her old jewelry boxes and sent me home with three new necklaces; the one who made surprise visits when we danced around the kitchen together, hand in hand, and I saw the spark of mischief come back into her wild blue eyes.

family matters

ALYSSA LOCKLEAR

Grandpa

My grandpa is a God-fearing man and a man of work. You can always find him working in the yard or trying to fix something, adding oil to someone's car or going down to True Value to pick up a piece for the dryer. Working outside leaves his skin with a dark, leathery look. He has a sternness in him, but is still caring. A fierce look burning in his eyes, but you know he is good. I guess you could say all Lumbee men are like that: looking out for the tribe and especially their immediate family.

I was in the kitchen, helping my grandma with a small load of dishes. She uses an orange Halloween bowl filled with water as a sink instead of using the regular sink. I had the smell of lemon Palmolive dish soap in my nostrils as I picked up a dirty Shoney's cup. As I scrubbed the inside of the cup with a checkerboard rag, I looked out the window.

Summer filled the air with a scorching temperature of ninety-one degrees. Outside, I saw Grandpa raking up fallen pine needles and pine cones, dumping them in his handy wheelbarrow. Sweat saturated his clothes. His shirt looked as if someone had dumped a gallon of water on his head. Back and forth he went. From the enormous pile of golden needles beside the house to the even bigger one in the middle of a field behind his little red shed.

My grandma would always pick on the way his rubbery skin looked, saying he looked like a Mexican, telling him to stay in the car when we go on vacation because when the receptionist sees him they won't give us a room.

You'll always hear Grandma worrying Papa, telling him to slow down eating or he'll choke, or to come inside before he passes out. They have been together fifty-one years and nothing will ever tear them apart. My papa acts stubborn like a mule, and if someone in my family is out of line he will put you back in place. Sometimes one of my sisters or brother would be sent to their house to be straightened up, but I saw their house as a haven.

Getting to stay with my grandparents was my break from my parents. They never *made* me clean or work in the hot sweltering sun. My favorite part, as a little tart, was when we got a little pink flamingo sprinkler from the storage room under the garage. I can still see myself running around in underwear just to get hit with ice cold water, always watching my feet to make sure I didn't step in ants or on a sharp pinecone. When I would help with housework, I'd be given money. I'd usually dust entire shelves, or help my grandmother in her flower beds, spreading soil, planting new flowers. My grandma just loves plants. The usual wages, between three to five dollars, only got me a couple things at the Dollar Store. Did I mention my papa can be a cheapskate?

My grandpa worked hard for his money, and as a little girl, every time we visited their house, he would give me a dollar. I use to think that was so much money and jump up and down with glee before my mom would take it for gas.

I love the way he talks. The other night when he called he said I needed to get an "amirella," when he was trying to say umbrella. He heard me and my sisters laughing at him. Then he said over the speakerphone, "Don't make fun of my English." Since my grandpa stayed on the farm instead of going to school, he never learned how to read and write very well. But he's still proud of what he can and can't do. The only thing that matters to him is God, family, and his white bread.

Deddy

In Robeson County you can find many grammar flaws. My flaw consists of me saying "Deddy" instead of Daddy or Dad.

My deddy went to the army when he was young. Something happened, and he had to be sent back home. I can never get the full scoop of what happened, but that's what I know. I guess he's lucky. I've heard rumors that he slipped in the mud in training and messed up his back. Anyway, he developed bipolar disorder, and boy it was not fun.

He would always yell if he misplaced something, and he'd claim we (my sisters and brother) broke it or someone stole it.

We couldn't go outside unless he or my mama was home. Whenever I asked why, they would tell me something could happen to me and no one would know. So I thought if I asked my mom one day while she was at work if I could go outside, it would be okay. My deddy didn't have a job, so he would check on his chickens at his father's house, or he'd be doing something else so that he wouldn't be at home when we got back from school. I never knew what he was doing—he had a very secretive life. Lucky for me, Deddy didn't catch me that day, but one day he did.

When he pulled in the driveway that day and I was outside, he just stared at me. In his fiery gaze, I could see what was going to happen. That look could knock you down dead. I thought then it would be the end of all humanity. Like all of his anticipation was built up to let something violent out. He opened the purple truck door as he turned off the engine. He passed under the tiny acorn tree as he made his way down the hard gray pathway.

He walked up to the porch and told me to tell my friends bye—I figured that was going to be the last time I would ever see them. They looked at me like even they knew the battle of life and death was sure to come upon me. My eyes started to pour tears as if they held all the water of the world before he could go to his room and get the belt.

He always used a leather belt, the worst thing imaginable to get whipped with. It had swirls in the dark surface of the thick belt. Af-

ter he was done with you, you would see the same designs on your legs and butt. This always made it hard to sit down but for only just a couple of minutes. I always received more beatings than the few of us that were living at home. I would always be mad, asking myself, *Why me?* I say this because when he would whip us, I was the one to get more licks from my leathery enemy. Looking back now, I guess I was rebellious. But sometimes it would be over little stuff, like the time I was simply cleaning my room.

I was picking up clothes off the floor. Not only was this my room, but it had been my older sister's previously. My mama was on the bed, and I was a little mad. She said, "Fold this shirt." I took it and said in a snappy tone, "Whose is it?" My deddy overhead and before I knew it I was being whipped. He told me that it didn't matter, just do what Mama tells me. The innocent thing about it was I was putting clothes in piles by the owner, and I actually just needed to know who the medium-sized red shirt belonged to.

Always after, he would call me in his room tell me how much he loved me. I do love my deddy. And I would tell him. I would say, "I love you, Deddy." Then he would say back, "I love you first." Of course I would tell him he is wrong and that I loved him before I even had the chance to be born.

My favorite part of the day was when my sister and I would ride in the back of his truck to go to the chicken coop. Wind blew through our deep brown hair as we talked about "what ifs?" and funny things that happened at school. The coop used to be just chickens in tall wiry cages, and we'd let them out to stretch and be fed and watered out of mason jars and reused bleach bottles. That used to be at my cousin's house in the woods.

We put them there so they would be harder for people to find. You don't want your chickens to be stolen. A few times chickens would go missing, either from being stolen or being devoured by chicken hawks or dogs.

When the woods were lush and green, the chickens would run back there and were very hard to catch. We always had to come up with strategies to catch the diabolical chickens, taking up to thirty minutes to catch just one. Then we picked it up and moved it to the

back of my grandpa's tin barn, which finally looked like an actual coop, though it was hard to make.

One summer morning, I found a huge mound of orange dirt beside of what would become my Deddy's dream. Back and forth I went, shoveling dirt into a wheelbarrow. This would be used to make the floor of the coop, making it easier to see the poop so you won't step in every little pile of chicken droplets.

The compacted dirt mound was so large, I didn't know if I would make it to the end of the day. Those were the times I wished my mom would save me from the heat of the morning. My back ached from having to lift shovels full of dirt. Back and forth, and then add yelling to the list. Not fun at all.

But my grandma did save me when she offered us breakfast. We came in to eat plates full of our fresh eggs, bacon, and sausage, and a Native American treat called flour bread.

Flour bread is like corn bread put just one big pancake. Its consistency is thick, and its cut up like a pizza. No flavor, bland and dull. It's best to eat with molasses or even make a sandwich. I took one of the thick slices and piled sausage on top to fill the dark void taking over my stomach.

Soon, we went back shoveling, pulling chicken wire straight for a fence, and building a chicken coop made for fifty-plus. We took extra tin from the barn to use for a roof.

I loved going there but hated going down a long field with two five gallon buckets to feed and water the four bronze turkeys and one dominant rooster. The turkeys and rooster were at the end of the field near some woods in what used to be the pen that housed my grandpa's hogs. But it was shaped weird, kinda like a little shed. I would have to climb in to give them their food, and make sure they always had a clean source of water. It was even worse after grandpa planted corn.

You wouldn't believe it, but though the deep green leaves may look silky and soft, they can be very itchy with a short-sleeved shirt on. As I went down the rows, the leaves would slap against my tanned skin, leaving it itchy and irritated. It was especially bad if we were chasing chickens, or if I was running after my little sister.

Sometimes when I think about it, I know that some people up here in the city will never know what hard work really means.

My Sisters

I have five sisters. Each of them I love on different levels. Some of them have changed over the years, making them kind, and therefore making me love them a lot more than I used to. Their names in order by age are, Shalasha, Megan, Eliza, Elena, me, and my little sister Aliyah. My grandma asks my mamma what in the world she was thinking when she gave us E or A names when she gets mixed up with them. She sometimes calls me by all of their names before she even gets my name right.

Shalasha is twenty-nine, living in Illinois with a son and a doctor for a husband. She is my favorite sister. Before she moved to Illinois, she lived in Lumberton. One more addition was her husband Shaun's granddad lived with them. When we went to visit the two bedroom apartment, we would play Mario Kart or other D.S. games. It was so fun visiting there for a night with them laughing and playing and baking cookies together, fun things like that. But then she moved to Greenville, where Shaun went to medical school and the granddad died.

Megan is about to turn twenty-seven in December. When she stayed at home, she would be mean as the devil, always yelling at us to clean up. We would try to avoid her, but now that she lives with her boyfriend in Prospect, she has become my next favorite. It's so fun living with her. We have the same interest in cooking, and she thinks I'm the funniest person she knows. Her boyfriend always makes up funny songs when we are sleeping and sings them in the morning to wake us up. More on that later.

Eliza is the evil one. She is twenty-two and is the devil's spawn for sure. She has always been that way with her father's temper. I think she is dumb as a box of bricks. I always try to tell her the right things to do, but does she listen to me? No. One time while I was staying with Megan, a kitten was stuck under the truck.

She lived just off the road and we went to stay with her over the summer. We were about to get in the truck when we heard a faint meow, and realized a kitten was under the truck sitting near the bottom of the truck bed. We made it all the way to Eliza's house thinking that the cat was gone. It was still under its death trap.

After a long hour and no help from the local police, the kitten was safe and sound. Eliza didn't want the rag thing in her house so we put it in a white trash can. I told her not to put it outside or it will get out and run. But she hears the opposite of what you say. So it was time to go and the kitten wasn't there. The gray fur ball was crouching in the corner behind her stepson's basketball goal. It hissed at me, and after watching *Monsters Inside Me*, I didn't wanna get scratched. I also feel sorry for her because she has married a looney bin.

He talks in slurs and is a cleaning fanatic, always wearing silky white basketball shorts that slide down showing a part in the back I don't wanna see. When we go over you can always find him scrubbing the floor or the scent of Febreeze choking the oxygen molecules.

Elena is sixteen years old. I am always picking on her and making fun, but she says I'm her favorite. Without me she would die of boredom. He's always asking me to come to her room and keep the jokes rolling, which are either about Jerry Springer or what has happened in the day. The same goes for my little sister.

She's eleven and with age has turned to a mass of destruction. I used to hit her and torture her as any other big sister would do, but now the tables have turned. She yells, scratches, and spits, always threatening to scratch my eyeballs out.

Although my sisters can be a pain, I love them and they love me. We will always pick on each other but with a weird love only we can have. They would kill another person if they dared to even look at us the wrong way, and that's what makes us strong as a whole.

The Evil Brother

My brother is eighteen years old. His name is Alexis but we call him ThunderEagle, his Indian name. He lives with our grandparents

in Lumberton and often finds himself in trouble. When we lived in Locklear's Court, he would always, always bully the three youngest girls. Oh, Locklear's Court. This is what was supposed to be "the projects" but was just brick houses with a lot of old people living next door. It had a little brick podium that explained how it got its name, but I never read it because it was at the very end of the street, and if I were ever caught down there I would surely get in trouble.

If you want to see the real projects just go to Strickland Heights. Twice the size of Locklear's Court with the meanest people. They always have something mean to say about you. Like if you have a stray piece of hair they'd say you didn't brush it.

He would always be pounding on us either with his fist or whatever he could find that would bring ultimate pain. I remember one time minding my own business in Elena's room when he busts through the door with a fishing pole. A fishing pole! Do you know what that feels like? Well, I can tell you. The long, thin bamboo pole made me feel like I was being held captive at the enemy fort, and hey were torturing me until I reached the brink of consciousness. I may be exaggerating, but hey, that thing hurt. I think I got it the worse, though. People just don't like me for some reason.

He would always sit on my head or try to poot in my face, but when he wasn't "bringing the wrath" he could be pretty . . . decent. Sometimes we would play video games, or when my parents weren't home and it was dark outside we would play hide and go seek in the dark, a fun game where you cut off all the lights in your house and try to find the people hiding. We even did prank wars and if I wasn't on his team, I would fear for my life.

He is nicer now, but I barely get to talk to him. I guess people can have a change of heart and if you knew my brother you would know that was a big one. The one thing I can remember my brother getting for me was a melon Brisk from Graceland, down the road from my grandma's house. My old brother would never do such a thing; instead, he'd just jump back into his girlfriend's car.

I can't help but find myself thinking of the old days, though. Like the one time he threw a raw potato at me and I threw it back. We went back and forth and I threw it so hard it exploded against the

wall inches from his head. I was mad at him, and tired of being bullied just because I was what he calls his big little sister. Another time, a wasp nest was created inside of the clothes line. He took a lighter and some Axe cologne and it went out in a blaze.

I don't know what he did with my old brother, but good riddance!

The Extra Piece

Dan is Megan's boyfriend. He is a good man but probably the taboo of the family. He is a white man with hair so light brown it looks red. It's long and thin. When he washes it, all he has to do is let it go and it will dry straight and silky smooth. He is my favorite of any of my sisters' husbands or past boyfriends. He's always making jokes and playing along with me and Aliyah. He's the one who let Megan have the cat we found.

I remember lying on their floor on a pallet. I was pretending to be asleep so I could hear what he was going to say on that summer morning. He was singing a song that was so funny I thought I would lose my cover. It went like this: "Your mamma is ugly and your daddy is uglierrrrr, if you don't clean out that litter box, your gonna find something in your cereal bowl. You're gonna think it's chocolate milk, but it's actually something that starts with s."

Another time it was night. I was rubbing my sisters' feet and giving them pedicures. When I asked Dan if he wanted his toes painted, he said, "Yeah." So his little piggies became cotton candy swirls.

On a serious note, he's always telling us that he loves us and that without us he wouldn't know what to do. A great example would be on his birthday back in April. He was on tour with an icon named Big Boi. Most people know of him as a musician or an artist as most singers say. He didn't get to celebrate with us so we were going to surprise him. I made a chocolate cake but was actually a loaf. I had to cut it at a slope because when it was baking one side bubbled over causing an avalanche of chocolatey goodness. I also made cupcakes, but the urge of my sisters wanting the chocolate domes was too strong. Luckily they left three.

After I spread a glob of chocolate icing on the cake, I made my decorations. I put Happy Birthday on the cake and put individual letters on the cupcakes to spell out Dan. After that we made a poster using yellow cardstock. I drew it of course and made individual portraits of each of us on there. We also made birthday cards.

When he got home from the tour and saw what we did he almost cried. He loved it so much that he didn't even want to eat his cake, and he loves sweets. Even Dan knows how much our family means and he is loved by everyone in my family. My grandpa, as stern as he is, wants Dan to marry Megan, so that's got to be sending some message!

He means so much to my family, and to me. He's like a father to me. A more sensible, kindhearted father that I wish I had.

Finally, Mama

When I was little my mother would try to save me from some of my daddy's beatings, knowing that his swings were a little strong for a child. She'd tell him that I didn't mean what I did, and that it wouldn't happen again. Other times she could be . . . well, annoying. Every single night she called me wanting me to rub her thick back. On some nights I wouldn't get called down, and I would thank God for it. She can be funny, embarrassing—you know, the regular mom thing.

When we'd be out for a drive in the summer she would roll down her windows and blast old R&B—Prince, Michael Jackson, and Marvin Gaye. We would plead to her to turn it down and then she'd turn it up even louder. I remember the time she did that when she was dropping me off to school.

I was in the seventh grade and of course image was everything. We rolled up to the curb at the front of the school, and when I opened the door, soft seventies rock blasted out of it. Boy, was my face red! She would often make me and my little sister dance in the kitchen to Michael Jackson, threatening us with a wooden spoon. She said that we were going to be famous, or that one day at school we'd have to

get up and do it. Well come one May day after he died, we had a Michael Jackson-themed May Day, and the whole school had to do the dances. Was my mother gloating for being right? Yes, she was.

Often when she's right about the future, she claims she has E.S.P. She had brainwashed me so bad that one time I thought I was going to cry because they were teaching the wrong move to "Beat It." Even to this day we will listen to Marvin Gaye or Teddy Pendergrass.

I will cook dinner or breakfast for her on Mother's Day and now she has taken advantage of my wonderful skill, forcing me to cook her favorite soup which is Campbell's Homestyle Chicken Noodle. What's the fun in that?

I love my mother, and if it weren't for her, we would still be staying with my deddy. She put him out because we were tired of his mood swings. My deddy used to be a drug addict and a drunk. My mom just couldn't take it. Even after he was sober and clean, he still showed his abusive nature. So then we moved to Durham just last year, to get away from him. Yeah, I love him but he was scary, and maybe even life threatening.

But nothing we do will be perfect. It's human nature and I think that's what makes me love my family the most. To be strong like my grandpa, mean like Deddy, changing like my sisters, and brother, and life-saving like my mom. And that, my friends, is why family matters.

dad

HANNAH KAUWE

The Fishing Trip

When I was little my Dad and I would go down to a river and go fishing. Just me and him was the way I liked it, but occasionally my sister would join us. I think she just loved to complain just to ruin our day and for her to get a laugh out of it. Everybody has someone like that in their life I guess. On the ride there we stopped at the store to pick up some bread and worms. It was gross and sad that we were about to plunge them into water with hooks in their bodies for them to get stabbed at with the teeth of fish. Then again, humanity never thinks about how they feel—we do what is good for us.

When we arrived on the scene, everything surrounding us was just land and water. Finally for a change there were no school buildings or blasting rap music from the car next to us. It felt peaceful and serene, kind of like a “take a rest and breathe” kind of atmosphere. I felt so captivated by the lake’s beauty that when my sister Rachel started to speak, I was certain that I had been tuning her out. “Did you hear me?” she asked with force. Although I heard her, I had decided not to let her ruin my day, therefore I didn’t answer.

As we started to bait our hooks, the sun had just begun to rise. You see, the morning was always the best time to go fishing, but the only downfall of this was waking up at the butt crack of dawn. After taking five minutes to stab the worm on the hook, I realized something very important if you want to fish, which was casting the rod.

At first I observed my dad and sister, and then I felt pretty confident in myself.

“I got this yall, check it,” I said boldly. As I cast my rod, my hand suddenly got a lot less heavy. As I looked down I noticed that instead of just the hook submerging in the water, my whole rod decided to follow it, too.

“What the heck?” my father yelled.

“It slipped, I’m sorry,” I said sincerely. It wasn’t my fault that I was an expert fisherman and the rod felt too unworthy for me to hold it.

“. . . Stuff happens. It’s just how we deal with the problem that’s the real struggle.”

This was probably one of my favorite things that he had ever said before, and it really got me thinking. Things happen to all people, it’s just how we react to the situation is what makes all of the difference. So, after pondering on what we would do, the rod started to drift away from us. My dad then decided the only way to get it back was to physically go into the pond and retrieve the rod. He then tucked up his fisherman shorts and entered the dark green pit of algae. When he came back he dripped water from waist down. It took all of my might not to laugh at his “stink face” towards me.

So, that was obviously a major setback, but besides this incident, I had fun the rest of the day. We all caught numerous fish and took them home to eat. When we landed at our house we began to hit the fishes heads with hammers. It’s kind of our thing, but then again we are a weird family, so it fits in with us. That night, we all ate like kings.

The Southern Women’s Show

“Please!” I begged my parents.

“Okay, fine, but only for thirty minutes. I want you right back,” he said, coughing up twenty bucks. “Do you have your phone?”

“Yes, Dad. Can I go now?” I asked anxiously.

“Alright. Remember, thirty minutes!” he called loudly from behind me.

I already had my eyes set on the rest of the exhibits. I had been working all day at my dad's booth. Back in the day he had a beef jerky business and he forced my sister and me to help him with it. In the summer we would go down to his "headquarters" (which was actually a trailer) and help him marinate the meat. The worst part was that we didn't get paid because I am quote unquote "family" and "supposed to support the family and his job." Now that I'm older, I am okay that I did not get paid. I would have just blown the money on stupid things like candy or toys.

As I walked down the aisles, I felt like I was in a TV commercials studio. Every place advertised their products so professionally. I won't lie, I felt impressed. I passed by all of them, knowing that I could barely afford some food, little alone a couch or gutter system. Then that moment where everything went into slow motion happened, and I couldn't take my eye off of a certain booth.

"Ma'am how much is this?"

"That is \$18.99 plus tax," the woman behind the counter said.

"Great! I will take it"

After about an hour, I came back to my dad's booth. When I saw the crease in his forehead and the distinct frown that he always made when he's disappointed, I knew his emotions were towards me and my lateness.

"Where have you been, young lady?" he asked forcefully.

"I totally lost track of time, and I - uh - got you - uh . . . Well, just look in the bag!"

He looked into the newly sealed bag to discover one of his favorite albums that he could never find back in the 1970s. After fangirling, he thanked me and told me that I still wasn't "off the hook," but secretly we both knew I was. The best part was that it actually was buy one, get one for free. This method is basically how I made it in life, and it still is, but who says anyone has to know. This way, I got off the hook for being late to get a CD that I really wanted and a free CD for my dad. Let's just say that I know how to get away with things. It took me my whole life to master this skill, but bribery is my best flaw.

A Game to Remember

At the age of four, I played on my first tee-ball team. At first, ball was definitely not life for me. For the first half of the season playing, I could not even get contact with the ball. I remember being the worst kid on our team. I was so used to striking out that it became a normal routine. Until one game, when I went up to the batter's box and really focused my eyes on the ball. I mentally slowed it down in my head and swung the bat. "Crack," the bat yelled. *Oh my gosh, what did I do wrong? Did I break the bat from just swinging the air?*

Little did I know, I actually hit the ball. In fact, I hit it so hard it went into the outfield where the kid picking daisies was. Since this was the first time ever I actually hit something, I started running towards first with the bat still in my hand. I am surprised the umpire didn't say anything. I guess they didn't penalize me because from seeing our past games, they felt pity for me. Oh well, I was happy no one called me out because this was a historical moment.

Every single game after that, I got the hang of hitting the ball and reversed my last place position with one of the best players on the team. Round and round the bases I circled. Years later, my dad was so into the game that he wanted to coach softball. My sister and I both played on the team he coached. Of course Rachel and I were competing to be the best (it would look bad if you weren't the best when your dad's the coach). We always got harsher criticism, though. Every single mistake we made, he decided to nag about the whole car ride home, and at dinner time, and pretty much twenty-four-seven.

At one point in time I was just ready to throw in the towel and quit. Softball was all he talked about, and I felt like we didn't even have a father-daughter relationship anymore. One practice I just broke down and went to the car for the rest of the session. I just felt he put so much pressure on me. Afterwards, we had a conversation on the way home.

"What happened out there? I just tell you a little criticism and you're going to come to the car and cry like a little girl? I didn't raise no little girls, I raised you to be strong. There's no crying in softball," he said.

“Dad! If you haven’t noticed, I *am* a little girl, and I have feelings, too. You haven’t just given me a little criticism, you have put so much on my shoulders that I don’t even want to play anymore if all that I’m doing is supposedly wrong. If I’m that bad at softball, then I will just quit now and get it over with,” I told him.

So, that was that. We didn’t speak the whole ride home that night. I felt ambivalent about what I had said to him. On the one hand, I felt right: he had overdone it and I wanted to let him know that. On the other, I know he just wanted me to be a better player and to improve. I actually have a passion for softball, I just didn’t want to have him as only a coach. I wanted my dad back.

The practices after this happened were a lot easier though. I didn’t get yelled at or anything like that. Near the end of our season, we had made it to the championship and everything was on the line. By this point, my dad still used criticism for me but not nearly as bad. I actually think this helped me a lot because there wasn’t as much pressure, but enough to make me focus and push myself. I was currently on first base and there were two outs. The score was tied and it came to the last inning of the tournament. Pressure was rising. Our adrenaline was pumping like crazy. We had trained for this moment and I wasn’t about to let all of it go.

This is it. The batter then hits the ball down the line to short-stop while I go and run down to touch first base. She looks up and me and chucks the ball over to me and a perfect angle. *Okay I can do this, just another catch in practice, just another catch in practice.* I keep repeating this in my head, but another thought is racing through attacking the first: *What if I drop it? What if the whole team blames me and will hate me?* The thought of this makes my stomach churn. There is no time for sickness though, so I shove my emotions out of the way and stretch my glove towards the ball.

The rest was a loud blur. The whole team piled on top of me and chanted me and the short-stop’s name. Then, I saw my dad running towards me. All of the sudden, I defied gravity as he picked me up and swirled me in the air. Looking back on that day, it is probably one of my most memorable moments in softball. I play to have the warmth in my heart every time we win, and to see his bright face

to come hug me. This is my motivation: to please him and myself. It makes me feel better knowing that I did a great job and he is actually proud of me. This is probably why I am so competitive and want to win. But hey, everyone has to have some kind of inspiration.

Disagreements

It all started when my parents met. They knew that their differences would come between them, but still chose love over all of the conflict. Even my grandparents knew that all they were heading for was disaster. They disapproved of my mom marrying my dad, so she eloped with him without them knowing. Within the next few days, she went to my grandma's house and told her. They did not speak to each other for about a week. When grandma finally realized that she couldn't change what happened, she finally accepted them and moved on.

The main reason that she had such a big problem with them being together is because of religion. My mom, her parents, and basically my whole family is Pentecostal/Baptist. My dad's religion is Mormon. My mom had grown up in a Pentecostal church her whole life and her mother was the Sunday School teacher. My grandmother didn't want them together because she wanted my mom to "stay on the right path with God" and "not to go to hell with him."

So growing up in my family was pretty hard. Every Sunday we had to choose if we wanted to go to church with my mom or my dad. The decision for us felt really difficult because we always felt like we hurt the other parent if we didn't go with them. Then as we got older, we actually started to understand the different religions and could actually decide our own faith. I chose Pentecostal, and Rachel chose the Mormon faith. It's hard for all of our family to be separated on God's day, when we are supposed to together, but it works.

Then, I actually decided to go to my own church after being at my mom's for twelve years. I just felt like it wasn't benefitting me at all, and I had heard about this awesome church that my uncle and friend went to, so I decided to check it out. On my first visit, I felt home, so I began to attend regularly. My mom felt hurt, but in the

end it's my faith. So now, I go to my church, my mom goes to hers, and my dad and sister go to theirs.

And yet, all of the time my dad tries to pressure me into coming to his church. "Why won't you go to church with me? Rachel made the right choice, why can't you?" he told me one day.

"Our decisions on right and wrong are clearly different. I did make the right choice. Rachel is her own person, so don't compare me to her."

"Don't talk back to me young lady!" he said, raising his voice. He does this to me all of the time. He always tries to change me and make me be something that I'm not. How could I tell him my opinion if he always accused me of "talking back"?

"I wasn't talking back, I told you my opinion!" I raised my voice at him. Okay, maybe I did talk back a little bit, but he always yelled at me and I never said anything, and I was tired of it.

"Don't talk back!" he yells as his hand makes contact with my face. A burning sensation covered half of my cheek, and that's when everything came flooding in. Emotions in my heart were stirring around, pounding into my chest. Hurt, anger, bitterness, hatred, and depression raced through my jumbled-up mind. A hot tear began to form in the crease of my eye, and for once I let it fall. I normally am strong, but when my own father slaps me, no. I'm gonna let them fall, and release them to gravity's force.

I could tell it hurt my father also when he did this to me. He eventually apologized, but how am I supposed to forgive him for something like that? I guess you can say that I still hold a grudge against him for this. It actually wasn't the first time this happened, but this one left the most pain. Most of the it was internal suffering. I hate how he thinks that just because I'm a kid that I don't know what's right for me. I understand. I am fully capable of comprehension. In fact, my grades are better than his were ever.

I want to forget about moments like this when we fight over stupid things. I try to bury them deep in the pit of sorrow that lies in the abyss of my heart. Sometimes I can fake a smile and laugh at his puns, but other times I can't hide the emotion inside. He asks me what wrong, and the only response I can think of is "My past." At one point we all move on, but I'm still waiting for that day.

Present Day

Scrapbooking and blogging is how I keep my life organized. It takes away the stress that I have on my shoulders. I love decorating and telling big events in my life so I can look back on the memories that I have made. When blogging you can honestly tell how you feel about something and not be judged or mistreated. For me, when an accomplishment or tragedy occurs, I go straight home and either blog about it or make a new scrapbook page. Blogging and scrapbooking about depressing things allows you to loosen the grip on your feelings and relinquish them into the hands of another. They also allow you to store accomplishments so you can always remember those moments, and how you were feeling.

Most of my blogs are about my family and our memories. We have so many that I swear my scrapbook is an inch in length! Some people ask me "Why haven't you written a novel, geez?" All I can say is that you can't put a price on life. My stories are pretty much the only thing that I have. When you read a novel, you make your own little judgments about characters and your own decisions about how the book is in general. This is just human nature. I mean, what's the point of reading a novel if you don't feel like you are captured and taken into the book? But I don't want society judging my memories as if they were a court case and deciding if they like them or not. These moments are for me to decide if I like or not and how they impact my life, not theirs.

I love my dad. We get into fights and argue all of the time, but who doesn't? One quote that I especially love is, "We live in a world that is built on promises that are constructed by liars." I have had many promises my dad made that were never kept. I remember every single one of them, and I can't let myself forget them. And yet, forgetting these promises is my hope for a bright new future with him. So I press on, and look forward to those days filled with laughter and enjoyment. My soul longs for a reuniting of our hearts, where one day they will live together as one.

mom, again?

SALLY

Really? Toothpaste, Again?

One morning I was brushing my teeth and my sister had left toothpaste in the sink from the day before. "Alysse," I yelled. "Come and get your toothpaste out of the sink!"

She replied to me in a two-year-old voice, "That's not mine, it's yours."

"No, no, no. You were the last person to brush your teeth yesterday," I assured her. "You have to start taking responsibility for yourself."

"Well, why can't you get it out?" she said. All of the sudden I could hear my mom's footsteps loudly, coming at a fast pace.

She screamed, "What in the world is going on? It is too early in the morning for this arguing!"

"She left her toothpaste from yesterday in the sink again," I explained.

"And I just asked her to get it out," my sister said.

"Because it is not my toothpaste, that's why I am not getting it out myself," I said. "Plus I always get it out when you leave this mess in the sink."

"Well you can get it this time, too, then," my mom said.

I replied, "But, why? She never cleans up after herself. You're always yelling at me, telling me to clean up, but yet she never has to. And that is not fair to me."

“And I don’t care. Clean it up.” She walked away. As I started to clean up the toothpaste, my sister chuckled. I just wanted to hit her.

Will Mom Tell Everyone, Again?

I wasn’t sure if I could take being embarrassed anymore. If I even opened my mouth about it, I would regret it. She would tell all of her friends about it, and then they—all of them—would end up coming back to me.

It was five-thirty in the afternoon and I was in the midst of doing my homework on the couch. I just couldn’t get this thought off of my mind. I had to tell somebody or I would just end up boiling over. After thinking it over for a while, I decided that it would be a good idea to tell my mom what happened. So I stopped my homework and knocked softly on her bedroom door.

“Come in,” she said with an even tone.

I took a deep breath and walked through the door. “Mom, can we talk?” I said shyly.

We sat on the bed while I tried to figure out the words to say. I told her that there was this boy in one of my classes who thought that I liked him but I could really care less about him. I asked her how I should handle the situation. She told me that I should just tell the guy the next time that I see him that I don’t like him and that my academics are more important than boys right now. I took what she said into consideration and left the room. As soon as I walked through the door, I heard her phone ring.

After that, mumbling is all I heard, so I listened at the door. “Sally just told me that a boy at her school told her that she liked him. What do you think I should do, Jan?” my mom asked.

“I don’t know Pam, you could tell her to just try to ignore him,” my aunt must have said. Then I heard my mom get up out of the rocking chair so I tiptoed back to the couch and acted like I was doing my work and not eavesdropping.

And then I remembered the first time I told my mom something private. It was about five years ago when I was in the fifth grade

SALLY

and I told her that I was having trouble with my grades in Social Studies and English. As soon as I walked out of her bedroom that time, the phone rang too. It seems that every time I tell my mom something private, the phone rings and she tells her friends what I just told her.

Two years later I was in the seventh grade, and we had just taken a science test about two days before and now the teacher Mrs. Clark was passing them back out to us. *Shoot! Shoot! Shoot! I should have taken more time to study this week. I already have a C in this class how much worse could this get.* “I really hope I get a passing grade on this test because all of my other tests have been mostly D’s or F’s and I can’t bear to see another,” I told my friend John, who sat next to me.

“John,” Mrs. Clark said, “great job. I can really tell that you studied hard. Sally,” she said, “on the other hand you might want to study a little harder next time and see me after class so we can see if I help you with anything.”

Gosh, again. I hate it when I get a bad grade and I have to talk to the teacher about it. Ugh!

“Hey Sal, what did you get on the test?” John asked quietly so that no one else would know.

“I got a 59 on this terrible test,” I answered.

“Dang!” he exclaimed. So after class I went up to the teacher and she asked me what I could do to help me get my test grades up and end result grades up. I told her that I didn’t know what she could do and that I just thought that I needed to study more than just the day of the test—I needed to study every day.

I left class angry. I was angry that I got another failing grade, angry because I knew that I would have to ask my mom to help me study. When I got home I explained to my mom that I wasn’t doing so hot in science and that I needed some help with the studying part.

The next day my mom’s mentor came to me and asked me how my grades were going, and I told her that they were okay. “Are you sure because your mom told me that you were not doing so well in one of your classes,” she said.

“Yeah, that’s true, but I’m working on it,” I replied. The week after this her mentor came to me and offered to help me study for science.

Again I realized that she tells everything that she is told even when she is asked not to. And it is very embarrassing, especially when I see her friends the next day and they confront me about it. That's when I realized that it was time to ask my mom to keep the things that I tell her confidential unless she asks me permission to tell someone.

A couple days after the boy incident, I built up the confidence to ask her to stop telling her friends about our conversations because they always come back to me. I tried to explain to her that some things are kind of uncomfortable for me to talk about with them—that is why I chose to talk to *her* in the first place.

Even though my mom told everybody my business, I still love her. I just can't get past that smooth brown skin and those round cheeks. Those eyebrows on her face curved with a pointed end. Her eyes, bold and sharp. Sometimes they can be soft, but always watchful. She has high standards but she can bend them every once in a while. She carries herself like a queen and sets a true example for me and my little sister.

breaking) the chain

TYREIK TOWNES

The Reality of It

Looking into his eyes, I become hypnotized by the blood-shot red surrounding his dark brown iris and his shrinking pupil so that I barely even notice the look of sorrow and his longing for forgiveness—he doesn't even know that I have already forgiven him. *You cannot change your past, but it's up to you to change your future. The window's closing, why won't you express your love to me?*

The abandonment created an internal scar, left a void of despair and pain. *But I'm 14 now. I no longer need your guidance.* The scars on his face and a few strands of grey hair hint at his wisdom. Those scars reveal more than just a couple of fights. His lips, without opening, clearly speak to me, saying, "Son, I am sorry, please forgive."

I wish that I could revisit the past, but not as myself—more like the Ghost of Christmas Past. I want to see what it looked like instead of how it felt. His eyes were like a crystal ball of what not to become, and what your future will hold if you do. My childhood went the way it did to help me better myself as a person. The absence of my father was merely a bump in the road, as some may say. His absence left me with the responsibilities of a man in a child's body. My mother always tells me that because of this I will be an even better man than the rest. I live my life by those words.

My Dream

I search his face for a reason to forgive him. Finding nothing, I search where no one else could: inside myself. There, I find heartbreak, rage, hurt, and unanswered questions—questions my mother couldn't even fathom.

“But why, Dad, why would you leave me and Mommy like this? Why would you tell me . . . all of those lies?! Why were you such a hypocrite?!” I say, slowly tearing up, trying to seem angry when really I was just hurt.

“Son, I was young and foolish. I didn’t know what I wanted.” He says this as his blood-shot eyes clear; the water in his eyes is triggered by tears of my own.

“And the lies!” I say with my eyes about to burst. Feeling the urge to cry I become even more enraged and realized that I had never truly forgiven him.

Before he even has a chance to answer my previous question, I lash out with words I never knew were inside of me. He yells at me in an attempt to calm me down, causing an even crazier outburst. I roar, “You are not the boss of me. If you weren’t there for me when I needed you, then why would you come now? I don’t need you! You know what? You may be my father, but you’ll never be *my father!*”

All in a Day’s Work

One day, I sat in the living room playing with my Hot Wheels while simultaneously watching the TMNT. Then suddenly a clash of voices filled the house. Unknowingly, I dashed through the hallway eager to find out what was going on. I casually tiptoed toward my mom’s door. As quietly as I could, I peeked over the threshold of my parents’ bedroom and saw the unspeakable: they were hugging! But how could they be hugging if they were just arguing? Maybe they were just watching a movie? Or maybe they knew that I was coming so they played it off? Oh well, back to the toys it was.

As I rushed back down the hallway, I tripped over the creatively assembled line of tanks, soldiers, Hot Wheels, and airplanes left to defend my house from those evil zombie pirates. I fell in a way that most people will probably never experience in their lives. As I miraculously spun 720 degrees in five seconds, I landed on a stubborn old 1960 convertible, which ended up with its left side mirror lodged in my back pocket, leaving a hole the size of a dime. I wondered if they tried to set me up for leaving them on the floor and playing with other toys. *Jealous toys!* After that big catastrophic tumble, I sprinted past the kitchen and dining room area right back to where I belonged: the living room.

My Hot Wheels were still sitting there, waiting for me to return to our session. I rolled my favorite car up the ramp (couch) and made the car do a flip. I then started to think about the first time I rode a rollercoaster.

I trembled in fear at the mere sight of it, but I was too young to follow my gut, so I dragged my parents along with me. I was so scared when I saw the loopty-loop coming up. In a desperate attempt to save myself, I grabbed on to both of my parents. I grabbed them with such force that I think I nearly broke my mom's hand. Nevertheless, my parents held me and never let me go. They made me feel like they would never leave me.

At least that's what I thought.

His Last Visit Ever

“Terrence, get out I’m done with this shit! I can’t do it anymore! Get out!”

“Babe, come on, I’m sorry. I’ll change, I’ll change!”

Before I could even ask the first question, I was met with another yell and a slammed door. My mom had just kicked him out for good. She was done. I think? What had this family come to?

My mother, pregnant with my younger brother at the time, could not handle this stress. So in an attempt to help her, I went as bravely as possible to her room to comfort her. I suddenly got the feeling that

Daddy wasn't coming back. And honestly, even though it would be a little different, I knew we would be just fine without him.

A couple of months later, my baby brother was born and my dad was there to see him. That was a good sign. *Maybe mommy and daddy are getting back together? I mean, they were both smiling and holding him, and they couldn't stop crying. They were hugging each other with so much excitement and love in their eyes—they had to be getting back together. Right?*

That's when everything went back to how it was. It was back to my mother and me—and now my little brother, as well.

But still no Daddy to be found.

The last time I actually saw him was when my little brother was one year old, and he made a surprise visit. It was only brief—about three to four hours—and I've only heard from him four times since then. When all of this happened, I was disappointed and sad, and even a little scared. I mean, my dad was gone. How was I supposed to feel? The question was, did he really get kicked out, or did he *walk* out? But to this day, I feel like my life has been better without him, even though it doesn't seem like it at times.

The Recovery Process

During these troubling times, I found it best to not talk to anyone about my situation. For years and years to come, that's what I originally had planned to do. It was only to be discussed with me, myself, and I. As a younger kid, I loved to write, draw, and make things. So I looked toward doing those things as a means of therapy, as I do this memoir. I really don't see it as a project, but more as the final steps to my recovery.

In these times, a lot of thoughts and feelings came to mind and I didn't know how else to express them except but to write. So I wrote poems, stories, and any questions I had down whenever I had the chance. Even to this day I do that sometimes, and over the years I look at some of the poems, and find I no longer find pain, rage and heartbreak; I find lines of inspiration, and a drive to do better than

TYREIK TOWNES

him, to be a better man than he is so that my kids won't even think of these types of questions, to beat the stereotypes, and show that black men, when taught correctly, can be anything they aspire.

As I sit here typing these last few words, I shed one tear in remembrance of the old feelings and past aggressions. I simultaneously say goodbye to those days; the shed tear is merely the final step to my recovery. No more pain, no more hurt, no more rage. I let the last ounce of it fall from my eyelid; it has taken eight years to form, yet it is only the size of a mustard seed.

This was my entire recovery process. It took some time, but I'm finally done. Just like a stone under pressure, a diamond was created. And I am that diamond. I have been under the pressure to always do the right thing, to make good choices. This pressure has taken me down a path that I do not want to turn back from. Instead, I choose to embrace it and live it out to the fullest. For my circumstance was nothing more than a setback for my comeback.

tales of the gangsta mom

ADAM ABRAM

The Dream

I woke up and felt a sinking feeling in my stomach. I didn't know how, but I knew my mother was dead.

I sat in my dad's bed, sick and crying.

Then I woke up. This time, a wave of relief washed over me as I inexplicably knew my mother still lived. Then I woke up. This cycle of dreams continued until I didn't know if I was awake or if my mother lived.

I was in my parents' bed, home sick with a migraine. I looked around. It was about ten. My dad's mother and siblings had traveled down from Ohio to stay with us and visit my mother. My grandmother, who I called Grandlady, came into the room.

"Am I awake?" I asked. I felt stupid asking, but I needed to know I wasn't still in my own version of *Inception*.

"Yes, you're awake sweetie," she replied, as if that were a perfectly normal question.

I paused, then tentatively asked, "Is she alive?"

"Yes, your mother is alive," Grandlady told me.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, and turned to a more comfortable position. "Okay," I said, yawning. "Thanks."

She smiled and walked out of the room.

Everything had a dreamlike quality. The bed I lay on was soft, and light filtered through the blinds. Although three others were in

the house, the room was completely silent. I was still groggy from just waking up, and the calm whites of the room lulled me back to sleep. Around twenty minutes later, Grandlady along with my aunt Jewel and uncle Raymond came in with a phone and a solemn expression. I knew what happened before I took the phone.

My dad's voice was on the other side. "Hey, Adam."

"Hey."

"Late last night, your mom passed away . . ."

I zoned out, not hearing what my dad was saying. I waited for my reaction, for me to burst into tears or drop the phone or something. But nothing happened. My eyes were watery, but I couldn't cry. My hands were twitching a little bit, but I held the phone firmly. I tuned back in to what my father was saying.

"You and your brothers can carry your mother out, if you'd like."

"Okay. I'm handing the phone back to Grandlady, okay?"

I didn't wait for a reply.

Celebration

"Sorry about your mom."

"Yeah, it's a shame."

"She was a good woman."

The chorus of condolences continued, and I routinely said 'Thanks,' 'Thank you,' 'Yeah,' and so on.

It was odd, seeing my entire class in one place outside of school. Even the teachers were there. As far as I knew, they weren't invited or asked to come, they were just there. Except for a few ill people, all fifty kids were there. Most to all of them had dressed in fancy attire—dresses and high heels, sport coats and ties. I walked over to the group, and they all looked solemn. Even the kids who usually held their own little conversations, oblivious to the world, silenced themselves when I approached. It was alienating, as if they all were gossiping about me, which was very likely. For being at my own mother's funeral, I was surprisingly upbeat. I was in no sense of the word ecstatic, but I wasn't feeling sad or angry or any

other emotion people are painted to feel when a death of a loved one occurs.

"You don't have to stay in formation, this is a celebration. Go, eat food, tell stories, do whatever," I told them. A lot of people eased up, as they were obviously off put. It was true, however. My dad didn't want a traditional funeral for my mom; it was a celebration of her life instead. Some kids went straight for the food, held on tiered silver platters. Similar to my parents room, everything at The Cotton Room was plain white or made of glass. White couches, white table cloths, glass chandeliers, even my mother's roses were a dull white.

The schedule was as so: wait for everybody to get here, factoring in CP time, have various people come up and talk about my mom, sing a couple of gospel songs, followed by the reception. Everyone we could expect to be here had arrived, so we began.

My father started off, introducing himself, explaining the plan—"It's not a memorial, but a *celebration* of Toni's life"—the schedule, and then he gave the floor to the first speaker. It was a man I had no memories of, but apparently my mother had some important role in his life if he came to give a speech. He spoke of my mother's hospitality, sharp intellect, and confident manner. He mentioned awards even I was unaware she had and how valuable she had been as a person and as an employee and employer. Applause met the end of his speech, and another man came up.

This time, I knew who he was. Uncle Terrain, my mother's cousin. He spoke of my virtuous mother and shared childhood stories of her. I noticed a recurring theme. Both had said my mom was a strong, kind, and intellectual woman.

My eldest brother Nick stepped up to the stage as applause walked uncle Terrain down. He and my other brother, Wesley, had flown in from New Hampshire to be here. Nick recounted what a wonderful mother she was, fond memories of when he was young, the battle for attention when Wes and I were born, and the multitude of ways he had managed to get in trouble.

Wes walked up to the podium next. He spoke about his reaction to the news, something that surprised me. He cried for all of ten seconds. Nick had said he had cried for about the same. I didn't cry

at any point. It shocked me that all three of us barely cried at all. He continued on to tell about his memories and how he would be carrying on life in accordance with the standards my mom set.

Applause still rang for Wesley when I was at the podium. I wasn't nervous; public speaking had never posed an issue for me. I had my speech in hand, an adaptation of a story I was working on for English. The applause died down, and I began.

"On January 9th, 2009, my mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer . . ." I dove straight in, occasionally looking up at the crowd. I spoke of how her physical state degraded, how she was losing weight, how the world said she was as good as gone. "Because of her chemotherapy, many things tasted different and usually metallic. One of the things that did not change in taste was Fritos, and I liked Fritos as well. So whenever I came to my grandma's house, I would always ask for some, earning me the title of 'Frito Dude.' Because my mom's hair was gone due to chemotherapy, she wore a bandana on her head, which made my brother Wesley, and soon me, call her 'Gangsta Mom.' She always smiled when we called her that, and when I did, she retorted with 'Frito Dude.'" I recounted times where she almost got over cancer and the family vacation we had. Finally, I concluded with her last decline, how she faded from weak to incoherent, from incoherent to dead.

*

It was a warm summer afternoon, and Wes, my mom, and I were all on the porch, enjoying homemade burgers and french fries. It was seventy-five degrees out, and birds were chirping. It looked like a scene straight from a movie. This was a big deal for my mother, as she had the strength to cook and eat a burger, something impossible a mere two weeks ago. We talked about anything and everything—school, sports, social life, anything was fair game. All three of us were carefree in that moment, as cheerful as the birds singing to the heavens.

what I carry with me

PABLO GARCIA

About four or five years ago, my mom and I began living here in Durham, North Carolina because she wanted to be closer to her sister.

I was in about the fourth or fifth grade, somewhere around that time, and I was going to Forest View Elementary School. This was my first time in a school like this, and it was different for me because it was more mixed with the races, unlike what I was used to. As I was saying, my mom and I had just moved here, and we were living with my aunt. Those first couple days of school were weird for me because I didn't know anybody.

In school, our teacher had us perform icebreaker activities, and I was able to learn about some of my classmates. I started to make friends as I learned about people in my class. Some of my classmates liked to skateboard and watch cartoons, like me, so we would hang out after school in my neighborhood.

On the weekends, I would spend time in the pool with my mom, aunt, and friends. We had floats and balls that we would use to keep us happy. I had to wear goggles sometimes to keep the chlorine out of my eyes, but when I forgot to wear them, my eyes became so red I looked like I had two strawberries on my face.

After about a month, though, my mom and I moved back to Alabama because of family issues. My mom was born in Alabama and she wanted to go back to her hometown of Montgomery. I had to change schools and meet people all over again. I was scared at first and then my mom reminded me that I would be okay. She talked

about the way I met friends in North Carolina and how I would meet friends the same way in Alabama. My mom was right.

The people in Alabama were different from the people in my school in North Carolina. I had some friends in Alabama, but we didn't have as much in common. I liked to skateboard and they liked to play basketball. I began to miss my friends in North Carolina. I would spend time with my cousins, too, but they were different ages than me, so it wasn't as fun.

That year, my aunt came to pick up my cousin Rashaad and I to take us to North Carolina for the summer. On the way, we stopped in Georgia to go on a safari where we were able to feed the animals from the car. There was one animal that got really close to the car and we were screaming. It was funny.

Once we got to North Carolina, I was able to see my old friends again. I had fun hanging out with them. We went to the movies and the mall. I also went with them to skate. I could do a lot of tricks and they showed me some of their tricks, too. Rashaad didn't skate, but he had a cell phone, so we had him take pictures of us while we were on the skateboards.

I was having fun in North Carolina, but I missed my mom. Back in Alabama, she and I would hang out and watch movies together—she had so many. One movie that I remember we liked was *Training Day*. When I came back to Alabama at the end of the summer, we watched movies as soon as I got home. It was great to be with her again. As we watched, we would eat popcorn that she would top with melted butter and different flavored popcorn salt. I think I usually ate most of the bag. We also sipped on soda or Kool-Aid as we sat together watching.

When I began middle school, I had to go to a different school once again, but this time wasn't as bad because I had some of my friends from my old school who were coming with me. I also met kids that rode my bus, so it wasn't as hard. I was also now old enough that my mom would also let me go to the skate park alone.

The skate park in Alabama was smaller than the one here in Durham, but it was still cool. It helped me to meet other people that liked to skate. Before going down there, I didn't know anyone who

liked to skate but me. There was always something new there: contests that I could participate in, t-shirts and other clothes that I could buy, and sometimes there would even be people who would come and sell skateboards, which was exciting because they didn't have a lot of skate shops around like we do here. Skating was fun because it helped me relax.

This was around the time my mom first became sick. She had diabetes and was having heart issues. She would have to spend time in the doctor's office and hospital. It was really sad for me because it had always been just me and my mom. I didn't have any brothers or sisters to talk to, so without her I was lonely. So I would get on my skateboard to help me feel better while she was sick. I would also think about the fun times we had.

I will never forget the night that my mom and I had "the talk." One night, we were watching TV, and the Trojan condom commercial came on. Little did I know, the next few minutes of my life would traumatize me for about a year. After the commercial, I said to my mom, "What are those used for?"

She then answered, "Are you sure you want to know?"

Well, obviously if I asked, I want to know, I thought to myself. But I knew better than to say that to her face, so I replied, "Yes."

Over the next ten minutes or so, my mom explained to me the purpose of these condom things. One thing I will never forget is her pause in the middle of her talking to keep my focus. I was just amazed that she and I were talking about this subject so easily. I was thinking, like, *What in the world?* But she continued because, then again, I *did* ask. So, in ten to twelve minutes the conversation was over and I was sitting there with my mouth open wide. My mom then had the nerve to ask me, "Is that what you wanted to hear?"

And again, all I could reply was, "Yes."

Another fun time I remember is when my mom and I decided to go roller-blading. I wasn't that good at roller-blading, so we went to the roller-skating rink to practice. I was almost about to fall, but my mom ran up and tried to stop my fall. She saved me, but my

momentum made her fall right down on her behind. When we got home, her butt was still really sore, and it was funny how she was sitting. I asked her what she was going to do about it, and she said she would go to the doctor the next day. When I came home from school that day, she was sitting on a doughnut. I was laughing and she said it was not funny, and that she had broken her tailbone. She said that I should be thankful because she saved me from falling. Then I couldn't laugh again because I was thankful that *my* tailbone wasn't broken.

Toward the end of seventh grade, my mom was in the hospital most of the time. My aunt again came to pick me up so I could spend the summer with her while my mom was in the hospital. When I went back to North Carolina with my aunt, I was able to spend time with my friends. I went to the skate park in Durham and also the skate shops in Raleigh. We also went to King's Dominion and Frankie's.

Spending time with my aunt was fun, but I was worried about my mom. I hoped she would get better soon. I missed the times we talked, went shopping, and watched movies together. My mom and I would talk on the phone while she was sick, but it wasn't the same as being there with her.

The summer was almost over and I was about to go home in a few weeks. I was hoping my mom would get better and be out of the hospital. But in July, 2012, I got the bad news that she didn't make it. She had passed away. The stress added to her diabetes caused her to have another heart attack. It was awful.

I remember when my aunt told me it began to rain outside. Then after a while, the sun came up. My aunt was trying to tell me about how after the storm comes sunshine, and just because this was a bad time now, we would be together to make it better. After she told me, I went to skate for a while to try to calm down.

I think about my mom every day and I miss her a lot. I am going to try to be the best I can be to make her proud. I know she is watching over me from heaven. I miss her and love her a lot.

After the funeral, I moved back to North Carolina with my aunt and went to Githens Middle School. Some days are hard for me, but I

do my best to get through it. I try to focus on the good times that my mom and I had. I also try to remember the lessons she tried to teach me. When I get older and get married, I hope my wife is as good of a woman as my mom was.

Mama's boy

MACEO HARRIS

Prologue

My mother Scherry Harris is the most beautiful and loving person I have ever met. Her light skin tone kind of like peanut butter glows in the sun. Her eyes are like two pieces of smooth caramel that you melt into. Her soft and heart warming hugs make my day.

I looked up at the ceiling, thinking about her and her smile—the smile that has changed so many days from bad to good. The ceiling stared back at me with a blank look, and then I heard her explosion of laughter in the next room. The sound of *Saturday Night Live* slid into my room. “Maaaa!” I cried out.

As the door swiftly swung open, the light flicked on.

“Booba, are you okay?” she said with a worried look on her face.

“I am untucked and need help, Mommy.”

She placed the cover over me, and I suddenly moved into a world of warmth and love.

“I love you more than this house, Mommy,” I said with a squeak.

“I love you more than this Earth, Mace.”

I blushed as she spoke those words of love. “Well, I love you more than the universe,” I said as I made space sound effects with my mouth.

“Okay, Booba. You won this time. Goodnight.”

The Day

That day, I didn't expect *anything* to be worse than my report card. On the last day of school before winter break, after getting report cards, I went to my mother's classroom, but she wasn't there. I asked other teachers where she had gone, and they said she left. I was confused and scared. Soon, I heard my name on the intercom—they were calling me to the main office. There, I saw my father. I was flabbergasted.

"Dad, I thought you were at work," I blurted out.

"I'm here to pick you up. Your mom went somewhere," he said in a firm tone.

In the car, I wondered when my cousins and aunt and uncle would get here to celebrate Christmas and New Years. "Mace, your cousins are at your nana's house. I'm going to let you go down there."

When we got to Nana's, I saw my cousins and gave them hugs and love. I saw my uncle, but didn't see my aunt or my nana. I saw my grandfather in his grass green recliner, his deep powerful voice shaking the house when he spoke. I sat down and in the back room and wondered where everyone could be. Did they forget about us? Where they shopping? How could my mom leave work to shop? But I knew everything was going to be alright because my four cousins and two aunts and two uncles and my sister were going to be here along with my nana and granddaddy and parents. Everything was going to be alright. I soon caught myself slipping off into a slumber.

When I awakened from the sort of trance, it was dark outside and still no one had returned. I walked to the kitchen door and listened. "How is she doing?" "Is she doing okay?" "Oh no, is she—" Quickly, I slipped back down into the back room. Was my mom hurt? Was she sick? Was she . . . ? Was it Nana? Or was it aunt Colette? Or aunt Phaedra? It couldn't be. They were all in good health—there was no way anything could happen to them.

I ventured out once more, this time to see my granddaddy. He was always confident and strong, so maybe he could help me now. My smaller cousins Evan and Xavier were playing while my cousin Marcus, who is one year younger than me, was just sitting there watching them. Then, the front door launched open.

"She died," Aunt Phaedra said as her voice broke, her breath leaving her body. Her face turned red as she started up the stairs.

I looked over to my granddaddy for strength: I saw his eyes glaze over. I could feel my heart start to speed up and blood pumping faster to every part of my body. My throat started to tighten, and my hands slowly started to shake.

"Who?" I asked, gasping for air.

"Aunt Lynn," someone said.

Not knowing where my nana or mother or aunt Collete were, I sat down, knowing that somewhere, somehow, they were mourning. Before the glaze in my granddaddy's eyes could roll out onto his cheek, I started toward the back room again. "Marcus, do you think we should tell Evan and Xavier?" I asked unsurely.

"Nah . . . They're too young," he said with a diminishing voice.

How was Nana feeling knowing that her sister was gone? My mind raced to the times I visited her. She was so kind. I thought about fishing in the lake in her backyard. Why did she have to die?

I sat there, teary-eyed. How was I going to look at my mother? How was I going to look at anyone in the house? How do you look at someone who has lost the person they've known their whole life? How do you look at someone who is crying and upset when you are crying and upset? What do you do when the strongest people you know cry? What do you do when you see your mother cry?

The Funeral

I should have known I wouldn't make it through the service. People were crying before we even got in the church. Everyone already had their head hung low, and some people were outright sobbing. I looked around: everyone's eyes were glazed now. I sat down next to my cousin Marcus.

Soon, we began to sing a spiritual that started to rock the house. The loud drums and voices made our eardrums dance. Then right in the middle of the song, I heard one person bust out crying. And another. Then another. I felt like I was going to pass out. My throat

felt like I had been in the desert for years. I looked over and saw my nana pouring out tears. My eyes became blurred by the water blocking my vision. My cousin Marcus looked at me, confused. I tried to hold it in, to stay strong for him, to let him know it was alright. I tried to keep the tears, I tried to cover my face. But I couldn't. It felt like I was picking up the world and holding it in. As one tear slid down my cheek, I gasped in air. Then I threw up a cry.

Not only a cry of sadness, but a cry of confusion. A cry for help because all the grown-ups I saw on a daily basis were in tears. I cried, and I couldn't stop. I looked over, and my mother was sobbing. My cries turned to fire. Why couldn't I make my mother stop crying? Over all the screaming and sobbing, each of my mother's sobs was an explosion that went off in my head. I was feeling her pain, but I couldn't do anything.

"Marcus, it's okay don't cry," I said, wiping away my own tears. We leaned against each, holding each other up. I would have hit the floor if he were not holding me up. Now, instead of picking up the world and holding it in, I felt as if I had picked it up and it was smothering me. My mother glanced over at me, wiping her tears.

Soon, the crowd started to quiet. There was only one person crying now. But then it spread like a plague, and soon it was the dark ages again.

I gave my mother a hug, but this time it was different. The tightness felt like I as never going to lose her, like our mother and son love would last forever.

As Aunt Lynn's sons carried the casket by us, I just held my mother tighter, thinking to myself I don't ever want to carry my mother's casket. I would rather her watch me get carried. Aunt Lynn's husband Uncle Hugo helped carry the casket, too.

As they lowered her into the six-foot deep resting place, I could see Uncle Hugo's tears glide down his smooth cheeks. His pitch-black glasses did not hide the pain that I could see and practically feel. My mother's hand combined with mine filled me with the warmth I needed to stay strong. I wanted to give the warmth to Uncle Hugo and let him know I was there for him like my mom was always there for me. Then I started to think, when I got to be his age,

I may not have grandparents or a mother or a father. My mother may not be there to comfort me and kiss me and tell me it's okay. I started to fall back on how I wanted to go before my mother. How would I make it without her coming home to hug me? How would I live if she was not there to wipe my eyes? I visualized a world without her. It was dark.

"Mace, wake up," my mother said in a tired voice.

We were back at home from the funeral and from the rain on the windows, it seemed like even the heavens cried for Aunt Lynn. Climbing out of the car, I stepped into a puddle and then started up to my room. I woke up many times that night, but I only truly woke up a month later. A month later, I was mentally right. A month later, I could truly enjoy myself again.

It was after school and my older sister and I were in my mother's classroom after school.

"Come and do your baby homework," she said naggingly.

"Shut up, dummy," I screamed back.

"Stop now, you two," my mother said in the calming tone. I hugged my mother and my day was complete.

Off to Sam's Club we went. It was muggy and wet outside. Inside the store, I walked slowly, examining my unlaced Nikes, the semicircles of mud on the white toes. I was tired of walking, so I leaned on the cart, looking up at my mother, reflecting on her beauty and work ethic.

Her sweet serenity was interrupted by a phone call and a sudden gasp. She stopped walking. I heard voice on the phone clearly:

"Uncle Hugo died."

My uncle Hugo only lasted some months after my Aunt Lynn passed away. It's moments like these when it becomes clear how fast two people can leave the earth. I went back to thinking that my parents may be older than me, but I don't want to carry them. I want them to watch me be carried. If my mother passes before me, I can see what happened to Uncle Hugo happening to me.

25.9 miles

OLIVER HILL

Baby Pictures

Books covered the floor, new posters enveloped the wall, and boxes of random junk filled the hallway. My arms hung loose, tired from lifting countless items. I took the small red stapler from my new desk and began to hang up more posters of Virginia Tech football stars and my favorite Yankee players. I smiled as I saw the much larger guest room become my own. I picked up a stack of small books and brought them over to my mom. She smiled and pulled out one from the middle.

“This is one of my favorites,” she said. She opened the cover and put down the plastic Tupperware she held. She began flipping through the pictures of me and my cousin, Maddie, taken from before we could even walk. I still had a smooth bald head, but she was already growing out the long blonde hair that would, sooner rather than later, bring her into a very large social life full of friends, social media, and boys, of course.

Remembering those pictures makes me notice how our relationship has changed over the years, and also how it has stayed the same. We have been through many memorable experiences over time that have formed the current relationship we have as cousins and friends.

A common meeting place for us is my grandmother’s house in Kilmarnock, Virginia. We spent a lot of time over the summers at

Gigi and Grandy's house. When we were small, our grandparents' house seemed massive. It sits along the Chesapeake Bay where boats travel in and out. An old boat house sits on the water where Grandy keeps his two boats, "The Wild Wes" and "The Happy Hokie." Boat rides occupied our time along with swimming in the pool on the back deck. We also had a tradition of dancing to "Ice, Ice Baby" on the balcony at that age. We spent every minute of every hour together at Gigi's house, and even as our younger siblings came into the picture, we held our bond.

The Wait

It was the summer before kindergarten. I had just turned five a few weeks before. Born only seven weeks apart, Maddie and I had a lot in common when it came to school. My little brother was almost two at this point and had already begun bonding with our younger cousin, Macy, who was about three at the time.

My family had just arrived at Gigi's house for our normal summer visit with the beloved cousins. Our family always got to Gigi's first, even though the drive from North Carolina was longer than their drive from Northern Virginia. This was usually due to our uncle Scotty's late work schedule. Uncle Scotty is a veterinarian who owns his own clinic in Fairfax, near Washington, D.C. Animals of many species and families live in the Stahl house. The basement has a room designated strictly for reptiles, the middle floor holds three birds, and three cats roam around the house. One of the three, Lucy, I had only ever seen about five times over the years, sprinting through the dining room towards the basement where it was dark and safe, away from people.

As I waited for Maddie to arrive, I unpacked the car and lay everything out in my bedroom, also known as the Giraffe Room because it was filled with my grandmother's collection of giraffe figurines. I sat on the couch and stared at the hundreds of giraffes as they stared back at me. Small giraffes covered the bottom shelf. Some of them weren't even the correct giraffe color, which bothered me slightly. As the shelves went up, the giraffes got bigger. A wooden

bobble head giraffe, a section of Virginia Tech-colored giraffes, a family of glass giraffes colored red and white, fragile vases in the shape of giraffes on the top shelf, and best of all, a giant giraffe that was twice my height sitting next to the bookshelf.

I knew Maddie wouldn't arrive until long past bedtime, but I still sat on the awkward triangular stair in the hallway and watched the long driveway through the tall windows. As time went by, I grew impatient. I whined for my mom to call and see where they were, despite the fact that I knew they were trapped in the endless D.C. traffic, as they would be for another hour or so.

The phone rang. I leaped down the last flight of five stairs and tumbled across the grey carpet to a stop. Popping up, I sprinted down the hallway and jumped in front of my grandmother.

"Is it Aunt Stephie?" I whispered with wide eyes, my small hand fiddling at my side.

"It's Macy," she whispered back blocking the speaker of the phone. She continued slowly speaking to my young cousin as I listened along.

"How far are they?" I asked for the one hundredth time of the night.

"They won't arrive until one o'clock," she answered. "Go eat your supper. I made picks!" I walked back into the kitchen with a disappointed face and began munching on the pickled green beans that I now dislike but would crave back then.

As I made my way back to the giraffe room where I would call it a night, I peeked out the window one last time. Nothing. I lay down on one side of the pull out sofa, leaving the other side for Maddie when she arrived.

As morning came, I woke up at my usual early hour and looked over to see Maddie, sound asleep on the other pillow. I jumped with excitement but forced myself not to wake her. I went downstairs and greeted my aunt as I ate my bowl of Lucky Charms. By 10:30, after hours of waiting, I heard heavy footsteps coming from the stairs. I leaned back in my chair and peeked into the foyer, where Maddie came walking down the hall and into the kitchen. Sighing with relief, I went to the doorway to see her.

Dinosaur Island

It was a brisk morning in Kilmarnock. The American flag on the back porch rippled in the wind. Waves rolled in and crashed against the rocks in front of the house, and whitecaps popped up around the lone sailboat in the bay.

Across the creek leading out into the Chesapeake Bay, there was a long island a few hundred yards away. Maddie and I watched the waves as we ate our Cheerios and drank orange juice. We had always wondered about the island. We usually passed it on boat rides and we saw it out the window every morning, but we had never been there. I looked over at Maddie as she squinted and turned her head. Deep in thought, she moved over to the window and continued studying the area. I swiveled my white bar stool around and hopped out of my seat as well. “What do you see?” I asked her.

“Is it just me, or does that tree on the island look like a dinosaur or something?” I looked across the island.

“I don’t see it,” I said. “Point to it.” She pointed her small index finger to a fairly small tree in the middle of the island. I stuck my face behind her hand and peered at the trees until I saw what she was talking about. The tree sat by itself, right in the middle of the island, and to this day I swear, that thing looked *exactly* like the dinosaur chicken nuggets we had for dinner the night before. My eyes widened and I turned to Maddie. “I see it!” I yelled, probably waking up anyone who was still asleep.

Gigi walked into the kitchen and started moving envelopes and other mail in the corner like usual. Rubberbanding magazines together and sorting bills, she asked, “What are y’all lookin’ at?”

Maddie pointed at the tree again. “The tree looks like a dinosaur!” she screamed.

“Shh, your mama’s sleeping still.” She walked over to the window to have a look. I turned to Maddie with what seemed like a brilliant idea.

“Do you think we can swim that far?” I asked her.

“I bet we could—we just have to make sure there are no jellyfish out.”

"Yeah, but I think the water is too cold for them today," I replied, not even considering how cold it would be for us.

Throughout the course of the day, the sky got gloomier and my hair began to blow as we played on the tennis court. Sweaty and sticky, we all went back inside to change into our bathing suits for a cool off swim in the pool before the rain came. The four cousins all went on to the back deck for Maddie to point out the tree we had discovered. As usual, it was a process to get my brother to follow along with what we were talking about.

Elliot lived to fit in with the big kids. Despite being smaller and younger than us, he tagged along with us, tried to be part of our conversations, and went all out whenever we played a game. Especially as my step-brothers came into the picture, this became even more of an objective for him. Everything he did was to get the approval of our step-brothers.

Once we finally got Elliot to notice the tree, we began to plot out a plan to get there. We continued revisiting the idea of swimming all the way over. Our parents suggested we just take the boat on a nicer day in the week, but we were too excited to postpone our adventure.

After a good fifteen minutes of discussion, we decided we would take a try at swimming. "Elliot, get your floaties on," I told him, tossing over the little blown up arm bands. Once we had suited up in our swim gear, we walked down to the small beach by the boat house with our moms and Gigi close behind with a camera.

"Are you going to take your shirt off?" my grandmother asked as I approached the water.

"No, I don't want the jellyfish to sting me!" I shouted back through the wind. We lined up at the water and let it run over our toes as the small waves came in. Maddie and I stood in the middle, Macy on the right, and Elliot, who looked like a giant bubble with all of his flotation devices, on the left. I leaned over the chilled water and we began to step in.

"Are you sure we can swim that far?" I asked Maddie, suddenly questioning the plan.

"I don't know—I think I saw a crab over there, too," she replied. We began searching for the crab and, seeing multiple jellyfish on the

water's surface, ditched the plan. After seeing the large crab crawl out into the water, we decided swimming in the bay was not the best idea.

We retreated back to the pool and looked at the pictures my mom had taken. We never ended up making the boat trip that week, but we did a year or so later. It really wasn't anything special, and we couldn't tell which tree was the dinosaur tree, but it was still enjoyable to finally make it there. The picture still hangs on Gigi's refrigerator, but the tree disappeared a couple of years ago. The island, though, is still known to our family as Dinosaur Island.

Enter Sandman

Maroon and orange trees covered the mountains of Blacksburg, Virginia. Signature "Hokie Stone" buildings filled the valley surrounding Lane Stadium. Parking lots were full, flags waved on the cars of tailgaters and cornhole boxes were laid out throughout the median between the street and the parking lot. My nose twitched as smoke from grills and cigars filled the mountain air. The family stood by the Hokie-colored Cadillac and took pictures like usual. Decked out in my Tyrod Taylor jersey and the first of many pairs of Virginia Tech Nikes, I joined my family on our way to the front of the stadium. The kids all turned toward the box seat entrance like we normally would, but Grandy had arranged for us a bit of a surprise.

"Hey guys, we're going this way!" my aunt called through the crowd. I turned to Maddie, confused, and made my way back to the adults.

"I thought the box seats were that way," I said pointing to the other side of the stadium. Grandy handed us each a card hanging on a black lanyard and began to lead us towards a green gate behind the stadium.

"What are these?" Elliot asked me.

"I don't know," I replied as I turned over the card.

"Pregame: Miami at Virginia Tech," Macy said, reading it. None of us put the pieces together but continued walking. Grandy opened

the green gate. Behind was an array of football fields, a long white building where men dressed in khakis and Virginia Tech polos went in and out. A couple of players were stretching on the far field. I tapped my brother's shoulder and pointed at them. His eyes got wide as he jumped at the sight.

"Mom look!" he yelled.

"I know. Wait until you see where Grandy is taking you." Grandy waved to a security officer who closed the gate behind us. We all strolled down a familiar claustrophobic tunnel with maroon and orange stripes lining the walls. As we walked around the corner, light shined through the opening of the tunnel into Lane Stadium. The pieces began to fall into place in my head. I sprinted down the last stretch of the tunnel and walked onto the bright green grass of Worsham Field.

Virginia Tech football was always a big part of our family. Not only did my mom and her twin sister, Maddie's mom, graduate from Tech, but the field had in fact been named after my grandfather, who is a loyal donor to the Virginia Tech athletic program.

I looked up at the sign that read Worsham Field and watched the punters and kickers warm up. Maddie and Macy were off on the sidelines snapping pictures for Facebook, while Elliot and I stood behind the field goal post and threw balls back to the ball boys as they were kicked through. Elliot struggled to throw the college-sized balls, as did I, but managed to get a feel for it after a while.

The clock counted down with fifty minutes left to go before game time. The giant silver bowl of empty benches began to fill with maroon and orange shirts and one thin strip of Miami green facing the sun. At the forty minute mark, the portion of the crowd that had made their way inside already began to cheer. I looked by the tunnel and out ran the rest of the Hokies for pre-game warm ups. As they filed into several lines of five players each, I searched around for a number five jersey like the one I was wearing. They began going through a series of stretches and exercises before breaking out into groups by position. Tyrod and the future star of the Hokies, Logan Thomas, warmed up their arms on the ten yard line. Kick returners stood in a line and caught punts. The linemen worked on hitting and

blocking drills, and Elliot and I continued fielding balls that rolled off the sidelines. After we got bored with throwing back balls, I found Maddie and we went to look at the Hokie Stone at the opening to the tunnel. I studied the quote on the stone. *For those who have passed, for those to come . . . Reach for excellence.* I had always watched the players reach up and slap the stone as they took the field but never understood why. As I grew older, I began to further understand the meaning of excellence, as did Maddie.

Being the children of twins, we are very similar in character and personality. We are both engaged in many athletic activities, do well in school, and have a twin-like connection in the way that we think. The both of us have always highly valued excellence, whether we knew it or not.

Time wound down the clock, and the players walked back through the tunnel. The stadium was now full, the marching band played loud, and the fans were ready for a big game. The band stopped playing at the two minute mark and the fans began the normal entrance chant that I had only experienced from the stands of the stadium. Thirty-four thousand people shouted, “LET’S GO!” followed by a “HOKIES!” from the other thirty-four thousand. Fifteen seconds of this went by before the captains took the field, sending the crowd into cheers before continuing the chant. Thirty more seconds and then Metallica’s “Enter Sandman” blasted through the speakers. The crowd erupted and all 68,000 people in Lane Stadium started jumping up and down, creating an ongoing wave of motion throughout the stands. The Hokies crammed themselves into the entrance of the tunnel, three of which held an American flag, a Virginia state flag, and a flag with a Hokie Bird face on its side. The notoriously energizing intro of the song came to a close and the drums pounded as the players began to inch out into the sunlight and then poured onto the field through a line of cheerleaders and band members, holding the flags high with pride as the overdrive of Kirk Hammett’s guitar blared through the speakers of the video board.

After the players had made their way onto the field, we had to duck out before the game started. The tunnel led us back out of the

stadium, and we sprinted toward the entrance gate to the box seats overlooking the stadium. God forbid we ever miss kick-off.

Blacksburg was one of the other few guaranteed annual family gathering spots. My whole life I have created visions in my head of Maddie and I ending up in college together at Tech. The environment of the city, the cool air, and love for Hokie football by its citizens has always appealed to both of us. Every year we continue the tradition of running down the tunnel, slapping the Hokie Stone and jumping to “Enter Sandman,” and we will definitely make a point of carrying on the Hokie pride to our children and their future cousins.

Similarities

Like our mothers, I think of Maddie as a twin sister that I only see three or four times a year. Despite our physical distance, we have managed to hold our bond and love even as football and baseball filled my schedule and cheer and cross country filled hers. In a way, we live the same life in two different cities. Filling each other in when we visit at Gigi’s is close to pointless, judging how similar our lives and personalities are. We would always be doing the same writing assignments and history subjects in school, had similar types of friends, and coincidentally experienced similar breakups within the same month of each other. We had both been in long relationships at the time, eight months for me and eighteen for her. Neither of us ended on good terms with our current exes, we had both been treated poorly, and had been through similar conflicts in our relationships. Luckily, we had each other during the breakups. Not many people have a cousin they can come to in times of need.

Every summer my family would arrive at Gigi and Grandy’s, I’d go through “the wait” all over again, but by the time they finally arrived, we would exchange yearbooks and talk about the school year. By the end of middle school, we could identify every person in each other’s schools, and have even taken vacations to Gigi’s house with our best friends. I brought my long-time friend Nico, and she brought her friend Morgan. Despite Morgan’s intolerance of Nico’s

personality, we all enjoyed our stay in Kilmarnock. Now, I always make a point of seeing Morgan when we visit D.C., and we always make sure to meet up with Nico when Maddie is in Durham. Even 259 miles apart, we shared friends like a set of twin siblings. Every one of Maddie's daily Instagram posts sparks the thought of when I would see my twin cousin next. Each picture reminds me of the baby pictures in the small book: her long blonde hair and big eyes are just like they were in the book, and I can still picture my bald head and big smile right next to her.

Two Scoops of Chocolate

MIRANDA CLINTON

"Oh my gosh, Miranda, look, the poster for *Catching Fire*," my sister, Maya, whispered. We had been looking around in the manga section at Barnes & Noble.

"Yeah. You know we have to get everyone together and see it, like last time." The year that *The Hunger Games* came out, Maya and I went with our best friends Naomi and William.

"You know because the book is so long, I think they're gonna cut the movie into two parts," Maya said.

"Maya, I've said this before—if they did make two parts of the movie, they would have titled the movie *Catching Fire: Part 1*."

"No, because the book is so long they would have to cut the movie into two parts!"

Sometimes I feel like Effie and Maya is Haymitch. When we disagree, we can never give in to each other about anything.

"I mean, seriously, look at the poster," I pointed. "It has the title *Catching Fire*, Katniss and Peeta, and November 22. Nowhere does it say that there will be two parts!"

"Maya! Miranda! If you two don't stop fighting y'all aren't going to see the movie at all. I mean you all are sisters, and you're fighting like this," my dad said as he towered over us.

"We just had a disagreement about the movie, Dad. Nothing serious," I said.

Maya glanced over at me and sneered.

The sun blazed as we rode up the gravel driveway, gray bricks bordering each side. We pulled up under the gaping old cherry tree.

“Grandma!” I cried as my sister and I climbed out of the green Expedition. Grandma was wearing her Harry Potter glasses and an indigo flower print dress. The tall porch made her seem like a giant. Maya and I ran to give her a gentle hug. She is eighty-two.

“Well now, how are you two? You didn’t throw up, did you, Miranda?” Maya scrunched up her nose.

Since before I was one I was diagnosed with motion sickness, so every road trip I took, I gushed out all of my stomach contents onto the awaiting seats. As usual, Maya cried “Eww!” to Mommy and Daddy. Then, Dad had to stop the car and clean out the seats, which turned a four-hour trip into six or eight hours.

“Why don’t y’all come on inside. Aunt Irene is in the den,” said Grandma. We moved inside the house, not caring about the bags in the trunk. In the easy chair sat Aunt Irene, also wearing Harry Potter glasses but this time a red flower print dress.

“Aunt Irene!” we shouted. Aunt Irene slowly stood to give us a hug. The same with grandma, Maya and I hugged her gently because she is eighty-two. Yes, my grandma and my Aunt Irene are twins like Maya and I.

Maya is the oldest twin by twenty-nine minutes. She’s active and daring. The youngest, I’m more calm and cautious. I get my middle name, Catherine, from this grandmother. Maya get hers, Elizabeth, from my dad’s mom. But we’re actually both a lot like Grandma and Aunt Irene. As far as anyone knows, Maya and I are just the second generation of twins on my mother’s side of the family and the only twins on my dad’s. Whenever we go to visit my aunts and uncles, they always rant about how much bigger we have gotten or how well we are doing in school or who looks most like my dad and who looks most like my mom (I look like our mom and Maya looks like our dad, but I don’t see it).

It was four o’clock in the afternoon. Maya and I sat in my grandma’s den with the old wooden door wedged open, showing the screen door closed, its black rails intertwining into a design of the unknown. The sun bathed the gravel drive outside. Touching it with

bare feet will send you running for the hills, which Maya and I have experienced. Nothing is on the TV in Greenville, South Carolina but *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and I got tired of that. Maya lay slumped on the couch, sleeping like a baby. *I guess she would not mind if I moved her a little, I mean she owes me for all those days she pushed me off the couch at home.* Though the house seemed to bustle all around us with my mom, dad, and grandma, this one room stood still.

"Miranda! Get off of me," Maya whined groggily.

"Oh please, you just woke up." I moved away from her, but for the fun of it, put my feet on her. She whined on, but finally met defeat and went back to sleep.

It was five o'clock now and the sun still shone on this summer day. A single breeze pushed against the door. And I could not keep my eyes open to save my life. Before I knew it I was asleep, too, my feet still resting on Maya's lap.

Maya deliberately pushed me as we walked through the narrow hallway. Our dad was already on us as we made our way into the large den.

"You are twins. All you have are each other. So get along!" Maya and I just had another simple argument on how to work the TV.

"But I just told her . . ."

"Ah. No buts, Maya," my dad said with his head tilting up and eyebrows raised. He looks like a clown doing that. I had to hold in a giggle or I would be in more trouble. "Now, I want you two to turn around and give each other a hug." As we turned, I saw Maya's face was red face, but not with anger—suppressed laughter and embarrassment played across it. Hugging your sister is a hard thing to do if you just had an "argument," but Maya and I hugged, awkwardly if I may say so.

"Now isn't that better," my dad said. We journeyed back to our rooms, not speaking to each other. However, Maya decided to take a trip into my room.

"You know, you're wrong, Miranda. And now we can't watch TV in the family room."

"Well then, go watch TV in your room and leave me alone."

“Why do you have to mess everything up?”

“Why do you keep bringing it up? Just go back to your room. There is nothing I can do, and all you are doing is acting like a baby.” Maya stomped back into her room whining and grumbling the whole way.

Fourteen years! For fourteen years I have had to put up with her indignant rantings. Does she even realize that it is just a waste of time? I sighed and turned back to watching *Scooby Doo*, the greatest show of all time.

“Miranda!” I blinked my eyes open. I had fallen asleep in the middle of *Scooby Doo*. What a disgrace. “Miranda!”

“Maya what do you want?” Thinking back, I realized she should have still been mad at me about the TV.

“Mommy and Daddy aren’t watching the TV anymore. Come on we can go on Netflix and watch *Teen Wolf*.”

Already running into my room and pulling me into the den, I wondered why she wasn’t still mad at me. It was like she was indifferent to the matter all together.

“You’re not still mad about the TV, are you Maya?”

“Oh, that? No, and plus we both know I was right,” she smirked.

“No, we both know I was right and the only reason I’m coming in here is to watch *Teen Wolf*. Not because you won.”

“Oh, shut up and come on.”

Gaping at her, I followed. Even after fourteen years I still do not understand how she can whine and grumble one minute and smile and laugh the next. Maybe it’s for the best. Who would want their twin sister mad at them all day?

Sitting on the long brown couch we turned on the TV and went to Netflix.

“Yeah, this is better,” I mumbled.

“What did you say?” Maya asked.

“Oh, nothing,” I said smiling as we went back to our show.

in doubt

MICHELLE RAZO

"I don't want to go to Sunday school." My exasperated expression said it all.

"Why is that?" Stephanie questioned.

"I don't think I believe in God."

I've never been a religious person. My families, especially my grandmas, are Catholic. They go to church on Sundays, pray before meals and before bed. But my parents and I don't go to church. They work all week and don't have the time or energy to wake up and go to mass. They believe in God, they just don't believe they have to go to church to prove their faith. Also, it's difficult listening to the holy words of the Bible with crying toddlers—*el padre* preaching alongside their screams.

In May 2009, I celebrated my first communion. I was forced to go to Sunday school. I dreaded the days I had to sit and listen to an old lady read from the holy Bible, her voice hoarse, droning on for what seemed to be hours. It wasn't completely awful—I got to spend time with my cousin Stephanie, plus we got free snacks. The classes weren't too bad, but they never felt right. I've never had full faith, never cared to pray, didn't believe talking to a person I couldn't see would help me in any way.

It was the end of sixth grade when I became agnostic. At this time my little brother Diego was one year old, making me eleven years his elder. Toward the end of my school year, we noticed his speech wasn't as developed as the other kids'. He didn't seem to

enjoy playing with the other kids, either. My mother spoke to his doctor about her concerns, and he said that these symptoms were similar to those that an autistic child may have. When my mom told me, I was terrified.

What fault does my one-year-old brother have? “Everything happens for a reason,” had no meaning to me. What reason was there for this? My sinless baby brother had done nothing to deserve autism. My faith vanished.

Although I don’t deny the existence of God, I don’t accept it, either. I question the belief system behind religion. Now, I believe you can’t trust what you can’t prove.

I hadn’t been open to my parents about my lack of religious beliefs for fear that I may insult them or the rest of my family. I have respect for everybody’s beliefs; I don’t push mine onto other people. If I hadn’t been old enough to care, maybe I would still have the same faith as before.

The question of my religion made me question myself. I struggled through a silent war; I didn’t care to tell anyone. What would I get from it? Have my family tell me not to question the Lord?

I decided to ignore it. I couldn’t change anything. Crosses still hung on walls, rosaries decorated the furniture. None of it changed my beliefs, though. The influence of my family’s beliefs hadn’t and didn’t change mine. I realized being bothered by those objects was as silly as complaining every time I drove by a church.

“*Hermana!*” Diego yells.

“What?”

He waves me over, points to what he wants, a toy or his milk cup that he is unable to reach.

My brother was two, his speech hadn’t gotten better. He’d communicate by pointing at things or yelling. My mother decided to get him a speech therapist. The woman who came in to give my brother the lessons was middle-aged. It didn’t seem like she had any kids of her own because she acted very reserved. She’d keep her distance, not ever really touching him. That’s not how kids learn—teachers have to interact with the children. I hated sitting through the lessons,

seeing her pronounce each syllable slowly as if he couldn't understand. He wasn't dumb. He may have had problems communicating, but he understood just fine.

After a while, the teacher stopped coming. When she'd arrive, Diego would refuse to sit and play with her. He'd stand up and utter one of the few words he knew very well: "No." It was upsetting; I knew he wanted to learn. He was eager. When I'd sit and read to him or teach him letters, he listened intently. But when he couldn't grasp exactly what I was trying to teach, he'd throw fits.

"Count to ten, Diego," I say, after going over the numbers several times.

"One . . . Two . . . Three . . . Four . . . Five . . . Seven." He stops, knowing he's messed up, and proceeds to throw the Legos that lay around us against the wall.

As I sit and watch my brother play, my thoughts race and the present is a blur. I think back to when I first broke down.

I was in sixth grade. I had finished my EOGs. I didn't have time to think about my personal problems, which I'm thankful for. The class was watching a movie because there were still people taking tests around the school. I was distracted from the movie by the golden necklace around my neck. *Why am I wearing this?* The golden piece of jewelry was decorated with a cross. I wrapped my fingers around the detailed figure, contemplating its importance. *This has no meaning to me. If he were real, my brother would be fully healthy.* My best friend was sitting next to me on one of the cold uncomfortable chairs that packed the dense room.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"My brother may have autism," I reply vaguely.

"I'm so sorry . . ." He doesn't know what to say.

I started crying, in the middle of the classroom. I gripped the necklace and tore off the cross. *I don't need this.* I was tempted to throw it away; it was of no use to me. But, it was a gift, and an expensive one at that. I would keep it 'til I got home and then stash it away.

"Are you having your *quinceañera*?"

My mother has always wanted me to have my sweet fifteen.

Most Hispanic girls have them—it's a tradition. She never had the chance to have her own; she had *me* when she was fifteen. Guess I was her big party.

"No *ma*, it's too much work and money."

I hate to let her down, but after realizing my loss of religious beliefs, I just couldn't do it. I've been baptized and have completed my first communion, two of the seven sacraments I'm supposed to perform. The next would be confirmation, which I would have to complete in order to have my *quinceañera*.

When I think of how I have already completed two out of the seven sacraments, I feel a twinge of guilt that lingers in my conscience. The word 'unholy' comes to mind, but 'disrespectful' does the job also.

I lay on the couch baby-sitting my siblings. I'm in awe at how they've grown. Diego is speaking much better. He sits playing with Legos and listening intently to Dora, replying to whatever she asks. My little sister crawls around on the rug, paying attention to her tiny rattle.

Time has passed. My brother is four. My little sister is nine months old. I'm healthy. My faith may not be, but physically I am well. My brother is progressing, but he is still not communicating verbally as well as he should be. He's entering school next year and I hope he will be prepared. I can already picture him walking up to the big school and opening up the front doors, only to get lost in finding his class. Will he be put into the special classes? I wonder. He has no clear diagnosis as of now, but I can only hope he isn't made fun of for being different, which he clearly is.

My little sister, she's a bundle of joy. She seems healthy; it's too soon to see if she'll have any speech problems. Even though I'm only a fifteen-year-old girl, I consider myself their second mother. The bizarre thing is, they have taught me more than I can explain. I don't wish to follow written rules the way others do; I plan to flow through life doing what I think is right, which is what I would want my siblings to do. They have both influenced me in so many ways. They've built up who I am, teaching me responsibility, good charac-

ter, and empathy. They have guided me through my journey in realizing who I am, and what I really need. Without them, I'd still doubt everything about myself.

I have no need to search for a deity to guide me through tough times—I have them.

GONE: *a lost puzzle piece*

ALLI MAY

Where It All Started

I wake to a loud knocking at the door. Through the thin walls, I hear my mom getting up and stumbling, blind in the darkness. She passes my room on her way to the stairs, turning on the light as she goes. My bedroom is closest to the stairs, the first one on the left. With the light pouring in from the hallway I look around my leaf green and gold room. My queen-sized bed sits in the middle of the room with dark green and gold sheets on it. I reach for the lamp on my night stand. Its intricate carvings fit like a puzzle piece to the one that sits on the corner of my dresser. Light washes over the room as I pull the string to turn on the lamp.

I sit up and can see myself in the mirror that hangs above the dresser, my hair a massive web of curls and snarls. I roll over and hear Mom talking to people.

“Hello, are you Anita Baker?” a disembodied voice asks.

“Yes, I am. What is this about?” Mom says tersely.

“Are you the owner of a 1998 Honda Accord?”

“Yes, but my daughter drives it. She’s at school in Greensboro.”

“Can we have a picture of her?”

“Sure, but why?”

“There has been an accident involving your car . . .” They’ve moved out of my hearing range, so I decide to get out of bed. I pad into the hall and stand at the top of the stairs in shorts and a tank top,

completely forgetting about my hair. Mom and two police officers in uniform are talking but turn to look at me when they notice movement. It doesn't register until later that I should be embarrassed.

"Go back to bed, sweetie," Mom calls. I do. But instead of going back to my own room crawl into my mom's bed and wait.

...

Mom comes in a while later and doesn't say a word, just holds me. She looks distant, like she's deep in thought. I decide not to ask any questions. I soon fall asleep, but am woken yet again by a loud knock at the door. I look at Mom and see her greenish-grey eyes have dark circles under them. I don't think she's slept since the officers left.

"Stay here," she commands, and once again I am left only to listen. I'm still half-asleep and fall in and out of consciousness.

...

"No! No! No!" This broken sob cuts through the air, bringing me back to reality. It takes me a moment to really remember what is going on. I jump out of bed and rush to the top of the stairs. I see my mom and the two police officers from earlier gathered in the living room, but now there is another man with them. A minister.

Playing the Blues

"Come here," she says quietly. Her face is a grim mask, but I try not to appear scared or worried. The stairs are a dark oak to match the brown walls of the upstairs hallway and the foyer downstairs. As I descend, I scan the rooms ahead. The stairs and living room couldn't be more than five feet from each other, yet it feels like miles. I eventually reach the living room where orange-colored walls add an out of place brightness. Two couches face each other on either side of a coffee table. When I reach my mother, she says words I never thought would come out of her mouth.

"A.J.'s dead."

My world stops.

Still. No one breathing.

“What?” I ask, my voice shrill in the silence.

“Maybe we should sit,” one of the officers says politely. We sit on one of the hard, leather couches. I balance on the edge, eager for information while internally dreading this conversation, and Mom sits back, unshed tears shining in her eyes.

“Start from the beginning,” I murmur. And Mom proceeds to tell me one of the most tragic stories I have ever heard.

Apparently my sister A.J. and her friends Ariel, Kanesha, and Marcus had gone out to celebrate Ariel’s birthday, but the previous weekend Marcus and A.J. had a fight. The officers think that Marcus must have still been mad, and while they were driving home, he pulled out a gun and opened fire on everyone in the car. Marcus got through one of the clips he brought with him before he got out of the car and turned the gun on himself.

I try to process this and only vaguely am I aware that the officers, who I now realize must be detectives, are asking my mom questions. They eventually leave. Mom starts calling people to tell what happened and to see if they can come over.

A.J... Dead? I couldn’t imagine it.

Even then, I swore I would hear her pull up and come through the door. And I was hoping she would do just that, to prove everyone wrong. But she didn’t.

Livin’ in the Good Ol’ Days

The light is flowing in from the window, its gold and red glow billowing to the floor. Birds sing in the large oaks outside.

We are getting ready to go to the service. I had to sleep with Mommy last night because A.J.’s dad and stepmom, Ray and Donna, are here so they have to stay in my room, and I refuse to sleep in A.J.’s old room.

I am about to put on my black A-line taffeta dress when I hear Mom say, “Why don’t we put on something more colorful? You

know how A.J. always wore a lot of colorful prints and pretty tops? How about we do that instead of wearing all this black?"

"Okay," I mumble weakly. So I put the dress back on its hanger and in the closet where it would remain. I try to look for a dress that's colorful enough: I have a long, teal and orange halter top dress that A.J. actually helped pick out.

Next thing I know, I'm sitting in a large church staring at a big stained glass window mural in the front. The light from the morning sun bounces through the bright picture of Jesus on the cross. I don't remember getting in the car or coming through those heavy mahogany doors that lead into the church or even sitting down. Jessica Evans starts singing. I look over at Mommy and see that she has begun to cry again. She cries a lot lately, but strangely, I haven't cried at all. Mommy says it's not healthy, keeping all my feelings bottled up inside and not letting them go. Grandma thinks I'm just in shock, that I haven't processed it yet. Maybe they're right, but I ignore them all. As I sit in the front row of the church I start to think of my first memories of A.J.

"Monkey, can you pass me that pen?" my sister asks from across the room.

"I'm not a monkey!" I tell her for probably the millionth time.

"Well you look like one to me," she teases as she takes the pen out of my hand, kissing my head as she does.

"I do not," I mumble under my breath, but I go and check the mirror hanging over the dresser just to be sure.

I turn back around and say, "See?" pointing to my face. "I don't look like a monkey."

"I think you need glasses because I see a monkey," A.J. states so matter-of-factly that I start to believe her again.

"Mommy!" I cry, running out of the room.

"What? What?" Mom asks in a calm voice. When I come in I see her sitting on the big king-sized bed with the dark green comforter, worn with use. I do a run-stumble combination, trying to get to the bed as fast as I can on my short, stubby legs.

"A.J. called me a monkey again!" I wail, trying to climb onto the big bed.

“Oh, did she now?” Mom says as she pulls me up onto the bed. Her face is full of patience even though we both know she has very little of it.

“Yes.”

“Alli, do you remember the conversation we had the last time A.J. called you monkey and you didn’t like it? And remember how we said that it was just her way of showing love?” Mom looks me straight in the eye.

“Yes, I remember,” I murmur as I deflate, sliding down from the bed and walking sullenly back to A.J.’s room.

A.J called me Monkey many times, and she continued to do so even to the very last time I saw her. AJ’s dad calls me Monkey, too. When I’d come home from camp the week before, he was at home waiting and the first thing he said was “Hey, Monkey.”

My Life in the Spotlight

After the service was over, it was like our house had been bombarded with people. They were everywhere—some were even sitting on the floor in the living room because the couches and the extra chairs we had brought out were already overflowing. I had always thought that the kitchen and dining rooms were pretty big, but with so many people in them they felt very small.

From the time we got home, the doorbell kept ringing. As soon as we had closed the door and walked the people into the house, the doorbell would ring again. After about the eighth or ninth time we learned to just leave the main door open and the screen door closed. That continued until the reporters started showing up. People from the local news were the only ones at first. But then the national news got a hold of where we lived and started showing up, too.

Because of how A.J. and the other girls died (a suicide-murder) it gained a lot of press and news coverage all over the US. The day of the service we had so many reporters outside our house you would have thought there was a famous person visiting.

At first the reporters would just come to the door and try to ask Mom or me some questions, but at some point when we did not

answer their questions they tried to forcibly enter our home and ask the people inside questions. Since we wouldn't let them in or answer any of their questions, they started targeting people as they walked from their cars to the front door. The families of A.J.'s friends Kanisha and Ariel, who had also been murdered, did not receive the same persistent reporters the way we did. After a few days the reporters went away, most likely to harass someone else.

Since A.J. had been born in New Orleans and Mom had lived there for a little over thirteen years, people they knew from New Orleans came to the service. After Hurricane Katrina everyone was scattered, but they still all came. And they all brought food. For days our house smelled like it always did when we went to New Orleans: spicy, seafoody deliciousness. A.J.'s other sisters on her dads' side brought up beignets from the Café Du Monde just for me. When they showed me the box, I took it and ran upstairs to hide it so fast I could compete with the superhero Flash. If you don't know, beignets are these rectangle pieces that typically come in threes. They're thick pastries made of fried dough with powdered sugar on top. Most people compare them to funnel cakes, but that's not true—they are much better. I hadn't had one since Christmas, and before that when we went down after the hurricane in 2006. One bite took me back to a time when everything was normal, a time before last week.

We used to go down at least twice a year before the hurricane, and I would get my fill of homemade red beans and rice, jambalaya, gumbo, and Aunt Carol Ann's banana pudding. Along with beignets and Popeyes, of course. Even though there's a Popeyes in Mebane it is not like the real thing. There, I would sit under the solitary palm tree centered in the yard and eat. Its big green leaves stretched toward the sky, providing shade on the hottest of days. Occasionally, a breeze would rustle my then unruly, curly blonde hair, relieving the humidity, if only for a few seconds. But when Mom, A.J., and I went back after Hurricane Katrina, for the Fourth of July in 2006, we were too devastated to stay more than a few days.

Everything was gone. The house, the stores, the palm tree that sat all alone out front. Gone. When we drove by Ray's house, the only thing left was a corner of brick foundation and the pool in the

backyard, now overflowing with water and fish and tadpoles. This was the house that A.J. grew up in, the one that she spent all her summers at. The same house I remember eating my very first piece of fried chicken in. And it was just gone. Poof. Without so much as a last goodbye.

Learning to Move On

My mom was older when she had me. I was her “surprise” as the family puts it. Her second mixed daughter—she already had one: A.J. We were almost twelve years apart. I remember when I was little, when A.J. would babysit me and take me out, usually to the mall, people thought that she was my mom. Probably because she looked older than she really was and the large age difference already between us. A.J. was my best friend since I could remember. Always picking on me in the way only a sibling can. I would ignore her or tune her out, sitting still and concentrating hard, not blinking for long periods of time, just staring at the page of my homework while she taunted me or tried to get my attention until she finally got bored and gave up. For a long time, A.J. was the only person, besides my mom, I would really talk to or be myself around. Then it was just my mom.

I miss my sister all the time. There isn’t a day that I don’t think about her or wish she were here. And even though I know she can’t be here in person and watch me grow up, it’s starting to get easier to move on.

listening. creating. escape.

LUCAS BIEWEN

Listening

I'm listening to the chords of the organ bounce off the walls. Then comes the bass, so perfect it sends shivers through my body.

My room is pretty small, crowded with desks and usually cluttered with trash. There are two closet doors to the right of the front door that hold all my clothes and shoes. To the left of the front door is my bed and my bedside table. The room has two desks and a cabinet with my TV and Xbox. One desk has all sorts of cans and other trash scattered all over it. Cutouts from old comic books paste the surface. In the corner rests my old U-20 piano keyboard. My other desk is my work desk. It has my computer, my Keystation piano keyboard, and my M-Audio box. This desk sits in front of three large windows overlooking my street. Next to these windows is a framed Kid Cudi vinyl. I keep my work desk pretty clean because it keeps my mind clear when I work.

It may not seem like much, but my room is my escape. I hate when people barge in, especially when I'm making music. I need to sit and listen to my music every day. It calms my mind, and my room provides a secluded place to relax.

I'm in my living room, looking up at my mom as she explains to me why I should take piano lessons. Being that I already showed interest, it didn't take much persuading. Little did I know, this decision would have a big impact on my life.

Every Thursday he greeted me with his slight British accent before inviting me into his living room to sit down at the bench in front of his black Steinway. He would ask me what progress I made in the last week and I would show him. At first, I only took lessons because I liked the attention. It was “my thing.” But as I started learning more advanced pieces, I got into it. I started composing my own pieces, and I would even write sheet music for them. I would perform in recitals and even malls. Performing was always easy for me. I hardly ever thought anything of recitals. It never really mattered to me how people thought of me if I messed up—which caused me to play everything virtually perfectly since my mind wasn’t congested with nervousness.

Then I quit. Sitting in that black bench one last time, explaining to him how big of a world he opened up to me. My dad was more disappointed than my piano teacher.

I’ve been interested in music my whole life, caring more about constructing a diminished chord than constructing a paragraph. There are pictures and home videos of me sitting in my dad’s lap on a bench with a pacifier hanging out of my mouth as I experimented with the keys of the piano in our small Minnesota house, mesmerized by the sounds each key made.

The snare hits and I’m back in my room, listening to the chords of the organs bounce off the walls.

Creating

“I’ll do it later!” I yell. “Leave me alone!” and slam my door. I sit down and turn on my computer, struggling to keep the chord progression in my head. The Apple logo illuminates the screen as I flick the switch on the back of my keyboard. I open Pro Tools and put my headphones on. I’m in my own world now.

I experiment with the keys after choosing to use a virtual jazz organ, spelling out each chord. When I have it figured out, I press record and play. It doesn’t sound quite right. I delete the last record-

ing and turn the knob to increase the volume. I play it again. Better. I create a new track and change the instrument to bass. Already with a good idea of how it's going to sound, I press record without even having to figure out the notes. I add some reverb and an enhancer to make the bass louder. A constant tick of a hi-hat keeps the rhythm steady. I throw in a bass, snare, cowbell, and some fills to finish the basics of the piece. Halfway through, I add another effect which makes it sound underwater or in another room, then I automate it to make the effect fade back to normal. It's finally coming together. I put some high strings and a low chorus for dramatic background before fading it out to nothing.

Perfect.

Escape

I remember when he called us down. It was late at night and my mom was supposed to be home hours ago. My sister and I walked down the stairs, dreading what was to come. He was sitting on the couch, a sad look in his eyes. We stared at him in silence for a few seconds before he looked up at us and said it. Those seven words. "Your mother and I are getting a divorce."

I immediately ran up the stairs, unsure who to be mad at. I grabbed my earbuds and turned my music up to full volume, trying to drown out my thoughts and the reality of the matter. I buried my face in my pillow and cried for an hour before falling asleep.

This wasn't the first time either. It happened in fourth grade, but they got back together. My sister was still mad for a while after that. As I look back, it didn't really affect me too much on the outside. If things got rough, I would put my earbuds in and everything would go away.

I remember my mom telling us we probably weren't going to be able to keep the house. I so dearly wanted to keep it. It was the house I grew up in. I begged my mom for anything I could do to help, although there wasn't much since I was basically buying everything for myself other than food. Once again, I grabbed my headphones,

turned the music up to full volume, and cried. After an hour of talking on the phone with my grandmother, Mom came up and told me we could probably keep it with help from my grandmother as long as we kept it clean.

After that, any time I was sad or my mom and my sister were arguing, I just lay down and put some music on. And then, there was nothing else in the world but those chords.

*someday,
it would all
float away*

GRACE LOWMAN

I was a very shy child. I was the person sitting alone in the back of the classroom, never raising my hand or jumping out of my desk when the teacher announced it was time for recess. I even combed my hair over my face in an attempt to shield myself from undesirable stares, but instead of protecting me, it caused my face to have an uneven tan. You wouldn't believe me, but I wasn't always like this. Most people dismiss my youthful personality as just a normal passing phase in a child's life because they find it hard to believe an adolescent capable of mature thought.

Shrugging Nonchalantly

Jessica B. Gates, my one and only friend in elementary school, was the queen bee: popular, smart, athletic, beautiful, and strange because she chose me as one of her friends. Me, the socially awkward, incredibly clumsy, cynical girl. The one person she shared all of her deepest darkest secrets with was not her best friend but the peculiar runt with lactose problems. I try to believe that it was because she actually trusted me, but it might also have been because she knew the severity of my shyness would not have allowed me to share even if I'd wanted to.

One day Jessica invited me over to her barn for a play date. An afternoon filled with a dull serenity. Always the same uneventful reg-

imen. For the first part, I watched her groom and tack her horse. Then I sat on the ground and watched her ride around in circles for an hour. After that I watched her un-tack her horse. I wasn't allowed to touch anything or pet her horse. All I could do was sit quietly and observe. In all honesty, it was the most fun I'd ever had on a play date.

Assuming we were leaving soon, I stood by Jessica's car waiting for her and her mother to arrive when Jessica jogged up alone. She explained how her mother was busy talking and that it would probably be a while before we left. In response I did my regular routine of staring and shrugging nonchalantly.

Jessica and I were leaning against the car, lost in our own thoughts when she abruptly turned and asked if I wanted to climb across the top of the horses' stalls. From the stone carved in the shape of a girl came an expression of pure shock and horror. All the horrible outcomes of this adventure raced through my mind: the horse could spook and break the stall, or you could fall and get hurt, or—even worse—you could back out and embarrass yourself in front of your one and only friend.

Next thing I knew, Jessica was dragging me to an old closet that had a ladder going to the ceiling. Jessica went first, zipping up the ladder like a trained monkey. I, on the other hand, ambled up it, losing my footing more than once, somehow obtaining multiple splinters in my hands. At the top I looked out to see a complex array of rafters crisscrossing high over horses' heads.

Nudging me to go first, Jessica crawled into an alcove of the structure to give me more space. I took a deep breath, holding on to the belief that humiliating myself was far worse than breaking a bone. I slowly inched my way across the first beam and was on to the second when Jessica started after me. With each step came a reverberating creaking noise seeming to come from deep within the barn structure.

I was almost at the other side when I glanced down to see a stallion prancing around his stall, trying to get the attention of his pasture mates. Suddenly I froze.

My entire body was on lockdown. I felt beads of sweat drip off my face and fall what seemed like miles to the ground. My hands

and knees turned white from gripping the wood so hard. His calls were getting sharper with his growing anxiety. Jessica's encouragement echoed in my head. The rhythmic drumming of the stallion's hooves swayed me. Soon I was falling into a dark abyss when a reassuring hand took hold of my shoulder.

I looked back to see Jessica's silhouetted visage. The tight, slanted line of her mouth, the creased eyebrows, and wide eyes full of genuine sympathy and apology. I took a breath, crawled the rest of the way across the rafters, and climbed on top of a large pile of hay bales where I waited for Jessica.

She came up behind me, gave me a semi-awkward hug, and we climbed down the mountain of hay—together. At the bottom Jessica's mom was waiting for us hands on hips, foot tapping, face red, and eyes bulging.

Sheltered by the Farm's Fences

There was no funeral. There was no music. There was no period of mourning. There were no flowers. There was only silence, quiet weeping, and whispers. It would not be until years later that I could fully comprehend what it meant for the death of a horse at Rosewood.¹

A dismal haze hovered over the farm for weeks after Nike's passing. The first horse that I'd ever ridden was gone. He seemed fine the other day at the vet school. Liz said he received treatment to get better. Standing up without swaying and begging for food had everyone fooled that he was alright. The following day he was gone.

Summer camp could not have been more thoroughly disrupted. Lost was the excitement of riding every day, of not minding being out in the scorching sun because we were surrounded by exquisite creatures, of the illusion of a perfect world, sheltered by the farm's fences to keep away the unwanted truth.

After this death I believed that everything would eventually be taken away from me. I saw no point in letting something in enough

¹ This paragraph adapted from Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1993. Print.

to get close if somehow, someday it would float away and never find its way back.

Two Subdued Words

“Number 100, Grace Lowman on Miles of Joy” pierced the suffocating air.

A dome of silence fell over the arena. Two judges, me, Miles, and an eight-jump course. When entering the arena, Miles spooked at the vibrant flowers that surrounded each crossrail, curling up the posts, daring any rider to pass.

I clamped my hands to the reins and ground my teeth while my clothes stuck to my body. A painfully slow and choppy canter brought us to the first jump; bright yellow flowers cried blood as my leg brushed the petals. With a swift crack of the crop I urged Miles over the first hurdle. Although airborne for only a second, it felt far too long for I became light-headed. I should’ve been exhilarated, I should’ve wanted more, but instead all I wanted to do was escape from the oppressive cage and the glaring eyes and never look back. The sooner I was done, the better.

Faster Faster!

Only three more jumps to go.

You can make it!

A jump standard was knocked down.

Don’t stop now!

A canter broke to a walk.

Please!

Miles paused to go to the bathroom.

I exited the arena hiding my face with shame. My head stayed bowed until I reached the safety of the looming black and white wall of trailers, each branded with their owner’s name. I slid off Miles’ back and placed him in a stall with fresh hay and water. My friends and family had followed me down to the trailers, all the while trying to console me. Through the pained grimaces, I saw my instructor make her way to my side. I took a breath, preparing

for the worst. She simply said good job and moved on to watch another rider.

A sole comment: Good job. Sarcasm? No, she isn't that harsh. Did I disappoint her to such an extent? Just how much had I embarrassed the barn? Anything else would have been preferable—a glare, a roll of the eyes, a lecture on how I should have been better, a blunt list of the things I had done wrong, anything but an expressionless face and two subdued words.

My father tried to come up with excuses for why I performed so horridly.

"She's tired. She's been up since five this morning."

"This is her first show."

"It's hot out and she's dehydrated."

All true, but nothing was acceptable as an excuse. I had practiced the course numerous times. No one else had failed. No one else lost their breath after only a minute of hard riding. No one else broke from a canter to a walk in front of the judges. No one else allowed their horse to stop and empty their bowels in the middle of a course.

I had always compared myself to other riders. To those who were years younger, to those with far more experience, to those who were the same level as me, and everyone in between. I was my worst critic. Setting high standards for myself, standards appropriate for more advanced riders, guaranteed failure and a loss of self confidence. I was digging myself into a hole and was not tall enough to jump out.

My first horse show enlightened me: I needed to change my expectations. From this event I was emotionally drained. For the next two weeks I brooded and isolated myself. Believing that everyone was out to get me, I dreaded those who came before me to see if I was okay. I did not show again until years later. My confidence in my abilities, not only as a rider but in all subjects I pursued, decreased and a new, shyer, and humbler girl emerged from the depths of failure.

Without the Burden of Knowing

“Grace!” Liz, my horseback riding instructor called for me. I dropped the bale of hay I was carrying to the barn and flew up the hill to the ring. I assumed someone had fallen or a horse had gotten loose. The sun shined bright and the rocks in the arena set a glare. I skidded to a stop with my mud crusted paddock boots spraying stones everywhere. My eyes scanned the ring for my instructor, but did not find her. There were only a few people riding and nothing seemed out of place.

The new horse, Tip, caught my attention as he swept past me. Trotting swiftly with Liz perched on his back, Tip could not have looked more stunning. I gazed in bewilderment as I watched my instructor move on this grand horse with ease. In my six years of riding at Rosewood Farm, I had never seen my instructor ride a horse.

Not once had she been in a saddle. Nor had she ever expressed an interest. I always assumed it was because she was getting older and her own beloved horse had passed away many years ago. I never realized that it was primarily because she had never found another match.

Liz came to a halt next to me and asked if I cared to ride Tip. I nodded my head as I craned my neck to look up at her. The moment I got on Tip, I believed that I had fallen in love. You could see all of Rosewood from his back, which stood over sixteen hands. Tip’s stride was smooth, and he responded to my every movement. From the start I could tell he was more advanced than any horse I’d ever ridden, but this only made me want to call him mine even more. I’d been ready to move on to higher levels, but did Liz think I was ready, too?

I arrived home that night after a long day of barn chores to find my parents waiting for me. Liz had told them I rode the new horse, and they were curious to hear if I had liked him or not. As I shared my feelings, they started to smile and throw quick glances to one another. I stopped, thinking they weren’t listening to me and that they didn’t actually care.

Finally my dad said, “If you like him so much, why don’t we just lease him?”

My vision blurred and I could feel my mouth getting dry. Leasing a horse? You meant to say that for once I could call a horse mine and love him without the burden of knowing that he truly belonged to someone else? For once I could go out to the barn and ride whenever I wanted without needing permission? For once I could share with my friends all about my horse instead of hearing them brag about theirs for days on end?

I arrived at the barn one day for a lesson and went out to get Tip, but couldn't find him in his pasture. I walked around the pond, over the hill, and past the tree line, but the handsome bay was nowhere in sight. My phone buzzed in my riding boot. Liz called to say that Tip was in a stall. When I asked why, Liz told me to come back to the barn and she'd tell me in person. Only a few weeks after we started the lease, Tip was horribly injured. Liz suspected a large tree branch somehow scraped his back to a point where a gouge formed and he became unrideable. The wound was treated and kept clean. It only took a couple of months for him to completely heal, but I would never ride him again.

Once Strong and Healthy

It takes three people to unwrap the bandages. Those at the vet school had to use six layers of gauze. Finally the last bandage is removed to reveal the startling wound. I look away praying that it isn't as bad as it seems.

Too many injuries. Too much pain and disappointment. Dugo's rain rot has spread from his back to down his legs and under his belly. Any more and he'll be a bald horse. Attempts to dry his skin are futile in the wet season.

Tip's wound had healed, but Liz had no one riding him. I guess he was still sore or maybe he was still scared. When given medication, he would pull away every time someone would try to get close. Fear that he would soon be afraid of a human's touch, Liz instructed people to give him space and always present treats. Being pampered far too much, Tip became rude and arrogant.

And now this. I stand staring, with blood-soaked wraps in my arms. Yet another wound must be dealt with, but this time it's my favorite horse. There is no bone, tissue, cartilage, or muscle, just a mammoth hole in the center of Dragon's back right leg. He sways from side to side trying to find a more comfortable position to stand, and I watch the agony in his movements.

Once Liz cleans out and re-bandages the wound, I maneuver Dragon back into his stall. What usually takes three easy strides is now the distance of eight throbbing steps. After a treat and a quick kiss, I collapse into the car to go home.

As my dad pulled out of the driveway, I looked out the window to see Rosewood through the chain linked fence, growing smaller on the horizon.

the troublesome memories of a guinea pig

PEYTON WENDELBURG

The beige stone walls, the *whoosh* of the glass and metal doors, and then the sounds and smells of pets large and small filled my senses. I was in the second grade. My mom, my sister, and I had just made it to the pet store to pick out my guinea pig.

My parents had promised me that if I showed that I could be responsible by reading a book every day for a whole month, I could get my own guinea pig. (Now that I look back on how easy the books I read were—two of which were ten-page books about the planets of our solar system—I think it's safe to say it was the best deal ever.) We found the glass display pens that held the guinea pigs. The others held all sorts of other rodents. I had already pictured the kind of guinea pig I would like to have: a guinea pig with jet-black fur. However they didn't have one. Instead what they had was so much better. In the pen stood a young guinea pig, his entire rear half smooth black, a mane as white as snow, and with patches of black on his eyes, separated by a white strip that extended from his mane to his nose, with the patch on right larger than the one on the left. He was the most adorable thing I had ever seen and I knew he was the one for me. I already knew what I was going to name him. Pickles. (Don't ask me why—I must have seen it on a T.V. show and liked it, I guess.)

When we finally got home, my stomach fluttered with excitement. We (and by "we" I mean Mom) had just finished up setting Pickles' cage. A three foot by two foot cage with a red bottom. Inside

the cage was a wooden hut in the center, a green food dish, a water bottle, a green hay feeder, as well as multiple toys scattered around, from tiny ball cages with a bell in each one to a little wooden puzzle with a nut in it. The cage was put on my wooden desk against a wall in my bedroom.

My mom suggested that we take him out and handle him a little bit so he would get used to people. I was very excited when I heard this. My mom, my sister, and I were all sitting on the carpet in my room. My mom was the first one to hold him. She put him in her lap, and he just kind of looked around. Then it was my turn, and all my excitement was replaced by nervousness. *Please don't bite, please don't bite, please don't bite!* I thought to myself.

I thought he was about to bite me so I put him on the ground, from where he then ran straight under my bed. We all then tried to get him out in any way we could think of: we tried to lure him out with vegetables and guinea pig food, we tried to flank or corner him, but nothing worked. Eventually my dad came in with a sweep and managed to pull him out.

*

"Pickles, no!" my mom screamed.

I looked over to where Pickles was, nibbling at the new red plant my mom got recently. I quickly took the plant away from him.

"Don't worry, Mom," I said. "He just had a few small bites out of the plant."

"Peyton, that plant is poinsettia. It's poisonous—it could kill him," my mom said.

I paled after hearing that. "No. NO! I don't want Pickles to die!"

"Relax, Peyton. Maybe he didn't eat enough to kill him. I'll look into it while you're at school," my mom said.

I couldn't stop thinking about Pickles and worrying. When I got home, I went straight up to check on him and ask Mom how he was doing. My mom said she searched the web, called the vet and poison control, and they all said you have to have a large amount to worry about it. Pickles was perfectly fine—not even a stomach ache or indi-

gestion, as far as I know. After that incident, I have been much more cautious about almost everything.

*

During summer break the year before fifth grade, my dad really wanted me to read something. Don't get me wrong: reading is totally fine by me, but I don't want to be forced to read something that I am not interested in. Which is exactly what my dad did. My dad wanted me to read the first book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but I had already seen the movie and it's hard for me to read the book the movie's based off of after I have seen the movie. So I was in my room, on top of the blue quilt on my bed, bored out of my mind. I looked around my light sky blue room (some would consider it Carolina blue). My bed took up a majority of the room, my dresser that held all my clothes was on the side my bed, and I had a small "library" right across from it. My "library" held mostly books from my childhood past. I looked back at the book in my hands and then decided to get Pickles out, and have him on my lap as I read. Unfortunately for C. S. Lewis and Pickles, this was only a day or two after my annual attempt to stay up for twenty-four hours straight (probably something I saw on TV), so I was still recovering from my lack of sleep.

It's 5:44 in the morning. I'm in the same clothes that I was in yesterday, and I'm under a blanket, but not the usual blue quilt on my bed. A few hours later, when everyone started to wake up, I asked my parents what happened. They said I had fallen asleep reading. I honestly wasn't surprised, what with me still recovering from my "stay awake for twenty-four hours" attempt, trying to read a book that bores me, and to top it off sitting on an extremely comfortable bed like mine, I'm surprised I didn't fall asleep sooner. What had me worried, though, was Pickles. Was he alright? I still had him with me when I passed out . . . Did he crawl away somewhere?

They said when they came into my room and found out I was still asleep, Pickles was right there, in my lap the entire time. They put him back in his cage for me. I was very thankful that my loyal Pickles stayed where he was.

*

Some time in mid-February 2012, I noticed Pickles had stopped eating and was beginning to feel lighter. At first it didn't seem like anything, but a few days later, he felt even lighter and left even more food piling up in his bowl. Something was wrong.

I told Mom, but she said it was just my imagination. I was not so convinced. I had also noticed he was not as active as he usually was. I had him out with me on the kitchen table. He was in his little bed we got him for Christmas, a small brown bowl with fabric all around the inside. He didn't seem to be moving around like he usually did, and he wasn't eating his parsley.

Okay, that's not right. Parsley is his favorite, and he has barely had anything this week, I thought to myself.

I picked him up, and he felt as light as the first day we got him. This time I knew that something wasn't right, and I went right to the couch Mom was on in the living room to tell her again that something was wrong. This time however, I had undeniable proof.

"Mom, something is wrong with Pickles," I said, cradling him in my arms.

"What's wrong?"

"He is really getting lighter, he's not eating his food, and he is barely walking around."

"Peyton, I'm sure its nothing," she said.

Not this time, Mom, I thought to myself. "Hold him and see how much weight he has lost." I held out Pickles.

She took him in her hands, and her eyes widened at how light he was.

"Oh, something is wrong," she said.

That's what I've been saying! I internally shouted. "What do you think it is?" I asked with a hint of worry.

"I don't know," my mom said. "I'll take him to the vet tomorrow and see what's wrong."

I was content with that. I decided the best thing to do was wait and see.

A day or two later, Mom told me that Pickles had a throat infection, which was why he wouldn't eat anything, hence why he was losing weight and lacking energy. At hearing this I became really worried. Was there any way for him to get through this? I wasn't sure, and I was scared that I might lose him. After five years of having him and taking care of him, I had grown close to him. Little did I know, my fears would come true.

February 29, 2012. School had just released the students, and as I walked to my dad's car the other cars around me just felt grey. When I got to the car, I asked him how Pickles was doing. He said he passed away.

As soon as I heard that I cried and cried and cried all the way home. When we got home, I went straight to where Pickles' body was: they had him in his plastic box covered with a towel. I looked at his body. It was curled up in a ball like he did when he was sleeping, only this time he wasn't breathing and he'd never wake up. We all decided that we should bury him in the backyard. We found a patch of dirt near the fence. My dad prepared the spot and we put Pickles in a cardboard box with some bedding and his favorite toy, a wooden puzzle with a nut inside. Even after five years he still never was able to get the nut out. We put him in the hole and buried him. My sister said a few words that I didn't catch. I was silent.

*

Pickles made a big impact on my life. He taught me to be responsible, cautious, and more caring. He was almost like a son to me. He made me happy when I was sad, calm when I was angry, and he made memories for me that I will never forget.

Five years ago, when I walked into that pet store, I had no idea what impact that day would have on the rest of my life.



SHABLOYPS MALOYKS

The Durham Blues

One night I was laying on my bed when my mom walked in with an excited look on her face. I could tell that she wanted to ask me a very important question. At that moment, however, I didn't know what the question was, nor that its answer would change my life forever.

“Branson, do you want to play lacrosse?”

Before I know it, I'm in Dick's Sporting Goods. It's like heaven: all I see is footballs, basketballs, and anything else a little six year old could imagine. I want everything in the store, but my parents won't let me look at anything except lacrosse gear. We are walking over to the lacrosse section and I see a blue lacrosse stick. I'm a six-year-old boy, I like blue, so I get the stick.

At first, I played for the Durham Blues, a team focused less on hard competition and more on just getting better. I got all my gear and was ready to go to practice at the Durham Academy middle school's lower field.

Once I got there, I felt really out of place and awkward. I didn't know anybody there, or even anybody who played this sport period. But to make it even worse, the coach comes up to me and says, “You have a girls' stick.”

It was the worst possible thing that could have ever happened at that point, and it made everything even worse. Of course, the one

positive thing that happened that day was the coach gave me a stick for free and it was also blue, so I was pretty happy. Or at least as happy as I could be surrounded by judgmental ten year-olds. It was just honestly the worst way to start off a day, or even start a sport.

But that coach who told me I had a girls' stick? We are still in touch, and he's been a great coach for me. He doesn't just tell you how to do things; he shows you. He doesn't cupcake you, but he isn't too mean. He'll let you know if you did something right, but he will really let you know if you did something wrong. Little did I know, he would inspire me in more than just how to play lacrosse.

The Cannons

I play for the Durham Blues to this day, but after a while, I felt like I was good enough to play for a more competitive team: the Cannons. I wanted to see if I was good enough to play up to their level.

The day of the tryouts, my knees were shaking, and I had butterflies in my stomach. We did line drills, where you work on your ball skills by passing back and forth; we ran about a mile; we then did some sprints; and finally the whole group trying out played games against one another. I thought I played well and had worked hard enough to get a spot on the roster.

The coach said he would post the roster on the website in a few days. I was nervous that whole week and checked every single day when I got home from school.

"Why haven't they posted anything?" I yelled as I checked yet again. I was so mad, I refreshed the page and—POW! It was there. At first, I was scared to look, but finally I made up my mind to read it: "Owen, Tyler, Jake . . . BRANSON."

I immediately called my mom.

"Really? That's great news! I am so proud of you," she said, and I knew that my dad and sister were, too.

When I went to the very first practice, I saw that everyone who tried out was there. I was confused but didn't really care because as long as I was on the team, things were fine.

BRANSON GILBERT

Our first tournament was in Charlotte. It was so hot that on the turf it was about a hundred degrees. It was like that all day. Even though I almost passed out, we were dominating all the other teams. We won all of our games, so we were number one going into the championship. We were up against a team we killed by a lot in the first rounds. My stomach had been hurting all day, but I still played through the game and tried my best. The clock was ticking down: 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . 0! We won! It was our first time playing together, and we pulled through and won the whole thing!

The U-13

The year after that season ended I tried out for the U-13 team. I was really nervous because I was playing with guys two to three years older than me. They seemed a lot bigger and taller than me at the time because I was only eleven. To make things worse, I tried out for a position that I didn't even play, which was attack. I usually played defense. At tryouts we ran about a mile, then ran some sprints, then did some shooting drills, and in the last thirty minutes everybody came together and played games. I was starting to get used to this.

After tryouts, I could literally feel sweat rushing off my head. I didn't think I'd played well at all. I hadn't even tried out with my own position. In short, I just didn't feel good.

They said they would post the team on the website in the next week. So every day after I got home from school, I would check the website. Every day I would get my hopes up, but it wouldn't be there. It felt like *deja vu* from last year. Then one day when I checked, it was there.

“Sean, McCabe, Jay . . .”

My name wasn't there. I couldn't believe it. I cried for the next hour, maybe the next two. I called my mom and told her the sad news. “Mommy? I didn't make the team.”

“I'm sorry. I know how much you wanted to be on the team and I know hard you played at tryouts,” she said.

"I know I tried my hardest, but I still didn't make the team."

"Well I'll call Daddy and tell him. All you have to do is practice more and more, and don't let anyone stop you from trying to accomplish your goal," she said.

The next year, I started practicing in December, two days a week almost every week to get prepare for tryouts. I was ready to play. That year, I tried out for my normal position, defense. I was also bigger and stronger than I was last year, so I thought I would have a better chance. We ran two miles and sprints, then we did advanced line drills, and in the last thirty minutes we played a few games. I was confident in how I played, but I was also very nervous.

I didn't check the website everyday this time. I didn't even want to know. When the roster came out, I was asleep on the living room floor in the living room because it was around nine o'clock and I was watching basketball with my parents. I guess while I was sleeping they checked the website and noticed that they have posted the roster. They found my name and screamed like they were at a Duke basketball game. Though I was still half-asleep, I learned then to never give up my goals—if I worked hard enough, I could reach them.

Triangle Select Lacrosse

My next team was Triangle Select Lacrosse. Together, we worked hard to make it to the Patriot Games, a tournament in Philadelphia.

At the hotel we stayed up until 10:30 even though we had games the next day. We would usually hang out at the pool, which had a huge slide *and* a hot tub. But little did we know, the fun would come to an end the next morning.

The last day of the tournament as we were warming up, I saw this huge team walk by. I thought to myself, *They are really big. I hope we don't have to play them.* Their shortest player was like 5' 8", and veins popped out of their arms every time they moved. Their jerseys were black and gold. The Pittsburgh Thrashers.

Well, we did have to play them.

Immediately after starting the game, they take control of the ball and begin to call out all these plays—“Carolina,” “Syracuse,” “Duke.” Of course, all of their plays were names of really good college lacrosse teams.

I had to guard a 5' 9" giant. I was confident in how I was playing, but he was a lot taller and bigger than me—I was short (I still am). I was worried I'd mess up and let him score. In the first half, they had the ball for around ten minutes, leading to three goals.

At sound of the horn for halftime, we ran off the field to the sideline and huddled up. Our coach laid it on us. “They’re outplaying you. I know you can play better than that. Come on, you’re playing like you want to lose. Play like you want it, like you need it! Come on now, let’s go play hard and win!”

We exploded out of the gates at the beginning of the second half, scoring twice in a row. After two more goals, we had taken a one point lead. With one minute left in the game, we thought we had it in the bag—we thought we had won. We even had the ball. But it was stolen. The time keeper counted down: “Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . .”

Come on, there is no way! No!

The fastest player on their team sprinted down the field and right as the time keeper said “one,” they scored.

In overtime, we scored right from the start and ended up winning the game. We dogpiled Josh Zawada, who had scored the game-winning goal. In the middle of all of it, sweat and the smell of victory draped the pile. It hurt because the bigger guys were laying on top of me, but I didn’t even care. We had won, and the adrenaline was rushing through my body.

Fall Ball

I arrive at Fall Ball, eight years after the girls’ lacrosse stick fiasco, ready to help coach the new little kids. It is cold and early, but I am excited to help. I teach the kids how to play lacrosse in the same program that taught me.

I’m working with the third and fourth graders, and there is a

little kid named Duncan. He's really good, but he messes around a lot. He always hits me with his stick. It doesn't really hurt but it can get kind of annoying at times. But I can't get mad because he's just a little kid, who not surprisingly reminds me of myself.

It's amazing how eight years ago I was standing where they are standing and being taught the same thing they are being taught. I am on the same field I learned on. And now I am the teacher.

hills

IRENE ZHANG

I.

"Irene, you should join cross country!"

I groan. Lylah has been pestering me about this for months.

"No way," I complain. "Too much work."

Lylah pouts. "Come on, I don't know anyone on the team! I don't want to be alone."

"Find someone else to do it," I reply, not wanting to do anything that involves sweating. Sweat is gross. Lylah has plenty of friends.

"Come on, it'll be fun!" she says desperately. I feel kind of bad for her now.

I know she's right. I should do a sport. Running would really help me get stronger, and it would look good on my college applications. Cross country is practically a walk-on sport too, so getting on the team wouldn't be hard. However, I am also a lazy seventh grader who has run a mile only once for gym. Well, technically I walked a mile, but that's the same thing.

"Jailynne might do it," Lylah tries in a sorry attempt to convince me.

"No one even knows what cross country is, Lylah," I retort.

"Pleaaaaassee" she whines, tugging on my arm.

"Fine," I say, giving in, "I'll go to conditioning and see what it's like, okay?" Lylah cheers in celebration, and I already begin to regret my decision.

*

I hand in my forty-six dollar physical to our coach, a light brown skinned man in his forties or fifties with a loose t-shirt and a Duke University baseball cap.

“Alright guys,” says the man, “I’m Coach Morgan. Now, cross country is a hard-ass sport, so y’all better know what you’re signing up for, okay?”

I’m already debating the option of quitting in my mind as I follow Lylah and the rest of the team outside.

The July sun burns fiercely, sending waves of heat rippling from the sidewalk. The sweat clinging to my shirt and my sudden inability to breathe make me feel like I’m drowning. The trees shelter us with their long, stretching branches, but I am too busy to notice, wondering why my stomach feels like it’s trying to pull itself inside out. The bushes lining the edge of the trail are littered with vibrant purple flowers. One of my teammates grabs a handful of the violet flora and shoves it in his mouth.

I wince as I trudge through the mud, following Lylah with Jai-lynne close behind. The cold, wet substance trickles down my leg and onto my yellow Nike shoes as we storm through yet another wonderful puddle. It’s like I’m wading in the ocean of the worst sport ever.

“Okay, one more lap,” Coach Morgan says. It takes a lot not to punch him right now.

*

Cameron, one of my best friends, catches me in the hall a month later. She’s the kind of person who gives everyone a nickname (I’ve been called Reeny Bean, Noodles, That Asian, and Smart Person so far), but as she traipsed back across the hallway, she grins cheekily and says, “See ya later, Cross Country!”

I feel a little undeserving of the name as I walk away. Sure, I run cross country, but that doesn’t mean I like it.

II.

My first invitational (whatever that meant) was at Guilford College. Coach Morgan had signed us up for the meet, but only three

girls and two boys show up at six in the morning at the end of the sidewalk by Rogers-Herr. The morning air is so cold that I can almost feel the ice forming in my lungs. I sneeze, breaking the silence before we climb into Rachel's mother's large white Honda SUV. The car ride is an hour and a half long. Rachel, Margaret and I spend it napping, not used to getting up so early in the morning.

The campus of the college is full of middle schoolers, all wearing brightly colored, sleeveless tops and matching shorts. They all look like insanely good runners. A crowd of people stands in front of the green Porta Potties by the parking lot, waiting their turn. Coach sends us off on a warm up, allowing us to explore the premises a bit.

"You know college kids run eight miles in cross country," Rachel says as a horde of college students passes us on the gravel path. I almost fall over in response to her comment.

"In high school, they run three miles," she adds.

"Eight miles? Three miles? I can barely run two!" I exclaim. *I am never doing cross country after middle school*, I tell myself as we head back to the start area.

As soon as we get there, I am handed a thin piece of paper with the number 126 printed in bold lettering. I pin it to the front of my bright blue uniform as we receive the standard pep talk of "run your pace, do your best" from Coach Morgan.

There are so many people. I had no idea that this many people ran cross country, or even knew it was a sport. The start-finish line is filled with girls from schools all over North Carolina, private schools, public schools, Catholic schools, and charter schools alike. As the ear-popping gun goes off, I am caught in the stream of girls and allow them to carry me across the field and onto the grinding gravel path. The trees fly by in a fiery blur of velvet red, crisp orange, and yellow as I race up the hill past the next group of girls.

I scan the crowd and find Rachel not too far in front of me. I attempt to keep my eye on her as she loops around the trail, the golden grass and stampede of sweating middle school girls obscuring my view. I find her again as she races through the chute of flags, myself running half a minute behind. The minimal crowd yells as people finish, ringing obnoxiously loud cowbells and snapping pictures.

“Churn the butter!” someone yells as I finish. I cross the line laughing. The man at the end scribbles my number down on a stiff brown clipboard and looks at me like I’m crazy. I couldn’t care less. With the post-meet endorphins rushing through my system, I’m on top of the world. That man can think what he wants.

I came in twenty-eighth, a pretty good place in my opinion. All five of us buy t-shirts from an over-decorated tent. Mine is at least two sizes too large, and rainbow tie-dyed with the words “Cross Country is a Mental Sport, and We’re All Insane” written in black Papyrus font across the chest. I put it on anyway, now matching my teammates, who have purchased the same shirt.

We stop by a Chick-Fil-A on our way home, walking in one behind the other, sporting our bright tie-dye shirts like a band of hippies.

*

I’m seated on the stairs next to Lylah the next Monday, listening to Coach fuss out the kids that didn’t go, complaining about how the boys could have won it. I know we could have won too, but I wouldn’t change a thing about the meet. I went to my first invitation-al and all I got was a crappy t-shirt. But I think I’m okay with that.

IV.

I sneeze. It’s probably sub-sixty in October and smart ol’ Irene just had to leave her jacket at home. Not that this vivid baby blue sleeveless nylon uniform isn’t amazingly toasty. The wind whistles in the branches of the tall oaks. The leaves are brightly colored, forming a rainbow of red and orange in the treetops. I don’t actually notice much because my shoes are caked in slimy brown mud and Jailynne and Isaiah have begun singing “I’m Sexy and I Know It” by LMFAO while doing some slightly inappropriate interpretive dancing.

Conference is the grand finale of the cross country season. It’s where all the kids from all the public schools compete to see which team is the best. Our school is hosting it at Forest Hills Park because we’ve won the most meets. Basically, we’re the already the best. Our coach’s job is to shoot the starting gun and tell everyone the rules.

The boys race first, something I find a bit unfair (Excuse you, it's ladies first. Learn your manners.) because standing in the wind and anticipating the upcoming race kind of sucks. I'd rather run and get the pressure over with. I follow my teammates as we jog over a slightly worn wooden bridge to find an adequate place along the course to cheer for the guys. Cameras flash and people cheer as the first boy appears at the end of the trail. I join in, watching each of the guys run by.

"Are you nervous?" Lylah asks as the guys bound across the finish line.

"What? Me? Nervous? No way," I say sarcastically. "This is only what we've been training for since July. I'm not nervous at all."

Though I know I'm doing it for humor, part of me wants to convince myself that I am totally calm and nonchalant about the race, which is probably impossible, but I can dream, right?

Girls from every team begin to walk toward the start line. *Okay, Irene. Pre-game pep talk*, I think to myself. *The faster you run, the faster you finish, so run like there's an ax murderer behind you.*

"Runners set!"

The pistol goes off, and I start out. I force my legs across the field and up the hills and the red-leaved maple trees look like they've been set ablaze. My calves feel like they've been set ablaze too, but that's beside the point. The wind blows my hair back as I pass a group of girls who have begun to slow down. I feel my feet kick the ground back as the leaves fly by, leaving them in the dust (or, technically, in the leaves, if that seems a little bit more realistic).

I can feel the adrenaline and the energy carrying my legs across the grass, the mud splashing up on my calves as I storm through the puddles, the raging autumn scenery blurring past me as I race up the hill. My feet are nothing more than yellow Nike shoes, and I barely manage to keep my legs moving.

Finally, I can feel the banners brush my arms as I force my legs to sprint faster, slowing to a stop as someone hands me an index card that I grip between frozen fingers. I can hear the crowd again, their annoying cheering and that stupid cowbell (seriously, I look nothing like a cow). Despite the fact that my lungs are on fire and the soreness in my legs paired with the wonderfully pleasant throbbing blood

running through my head is making me nauseous, I can also feel the happiness when I hold that seventh individual place plaque.

And somehow, that feels great.

V.

I walk out of the bathroom in a pair of neon yellow Under Armour shorts and an old Duke Crop Walk t-shirt I've cut the sleeves and neck off of. The air is humid and damp as we jog our warm-up, our shoes making light thumping sounds on the worn dirt path.

The September sky is brightly lit. The beams of sunlight ripple through the green leaves of the deciduous trees that cluster on the edge of the beaten-down trail. We leap over the rippling creeks that twist through the trees and cut the path.

When we get back, we've got a strength circuit waiting for us. Squats. Step-Ups. V-Crunches. Form Runs. Hills. Rinse and repeat. We stride across the football field, kicking back grass and dirt, forcing our muscles to drag our bodies up the hills.

Two years ago, I told myself I wouldn't do high school cross country, and yet here I am doing just that. Lylah convinced me to join cross country, but the team convinced me to stay. I remember laughing that day Jacob shoved those purple flowers in his mouth. I remember joining Nick in throwing his shoes across the football field. Mostly, I remember crossing that finish line in October two years ago, with the cheering crowd and the adrenaline rushing through my head and knowing that I wanted to do it again. I've concluded that the best part of cross country isn't the running, or the endorphins. It's the people that you run with and the hilariously stupid things they end up doing.

"You know, I've got a friend who plays football, and he saw us doing hills the other day," Celia says, her curly, golden hair bouncing off her back as we jog back to the concession stand. She nods towards the football players on the softball field. "He asked me if we were doing them because we were late to practice because that's what they make football players do. I told him, 'Nah, we run hills for fun.'"

how to run and not get ANYWHERE

ALEX CHEN

Start of a Legend

I don't like exercise. It was never something I wanted to do, no matter how little. Both of my parents knew that. So when I announced that I needed a physical to try out for the cross country team, *she actually turned off ABC World News!* I knew something was up from that moment on.

My mother turned to me and asked, "Do we need to go to the psychiatric ward?"

I sighed. So she doubted my ability. That's what was going on.

"Well, if you collapse in the middle of it and can't get back up, I'll have to say I told you so."

She relented. The next afternoon, after school, I didn't take the bus home or go to practice. I sat on the sidewalk outside the carpool lane. My mother arrived, tapped the horn, and I immediately jumped up, ran over, and got in.

"Took you long enough," my mother said.

After we got my physical, I started practicing again. I loved the feeling of being able to go wherever my legs could carry me, without having to worry about my eligibility as an athlete. Before I knew it, the first race was nearly upon me.

The coach summoned me to a private meeting. He had told us that he would talk to us one-on-one in his room the day before the first meet. He had already met with almost everyone else in private.

I went second-to-last, since I ranked as the second-to-best runner on the team. As soon as I stepped into his dingy-looking office, he said, "If you don't throw up tomorrow, you're off the team."

"Why?" I blurted out.

"Because if you don't, I know you aren't trying hard enough. You are dismissed."

I didn't know what to think after that encounter. That night, I was torn between wanting to throw up to impress him, or not throwing up to keep a civilized look. The next morning, I was still undecided. So, I went to Matthew, our first runner, for help.

"Don't listen to that bum-ass coach. He crazy if he be thinking that I finna throw up."

That sounded like a good philosophy to me, so I decided to stick with it. After school, we got changed and went on our warm-up, which consisted of a half-mile around the school, then stretching and patiently waiting. When the white activity bus turned in, the already nervous atmosphere suddenly grew tense with anticipation. The competition from W. G. Pearson stepped off the bus, and promptly one of them slipped in the mud and fell with a sickening thud.

"Did you see that?!" we asked each other excitedly.

"Yeah, man, they suck even more than we do!"

"Alright, this is gonna be so easy!"

Before we knew it, the call to the starting line was announced. We all clustered together on one line, getting ready for the nudging and jostling of the start of a race. The feelings inside me composed mostly of anticipation. I did not feel fear. The coach had us thoroughly learn the course the week before, so when the gun sounded, it was with a feeling of confidence, even elation, that I burst off the line and went straight to the front behind Matthew and a guy from W. G. The course wound around the school four times. As we started the second loop, I felt good. I kept right up there with Matthew. There was a lead pack, composed of me, Matt, and the W. G. guy. As the third loop came around, there came a feeling of someone clamping a tight hand around my waist. "No, not now!" I thought to myself. I couldn't shake it, however, and by the third loop I was no longer with the pack of leaders but with the pack behind the leaders. My

insides felt as if my heart had waged war on my lungs. I struggled through, getting passed by about five W. G. people. By the time I crossed the finish line, I did indeed double over and purge my stomach contents right next to the chute.

So, on my first race I threw up, not because I tried too hard, but because I got a stomach cramp. Go figure.

Districts

A year and a half had passed since my first cross-country race. Since spring surrounded us, track season was starting off with a bang, literally. The previous fall cross-country season had passed without incident. I finished in the top ten in the county for middle schoolers. I went into track season feeling full of myself, confident I would repeat the top ten feat in the eight hundred meter run for the district meet.

I did well, running all of the regular season meets and pretty much winning all of them. I only lost two races that season, and the people I lost to surely would beat me again at districts. There was Dylan and Quin from Githens, Daniel from Shepard, and Jalen from Carrington. They were the competition going into districts, the final meet, which involved all middle schools in Durham competing in one meet.

The morning of the meet I had three bowls of Frosted Flakes along with a banana. I wanted to have as much energy as possible. School passed by, and then 2:20 p.m. came. Sprinters, throwers, and distance runners alike took over two tables in the cafeteria. While waiting for our coaches to arrive, we all sat with people who did similar events, because sprinters and distance runners do not like each other. However, we were a team today, with one goal of winning. I sat with Nick, who ran the fastest mile out of all of us, and Ben, who ran both the eight hundred and the mile.

“How do you think you’ll do today?” I addressed this to Ben and Nick.

“I got these new spikes, so I’m gonna do good,” responded Ben.

"I got new spikes too! But I went to Europe for most of the season and I stuffed myself on sausages and French baguettes, so I can't run as fast as I used to," said a very demoralized Nick. Nick did indeed get slower, because last year in seventh grade, he had run 5:25 in the mile. This year however, all that he could manage was 5:53. He had no confidence for his improvement, either.

"Well, I also got new spikes, and I plan to put them to good use," was all I responded with.

The coaches arrived and said something about us being the defending champions, and we had to win again so we could be the first to win back-to-back. Then came inspirational speeches by the head coach, the sprint coach, and the athletic director. We were dismissed to the locker rooms to change. The air in the locker room was charged with confidence. The general opinion was that we Rams from Rogers-Herr Middle had the best-looking uniforms in the district.

"My singlet looks especially good today!" I said to no one in particular. "I ironed it for half an hour last night!"

"No one cares," someone said back.

I bit my tongue. I was wondering if I should have said something back, but I decided against it. We all needed to focus on the upcoming task, which was winning districts. The bus ride flew by. Our team was the first one there and promptly set up our shelter and began drinking Gatorade and eating snacks high in carbs, like pretzels and granola bars. Since the distance races were near the end, I got to sit out for an hour or two, and by the time they announced the eight hundred, I was pretty bored and itching to go. I immediately sat up, and yelled at my two teammates to come on and start stretching.

We jogged over to the grassy field, ran around it a couple of times, and then it was time for us to line up to walk to the starting line with the meet directors. As we were walking, I wondered, *Why are they making us walk to the start? Why can't they just expect us to walk there by ourselves? We have enough responsibility.*

The short walk over to the starting line tensed up with hostility. There were two races, one for the faster runners and one for the slower runners. Ben and Matt were in Heat One, the slower group. I was in Heat Two, along with everybody else that was fast. While

the first race went on, I peered over my shoulder, half watching and half stretching. I felt like I could not stretch enough, and when the first race ended, anger ran through my body because I felt I hadn't stretched properly. Those feelings quickly evaporated however, as the competitors were asked to the starting line.

Bam! went the gun, and off I went, keeping pace with the leaders. By the first curve, I kept up in third place. The pace seemed about what I expected. As the second lap started, I pumped my arms and felt good. The movement of my lungs had gradually begun to increase, and it got to a point where I was struggling to keep up. But I did, and on the final straight I was still in third. However, pounding footsteps were sounding behind me, and I had no idea who they belonged to until the owner crept up beside and started to edge past. I quickly glanced right and saw that it was Quin, who had beat me last year. I had no intention of letting him beat me again. I dug down deep, found whatever energy I had left, and pounded away at the rubber track. Quin must've been digging deeper, for he eventually passed me and took the third spot. I was half a second behind in fourth.

The day after, I was so angry with myself. I realized, however, that there is always a person better than you at something, so we just have to learn to accept it and let it go. I fully committed to running at the end of this race, and eagerly looked forward to running for Jordan the following year. I also knew Quin would be attending Jordan. This motivated me to train harder so I could beat him.

The Shoe Store

"Hey, Mom. I need new shoes. My old ones look like they have gone through a meat grinder."

"No need for imagery. Sure, as long as you put them to good use."

My old sneakers had been worn down so badly, I decided to donate them to one of the containers where you can just drop stuff like shoes in, and they get donated. It felt really bad though, knowing a homeless shelter somewhere would soon receive a pair of shoes that belonged with ground beef in the grocery store. But my mom had

insisted we didn't keep them inside the house. However, I felt good because I was getting replacements.

I had seen an advertisement a couple of weeks ago about a pair of running shoes that had been recently been released by a company called Brooks. Brooks are known for their running shoes, so I decided that these new models couldn't be bad. I never knew that would be the biggest underestimation of my life.

The day before my mom had scheduled to buy shoes, I went to bed super hyped. The idea of getting new shoes had become very alien to me since I hadn't had a new pair in about two years. When I woke, I immediately sat up, like in a movie when a character wakes up from a scary dream.

"It's a brand new day, the sun is shining," I started to sing.

I felt wonderful, more so than I had in months. All the tension in my shoulders was gone. There was an extra spring in my step as soon as I jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom to brush my teeth. By the time I went downstairs, everyone in the house, and possibly the neighbor's house could hear my loud, shrill screams of sheer delight.

"Why you so excited?" my mom asked me.

"BECAUSE I'M GETTING NEW SHOES!" The glass next to me almost shattered.

"Calm down, son. Back in Mao-controlled China, we got new shoes every thirty years. All the new shoes went to the commies."

"Well, guess what Mom? We're in the twenty-first century and all those cobweb-covered memories of your suffering by communist rule are gone!" I knew it was harsh, but I could not deal with any negativity on this happy day.

As we arrived at the store, I could barely contain my excitement. I tried to remember what it felt like the last time I got new shoes, but I couldn't. As we entered, I couldn't help but marvel at all those colors displayed on the walls. All sorts of shirts, pants, shoes, and accessories were available for the customer to take in. I even saw out of the corner of my eye, an exquisitely colored t-shirt with a price tag of 110 dollars. I pointed this out to my mom. "Hey, Mom, how could they ever get away with selling that?"

“You’ll understand that when you’re older,” she replied.

I did not question this further, for my mind focused on shoes and shoes only. When I saw it, the one shoe on its display, hanging from a wall, my heart leapt. Here was what I had been dreaming about for more than a month. Immediately, I grabbed it and started admiring it at all angles, turning it over and almost touching it with my face.

The guy who gets the right size for you came up to me and asked, “These babies are hot. I only got size nine to twelve. You want one?”

“Yes please, nine and a half.” I replied, thinking that luck had found me today, because I wore size nine and a half.

Turns out, they fit me perfectly. I tied the laces as tight as possible, then came walking around the fake track-looking thing on the floor. When I made sure they fit me perfectly, I told my mom, who was off doing her own shopping, “I just found some gloves for my feet. They fit so perfectly.”

“Well, alright then, let’s go!”

The checkout passed swiftly, and for the next few weeks, I would just sit there and stare at the box, as if staring at them could make the time come faster for when I could wear them. It was pathetic, really, how much time I spent just staring at the box. I would take them out, put them on, walk around the house, and then put them back in the box again. This pattern went on for about a month. One day, at school, there was an announcement that track was starting early. I practically skipped home from the bus stop.

High School Rubbing and Racing

Over the next few weeks, as I ran with my new shoes on, middle school gradually got so that the teachers started giving you less homework, and they didn’t care as much when you broke the rules. That’s because another year at Rogers-Herr Year-Round Middle School was nearing its end, and I was getting ready to graduate. That meant going to high school and traversing the huge bridge between middle school and high school cross country.

Graduation went smoothly, and before I knew it, summer training had started for Jordan cross country. The first runs started at the Al Buehler Trail, which is a hilly, three-mile loop that winds around the Washington Duke Inn golf course. I knew that some of my freshman friends were going to be there, so I wasn't worried about getting dropped big time by the more experienced juniors and seniors.

I woke up at six-thirty on the first day of summer. Not something I usually did, but neither was high school. I brushed my teeth and only ate a granola bar because the training would start at seven sharp. I didn't want to eat too much and get stomach cramps.

"Are you ready?" my mother asked me as I was checking the laces on my shoes. We were currently driving along Hope Valley road, on the way to the Al Buehler.

"Yeah, it shouldn't be too hard. It's only the first day, and the old guys are expecting new guys," I explained.

"I'll take your word for it," my mom said.

When I got there, I saw Matt from my seventh-grade cross country days, and immediately brightened up a little. I knew that I had improved more than Matt in eighth grade, so I wouldn't be last on everything. On the first day, there were only two freshmen. The rest were returning sophomores and seniors. Surprisingly, there were no juniors. At seven sharp, everyone started running, and since we didn't know what to do, we just fell in step a little ways behind them.

"What do you think we're doin'?" Matt asked me.

"Let's find out," I said simply.

Turns out, the workout of the day consisted of running up and down one of the big hills eight times. The task seemed simple enough, but I knew my body could change in a heartbeat, literally. It was with great caution and control of my speed that I started running up the hill. This particular one slanted up at almost a ninety-degree angle, and lasted for about a quarter mile. After four up and downs, pain started springing up in my legs. I couldn't have been feeling worse than Matthew because I had lapped him on the fifth hill. We exchanged some positive grunts of encouragement. I was getting ready to walk by then, but Matt's determination to finish running pushed me on as well.

When I finally finished, my chest moved up and down so hard that I collapsed on the ground and lay there. When I finally mustered enough strength to sit up, I found that everyone else finished and left for the main meeting point. I felt that I owed Matt some thanks, so I waited for him to finish. A considerable amount of time passed before he crossed the line for the eighth time, but I still clapped him on the back, and said, "Good job, yo. You were the only reason I finished."

"You would have done the same for me," he replied.

From then on, I had more of a feeling of friendship than I ever had for anyone. I didn't have a brother, but Matt probably would've been more of a brother than mine. We returned to the parking lot, the team's meeting point, and found that no one else was there. They had all done the cool down and left. This was the case in many practices over the summer, but Matt and I always waited for each other.

My mom didn't talk to me on the ride home because she knew that I was tired. As soon as we stepped through the doorway, she asked, "Are you sure you want continue to do this? You didn't look too good out . . . Are you okay?!"

I made a dash for the bathroom, and guess what? I threw up.

dress-up

SERENA PALMER

Graduation

I rubbed my eyes and lifted my head off the pillow. The clock read six o' three. Why had I woken up so early? I asked myself, still in a sleep haze. I hadn't set an alarm or anything. Then I realized what day it was and I immediately knew I was not going back to sleep.

I hopped out of bed and went to the bathroom. I was downstairs by six fifteen. Everything seemed surreal and shone in a new light. I knew that the invisible lenses I wore would be gone soon, and I wanted to capture these last moments before time stole them from me from me. I actually had time to empty the dishwasher, something my parents had been nagging me about all year. "You've got to be responsible for middle school," etcetera. As I put the drink glasses away, they seemed so fragile, so beautiful, even though I had seen them every day of my life. My blue Hawaiian floral book bag that I had worn since first grade magically transformed from a ratty old thing that I would rather not carry into something I could pick out in a pile of school bags. It floated on my shoulders, eerily light because it contained only my dress shoved in, with no regard to wrinkles, the night before. The dress was lime green with blue polka dots lined up around the hem. It was the only dress I owned because my body had entered that awkward stage where no clothes really fit. Either it was too short, or the chest gaped, or the armholes were too big.

On ride to school, I sat on the edge of my seat trying to soak in the scenery. The trees blurred together in streaks of fluorescent green. The houses we sped past looked the same as always, which soothed my nerves because the stone angels were praying for me. When we pulled up to the curb, I hopped out and confidently walked into school, feeling that I had earned the right to strut about. The school seemed smaller now, like the doors were built for little kids, not middle schoolers. For the first hour and a half of school, the citizens of Upper Elementary (who were acting like a herd of cats hyped up on energy drinks) were directed by our teachers (who were acting like we had stolen their caffeine) to deliver ice to the library for the reception, to set up chairs, and to test the microphones.

After our tasks had been completed with gusto, we lined up by height order, which meant I stood smack dab in the middle. I both resented and felt embarrassed by this because I used to be one of the tallest kids in my class. It had given me this power, which had evaporated slowly but surely as the boys hit their growth spurts. We walked in to the gym/auditorium (which functioned as both because our school had total population of three hundred) to "We Are The Champions," performed on the piano by Corey Bledsoe, a former student. The gym had four basketball hoops hanging from the ceiling, and two smaller ones set on the ground for the younger kids. Blue ventilation pipes, big enough for me to crawl through if I somehow managed to get up there, hugged the cinderblock walls. A rock-climbing wall had been installed on the right. I had never been small enough to enjoy it, being that it was only five feet tall. The gym had lines on the floor, basketball markings. I remember putting one foot directly in front of the other, following the lines, playing line tag for the last time. My smile hung off my face like I had used old tape to fix it there.

After parading in front our parents so they could admire their beautiful offspring, we marched up the ramp beside the stage. I could barely see my feet and, even though outside the temperature felt like early summer, a damp chill crept up my arms. It smelled of dust that had been there since the school had been founded. It felt like a crypt, everyone shuffling along in total silence, the skeletons

of play scenery towering over us. The flooring had the raised circles on it that are meant to keep you from slipping, but a fine grit of sand coated it, making the circles useless. I turned the corner and followed the kid in front of me through the curtains. The lights stunned me and I couldn't see anybody in the crowd. *It's just as well, because if I could, I'd run right off this stage.*

I walked down the row of mismatched classroom chairs. A horrible image flashed into my head: my dress could be tucked into my underwear and I would never know it. It happened all the time in books. It seemed to take forever for me to reach my seat. I sat down quickly and surreptitiously checked that my underwear had not, in fact, snagged my hem, which was around my knees where it was supposed to be. I looked out at the audience, searching in vain for my parents. However, I did spot enough familiar faces to remind myself that my every move was being watched. My leg started to jog, but I stopped it quickly. Ms. Thomas had said it made us look nervous. Instead, I crossed my legs and sat on my hands, the back of my thighs sticky with sweat. We said the Pledge of Allegiance, sat down again, and heard a speech about how we were ready to go take over the world. I pledged in my mind that I would do good at all times, be a perfect little angel, and live up to all of my former teachers' expectations. Looking back on it, I had no idea what my pledge even meant. My mind was a muddy pond and I believed I saw was the bottom. It was really just the surface.

I looked up a row to where Evelyn sat with Christian, a girl who was blind, and Ms. Maness, Christian's teacher. I felt the slow march of jealousy begin in my small intestine and head up toward my heart. Evelyn had been chosen to guide her through the graduation, even though I had spent just as much time in Ms. Maness' class helping out. Before I could become totally consumed by the injustice of it all, the teachers started handing out diplomas.

Mr. Price called my name, and I stood up, smoothing my dress out in the back. I walked to the front of the stage, sweating profusely now. Ms. Thomas handed me my diploma, which I clutched in my left hand, wrinkling it a tiny bit. I shook the principal's hand and hoped that I didn't grip too tightly or have a limp sweaty fish hand.

I turned to go back to my seat, but Ms. Thomas grabbed my arm and directed me down the stairs, back out onto the gym floor. Ms. Thomas hadn't mentioned this in the itinerary. Everybody gave everybody looks that plainly said, "Do you know what's going on?" "No. Do you?" until Mr. Price pulled out the frame for backdrops covered with a sheet. A parent rolled the projector out and set it up in the middle of the floor. We knew what was going on now. Baby pictures appeared, spectres of our past, dancing in time to music. It nearly made me cry until they played "We All Live in A Yellow Submarine," a welcome relief to sadness.

The slideshow finished, and we knew what to do. Bouncing with adrenaline, we climbed back up onto the stage. There was a mad shuffle as everybody made sure they were standing next to the correct people. We stood there awkwardly for a few seconds, waiting for Ms. Thomas to hit the right combination of buttons in the right order to make the ancient sound system compatible with an iPod. A twangy guitar chord sounded, and we swung into synchronized motion, pretending that we were driving cars. Bon Jovi's hoarse voice drawled about saying goodbye and no brakes on a lost highway. I danced like what felt like Beyoncé to me, complete with hip swinging and chest thrusting, but it probably looked more like a fifth grader flapping her arms and swaying in time to the music.

We left the stage in groups of four or five because the song described how we were driving away and the groups implied that we were in cars. I had, on a sudden extroverted impulse, decided to be one of the last four people on the stage. Evelyn had left in the second "car," and I watched her walk out of the back of the auditorium, her hair glowing, never going out.

Westminster, Traditions, and Kindergarten

Like the best friends you read about in novels, like Harry and Ron, Pooh and Piglet, Bert and Ernie, and Anne and Diana, Evelyn Ritz and I met when we were two at our preschool, Westminster. Our families ended up intertwined through a series of random co-

incidences. Evelyn and I were in the same class every year, and my younger brother, Isaac, got put in the same class as her little sister, Cordia. From there, our moms set a carpool; Ms. Ritz kept corn syrup-free ketchup for my brother, who was allergic to everything under the sun; my mom would get asked if Cordia and Isaac were twins when she took them to the grocery store; and my younger sister, Roselyn, ended up being “friends,” as only a little kid can be with an older one, with Evelyn’s older sister, Georgia, because of the constant connection. Since there was a friend for everyone, our families even ended up creating our own traditions.

The Halloween pumpkin carving was the real gathering of the clans. One family would go to the other’s house. The parents brought carving knives. The kids brandished spoons, used to extract the goopy insides of the pumpkins, and Crayola washable magic markers, which we used to scribble designs that the parents would turn into masterpieces with their knives. After we finished, we’d run off to the sturdy tire swing that would blur the world until nothing existed in the universe except for you and the other people on the tire swing.

If we were at my house, we’d stay inside because my swing-set was overgrown with weeds and the whole structure rocked if you swung on it. But if you went back across the mud puddles from the swingset at her house, there was a slab of concrete right outside the basement door that was perfect for playing Groovy Girls before dinner time. We usually had pasta. We were all so hungry by that point that we gulped down every bite and then went back for more. Except Evelyn. She ate at the pace of a snail, savoring each bite, and finishing just in time for dessert. After dinner the kids would run off again and play Hi-Ho-Cheerio, Uno, or Mancala. Our favorite pastime, however, was dress-up. The Ritzes had a huge Tupperware bin filled with clown wigs, fairy wings, and high heels with blown out insoles. We dressed up like prom queens and strutted around because we were the giants of the earth and we held the world in our palms.

Of course, the shared birthday was the most logical thing to do to. Evelyn and I had the same friends and were each other’s friends,

and our birthdays were exactly five days apart. The most memorable birthday was the one with my first and only piñata. The butterfly piñata had purple wings and was filled to the top with candy. My dad hung it between a ladder and the stair banister. At the party, each tiny girl, around six years old, took a whack at it with a yellow whiffle ball bat. It did not crack. We each got a second turn, then a third one. Still, not a dent in it. "Daddy, can you try?" I asked him innocently, not realizing I was setting him up for failure. After three good whacks at this indestructible behemoth butterfly, my mom suggested a different tactic. My dad went into the kitchen, grabbed a really big knife, and performed open heart surgery on the butterfly. Goliath had been conquered, and we ate its innards.

Once Evelyn and I had finished our preschool career, we were ready to go out and vanquish the cinderblock E-shaped building that became my elementary school. I got into Morehead, the school she had gone to, through a lucky twist of fate and a phone call from the school saying that someone had dropped out. Otherwise, she would have become one of the other shadows in my memory, distorted by time. We both ended up in Ms. Faggart's room. I don't remember this time in my life as particularly stressful, but apparently I cried before going into school each day. Two times I got into trouble at school, and both involved her.

A play structure squatted in the middle of the mulch-covered playground. It had little compartments under it that you could sit in, formed by the ramps that led up to the slide. Evelyn and I would sit in them and talk. There were slits in the ramp so you could keep your grip with your feet. The slits made your ponytail prime for the pulling, and anyone who cared to eavesdrop or comment on your very important dialogue could.

This seemed to be all Jeremiah wanted to do. "Go away!" Evelyn would say. He'd just sneer at us and say, "You can't make me." One day, I got so fed up with him that I crawled out of the tiny space and . . . no, I didn't hit him. I told *Horace* to punch him, and he did, knocking out Jeremiah's two front teeth in the process. Obviously, I got sent to the principal's office, but I think I lied because I never got in trouble. I think I also lied to my mom because she remembers only

that I went to the principal's office, not that I told some kid to knock the other kid's teeth out just for intruding on a conversation.

The second time we got in trouble it was Saint Patrick's Day. In preschool at Westminster, the teachers had left gold rocks around the playground for us to find. Evelyn and I concluded that the same must be true for Morehead. We crammed ourselves into the little nook under the playground and started digging. We got about a foot down without finding gold, which was a little strange, because the treasure at Westminster had always been in plain sight. Then our mining operation was discovered.

Ms. Tye loomed over our small, huddled forms, her ankle-length black skirt whipping about her legs, her green hand clacker sounding like the teeth of children, her gray-brown hair-sprayed curls shifting only slightly in the March wind.

"What are you doing?" she boomed from the height of a mountain.

"Digging for gold." Evelyn said meekly.

"Fill that hole in right now, and don't ever dig on the playground again. That's what the sandbox is for."

I felt the blood rush to my ears in anger. *How could she not understand? How could she be so blind?* Evelyn also was infuriated by this, shown by the flaming of her cheeks.

We shoved the dirt back into the hole anyway and abandoned the scene of the crime to go sit under a different structure, where we plotted our revenge. It involved poodles and a wizard.

The Fight

In first grade, I had a very different teacher than Ms. Faggart. Ms. Faggart was all smiles and motherly affection. Coming from teaching in Washington, DC, Ms. Thomas was not. She was a young woman with a penchant for wearing slippers and using dainty office supplies while teaching kids who were not very interested in what a fraction was, their eyes darting about the classroom, trying to find something to distract themselves with, when she would snap them back to attention with a question. Evelyn and I tried to avoid contact

with her as much as possible. However, there were just some things you had to ask the teacher about.

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

“So do I.”

“You want to ask her?”

“No. I’ll go if you go.”

“I’ll go if you’ll do the talking.”

“It’s only an hour until lunch. I’ll be fine.” Self control was essential in Ms. Thomas’s class. If there was something that couldn’t wait, such as the need for a Band-Aid, we’d ask Ms. Beechum. She was the teacher who read us *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Since Morehead was a Montessori school, grades were mixed together. The groupings were pre-k and kindergarten; first, second, and third; and fourth and fifth. First and second grades sort of munged into a blur for me. But even though I didn’t switch classrooms, third grade was a totally different universe. I personally don’t remember much of that year, but my mom told me about it.

The school was being renovated, so that put all of the Upper and Lower Elementary classes in trailers. The door to Ms. Thomas’s trailer wouldn’t always close and there were suspicious water stains in one of the corners. The walls were covered in brown patterned paper and the floor would shake every time someone moved. The portable bathrooms had two stalls and a sink, and many a kid got themselves stuck in there, because the doors would only open if you turned the knob halfway.

Ms. Beechum had retired at the end of second grade because of health problems, and we got a new assistant teacher for the first quarter of school. She was moved to another classroom after the first semester of school because of classroom issues, and then came to us. Her name was Ms. Glover. She had red hair and read us *James and the Giant Peach*. She wasn’t afraid of anything, much less elementary school kids.

Eventually, I could ask Ms. Thomas to go to the bathroom by myself. Academically, the year went just fine. Socially, I was an unintentional drama mama.

I made one girl’s life miserable, and she returned the favor gladly. The girl was the same height as me, something that irked me.

She had a bunch of little braids with beads on the ends that clacked together whenever she moved. Her clothes always looked like they belonged to a Bratz doll come to life, while I was wearing an old t-shirt and mismatched shorts.

The conflicts always involved a series of petty incidents. "You took my knitting needles!" one of us would accuse the other. "No I didn't! See, I've got my own right here!" would be the retort. Then the accuser would storm away.

"I want to swing, but she's one the swing and there aren't enough for all of us. Let's go somewhere else," I would say. It was miserable and both of us feared the other.

I also discovered allergies in third grade. They got me something good. I woke up in the middle of the night, itching like crazy, my face feeling extremely puffy, my eyes not opening all of the way. After trying to go back to sleep and failing because my skin felt like it was crawling with bugs, I called for Mom. She turned on the light a bit, looked at my face, and said, "Let's give you some Benadryl."

I turned out to be allergic to something in the trailer. My mom came to the conclusion that it was something in the carpet, so I was allowed to sit in a chair instead.

"Princess," the girl muttered at me one day. This was the third grade equivalent of her calling me a bitch and meaning it. I stared straight ahead. I hadn't wanted to be singled out—it just was because of my allergies. I actually hated being alone, but surrounded by people I didn't know was okay. There was safety in numbers.

Added on top of this tall-girl drama was the friend situation. Evelyn, Sarah S., Caroline, and Kira were all in my immediate friend set. Then there were some other girls in my class who I roughly knew. Sometimes, Evelyn or I would spend recess with a person in the outer echelons of the friend group at the exclusion of the other person. I remember being very annoyed at this—she was ditching me for someone else. Apparently she was frustrated too, because we had a pretty dramatic fight at the end of third grade on the playground. It was verbal, of course, because we had the statement "Fists are never the answer" drilled into us since day one. But who says words aren't bloody and black-eyed too?

When we left third grade, Ms. Thomas was ready to put the year into the forgotten memory bank to be dolled up until it was unrecognizable.

Stupid Decisions and Letters to Evelyn

I walked in through the chain link fence, my bare feet arching on the gravel. Evelyn stood with her back to me by the picnic table and turned around when she heard us. My mom and her mom, either totally oblivious or the scheming masterminds that they truly are, decided to get us together at the end of the summer in the form of an invitation to the pool the Ritz's went to in Eno Valley. I'm not sure if it is really in the valley of the Eno. Maybe the pool founders just liked the name. We awkwardly greeted each other, not sure if we were forgiven by the other. *She might be about to yell at me. This isn't going to be pretty.*

"Hi," she said.

"Hi. How're you doing?"

"Great. How about you?"

"I'm glad it's summer. What class do you think you'll be in?"

We continued the small talk for a while, then got in the pool. The nice thing about being underwater is that it requires no speech. By the end of the day, we are better friends than we were before.

Ms. Thomas moved on to teach Upper Elementary with us. She fit much better with the older age group. There, terror was more necessary than paralyzing. I, however, had the other teacher, Mr. Halpin. He had an old Tigger costume cut open and laid in the back corner as a rug. His room perpetually smelled of coffee. I swear, he was made of the stuff. But the number one thing I remember him as was LOUD. "GOOD MORNING," he would bellow. "DO YOU HAVE YOUR HOMEWORK?"

He said it was good to project your voice. You were exercising your lungs. I was not a fan of projecting my voice, and therefore could barely speak to him for half of fourth grade unless Evelyn was there to complete my awkward sentences.

He called every girl honey, which caused endless confusion. Evelyn and I sat one behind the other. We would both raise our hands to answer a question, and he would look at us and say, "Yes, honey?" We'd both start talking at the same time, and one or the other of us would stop and turn beet red, embarrassed that we had assumed he had been calling on us.

Mr. Halpin would play music that we brought from home for us to reflect on after Morning Meeting. Morning Meeting consisted of the class sitting on the rug and the teacher telling us the day's plan and/or discussing the news. The only flaw with the music practice was that nobody except Parker brought in music. Plus, he only ever played one track: "YYZ" by Rush, a seven-minute song with a three-minute drum solo. When he moved out a year ahead of us, no one took up the music baton, so Mr. Halpin did. One day he played "Fireflies" by Owl City, and Evelyn fell in love with it. Every day she requested it, or Mr. Halpin would play it out of habit. "YYZ" and "Fireflies" were both comforting and exasperating. I knew exactly where the synthesizers would squeak out a high note, and precisely where the drummer would perform a complicated duh-duuh-duh-dadadadadad-omph sequence. Such was life.

In fourth grade, every Wednesday a few kids would go to help out in Special Ed PE. Evelyn and I were assigned the first rotation together. We would dance the Hamster Dance with the class and play games with them at the instruction of the teacher. Emma, Karla, Felipé, Christopher, Josh, Eliezer, Saul, and Christian were the kids in the class that year. We felt friendship, curiosity, and pity towards them. I'm not sure how we got ourselves full-time positions in Special Ed PE, but Evelyn and I managed it, somehow taking everyone else's spots. We were silent and cute, puppet masters in training, playing the world to our advantage. Once PE ended, we ended up shunning the rest of the Upper El world to visit the Special Ed class during recess. Karla loved bubbles. She would laugh and clap and pop them with enthusiasm like you've never seen before. Josh had a charming smile. Eliezer and Saul would play Tic-Tac-Toe. Felipé would play with blocks all day long. Christian loved her light box, a box you could put transparencies on and the light would shine

so she could see them. Emma loved books, especially Dragon Tails. Dragon Tails was her passion. Having these joint friends that no one else had brought us even closer.

In fifth grade I probably became the most deplorable person to have ever walked the face of this planet. In the middle of the school year, I developed this very obsessive crush on a guy. He was really cute. He had crazy brown hair that flopped every which way even though he didn't style it. He wasn't that kind of person. He played soccer and would wear his soccer shorts to school with a Scooby Doo shirt. He had glasses that caught the light easily and made it so you couldn't see his eyes, just white lenses. His laugh was this sort of snicker-snort that, when paired with a toothy grin, was deadly. He played four square at recess, and my obvious logic was that if I played four square too, he would notice me. The only problem with this flawless plan was that recess was the time I went to the Special Ed class. Our recess was split up into two fifteen minute increments, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. I figured that if I went inside once a day, I was filling in my duty. Sometimes, later in the year, I wouldn't go in at all.

This was a major source of tension between Evelyn and I, for good reason. I remember her trying to convince me to come inside, standing next to the four square court, her hands on her hips, but I told her I wanted to play a few more rounds—which lasted to the end of recess. She had no idea what my real motives were, but she tried to correct me. I didn't listen. I was too far gone.

The end of fifth grade came and went in a blur. I don't think I cried, really, because I knew I'd see pretty much everyone at my Montessori middle school. The two people who I really felt I would miss were Evelyn, who I knew I would see again outside of school, and the kid who I had a crush on. The fact that the guy didn't come to my middle school made me realize why obsessions, whether they are over boys or pizza, can be bad.

Before we got email, Evelyn and I sent each other snail mail—with paper, envelopes, and stamps—back and forth. I saved every one of her letters. She'd comment on the teacher she had who wore miniskirts and make-up that would make a clown jealous. I'd send

back something else. Once I wrote something about workplans, a fundamental part of Montessori. I remember distinctly that she did not remember what they were, after having used them for the last six years of her life. She had forgotten because she hadn't used them in public middle school. It was then I felt the disconnect, the fact that she was irreversibly changed and I hadn't been there with her. We didn't have the pumpkin carving party that year.

Sometime in December I invited her over to my house. "So, how ya doin'?"

"Great. How're you?" It was the swimming pool all over again.
"Cool shoes."

"Yeah. Converse are amazing, aren't they?"

"I'm loving the socks," my voice edged towards sarcastic.

She smiled and said, with total sincerity, "Yeah, they're so much fun." I regretted my flippancy.

She sported two knee high socks, one tie-dye and the other polka dotted, something she'd never done before. We headed up to my room, which was now painted yellow instead of the light blue it had been since first grade. At first we were awkward, tripping over each other's sentences, before we settled into the rhythm we had perfected years ago playing dress up.

A large, handwritten cursive word "him" in black ink. The letter "h" is tall and has a long, sweeping tail that loops back towards the "i". The "i" has a small dot above it. The "m" is written with a single, continuous, wavy line.

JAZMIN FLORES

1.

I have never really noticed how well-structured the church was. Never noticed how the pillars stood tall and arched just a little to hold the roof high. Never noticed how the stairs, rising up, led to very precious moments.

My graduation. My yellow dress swings just above my knees while I try and keep my balance in heels. Already my feet ache, but I don't care because I know he is waiting for me inside. I know that once I see him, I will feel no pain, only happiness.

The door swings open and all I hear are clicks of cameras, giggling, and crying. I stand there giving and receiving compliments. Everybody looks spectacular in shiny dresses and black dresses, everyone has prepared themselves to say goodbye.

Then I see the one person who can catch my eyes from far away. Him. He stands tall and proud with his friends around, looking goofy in his suit, the one he promised me he would wear. His plaid shirt with pink pants and a navy jacket look perfect. That boy could look good in anything. We make eye contact from across the church lobby, look over at the lonely corner, and smile. As I excuse myself, I realize that this is my last moment with all these people, all my friends. My last moments with them, but the only person I wanted to spend it with was him.

He waits for me in the corner as I walk over. He smiles, his bright red cheeks matching his fiery hair. He grabs my hips and lifts me up into a hug, whispering in my ear, "You look beautiful today."

Obviously, I giggle and hide my red cheeks in his shirt. Even though I'm wearing tall heels, he stands five inches taller. He never lets go of my waist, but I don't mind. He talks about how the graduation is going to go and that his mom wanted to take a picture of all of us and how his friends said that I looked "appealing." We just smiled and laughed.

Soon everything was over. Everything that was made in those three years of our life—those studies, those long mornings, those lunches we spent giggling and throwing food. Those days were over. They were over with the fling of our caps and the tears of our classmates.

2.

His face turned red every single time he saw me. He tried to make it discreet, but I loved that he could never really hide it. My friend just laughed and sighed.

"Hey, whatcha think of the homework?" he asked.

"It was okay, really easy."

After a moment, he smiled and walked away with his hand in his pockets smiling and standing tall. I just stared and sighed. I always hoped for something more, but he didn't seem to realize it.

"You have to tell him," Reni said, her advice sounding more like a demand.

"I can't if he doesn't like me." I pouted, just like every other time we talked about him.

Class was dismissed. After I had gathered my stuff, Reni snuck up behind me and started tickling me. Knowing it was my weakness, she always did this to get my attention. She told me that he wanted to talk to me, and that it was important. I was so disappointed from my last conversation with him, I didn't even smile at his name.

We walked out the classroom, leaving last like always. But I was just in time to see him waiting for me in the courtyard. He looked nervous and giddy. And perfect under that tree. His orange hair exactly the same shade as the fall leaves over his head, he stands tall and straight, hovering above his friends. As I walk outside, the cool breeze hits me and I remember that Reni told me he wanted to talk to me. Me. About something important. I walked over to him as casually as I could. He just smiled at me and blushed. He told his friends to go away, that he needed to talk to me. He pushed them away playfully, trying to get his point across. I just giggled and waved at his friends as they left.

Once we are alone, I noticed that we weren't exactly alone. The other eighth grade class watched from the glass windows, and of course Harrison decides to run out and yell, "Chicken! Get the chicken!" Harrison was that kid in the school we could always confide in. His curly hair amused every single one of us. I smiled as he ran, in his gym uniform, remembering when I had heard that term before. When Reni and Frederick, my best friends, talked to him they also always used the term chicken around me.

He just sighed and told Harrison to go away. He shrugged, flipped his hair over, and walked away.

He sighed and started his important conversation. "I didn't really write this down or anything." He sighed again. "But I do know how I feel about you."

Could this be it? Is he asking me out? I couldn't help but smile and let him continue.

"I always liked you as a friend, and I knew that I could always trust you." He breathes. "So, I want to ask you, if you would do me the favor of being my girlfriend?" He looked up, relieved to be done.

Oh, I just wanted to scream and jump around and kiss his cheek, but I controlled myself and said, "Yes, I would like to be your girlfriend very much."

I laughed. Grabbing him by the neck, I rose up to hug him, nestling my face on his shoulder.

3.

Is it true?
Of course, it's true.
Jazmin, tell me.
Is it true?

Rumors flourished, and of course everybody knew every detail already since they had watched everything. They congratulated us and said we were really cute together. Of course, we only looked at each other.

We held hands. We sat together at lunch. We talked. We laughed. We did couple things that made everyone laugh, including teachers. But we didn't care—we did our thing.

Our first date was a blur. We knew each other too well. He knew exactly what to buy, what to watch, and what to say. We were going to *Iron Man 3*. He was running late from his lacrosse game, but I didn't care. I was still nervous just to see him. My friends stood to the side, ready to go into the theater. Until I saw him that day, I knew I hadn't ever smiled that wide and bright. He grabbed my waist, turned me around, and kissed my lips. My first kiss. He apologized for being late, and we hurried in to the movie.

Side glances, giggles, and holding hands. What can I say? That was the best movie ever.

4.

Our last ride we saved for each other. It had been our field trip together, to Busch Gardens. We talked about the rides we had gone on and what we had bought. We held hands and walked together in the line. Teachers whispered and smiled at us. I could never explain how awkward it was whenever others stared. But he didn't care, so neither did I. Whenever people asked if we were dating, he would gladly say "yes" and give me a peck. I always loved it when others asked.

But right now, I was nervous for the ride. When he noticed, he held me tighter. At the front of the line, he lifted me from my

waist and climbed in behind me. Wearing his oversized hoodie, I didn't exactly move swiftly or look cute. I just dumped myself into the seat. "Way to look cute," I mumbled to myself quietly. As he tried to hide his smirk, I lightly tapped his arm. I smiled and turned around to see all our classmates and teachers waiting for the next ride, watching us and smiling. *Goodness, did they have a life?* I wondered to myself.

The ride was over quickly, but that didn't stop me from yelling my lungs out. I awful in our picture, screaming and slapping his face with my hair. But he never complained—he just smiled and laughed at my hair. When it was all over, he lifted me out of the car, again my strong LAX boyfriend. I could get used to that. While we waited for the rest of the class to finish the ride, we stood and talked. I was starving from walking around and had been craving Dippin' Dots since we walked into the park. He had noticed and now offered to buy me some. Like the shy person I am, I said no thank you.

"Oh, come on. You're my . . . girlfriend, now. Appreciate the princess treatment," he whispered.

We walked slowly to the Dippin' Dots stand, just as the rest of our class was finishing the ride. We ordered and paid, waiting five minutes for our change. We were so engrossed in our conversation we never noticed our class had left us. Oh, we were going to get in so much trouble. But he didn't care. He took his time. He just held me close and smiled down on me. With those deep blue ocean eyes, who wouldn't slow down to stare?

As we made our way back, they were waiting for us. The last teacher I would want to yell at me was there. "Where were you?" she yelled. "We don't have time for this, you two. We need to stay together at all times—no goofing off." She sighed and looked down at her watch.

She made me mad, yelling so much as him. But he didn't care. He just held my hand and stared at his friend behind her as he waited for her to finish. It's a good thing only one of my friends was behind her, otherwise I would have started laughing. We walked over to them and they just awed at us, with eyes that made me realize I was still wearing his oversized sweatshirt, my hair was all over the

place, and of course, we were still holding hands. But to make the moment even sweeter, he just said, "What? It's not nice to stare." And then kissed me, right in front of the teacher. He was that kid to put a show on for the class. But at the moment, I was so far up in the clouds, all I could think was that I loved him.

5.

Our dates were always fun. We either saw movies, we ate, or we shopped. We did whatever we wanted to do. But two weeks later, he called me for a different kind of date.

"Can you come to my lacrosse game?"

"Sure, why not?" I giggled as I scrambled around in my bedroom.

"Well, to meet my friends and my family," he finally said.

I didn't say anything. I didn't even breathe. I finally managed to say a quick, "Yes."

I didn't say anything else. But before I hung up, I caught a whisper of "I love you" that softly faded away.

That weekend, I got ready for the lacrosse game of my life. His championship was today, and I had a high-stakes game of my own: meeting his friends and family. At first, I tried to look casual and put on jeans and a t-shirt he bought me from his favorite store, Vineyards. I slipped on my sandals and looked in the mirror. I shook my head. *No, I can't wear this. It looks like I don't care about this encounter.* Instead, I picked out a striped high-waisted short, my flowery bow top, and my sandals. *Much better.* My mom yelled at me to hurry up because we were running late.

As we arrived, I noticed I was dressed up. I got out of the car and saw the field was packed. I saw his younger sister, waving her hands in the air, so I waved back and started walking over. I accidentally caught his attention, so he ran over just before the game started. He kissed my cheek and introduced me to his best friends Michael and Nick. They both welcomed me to my first lacrosse game, going on and on about the tackle names and how my boyfriend is a good offensive player and does his job well.

As the game was about to start, I headed over to the chair his sister had brought me—before I could make it there I heard Nick and Michael yell out, “Dang, son! You did well!”

I barely turned around before I felt his arms reach around me and twirl me up for a kiss. He whispered, “I know.”

6.

I was trying to doll myself up for the dance. I wore my comfy jean shorts, my loose top, and my Toms. I let my hair down because he always complimented my hair. I got there pretty early, so as I waited for him to arrive, I took pictures with friends and snacked on some food. We grabbed our table, prepared for the music to start. The DJ was his brother, so it was going to be a bit odd. As he arrived, I couldn’t help but laugh at his outfit. He was wearing his plaid shirt with very, very short shorts for a guy, and Sperrys. His white legs just stood out. He walked in and high-fived everyone. I waited patiently in the other room, sitting with my friends. Since I’d started giggled about everything we said, it was hard to have a conversation anymore. He walked in and stood in front of me to pose.

“Whatcha think? Don’t I look good?” He smirked and laughed at my expression. Everyone else laughed, too.

As the music began, we all danced together in a group, but as soon everyone started coupling up, I got nervous and left the room to get a drink. He followed me out, pulled me by my wrist, and laughed. “You can’t hide from me during a slow dance,” he whispered down on me. I just laughed and sighed. Even though all kinds of people were dancing together, there were only two relationships in our entire class, so we would get most of the attention. Soon the first slow dance was over and everyone began dancing to Lil’ John’s “Shots.”

Toward the end of the night, everyone started clearing the floor, ready to get their stuff. The lights suddenly dimmed and the small lights turned to my favorite color, green. Then I heard his voice. “I would like to dedicate this song to Jazmin because I wanted to

show you how special you are." His voice shakes at the end and I turn around to see him walk over to me across the dance floor as Five for Fighting comes on with their song "100 Years." After he spun me around and held me on my tip toes, he grabbed my waist ever so slightly and didn't keep his distance. I loved that song after that day. Everything was perfect then—all I could have ever asked for. Soon that night was over, but not so soon after he gave me my goodnight kiss.

7.

It had been six and a half months and he still treated me like a princess. The first month of summer was a blast: waking up late, texting, watching movies all night, and hanging out on school days. Sometimes we'd go out with all our friends and sometimes with just his friends. I'd grown to like the whole friendly lacrosse vibe. That first month we talked every night and Skyped if we hadn't seen each other during the day.

But soon the fairy tale was over. We weren't talking as much as we had, I hung out with other friends, and he went to lacrosse camps. He still tried to be there for me, but I could tell he was frustrated.

I finally asked him, "Do you think we can actually keep this relationship up?"

He didn't say anything. Then, his voice barely a whisper, he said, "Yes. Yes we can because I love you, and I still want to be with you."

I just held back my tears and sighed. I hung up knowing what was coming. We didn't talk for a week because he had gone to another lacrosse camp. I knew it was over. I knew this wouldn't last.

When he finally called, he sounded sad and upset. "Hey," he sighed. "I know I said we could make it, and I still believe we can, but I don't want to hold you back from anything, I don't want you waiting for me all the time. I want to take you out and have you with me. But right now I can't, and you deserve better." He sighed, and I knew he couldn't finish.

“I know.” My tears left their silent trail on my cheeks, our journey together streaming down my face. “And that’s why we are going to stay friends,” I finally said.

I heard a muffled sound, and then he stuttered, “I still love you.” And at that instant I realized I had never said it back.

I smiled and said, “I love you, too.”

As I hung up, I said goodbye to all those memories and all those adventures. I smiled and sighed. That night I fell asleep with the stuffed panda bear he bought me, my tears drying up and the past fading away.

the perfect day that went bad

PAPA CHUY

It was perfect weather to be out fishing. I ran to my closet and scanned my shoe shelf for my Timberlands. I was in a hurry to catch the early bird, so I threw on my black Adidas jeans. My mom came out her room wondering why I was getting ready, so she asked, “*Mijo, where are you going?*” I told her I was in a great mood to go fishing and asked if I could take the black Ford Explorer. She trusted me because when she was in so much pain and couldn’t drive, I had to take her to the hospital. So in a few seconds my mom gave me her phone and the car keys. The phone was just in case I got into trouble.

After I had put the fishing rods in the car, I got a call from my girlfriend at the time, Jackie. I wasn’t worried at all to answer her call. She asked me what was I going to do today. I told her, “I’m going to go fishing alone.” I was about to ask Jackie if she wanted to come, but before I could finish, she got so mad, she screamed loud enough for other cars beside me to hear. She thought I was making up excuses just to go hang with other girls.

In about thirty minutes, I was at her house to tell her that I was going to be alone and hug her. I held her hand and told her, “I love you.” She looked over my shoulder at the Explorer and suddenly looked mad like a mother lion protecting her cubs. She got so jealous that all she said last was a slap to the face. Jackie thought she saw a girl riding in the car with me. I held her hand, not hard or soft but as if it was a baby’s hand, and kissed it. She told me she loved me and kissed my cheek because it was turning red.

I looked at her green-blue eyes and told her, “I will never ever treat you bad or cheat on you.” And she was crying because she felt bad for slapping me. As soon as we calmed down, we realized the girl Jackie supposedly saw was just my black Hollister coat in the car seat. She wanted to cry even more, but I told her, “It’s okay.”

Her father had seen the whole thing and he came to the front porch where Jackie and I were standing at to see what we were doing. Her father called my name in a deep rough voice. He told me she couldn’t go anywhere because they were going to Oakland, California. I asked if they wanted me to go with them. He said yeah, but they were going to leave that night, so I had about nine hours to do whatever I needed to do. He told me to meet him at my house. I said, “Okay, cool. I’ll be there”

He said, “Okay, see you in a few hours,” as he went inside.

When I finally arrived at the lake and got my fishing rods out the truck, I could already see “Big Joe.” That was the name of the biggest fish in that whole lake. The only person in my whole generation to catch Big Joe was my great great grandfather José Aléman. While I walked toward the lake, a big cold splash hit me. It was Big Joe’s splash.

I set a chair and started fixing my tools to actually start fishing. The worms were nice and fat, so I knew I was going to get some good kind of action. I grabbed the hook and stuck it in the brown wiggly worm. I took one step back pressed the button on the rod, and swung it as if I was playing baseball. The string flew more than fifty feet.

I waited for hours, and I looked at the time. It was eight p.m. I had two hours until I had to meet my girlfriend at my house in Atlanta to get ready to go to California. While I was packing my fishing tools, I heard my rod being pulled hard, so I ran and pulled it back. It was Big Joe. It took me a good twenty-five minutes just to get him ten feet closer. Meanwhile, my phone rang. I looked at my phone . . . It was a call from the hospital. I stop reeling the rod, but still held it with grip, and answered the phone.

A lady with a sweet voice said, “Hello—”

I answered with a nervous voice, “Is there something wrong?”

Immediately she said, "I'm sorry to inform you the gonzalez family are in the emergency room."

My heart stopped. "Is Jackie alright?"

All she told me was she needed more support from family, friends, and me. In a flash, I dropped the rod, and Big Joe with a pull took it down to the deep blue water. I knew I was going to lose the chance to take a photo of Big Joe to show my family I had caught him. I left all my tools at the lake, slid my phone into my right pocket, and flew to the truck. While I was starting the truck, I saw Big Joe splashing up and down the water out of the corner of my eye, and I drove off.

On the road I was speeding at one hundred miles per hour. I zoomed through every green and yellow light. I saw a police trying to hide, and I had to slow down at the exact speed limit. Then, on the right side of the street, I saw a sign that read "Hospital Next Right." I went speeding again. As I entered the parking lot, I stomped on the brakes took the seat belt off, turned the keys back, truck turned off, and took off running to the hospital entrance.

Once I got to the front, I asked nervously, "Where's Jackie Gonzalez?!" They replied with nothing but frowns. I said it louder, "Where is Jackie?"

A doctor with yellow hair who was drying his hands with a towel, approached me. He told me bad news, the words I'd never wanted to hear. He told me to follow him to a hall where Jackie was. I asked him, "Is this about Jackie or her family?"

He spoke in a voice so sad that my heart felt blank. "I am truly sorry," the doctor said.

"Sorry for what?" I replied.

The doctor was sad himself and told me what he meant with many pauses. "I'm sorry—but Jackie is in a better place . . . Her parents are fine . . . They will recover soon."

I was heart broken. My heart felt as if it had been stabbed with a sword. My tears raced down my face. It was all silent. I could only hear sirens and his squeaky boots walking away slowly.

I walked in a room and saw her dad. He was quieter than ever before. He told me the words Jackie wanted to tell me. She had told

him, "I love you Mom and Dad. Tell Chuy I love him and to be with a girl that won't treat him like I did . . . I love you all." Then there was total silence. We stayed at the hospital for a good twelve hours. Then, since their car was still under the trees, I took them to my home.

When we arrived at my house, he told me what happened. They were on their way to my house, but they were going slower than the speed limit because they were being cautious not to crash. Then a drunk driver with his high beams on swerved into the other lane. He didn't notice that Jackie's dad was hitting the horn to warn him they were going to crash. But the driver didn't pay attention and pushed them off a bridge. The car rolled a few times down a forty-foot hill under the bridge and stayed upside down.

He was blaming himself, so I told that him it wasn't his fault. That I was here for him. My mom told them they could stay as long as they liked. To make them feel welcome, I made original coffee. While I was making the coffee, I watched Jackie's mom. I saw that her eyes were swollen from crying, and she had cuts on her arms and face.

They didn't stay long—only two weeks. While they stayed with us, they wanted to start packing so they could move back to their hometown, Oakland. They told us they appreciated all we did for them, for the company and the support. They said goodbye and decided to leave. My mom told me to go with them until they were much better. So I did. I stayed in California with them for four months, but none of us will ever really be better. I honestly can't forget this nightmare and still sleep with her in my mind.

gracie

JADA BRADFORD

“Hey, Jada!”

I remembered hearing that from Gracie.

“Hey, Jada!” began repeating in the back of my mind. Blurriness covered my vision. I felt a hand touching my back, then I decided to come back to the real world.

A middle school senior, I was being serenaded by the sixth and seventh graders. My teacher asked me if I could do her a favor and take some paperwork down to the sixth grade hall. “Sure thing,” I said amicably. As I walked down to the sixth grade hall, I saw a locker with Gracie’s face on it.

My classmates and I sat in front of the walls in the hallway near the cafeteria. The sixth graders began walking by in a line and Gracie was in that line of sixth graders. “Hey, Jada!” she said gratefully.

“Hey Gracie, girl!” I replied. Gracie’s skin tone was like brownie mix, dark and shining and her smile made everybody grin.

*

Bernard, BJ for short, was in the same grade as me, and he was a sweetheart, just like his sister. All I know is, he would do anything for anybody. Just respect him, and he would return respect. At the time, he was just a short little thing. Round, too. Bernard was Gracie’s brother.

“Hey, Jada,” he said kindly.

He resembled his sister, but they weren't twins. One morning two weeks ago, I noticed that BJ didn't come to school. Personally, I thought he was sick. I missed being greeted by name in that friendly voice, like he did every day. During fourth core, the intercom interrupted our whole school.

"Good afternoon, Panthers. I hope you're having a good day," the principal said, sounding devastated.

Pause.

"I just want to tell you guys some news we found out today: Gracie Gill passed away last night," he said with grief. "We just wanted you guys to know, we love each and every one of you, and just stay calm. We will let you know more details about it later, but for right now just keep doing what you doing, and just know that we really do love you. Have a great day," he said affectionately.

The intercom shut off. We were shocked.

My smile vanished. I never knew something like that could hurt me so bad. Blurriness covered my vision again.

*

BJ didn't show up for a week. I wouldn't either if any of my family members died. Not hearing my name in their sweet hellos felt awkward. People said hello to me every day, but hearing it from those two was special.

I asked my teacher if I could use the restroom. As I walked down the hall, memories flashed.

"Jada!" Gracie says while running up to me and hugging me tightly.

"Girl, what you doing out the classroom?" I say jokingly.

"I had to go to the office."

"Oh, okay. Well, tell them sixth graders I said hi!"

Since our eighth grade restroom was destroyed, I decided to go to the sixth grade restroom. In fact, I had lied about using the restroom. I just wanted to see Gracie's posters in their hallway. One poster read, "RIP Gracie. WE LOVE YOU!" Another read, "GRACIE YOU WILL BE MISSED! HEAVEN IS KEEPING YOU SAFE, HAVE FUN WITH THE OTHER ANGELS!" And when you left the hallway there was a

giant poster on the front wall with her picture on it with clouds and doves and the caption "Have a blast with the other angels."

Embracing those posters made me think about how would it feel if I had somebody taken away from me. When I returned back to class, the intercom came on.

"Good morning, everybody. Today we got more news about our lost Gracelyn. We found out that Gracie had a asthma attack. Her funeral will be this Thursday at nine a.m. Everybody, please show up if possible. I love you guys."

*

Roxboro is like a family. Everybody knows each other, everybody hangs with each other, and everybody fights with each other. It's just ideal. Roxboro is very noisy, too. Everybody, I mean *everybody* knows everything. When something happens, like for instance death, everybody knows. So when Gracie passed, people were devastated. They couldn't accept the fact that somebody's child was dead.

To be honest, I was really happy to know where her funeral was because I wanted to pay my respects to a true and dear little girl.

Thursday was my special day to get checked out for the funeral. I got dressed in my sleeveless lace dress with shiny charcoal black flats. I wore my hair straight and long. When I arrived at the church, it was crowded. I knew it was going to be by how Gracie was. I sat with my best friend that lived up the street from me. We were just tearing on how Gracie was a great little girl. The service went on for hours and finally they asked if people wanted to say a few words about her. I was shy, so I decided to stay in my seat, but my best friend decided to go up there. But instead of talking, she sang a song. Her voice was melodic and beautiful. It made everybody cry. After that, we said goodbye to Gracie.

I will always remember Gracie. She comes to my mind still to this day. One day, I will see her in heaven, but when I do get there, I already know the first thing to come out of her mouth will be "Hey, Jada!"

giggles and smiles

ALLISON JUAREZ-RAMIREZ

My First Companion

Where I roamed exactly? I didn't really know myself. I wandered down the colorful hallways in August of 2004. The walls were covered in tons of posters that I couldn't read nor comprehend, and an adult stood at the opening of every door. The enclosed hallway filled with prancing kids and adults accompanying them. School. Parkwood Elementary to be exact. My very first day of school began that early morning. My mom led me to the room where I would stay for the rest of the school day.

Miss Miles kindly greeted me and my mom into the safe environment that was her classroom, or our classroom. I wasn't fully able to pay attention to her because I was too busy glancing at the other kids sobbing. Although why were they crying? It was just school. I mean, all you did was play and learn. Soon enough, my mom kissed me goodbye and she disappeared. Alone, I made my way to the wooden "purple" table.

"Why are you crying?" a blonde girl asked someone next to her with red glassy eyes. No answer. I was too shy to speak to anyone else there. I didn't know anything about them, and they knew nothing about me. After a while more kids arrived and began to fill up the tables—red, blue, green, purple, yellow, and pink. Soon enough, it got quiet.

"Welcome to kindergarten, kids! Call me Miss Miles. I'll be your teacher for the rest of the year! We're going to have so much fun to-

gether, and you'll all get to know each other pretty soon. Let's start off by learning names. Grab one of the paper name tags in the middle of your table and get ready to learn how to spell and write down your name, then you'll share with the rest of the class! Afterwards, I'll give you all free time to meet some of your classmates."

I remained seated in my miniature plastic chair and made the most radiant name tag I could, using Crayola markers and Elmer's glitter glue. By the time I finished, everyone already found somewhere to play and someone to play with. I awkwardly observed my surroundings, and looked to see where I would go play. It appeared there were only abandoned seats and tables surrounding me. In front of my eyes were half-empty chests of costumes and clothing, and blocks being thrown in the air. In the very corner by the bean bags, the mini play kitchen caught my eye. There was only one girl there using the periwinkle-colored dishes.

I meandered toward the kitchen and looked through everything in the cabinets. Behind me, I heard a delicate voice say, "Pass me the pink plates, please!" I didn't turn around. "Can you please pass me the pink plates? They're in the door above the stove." No sound came out of my mouth. I just looked her in her big brown eyes and handed her the rose-tinted plates.

"Thanks. My name is Julia. What's your name?"

The words "I'm Allison" slowly crept out of my mouth.

"Do you want to help me make some macaroni?"

I loved macaroni, so you could say I was pretty convinced. I softly smiled and told her I'd help.

My phone vibrated nonstop from my cherry-stained nightstand, receiving message after message, reading, "Happy Birthday!" or "*Feliz Cumpleaños!*" Soon, I received a message reading, "Happy 14th Birthday! I love you so much and I can't wait to see you at Youth Ministry tomorrow to give you your gift. Don't forget that I love you, see you soon!" It ended with fourteen hearts . . . It was from Julia.

After knowing her for nine years, ever since that first day of kindergarten, I have created such a strong bond with her. I grabbed my phone to reply to Julia's text, letting her know that I was extremely

thankful for the care that she had always provided me. After wishing her a goodnight, I shut my bedroom door and turned off the lights. I set my alarm for 8:00 a.m., early enough to get ready to see Julia at church tomorrow. I hopped into bed, turned onto my side, and covered myself with fleece blankets. Soon enough, my eyes droop heavily and close.

The Second of Four

Ten at the time, I put on my silky cap and gown over my ruffled ivory dress with the delicate flower attached to it. I felt old. I mean, I was finally graduating! In about three months, I'd be in sixth grade, onto Rogers-Herr Middle School, though I felt unprepared. "Everyone line up the way we practiced all through last week! Remember, alphabetical order!" Sure, my nerves tensed up, but I filled with exhilaration at the same time. I swiftly took my place behind Amanda Jones, and I turned my head toward the very end of the line to wave at Audrey as she stood tall in her sapphire dress.

Quietly and briskly, we walked through the fifth grade hall, through the first and second grade building, and into the gymnasium. This gym was huge! It was probably the most enormous room I had ever seen. Glossy balloons and streamers concealed the pasty brick wall. All twenty-eight of us skipped across the slippery floor to our seats on the side of the rigid wooden stage that had been rolled out. My bare thighs were covered in goosebumps as they lay upon the freezing metal chair. Out of nervousness, I turned myself and looked for Audrey in the very back. She sat in her worn out, propped up metal chair, with her thin flimsy hair spread on her shoulders.

The chair. That's what sparked our friendship. All of a sudden I was back in fourth grade, on the first day of school in August 2008. My two side ponytails swayed through the air as I walked towards Mrs. Norten's room. She seemed amiable, but soon enough I learned that she wasn't.

I easily found my classroom for the school year since it was the only fourth grade class in the whole building. I saw my new peers sit-

ting with their friends already as I peeped through the glass portion of the door. My size-four feet shivered into her room. My toes clenched up, and my feet dragged themselves across the dusty white tiles. I looked around, and as I looked more and more, I walked even slower. It was as if my last option was going to end up being the unwelcoming floor.

“Do you wanna sit next to me?” She sweetly smiled.

I slowly sat next to her and whispered, “I’m Allison.”

The tall, brown-haired girl responded with “Audrey. I’m happy that you sat next to me.” *Hold on. Was she really happy because I sat next to her? Did she actually ask me to sit next to her? Am I actually in the right classroom? This is unbelievable. Simply great, yet unbelievable.* We then continuously spoke to each other for the rest of the school year.

Sure, we weren’t a foot away from each other, but I was 110% sure that we were right by each other’s sides the whole time. It’s crazy how it all began with a simple chair. What if she had never asked me that one question, to sit next to her?

“Alex Albineda.” The ceremony began.

Visiting the Stars

I lay my head upon the back of my chair. The lights that appeared to be stars glimmered on the black ceiling. We were shown a variety of constellations and planets. The tranquility in the room made my eyes droop a little, although I was fascinated by the lights a hundred feet above my head. Serene and soothing music made its way into my ears, and soon enough it felt as if I were alone in the room with the stars looking over only me. They were projected onto the ceiling, yet they seemed so real.

It was the first field trip of sixth grade, to the Morehead Planetarium. Not many people from my elementary school attended Rogers-Herr, so I didn’t talk to many. “Everyone line up by your assigned bus!” Ms. Moser yelled. I carefully stepped onto the rugged steps of the bus and walked all the way to the back. I sat down in the very last seat on the right-hand side, the first that I could find.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who wasn't sure where to sit or who to sit with. A pretty brunette with sparkling hazel eyes wandered, observing every seat and who was in it, but all were occupied. "You can sit next to me. If you want . . . I mean you don't have to if you don't want, but you—" She took a seat next to me.

She smiled and quietly said, "Thanks." *What was I thinking? Why did I say that?* She must've thought I was so desperate for someone to sit next to me, but it was too late now. At least I wasn't alone anymore.

The bus started to budge a little. Not a word was said. No eye contact whatsoever. My hands shivered as they slowly moved in between my thighs, and my feet held each other tightly under the seat. I looked down to see her chubby fingers interlocked with each other. All of a sudden I felt my legs fidgeting on their own—I couldn't control it. I wasn't sure if I should've opened my mouth, or kept it sealed. I was only able to stare at the metal edges of the window filled with dust, where I gently pressed my right cheek. Scared, I cracked my mouth open and mumbled, "I'm Allison, what's your name?" While I spoke, her eyelashes only fluttered like the wings of a monarch. She seemed shy at first, but then she looked up and told me her name. Lindley. Such a pretty, delicate name.

Question after question, answer after answer, we became more outgoing with each other. Once we loaded up the buses and made our way back to school, we spoke with no hesitation anymore. We were close to pulling up into the bus parking lot at school when she told me, "I'm glad I met you. I wasn't comfortable talking to anyone because not many from my elementary school go here since it wasn't public." It touched me knowing that I helped her open up. She became the friend I needed, and I became the companion that she needed.

"Same here. I don't really know anyone that goes here, but now I know you!" I replied. We giggled.

We unloaded the bus and got ready to dismiss from school since it was around 2:00 p.m. She hugged me goodbye, and as soon as I got home, I received a text saying, "Hey! It's Lindley," finished off with a smiley face.

I didn't really know about stars, they were strangers to me, but once I got to know them and what they were really made up of, they weren't really strangers anymore. They were something, or someone, that I could really look up to.

Sweet, Short, and Simple Reconnection

"Um, excuse me, where is room 205?"

"Go down the hall, make a left, go up the stairwell on the left side, and then once you're upstairs, room 205 is the last room on the left at the very end of the hallway."

"Oh well, um okay . . . Thanks?"

Room 205. Where was room 205? I was lost. So lost. Hallways were packed and ear-splitting, your ankles were being trampled over and you couldn't see anything past a few feet. It was my first day of high school and I had no clue where to make a single step towards. Once one of the administrators had directed me where to go for my homeroom class, but lost, I continued to wander. After a short period of time, I decided to follow the same route as everyone else.

I stepped into room 205, once I found it, and so many familiar faces sat in the desks: Andy from church, Robin, Maceo, and Andy from Rogers-Herr. I made my way to the back where I quickly spotted an empty desk. I settled down my things, waiting for the very first bell to ring that would start the school day off. "Hey, girl, you got a pencil?" The voice sounded familiar. I turned around and recognized her dimples piercing into her cheeks in a second. It was Alexis!

I laughed and said "Yeah! Hold on, let me find it." Alexis and I have always gotten along very well, although we barely spoke to each other during our spare time. I handed her the pencil, and within a few seconds, the deafening bell rang.

Jordan High School has a block schedule, meaning that we have four classes in one day, A-day, and four classes another day, B-day. My first day of high school intrigued me, although Alexis and I only had homeroom and lunch together. B-day came and I saw her once again in homeroom, and surprisingly also in my Agriscience Appli-

cations class and lunch! There was no doubt that we talked every chance we had—in the hallway, during transitions, homeroom, Agri-science, lunch and dismissal.

There isn't much to say about how our friendship is constructed. It's simple. It's always been simple. She's always understood me, I know I can rely on her for anything, and it's all giggles and smiles when I see her. My stomach never hurts more than when I'm with Alexis, due to laughter, I'll tell you that. We met in sixth grade, in Miss Blystad's math class at Rogers-Herr. We always sat next to each other, but then we kind of fell off. We never took the time to talk out of school, or spend time together, and I regret it so much. Although that occurred, we reconnected in high school, we've always easily "clicked," and in my eyes, I view it as a gift.

Epilogue

I don't see Lindley or Audrey every day anymore. Sadly, high school separated me from them. Although this is the case, we keep in contact. After a while of not seeing them every day, I've come to realize how much their presence means to me. It's very different not seeing them everyday, although it's made me so much more appreciative when I do see friends and family. I don't take the little time I spend with them for granted anymore. I do get to see Julia and Alexis everyday, though.

It may be my first year of high school, but I only have a little more than three years left. I'm making an effort to keep up with them, and I know it won't be difficult since it's something I want and it's important to me. Don't ever waste time. Never waste the time you can use to share with those who you care for. Take advantage of those little moments you get to spend with them. Make time for them. You never know when they could disappear from your life.

the Clique

BECKY ALLEN

Chapter 1

Middle school was where we really formed, and that's when we became known as the clique girls.

We all went to the prissy little Catholic school called St. Thomas More. There were only forty kids in our grade, so everyone knew everyone and everything about them. We had all of our classes together, and at recess we would all go outside on the busy playground, which was really just a blacktop. We would chatter about all that we could during the little time that we had and talk, most of the time gossip. It always had to do with the boys in our grade and who they liked or who they asked out. All six of us would sit in a tight circle, as if there was a bubble surrounding us. If you scanned the blacktop, that circle it must have looked really exclusive. No one would feel comfortable approaching the circle, or even dare to ask to come join us.

Virginia, Creel, Caroline, and I had met in kindergarten, Alison I met in third grade, and Alex I met in fifth. Alison was the tallest of all my friends, all of whom were short and thin, which is why she often times felt insecure. They were all very pretty, ranging from Creel's bronze skin to Alison's glistening pale skin, and all had perfect bodies, long hair, and big eyes. Every boy in our grade knew of us by our name, story, and face. We would walk into class and some strange boys we had never talked to or seen before would say, "Hey guys,

how's it going?" and throw us a wink. "Great, thanks," I'd reply. Luckily that only happened occasionally.

Sometimes my friends and I wouldn't agree, and we got into some serious yelling and crying arguments a few times. They were often about how I wanted to include other people in our circle, but they didn't. For example, one time at recess I hung out with some of the other girls, but when I came back to eat with my friends, they were all mad at me and didn't want me to sit with them. There's nothing worse than having to fight over wanting to include new friends with your best friends. And soon, it started to become a real problem.

Chapter 2

The posters fluttered against the wall. The class sat in silence as she read the title of her story: "The Circle." The second she said it, my friends and I repositioned ourselves on the chilled plastic seats. My face reddened and we exchanged worried glances. Our teacher had assigned everyone to write a short story about anything they wanted. *She could have at least put some restrictions on what you could write about*, I thought. This one girl in particular thought it would be funny to write about us, and the only thing she changed was our names.

"Makeup plasters your faces. I hope it rains, so we can see it all melt off. The only reason the guys in our class like you is because you're pretty." As she read, people stared us down. I felt so embarrassed and hurt—I didn't realize she felt that way. There isn't one thing she didn't say, from about how we sat in an annoying little circle to how irritating it was when we talked in text language. She poked fun of our prissiness and even told the whole class about the guys we dated and our relationship problems. See, that was the issue with a small school: no one could keep a secret and everything got around quickly.

The teacher was clueless. She gave the girl an A. She had no idea it was about us. Everyone thought it was hilarious that someone had finally called us out on our cliquiness. The girl told us that it was just

a joke, yet, we all knew she was being serious. I soon realized she wasn't the only one to call us out.

Suddenly I'm back in a room filled with fifth grade girls, discussing cookies and wearing our badge-decorated vests. Girl scouts was the "thing to do." Our meeting today happened to be about bullying and excluding others. We all knew the target was on us. The leader of our troop asked if there were any cliques in our grade. No one said anything until this girl named Ellie said, "Of course we do guys. They sit in a circle at recess and never let anyone hang out with them." She was the only one who said anything. Everyone else was too scared to talk.

Chapter 3

"Look at them smiling," Alex smirked. We would always peer across the overheated pavement to see what the other girls were doing. You could tell they were enjoying themselves, laughing and knee slapping, but at the same time they felt bullied. If we were on a caste system, they were the untouchables and I didn't want it to feel like that. From their point of view, we were the evil popular girls with no worries who gossiped about everyone else, whereas really we just sat there complaining about our own lives. I didn't want us to be the mean girls, the ones in the movies who are always matching their tacky outfits and finishing each other's sentences. It was just that us six were very best friends and it felt awkward with anyone else. But I tried to fix that.

"Hey guys, maybe we can go hang with them for a change?" I hoped.

"Why would we do that?"

"It's not like they want to hang out with us."

"Yeah! If they did, then they would have come over here." Truthfully, we knew they wouldn't come hang out with us because we were seemingly unapproachable.

We wore bright bows and makeup; we always tried to look our best and impress the boys. We all had the same silver slide-open

phones and we felt cooler with each ding of a new text message. We started new trends and ended the old ones. The other girls didn't wear makeup, didn't care how they dressed, and were very sporty. I knew they didn't dress the same as us, but that didn't mean they weren't just as fun to hang out with. From then on, I tried my best to offer my friendship to everyone and let them know we weren't as condescending as they thought.

Chapter 4

I should have known that they weren't going to accept me right away. Everything about our stereotype irked me.

We weren't actually that rude, but everyone still hated us. I didn't want to not be friends with Creel, Alex, and Caroline. And there was no way for me to stop talking to Alison and Virginia because they knew everything about me, and I could tell them anything. I realize now that one of the reasons I most likely didn't want to leave them was because of popularity. I knew if I always hung out with the other girls then I would lose my reputation. Finally one day at recess I went up to the other girls and tried to sit with them.

"Hey girls, I thought I might join you today!" They didn't acknowledge me, but instead continued their conversation.

"The other day my brother came into my room and tried to get me to help him with his homework. And I'm younger than him!"

"Lucky! I wanted to help my little sister and she tried to play it off like she didn't need help, but I know she did!"

"Yeah, I've got a brother too!" I butted in.

"And then she had to ask my mom for help! I was like, I could've helped you." They completely disregarded what I said, so I left and no one even noticed. I had to go right back to the circle. When I arrived, all my friends stared me down

"See, that was my point!" Alison boasted. But I wasn't going to just give up there.

Chapter 5

At recess you saw the other girls bouncing basketballs, kicking soccer balls, and throwing footballs. That gave me an idea: when the winter came, I would play basketball. Besides, I was tall and lanky and was a good runner. Not many girls tried out, so I knew it would be easy to make the team. I remember that night so well, sitting at my computer for an hour just waiting for the roster. I found my name, fourth row, second column. I had made it!

The coach was a huge, burly man with a threatening, deep voice, and he always picked favorites. He scared me to death. Our practices were long and sweaty, but you could feel the hard work paying off and the crowds cheering at every basket.

Creel had also made the team so I spent a lot of time with her, but as I started getting closer to the team, I became better friends with the other girls. We joked with one another and I could feel the laughter ring through my ears. I knew all along that they would be just as fun and cool as us. We got so close that they told me their secrets and even what they thought about us. Before practice in the locker rooms they told me that the whole school called us the “clique girls” and that we acted like we ran the school and only tried to be popular.

That day during practice my coach asked if I was feeling okay. I wasn’t. I was hurt. I realized that I had to try my best to make sure they could see a different side of us.

Chapter 6

After the basketball season ended, the team remained good friends. We had a banquet and sleepovers and all the regular girly things. I felt relieved and content. I thought that this was it, I had finally got them to like me and my other friends. They started to call me over at recess to play with them and even welcomed me to sit with them at lunch. I texted them, and went to the mall with them (even though that wasn’t really their thing). We learned to do things that each other liked and not just what we liked. I figured

BECKY ALLEN

that now all the “clique” nonsense would go away and we could all just be friends.

At the time I didn’t realize was that I was actually leaving my other friends behind. I got so busy trying to be friends with the other girls that I lost track of my original friends. I thought we were all in this together, but in truth, it was just me.

I decided to ask Creel about it because she had been on the basketball team too. She said, “Well, you have kind of been distant lately. We feel like you just left us. We aren’t your old toys, Becky.”

My mouth fell open. I immediately apologized and went back to the circle, the bows, and the makeup.

I had forgotten how entertaining it was to stay up talking to Virginia way past our bedtime on the phone and how Alison and I used to write boys crazy love notes, covered in kisses and ending with “Love, your secret admirer.” Those were good times and I had lost, but I got them back again.

Luckily, the other girls understood, and they now knew me for me, not some silly stereotype. My best friends and my new friends might not have always gotten along but I knew each of them had my back.

If you scanned the blacktop now, you would see students enjoying themselves at recess—no circle, no segregation, no clique. Any one can talk to anyone, and that’s the way it should be.

a vault of nicknames

ISIS BROWN

It is a widely known fact that kids don't think before they speak. Their naive little brains don't realize what their words really mean. So when kids make fun of other kids, it is just brushed off as "kids will be kids." It is also a widely known fact that adults will always tell you just that. I first learned this fact while sitting in the principal's office in fourth grade.

My "friend" Aria Porter slumped in the chair beside me. A little birdie had tipped Mr. Redfearn off about our problem. I guessed that the little birdie was our teacher Ms. Durham. She had good intentions, but this just made matters worse. Mr. Redfearn studied us, moving his hands from the back of his head to his chin to his lap. We just sat there in the silence of our own thoughts until he spoke.

"Is there anything we need to discuss, girls?" he questioned, knowing the answer.

"There isn't a problem. I don't even know why we're in here!" Aria burst out.

He turned to me, waiting for my answer, which caused Aria to turn and glare. Her face was relaxed but her eyes were screaming, *Just say everything is fine. There is nothing wrong, you idiot.* I was scared, but not scared enough to obey her.

"She's been kind of mean to me lately." I glanced down at the tips of my Converse.

"How has she been mean to you?" he asked calmly.

“Just mean to me, you know calling me names and stuff.” I kept my eyes on my shoes, fully aware that Aria was burning holes into my skull.

“Kids do that stuff all the time. It’s nothing to worry about.”

That caused me to look up. Here I was, thinking I had an opportunity to get the name-calling to stop. I was wrong, so wrong.

Glancing toward Aria, I just knew she was going to threaten me or something after we left the office. Aria smiled and took the pass Mr. Redfearn had written us. She pulled me out of my chair, leading me out of the office by my elbow. Once the office was out of our vision, she nudged me in the shoulder.

“Dude you almost got me in trouble.”

“You know Aria,” I snatched the pass out of her hand, “there’s this thing called Karma, and it’s gonna hit you hard.” I strutted away with all the confidence that I could muster.

I was sure Aria would have snapped a comeback at me, but surprisingly she didn’t. She just followed me to class, her sneakers calmly hitting the floor behind me. For the rest of the day my face glowed, and Aria didn’t bother me in any way.

*

The peace and quiet from Aria only lasted the weekend before she was right back at it. I guess my little comment didn’t hit her hard enough. She went back to calling me any variation of the word fat or ugly. Some names were really lame, but others were so creative she must have sold her soul to get them. It wouldn’t be hard to believe, considering how evil she really was.

It wasn’t just me in our group of friends that she “nicknamed”; it was Kelly, too. Sweet, adorable Kelly—the real innocent one. She was a September baby which made her the youngest. There were multiple days where all the wicked was directed toward her. I would have to be the one to find and console her on the bathroom floor. It would only be halfway through the day before she cried herself a river. I hated to see her like that. She just didn’t have a tough enough shell. She was burdened with lies that Aria told, lies that turned her

skinny model figure into a Russian nesting doll when she looked in the mirror. So she did what most girls would think to do. She ate less and less. I kept trying to get her to eat at lunch, but she wouldn't budge. Aria would just laugh and make fun of her more.

Brooke didn't really do much about it. She and Aria were joined at the hip. She was the one who discovered Aria in the first place; it would only make sense that they were the bestest of friends. I knew from the way Brooke acted though, that she didn't approve of Aria either.

Aria's subscription was about to run out. She was only staying for fourth grade and then off she went to another part of town. We were aware of this since the first day of school and quietly counted down the days 'til she would be gone. It sounds like a mean thing to say, but we were all tired of the way she treated us. Back then we thought it was better to wait it out instead of confronting her early on. It was a stupid decision really, but that's the only solution we could think of.

The last day of school crept up on me. I called it The Last Day of the Frenemy, the day I had been counting down to. Her mom was picking her up early for some reason, and the class was granted outside access the last hour of school. I went back inside to get some water right when Aria was about to leave. We had a little staring contest until she spontaneously hugged me. I stood in place, stiff as a board and confused.

"I hope we can still stay friends after this," she muttered into my hair.

"Um yeah, sure Porter." I pat her back awkwardly.

She stepped away and pushed her hair behind her ear. Taking a deep breath, she looked at me and said, "See ya sometime Piggy Patch." She booped my nose and then she was gone.

I did get some friendly calls from her after that. Actually friendly if you can believe it. She didn't call me names and seemed to genuinely care about me. The calls eventually stopped and I didn't worry about it too much. It was okay that I didn't talk to her anymore. I felt happier with her gone from my life. At least happier for the summer, anyway.

*

I can't really describe how excited I was when I found out that Kelly and Brooke would be in my class again. There was no Aria this time to bring us down. We were the top dogs at school, we were free of an unwanted bully, and we still had each other. Mr. Gibson's class was out in the trailers, which I had never been in. Being the first one there, I immediately found my way to the back corner of the classroom. I plopped into a seat and eagerly awaited my besties, saving both of them a desk. The room slowly filled up with more kids that I knew, but no Brooke and no Kelly. Being fashionably late was always Brooke's thing, but Kelly being late was strange.

Three minutes before the bell rang they showed up arm in arm and out of breath. They searched around 'til they found me at the empty table, then they squeezed all the worry out of me. I had seen them a few weeks before, but we still giggled and gossiped about the things fifth grade girls giggle and gossip about: Justin Bieber mainly, but also thoughts on the kids in our class and our agreement to rush to the swings as soon as we were let out. I could already feel the fantastic drama-free year ahead of us.

One more minute until the bell rang and Mr. Gibson was supposed to lock the door. Just before he could though, a girl rushed in with hair swept in all directions. She scurried to our table and took the remaining seat, grinning at us. I didn't really know at the time what that would bring us, but I was a huge believer in not judging a book by its cover.

During those childish "get to know you" games, I learned that the girl's name was Vicki and she loved fashion. She wore the weirdest outfit on that first day, but a month later everyone was wearing the same thing. Imagine rainbow ruffles everywhere and dozens of bangles dripping down her arm. Brooke pulled Kelly and me to the side for yet another discussion.

"I think we should bring her in."

"Well I vote no." Kelly shook her head and sighed. "There is no way I am going through another Aria."

"How do you know if she's like Aria?" I questioned.

"I just have that feeling, you know?" Kelly observed Vicki across the room.

I knew what feeling she was talking about. The same feeling she got with Aria. We had ignored her the first time and then she had ended up being right. If she had a hunch that the apocalypse was nigh, I would totally believe her. That is why I was on her side this time.

"She can't be that bad you guys," Brooke argued, glancing over her shoulder at Vicki.

"It's still a no, Brooke," Kelly stated.

"I agree with Kells. We are not going through that again." Kelly and I both crossed our arms and stared at Brooke until she caved.

"Fine. Whatever you want, your highness." Brooke stormed off in defeat.

*

Brooke kept her promise, and didn't make any move to invite her. Vicki just invited herself. Every day she was there, and eventually we just had to accept her as a friend. After a few weeks we found out who Vicki really was. Another harsher, colder, more confident Aria.

During recess we would follow her to the swings, and stood by as she forced some girls off of them. Kelly and I felt guilty and tried to say sorry to them, but every time they quickly walked away. During lunch we would sit together and listen to Vicki and Brooke gossip about the girls in our grade. Kelly and I would nod our heads and throw out some minor rumors we heard, but we didn't really want to. During class Vicki would somehow get me to do her work. She would always tell me that she listened in class, but she didn't understand. Trying to be nice, I would help her, but she just copied down what I said.

Kelly began eating more, but after a while I started seeing her on the bathroom floor again. Turns out, Vicki whispered the meanest, most nastiest things in Kelly's ear after hearing about our torturous year before. They were worse than all the things Aria had ever said. Brooke didn't do much to stop it, she just watched Kelly break down.

At some point, Brooke told Vicki about the nicknames Aria had given. That sparked something in Vicki, and soon she started calling me those familiar words. Then she got creative and came up with more. And then it was just Kelly and me crying on the bathroom floor with nobody there to console us.

Halfway through the year, Vicki told me she didn't like me and didn't want to be my friend anymore. I told her the same thing, but Brooke the peacekeeper had to butt in. She tucked a dirty blonde strand behind her ear, and gave us a pretty nice speech about friendship. But what we had wasn't considered friendship, and if it was, it had to be the most twisted friendship in history. She united us anyway, and our twisted friendship trudged on.

*

Bees were coming out of their hiding spots, flowers bloomed everywhere, and that sweet spring smell flowed through the air. You could feel the warm creeping up, wrapping itself around you softly. It was nearing the end of the school year, and the four of us had chosen and applied to different middle schools. Brooke got into DSA, the only school she applied to. Kelly and Vicki both got into Githens because it was in their zone. I got accepted into Rogers-Herr out of the five schools I wanted to go to. Everything was moving so fast. I realized that soon Vicki would be out of my hair. She would be gone just like Aria, and maybe I would really be free this time.

I don't remember practicing for our "promotion ceremony." I don't even really remember our last few days. All that really comes to mind is the poofy magenta dress I wore, the small dark gym, how nervous I was, the little snacks we got afterwards, and the millions of photos we posed for. It rushed by in a blur and then it was over. Saying goodbye to my friends hurt—it was a good hurt, though. Happy tears and lingering hugs and pinkie promises to have many summer sleepovers. Then they left with their families for celebratory lunches, but I stayed behind. I needed to wander around the playground one last time.

I remembered how Mr. Gibson had told us we were literally stars. How everything is made up of recycled star dust, including me and you.

My balloon dress swooshed around my knees. It looked like the universe with all the glitter hugging it. Swirling around made all the glitter turn to stars. I was wearing the galaxy, and that made me feel big. Bigger than Aria or Vicki. Bigger than all the other gorgeous girls in my grade. Bigger than everyone and everything. I wasn't just wearing the universe, I was the universe.

Knowing that I was more than just some useless human being—so much more—helped heal the small but stinging scars Aria and Vicki had left me with.

*

It is a widely known fact that kids don't think before they speak. As true as it may be, it is okay. Because as the wise Kelly Clarkson once sang, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

ridge and alec DESTROY TOKYO

RIDGE PRICE

Growing up we all had a friend—well, we all had *friends*—but we had that one friend who every free chance we got, we would spend it with that person. That friend for me is Alec.

Alec is the guy with the words Baltimore Ravens written in purple across his shirt. At first sight he may look overweight, but a lot of that is muscle. He could pick up a full grown man and throw him across the house if he wanted to, so watch out. Out of all my friends he is definitely the most fun.

Back in the day, Alec would stomp down the hallways like a mad man screaming “AHHNEAAUH!” like Godzilla, banging against the walls and, sadly, shaking the whole house until his dad would yell at him to shut up. When we weren’t screaming, slamming, and smashing, we would play Star Wars video games on his Playstation. We would also create cities out of VHS tapes or Legos just so we could destroy them with our Godzilla toys.

Not everything we did was loud and destructive. We were huge Godzilla movie buffs. We knew the names of every giant monster and would list them off in unison: “Godzilla, Gigan, Ghidorah, Gomorrah, Anguirus, Mothera, Deastastroya!” This would go on ‘til an adult rudely interrupted us. We hardly ever got to finish, but we didn’t mind; the fact that we knew all of them made us so proud. We’d just go to another room and start watching a Godzilla movie. Believe it or not, Godzilla has been a huge part of our lives. We still get excited when we see one of the movies on TV (usually on Syfy).

Time not watching movies was spent building Lego sets or making cheap and cheesy action movies, most of which were made with Lego Special Effects. And by that I mean if a car is supposed to crash in the movie you would probably see a Lego car falling down a staircase. We knew they weren't George Lucas quality special effects, but somehow we thought they worked with the film, even though the likelihood of a car shrinking down and falling down a staircase was pretty small.

*

Probably the funniest moments happen when Alec messes with my mom. Every time they're together, he finds a way to annoy her. The first moment that comes to mind is one we have all been talking about for years.

"Boys, come on! I've been waiting for hours," my mom yelled to Alec and me as she walked out the door. As we shuffle down the hall toward the door, I hear Alec's muffled laughter. Why is it muffled? I turn around to see Alec wearing a cardboard box we had made with eyes cut out so he can see. The box was originally made for a movie, but wearing it to the mall was so much better. So, Alec and I walk out the door, me wearing my normal clothes and Alec wearing the box head thingy.

"Oh hel—*heck* no, Alec, you are not wearing that stupid box to the mall!" screamed my mom.

"Stupid box?" cried Alec. "Why not, Teresa?" he asked, knowing the answer.

My mom replied, "Because it makes you look like a—because I said so." Now Alec could have just stopped, but he had to say something.

"You've changed, Teresa!" cried Alec. "Ever since you started dating Vernon, you've changed."

Okay, so before I go any further, I should probably tell you who Vernon is. So my mom was dating this black man who she still is dating. He is probably the whitest black person you will ever meet, but before I go any further I should probably go back to the story.

"Alec, shut up and take that box off your head!" commanded my mother as she backed out of the driveway. He obeyed and no one

talked for a while—the car was probably the quietest it would ever be. But then out of nowhere my mom yelled, “You’ve got to be kidding me,” as she slammed on brakes and pulled over to the side of the road. Alec had put the box back onto his head. “Boy, if you don’t take that dumb box off, I’m going to put you out the car,” threatened my mother.

“Okay, Teresa. Just don’t make me cry no more,” replied Alec in a low, sad voice. Once Alec took off the box, we made it to the mall and had a good time. We started driving home, and guess who put the stupid box back on his head?

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” shouted my mom in a harsh tone of voice.

In reply to this throat-scratching yell, Alec took off the box and said with the biggest grin, “Yes, Teresa. Yes, I am!”

*

It was the beginning of December. Everyone was doing the normal thing: waking up, going to school if we had it, getting home. You know, the usual. One day my mom got a call from my Grandma saying that Granny Black was in the hospital. We all rushed to the hospital, but what we saw tough. She was hooked up to all these gadgets and hospital equipment, so she could barely talk to us. Alec and his parents showed up soon after. I wanted to talk to Alec, but my brother River and I were sent to go get everyone Chick-Fil-A.

When we got back, Alec was sitting outside shaking. River went inside to give everyone the food, so I stayed outside with Alec. We talked about how we were worried about her and what would happen if she died because every Sunday the family would go over to her house and eat lunch together. I told Alec that she was strong and she had come back from things like this. We started feeling like she was going to be okay, so we went back into the hospital and ate our chicken.

After everyone was done, the doctor told us that Granny would have to move out of the emergency room to a more long-term hospital. We eventually got a hospital to drive out and pick her up, so

once she was driven off we all left. Everyone thought Alec and I should stay with each other overnight because of what we had been through. So we spent the night and reassured ourselves that Granny was going to be fine.

After she'd spent a few weeks in the hospital, she started getting better. She could talk to us, and boy did she have a lot to say. Eventually, she was able to go home but had to stay on something to help her breathe. We all thought that everything was going to be okay.

One day my mom got a call. Granny only had a few hours left.

When we drove out, everyone was talking to her even though she couldn't reply. We were all telling her how much we loved her and how excited we all were for Christmas, which was only a week away. After everyone talked to her, we didn't leave. We stayed a while, watched TV, talked, that sort of thing.

We all walked into the room to see her one last time, and right there she passed away. Everyone had tears forming in their eyes. The adults seemed to keep telling us, "She's in a better place," but even knowing that it's still hard to deal with the death of a loved one.

After the coroner showed up to pick up Granny, we all sat quietly for a while. Then we all left, our families going to their houses, and me going with Alec. That night Alec and I stayed up wondering what was going to happen to the family. Were we still going to eat lunch together every Sunday? Was the family going to fall apart?

A couple of days later, we attended the funeral. Alec spoke, and the things he told everyone about Granny made it feel like she was still here. He told stories about her and things they did together. It was heart-warming. Looking back on it now, Alec's speech at the funeral really helped the family feel a little better about the situation.

We all still miss her a lot, but we don't let it devour our lives. We still talk to her, even. We don't mourn anymore; we remember.

*

So it all started with going out to eat at Chili's. There had been a huge wait, so we didn't get out of there 'til 10:30. His mom decided to hit Walmart because she had to pick up a few things. Alec and I were

so bored—I would have never imaged an empty ghost town Walmart would have been this boring until Alec discovered something.

“Ridge, check this out,” Alec said as he zoomed past on a shopping scooter, yelling and screaming. The store was so empty you could hear his screaming echo through the toy section. Soon after this discovery, his mom showed up and asked us to go get a drink, one drink only. So we scooted to the drink aisle, and when we got there Alec grabbed two drinks. “Ridge, they’re two for two.”

“Alec, two for two? There’s no deal—two for the price of two would be the same as buying two not on sale,” I replied, hoping Alec would realize how dumb he sounded. Instead he told me that two for two meant buy one get one free.

It’s things like this that make Alec so fun. You can never tell if he is serious or joking.

*

You know how most friends don’t stay friends like they think they will? They switch schools or move away—it’s always something. But that hasn’t happened with Alec. We still hang out most weekends to this day, never losing that friendship we had when we were younger. And, of course, we still act like we’re six years old sometimes.

So, Alec has this super-golf-cart we drive when I go over to his house. When I say super I mean a golf cart equipped with four-wheeler tires and engine. We drive the mud-stained super-cart from the heat of noon to the chill of night. Golf carts aren’t meant to be driven like go-carts, but it happens every time I go to Alec’s house. We’d drive all through the night if we could.

*

My life without Alec wouldn’t be the same. Yes, my name would still be Ridge, and yes, I would look the same. But I wouldn’t act the same or have the same values I have now. My family wouldn’t even be the same without Alec. I’ve been told that Alec, my brother, and

I will still be talking about some of his stunts at my four-year-old brother's wedding. "Remember that time, Alec?" I'll wheeze.

So, here's one more: Alec was at my dad's house with me and my brother. We were outside playing basketball. Everything was going good 'til we heard Alec yell out to the neighborhood, "Ball is life!" as he ran toward the ten-foot basketball goal attempting to dunk. When Alec gets to the basket, he jumps into the air, slams the ball into the hoop, swings around, and then slams himself into the cinder blocks supporting the basket.

He limped into the house pulling his shorts up mid-thigh, blood dripping down his leg to tell my dad, "Billy, I had an accident." We all burst out laughing. My dad got him Band-Aids and stuff to clean himself with. Everything was okay after that. Alec felt fine, we all had a good laugh, and the day ended without anyone having to perform surgery.

*

When Grand Theft Auto 5 came out, Alec and I played it twenty-four hours a day. The game was hilarious. Alec and I joked around about the lines in the game, repeating things like, "Sucka, what you gonna do?" or "Fool, you done lost your mind." One weekend when my brother was driving us home, Alec summoned his GTA5 knowledge by sticking his head out the window and yelling, "F*** the law!" We were laughing so hard tears dripped down our faces even as we pulled into the driveway. When Alec and I walked in, we noticed one of the Godzilla VHS tapes we watched all the time as kids. We popped the movie in and watched it just like old times.

It brought us back to a simpler time. Even though the films are giant monsters destroying Tokyo, I feel peace like Alec and I felt every day of our worry-free childhood. The worn down images remind us of the many years we spent watching the movie, a time when our only problem was wondering if Godzilla would stop Gigan from destroying Tokyo.

two peas in a pod

AMELIA STEINBACH

Chapter 1: That Blonde Girl

I walk through the doors of the cafeteria and immediately glance to the left, where the blonde girl always sits. She is sitting next to a tall girl with short brown hair, and on her other side is a short African-American boy. Talking and laughing with the three of them, she stops and looks up when I walk in and we stare at each other for a good forty-five seconds as we always do. I want to be friends with her because she has blonde hair just like me.

Fast forward one year, and I step into my first grade classroom for meet and greet only to have my new teacher run up to me, pull me over to a table, and plop me down in one of the empty seats. I look up to see the very same blonde girl sitting at the table the teacher dragged me to. Her dad is wearing a loose button down shirt and khaki shorts. They are speaking to each other in words I don't understand, and I look up to my dad with a questioning face. Bending down, he whispers excitedly, "They're speaking French." He rushes over to them and hurriedly begins to show off his skills in the language. My teacher, Ms. Shenkel, introduces us, and hurries off to the other kids, leaving me the only one at the table not speaking the language.

Olivia's (for the blonde girl now had a name) dad and my dad talk for a few minutes while I sit there utterly confused as to how in the world I am supposed to become friends with a girl who is speaking a language I can't understand.

*

"Hi," she shyly whispered on the first day of school. *So, she speaks English*, I thought. A few days went by, and I had a brand new best friend.

Some day around the middle of October, Ms. Shenkel informed the class that our spirit week took place next week, and Tuesday had the title twin day. I looked over at Olivia to find her already looking at me. We nodded at each other in silent agreement. The next day at recess we exchanged our house phone numbers on pink sticky notes.

Well, Monday rolled around, and we decided it might be a good idea to figure out what we should wear the next day.

"Mommeeee!" I yelled at seven o'clock that night. She rushed over. "So . . . tomorrow's twin day, and I'm twinning with my best friend, Olivia." My mom shot me an exasperated look, and then rushed off to dial the Rostagni's home phone number. Olivia's mom had no more notice than my parents did, and our mothers talked on the phone for a few minutes trying to figure out what clothes we had in common. Most of their conversation consisted of them complaining about our procrastination about the whole situation.

I ran into school Tuesday morning wearing a jean skirt, pale pink tights, and with my hair in two pigtails. Olivia walked in wearing a jean skirt just like mine, but her tights were hot pink, and her mom had put her hair in two french braids. I guess we looked enough like twins though, because I got called Olivia all day long, and she got called Amelia. We got used to it and would need to be for the next many years.

Chapter 2: Little Black Book

"I'm going to write down everything I hate about Ms. Chang in this book, and we can write why we're mad at each other in it, too!" Olivia explained excitedly as she shoved a little black notebook in my face one day in fourth grade.

The notebook is four and a half by three and a quarter inches—very tiny. Easy to hide in clothing, school binders, or backpacks, which we did often. Black and white, the miniature composition notebook resembles something a little girl would doodle in. The book is worn from being held, tossed, and hidden. The pages are no longer crisp, but now crumpled and used. Purple ink splashes the white pages. Hatred and apologies line the pages, and little sketches take their places next to the words. There are millions of fingerprints on that book that belong to Olivia and me. Our blonde heads were always together leaning over that book.

11/17/08

Olivia: I hate her. She doesn't even understand how I feel and she's not a good teacher. I can't wait for fourth grade to end.

12/3/08

Olivia: I mean you're just annoying me because I feel like you're always bossing me around.

Amelia: Just because I'm suggesting something doesn't mean I'm bossing you around!

I guess Olivia's plan wasn't so fool proof though because one other person read the words in that book: our teacher, Ms. Chang. She flipped through the pages, reading words filled with hatred toward her. Slowly, she turned to glower at Olivia.

"I think you should keep this at home," Ms. Chang whispered firmly. A squeak managed to escape Olivia's mouth before she ran to me in embarrassment. That little black book was never seen in Ms. Chang's class again.

Chapter 3: The Queen Blondes

We walked up to the tree just seconds after the screaming started.

"It's all your fault! He liked me until you got here!" Izzi shouted and sprinted away as she always did. Just as predictably, Emily

started sobbing and slumped against the base of the huge oak in the middle of the playground. I began to race after Izzi, but, as always, to no avail. I soon gave up and turned around to head towards the bulky tree where it always started.

It seemed as though this recess would be no different to any other recess our entire fifth grade year. *Lunch will probably come and go with us trying to continue solving it*, I predicted to myself as I walked back, in no rush to get to them. The three of them lay against the tree as Amber and Olivia tried to talk some sense into Emily. Izzi would not be seen again until she wanted to be. We spent our entire fifth grade year trying to be guidance counselors for each other since we could not stand the school's guidance counselors . . .

Ms. Autumn was Forest View's guidance counselor and for some completely absurd reason, Olivia and I were under the impression that we knew how to do her job better. We were just simply convinced that we were always right when it came to stuff like that. One day, toward the middle of the year, Ms. Autumn decided to start a "Girls Club." In this club we talked about what gossip really is, how to solve fights, and every other problem a dramatic ten-year-old girl has. Naturally, Olivia and I decided we were far beyond that, and that we knew much more about the real definition of gossip.

The two of us would spend hours talking with her about how we felt, and our undecided feelings about the club. Ms. Autumn told us that if we would like to, we could come to one of the meetings, and then leave in the middle if we weren't satisfied. We sat through the first half, and then made eye contact and got up to walk out like little queen bees. We were quite the divas, and Ms. Autumn must have had a lot of patience. Striding into the lunch room, we sat down at our regular circle table, took out our twinning containers of raspberries, and began to compare notes about the meeting and the people—well really, to gossip.

Chapter 4: No-Goodbye Graduation

Mr. Leikind was Olivia's and my fifth grade homeroom teacher, and as the teachers pets that we were, we spent hours cleaning out

his desk and sorting things around the room. He was the teacher that saw us the most, and he was the one who, during the EOGs, would go from my desk to Olivia's in our attempt to name every Harry Potter character we could remember on our blank sheets, since no talking was allowed.

Towards the end of the year, our fifth grade team, Team Phoenix, gave out awards: Queen of Questions, Nobel Peace Prize, etc. Mr. Leikind got to the end of his list and looked up to announce the final award.

"This is the only award that will go to two people," he began. "I'm doing this because I've never seen a better friendship than the one between these two girls . . ." Olivia and I, of course sitting side by side, looked at each other, laughed, and got up without even waiting for him to finish reading off our names. The award was Two Peas in a Pod.

We spent the last week of school going to graduation picnics, graduation ceremony practices, and running around doing whatever we wanted. The last day finally got there, and everyone came in with curled hair and fancy dresses. Our graduation ceremony and after-party went by and hundreds of pictures of our group of six were taken. It might have been the only day we all got along.

Olivia and I only went to the same school because her mom worked at Forest View. In the back of my mind, I knew there would come a point in this day when we would all go home, and Olivia and my last day in the same school together would end. Forgetting this, we spent most of the day running around the school and playground, finally experiencing really being at "the top." When we went back to Mr. Leikind's room with about an hour left of school, it really began to sink in. We didn't really talk about the fact we would be at different middle schools and high schools until she was supposed to walk down to her mom's classroom about five minutes before the bell rang. We both started tearing up.

"I'll be at your house in two days to go to the pool!" Olivia said. Even though forty-eight hours was not a big deal, it felt like I was never going to see her again. In reality, we're still best friends three and a half years later. I gave her a million hugs and stood and watched as she walked down the hallway to her mom's class.

Fifth grade graduation was not goodbye, just the end to that chapter of our friendship. It's probably a good thing we don't go to the same school, though, because I don't know if we would be able to make any other friends since we'd spend every minute together.

pato-pato-ganso

ALANA FIORDALISI

Preparations

Wiping the fatigue from our faces we would begin the process. *Fill cup with grounds, tap to level off, into the filter they go, load into brewer, place pot beneath, pour in the water—DON'T SPILL.* Our minds went through this procedure six times each morning until we had an adequate amount of coffee. The process was lengthened when we lacked motivation or when our eyes were leadened with exhaustion.

We were then sent up a hill to the front of the school with rickety wheeled carts dragging along the uneven pavement, the milk pitchers often leaking onto the cement, leaving a creamy white trail marking our exact path of travel. The coffee cart would be sitting there at the front of the school, “Cool Beans Café” plastered across the front, followed by each of our menu items. The table to the side was soon filled with milk jugs, lids and sleeves for the cups, and our staple tip jar that was set out every day, weather worn and cracking but collecting donations for the children of Honduras nevertheless.

This process repeated day after day, week after week, month after month, for two years, through bitingly cold winters to humid and hot springs. Every day two of us would peel ourselves out of bed and trudge to school in the darkness of early morning. Every day we would labor over these seemingly meaningless pots of liquid. Every day as the parents dropped their children off they would be greeted

with coffee while we got nothing. But every day we'd rake in cash, coming closer and closer to our final goal.

Even those mornings, we'd eagerly fantasize about how the air would feel on our skin, how the water would be blue as the whales swimming within it, and how the sand would be soft as velvet, flooding into the gaps between our toes and dusting our clothes with the pale snow. We'd worry about the type of food they offered, how we would get along speaking in Spanish, and if we would even earn enough money to go in the first place.

Sometimes it seemed like a lost cause. How were we supposed to raise \$2,750 before the end of the school year while at the same time paying off our loans from starting the business? We had many a dreary meeting when we were told we weren't meeting our goals. We tried promotions and discounts but our income always lagged toward the middle of the year until the haunting thought of not being able to go finally kicked us into gear during the last three months of business.

But all of those lengthy mornings seemed well worth it when you and seven of your closest friends, who you hadn't seen since eighth grade graduation the week before, were standing in the airport checking the departure board for your flight out to Roatan, Honduras.

Anticipatory Chit-Chat

After jolting out of bed, racing to the bathroom, and, with shaking hands, snatching my toothbrush from its ceramic watering-can holder to brush my teeth, I improvised an airport-suitable outfit and dashed out the door into the dark, crisp morning.

Once my father and I climbed out of the car in the surprisingly crowded parking lot, we wasted no time heading into RDU, the architectural dreamland of an airport. Plopping my almost-bursting, forest green duffle bag onto the freshly polished floors of the airport check-in, I used my hawk vision to scan the immense room for any of my former classmates. We eventually all found each other (which was a miracle in and of itself) and ventured through the dreadfully slow security check.

Finally making it through, the seven of us, along with our two teachers, sped instinctively to the Starbucks at the bottom of the stairs. Receiving our beverages, we proceeded to our gate, sat back, and “relaxed,” continuing the anticipatory chit-chat about the adventure that we were about to embark on. My winter-paled thighs stuck to the cracking faux-leather seats and my friends all marveled at the fact that I was drinking a scalding hot chocolate in the middle of a North Carolina June. I just chuckled at the irony of it all when I saw them sipping their frozen beverages through over-sized straws and shivering in the chill of the air conditioning.

We fidgeted with our bags and empty cups until the flight attendant finally announced that we were allowed to line up. We jumped straight out of our seats and shuffled anxiously into the line of tired faces. We all got situated in our seats, me at the window, Mikayla in the middle, and Sneha on the aisle. I rested my head against the humming, slanted walls of the aircraft and listened to my friends, their bodies contorted into unnatural positions to face the seats behind them, draw even more answers out of our teachers.

We stopped once in Atlanta, Georgia, having to sprint through the airport in search of our soon-leaving plane, and then we were back in the air, turning our music up loud enough to drown out the whole world on the most surreal flight any of us would ever go on.

As we neared the Caribbean, we started cramming around the minuscule window to gain access of the magnificent views. I was shoved out of the way on multiple occasions by the unfortunate aisle-seaters who had once thought that they had the ideal spot.

Finally the plane began circling around Roatan, Honduras, nothing more than a forty mile-long island that would be our home for the next eight days. Michele, our teacher of all sorts, master diver, and coordinator of this trip helped us spot our resort from above, and we peered down upon the minuscule huts that would be our rooms.

The airport consisted of a lonesome runway and a small, single-story building that lacked proper air conditioning. We all filed off the plane excitedly and paced over the heat-soaked pavement into the snaking line at Customs.

Here we were. This was Honduras.

After collecting our bags we filed onto a run-down bus, 'Anthony's Key Resort' plastered on the side. The bus crawled up hills and sped down mountains, crushing us against the windows when we rounded a turn. A chorus of sighs whispered through the air when we finally came to a stop.

Dolphin Fetch

The taxi boat, a decrepit, blue bucket with slippery ledges for seats, putters at a dreadfully slow pace out to the dolphin enclosure that lies just off the shore. Our neon-colored mesh bags that hold our fins, snorkels, and masks are piled at our feet, inhibiting our movements to as far as our heads could swivel. Occasionally we get tipped by waves and have to stick out our arms to grab on to the person across from us for balance. Only when they pass do we realize this turbulence is actually coming from the waves of the larger, much faster dive boats that we were so jealous of.

We make it to the enclosure relatively unscathed and clamber onto the frightfully skinny dock that forms a barrier keeping in the dolphins. Arms extended to the sides for balance, we cross our way over the narrow dock and proceed onto the beach that was, in reality, twenty feet long. The instructors tell us about what the dolphins will tolerate and send us off.

Face down, backs up in the water we wait eagerly for a sight of one of the many dolphins. We nearly lose hope when, almost twenty minutes into the snorkel, we haven't seen a single one. We try all of the strategies they suggested, including snatching sea grass off the ocean floor for a game of dolphin fetch, but to no avail. It isn't until we eventually all drift off from each other that I finally catch a glimpse of a sleek, silver body.

At first it is just a single dolphin, a scar traveling the length of his back from playing with his friends. I dive down to the murky bottom and snag an algae-veiled strand of sea grass. Returning to the surface and clearing my snorkel, I pitch the flimsy olive string in front of me into the wind, letting it drift in the gusts and be carried a few yards away.

The dolphin's eyes follow the green streak from underwater and, upon its landing, darts to it and miraculously brings it back. This process continues for some time and gradually more of the animals begin accumulating around me, not wanting to miss out, all focused solely on the grass. As soon as the grass flies from my fingertips, six four-hundred pound sea creatures rush off, toppling over each other to be the victor, the one who got the pride of returning the prized plant back to me. They pelt to me at speeds of six miles an hour and then stop abruptly in front of my face, smears of smooth silver in the shadowed water, meeting my gaze for a moment, their long rostrums cracked ever so slightly as if into a smile. The pod and I eventually fall into a rhythm: I throw a strand of grass, and they speed off and return to me, the victor with the plant in its mouth, but all with joy in their eyes.

A whistle blows that signals the end of our time. I kick my flippers, turning in a small circle to see each of the dolphins once more, then paddle off back to the minuscule shore.

Befriending the Barefooted

The chain link fence surrounding the near-acre lot where the children play stands locked. It's nothing to deter us; the rusty padlock is utterly useless since the children simply climb over the fence anyway. The gate creaks open and we enter tentatively, not wanting to show disrespect with too much enthusiasm or confidence. We trek down a small hill, slick with wet leaves that have been stomped against the dirt, and over a rotting wooden bridge that spans over a steep ditch once carved by a stream that no longer holds any life.

There are twenty children at most, the littlest ones on skateboards with checks too wobbly to ensure any safety, some older girls playing volleyball with a fraying net, the older boys tossing a basketball into a netless hoop, but most simply running around, no shoes on, laughing hysterically when someone gets "tagged" then promptly running away.

I walk up to one boy, no more than nine, shaved head and scintillating eyes, who sits atop the steps of a small shed, passively watching the children darting around. He turns to me, a gleaming smile hanging like the moon on his face. I return the favor by grabbing the large camera from around my sweaty neck and taking a picture of him. When I walk up closer to him, I show him the screen where his face from just moments ago is mirrored. Immediately, his eyes widen and his smile cracks open even further, making an incomprehensible noise.

“Wow, good job, already making friends! He’s deaf and mute by the way. Look at the way you got him to smile.” I turn around to see Michele, beaming with happiness. She nods at me to continue.

I lead him over to a table where we’ve begun setting up draw-string bags for the kids to decorate and take home to carry their school supplies in. I go off to help hand out materials, but I keep an eye on him and make sure to retrieve his favorite markers. In the flurry of eager children, we don’t even notice the sudden increase to fifty when before there were but twenty. We start dishing out bags of different colors and replenishing the marker supply as quickly as possible but these children know nothing of waiting in a world where they constantly have to take what they can get. Nevertheless there wasn’t a single fight or argument, but rather children splayed out on the ground or piled around a table sharing markers and giggling when they saw other people’s drawings.

The mood starts to settle once the kids all retrieve their materials. I spot one particular girl, who can’t be older than six, drawing contentedly while lying on the rough concrete. She meets my gaze and beckons me over with her eyes. She asks, *“How do you spell my name?”*

I have her repeat her words a number of times more before I understand the rapid Spanish, but as soon as I do, I slowly spell out, *“N-A-I-R-A. Naira!”*

She looks at me with a sense of awe, her hair perfectly styled, clearly by a mother who adores her child. She takes me to meet her friends, all thirteen of them, and they declare me their “mother,” making me put them to bed on a piece of plywood and then chasing after me when I leave, calling *“¡Bruja, bruja!”* Witch, witch! I turn

suddenly and chase after them, surprised when I can't keep up with a cloud of barefooted kindergartners. When it is time for them to "go to bed" again I am ready to collapse, but this game continues for close to an hour before we digress into the most intense game of duck-duck-goose, *pato-pato-ganso*, ever known to man.

The final hour rolls around and the children are told to go home. I run up and grab Naira and promise, in the best Spanish I can summon, to think about her every day and I make her promise that she won't give her father, our trusty boat driver, any grief. She looks up at me with pleading eyes, heartbroken that this will be that last time we'll ever see each other, and musters the words, "*Te amo.*" I love you.

Swayed into a Trance

In Honduras, everywhere you looked—up, down, left, right, forward, backward, and even upside-down—was a view that begged to have its picture taken. Palm trees sprouted every ten feet, their scalloped brown trunks thick, topped with leaves like those of a pineapple, fresh coconuts hanging tantalizingly close but just out of reach.

Sand covered the key where our houses sat, and the rest of the resort was essentially a pier, giving an ever-present tropical atmosphere. You couldn't take more than twenty steps without the sight of water, crystalline blue with barely a ripple running across its surface.

The deck of our cabin held lounge chairs, a table, cracked open coconuts available for anyone to eat and a roof for protection from the unfortunate amount of rain. A set of three steps led right into the ocean, the small tides often licking the wooden planks. Next to the steps stood fossilized coral: huge, dark grey hunks of porous rock with spotted snails clinging to it, a perfect place to rest things while wading out into the timid waters. No other huts were visible from ours; it was just us and the ocean. We took advantage of the serenity as often as possible, usually bickering about whose turn it was to sit in one of the two hammocks. Fortunately, it was my turn to

be rocked into a trance to the sounds of rippling water, thinking of nothing but how my life will be when this summer rolls to a close.

Tightly wound cords of hemp weave in and out of each other, holding strong. These seemingly insignificant couplings support me and keep me levitated, suspended. The inch-wide gaps between each knot are enough for my fingers and toes to catch, but never so big that I might find myself slipping through. The gentle rocking of the hammock sways almost in synchronization with my changing outlooks—one moment, I see my future as a series of experiences to welcome and look forward to; the next, I want to stay in this moment forever, hesitant about the inevitable changes that will be brought on at the end of the summer, including the inevitable change of schools.

The constant rocking lulls me into a trance, my eyes locked on the horizon where the pale, midday sky greets the boundless ocean. Thick sea air blankets me in a just barely comfortable warmth, the scent of sunscreen lingering under the cover of the porch. Palm trees whisper in the occasional breeze as the entwining cords of the hammock press hatched marks into my skin. *Yes, I decide, I'd rather remain in this moment forever.*

the Colors of Scotland

LEXXY

I'm not gone just tell you 'bout the fights and the joes. I know that's the first thing y'all think when you hear "Scotland Manor." I'm not gone tell you 'bout the drugs, either. Cause that's not what it's about. Y'all think of shooting and people getting robbed, but naw. I won't tell y'all bout the police coming out there every day, even though they do. That ain't the point.

First off, don't nobody get shot. Rarely will you hear gun shots—it's not that dangerous. Those of us that live here don't worry 'bout getting robbed or shot. We not thinking 'bout the police that roll down here every eight hours, either. We worry 'bout enjoying ourselves and laughing.

Even when the joes do roll down here like they gone catch something, we just laugh right in their face. And 'specially when they stop to ask us questions with that "friendly" grin on their face like they gone get us to snitch on White, Purple, and Cream 'bout what they did last night. It was always one lady, we called her Neighborhood Watch, who snitched every time. Half the time the feds were out there was 'cause of her. What we do is none of her business. Ain't like we were doing anything wrong, no way. We was just chilling.

*

Besides fights, football, and cookouts, basketball was everybody's entertainment. It didn't matter if you played or just sat on the old steps and watched.

At the very bottom of steep old Scotland, there were always at least five multicolored basketballs. Some were a bright orange and some were a brick red and some could vary from a salmon pink to a coffee brown depending on if they were freshly stolen or how long they'd been sitting there. Everybody in Scotland loved basketball but nobody loved it as much as Silver.

I swear there have been at least forty different basketball goals in at least ten different spots in the last seven years. Ms. Sharon, a.k.a. Neighborhood Watch, hated the goals, and because of that, we hated her. Every goal we got, she'd take away while yelling at us.

But our homie Brown always got us goals. He wanted to be a bodybuilder/boxer. He was buff and built, with smooth brown skin, and he always had cornrows in his head. He was a criminal, but we all were, and we loved him. He would do anything for us. We'd tell him as soon as she took the goal—all we had to tell him was that we were bored and she took our goal. Later that same day or night, we'd see a taut figure with muscles that gleamed in the street lights walking down the street with a basketball goal around his shoulders. We'd thank him and go hoop.

Years later, Brown got sent away over some drama and we never saw our homie again. I heard he's back in Durham, though. I even thought I saw him walking down the street a few weeks back.

*

It was hard to tell when my crazy cousin was sad, but Lord when that girl was angry, you *knew*. She'd let your tail know in a heartbeat. She had dark skin, and when she was mad it was like a deep dark reddish color. Her anger seemed to come from somewhere else, some place far away, a place deep inside her, and even though it wasn't me who was angry, I felt the anger, too.

Silver would fight. Oh man, she could fight. And she still can. Her hands are quick and heavy. She'd swing and you wouldn't even know that she had just hit you until you felt pain rush through you. By the time you noticed she had hit you, the fight was over with and you had lost. And the whole neighborhood saw.

My cousin Silver was crazy. She'd fight whoever wanted it. She wouldn't go around hitting little kids or nothing, but if a grown woman wanted to fight, it was whatever. A grown man could get punched in the nose, too. It didn't matter. Whoever, whenever, however. It was nothing.

Silver was a tomboy. She hung with the guys. She was quick. Like super quick. She could run so fast nobody could catch her. She was about 5' 6". Then, she had medium length hair that she kept braided back in cornrows. She had a short temper when it came to things or people she loved. She took care of hers: if she loved you, then you knew it. She took care of herself, too: she always had the nicest clothes. She looked nice even if she came out the house in basketball shorts and a white T. Everybody in the neighborhood loved her and would do anything for her, but I'd do more than anybody.

*

Midday in Scotland. Heat, boredom, jokes, and a group of us walking up the street. Our mothers are off doing Lord knows what, and Lord knows where our fathers are, probably out doing *something*—we don't know. My younger brother's out playing in the woods with his friends, neighborhood youngins, and I'm with my friends.

"Aye Silver?!" Green calls from down the sidewalk, pants saggin' low, with a Black behind his ear. Silver and I stand there and then start walking toward him. I stop at her old house. It's a nice blue color with a brick red door. It doesn't look abandoned—just nobody lives in it anymore. It's about two doors down from Green and Red's house and about three doors down from mine.

I'm listening to music. That's what we all do. The only thing to do is to wait for Silver at the end of the sidewalk, soak up the sun, and laugh.

*

I was in seventh grade, outside with the homies. It was probably around 7:30, 8:00. It ain't dark yet, but it's getting there. We were all

outside bored, just walking around, so we stopped at Silver's old house, one of our hang out spots.

We started to talk about when Silver had moved, and she mentioned how a couch was still in there. Mind you, we're bored. So we started to wonder if it was still in there. Lexx started telling us about how she used to get into her house when she didn't have her key, and other stories of that nature. For some reason, Orange started kicking the door trying to get in. He was kicking that door with some force.

Yellow kept saying, "Shh, y'all hear that?" We didn't know what he was hearing 'til he said it again. "Y'all don't hear them sirens?" Then I started to hear 'em. I think Gold heard 'em, too, but we didn't really pay any attention to them.

I was sitting on the porch listening to music and talking to Yellow, while Orange continued to kick the door and punch the windows. Then the window fell in—it didn't shatter or anything. So Silver went in and looked if the couch was still in there. It was. She came out and then Orange went in just to be nosy. We started talking about how this could really be a hangout spot now, so Silver went in to unlock the back door. After she did that, she comes in from around the back. Orange came out the house and Silver put the window back in place.

It was dark now. Yellow said that the sirens were getting closer. We all get quiet to listen, and we don't hear them anymore.

We were still trying to listen for what Yellow was talking about, and then we hear a quiet roar like somebody was driving down the hill. We saw a car with three lights on the front. We saw the light shine toward us and we knew who it was. *Oh, God.*

Everybody broke.

We all took off toward the back of the townhouses. Pink quickly ran to her house. Once we got to the back, Silver and Yellow went toward the woods on one side of Scotland. I had dropped my phone and it was dark in the back, so I couldn't see anything, but I knew Scotland like the back of my hand. I knew where I was, but I couldn't think of where to go, so I ran home.

Orange and Gold were behind me. Once I got to the back porch of my house, I heard a loud screech, the sound of slamming on

???

brakes. Two police officers flew out the car with guns in their hands. *Oh, my God.*

When that gun got in my face it was like everything slowed down. I saw everything around me even though it was pitch black outside. To this very day I can remember what everything looked like. It's like a picture stuck in my mind. And the face I see the most is my little brother's. The look on his face was complete shock and fear. He was scared they were going to shoot me, but he was so shocked he couldn't do anything but scream my name

They were screaming at me, telling me to put my hands in the air, and to sit down in the chair behind me. Their flashlights were so bright, my goodness. When I looked back to see where the chair was, I saw Gold try to creep back behind the doghouse to hide, but Orange's bright shirt followed her and they were spotted. It all happened so fast.

My mom was on the phone with my aunt, Silver's mom when all this happened. She came to the back door quick, her eyes wide in shock. It looked like so many thoughts were going through her head. The police were asking me all the questions. Lord, so many questions. It was annoying. I wasn't even really paying attention. My mom was answering most of the questions.

They kept asking for names. "Who were you with?"

I didn't want to tell names. Nobody in Scotland talked to police but the Neighborhood Watch. My mom told the police my cousin's name. Oh God, this was about to be drama. Silver was known by the police more than anybody in Scotland and everybody knew that. Why would my mom tell them her name?! Was she crazy?!

Once the police found out it was an empty house, they calmed down with the questions. They let us go home. But they boarded up the windows and put a "No Trespassing" sign up. My mom had told me I couldn't go back outside for the night. But man, I really wanted to go back outside.

Everybody came up to my window once the police left and everything, asking me what happened. One boy came to my window and said, "You snitched." I had to clear that up. I would never snitch

on anybody and 'specially not my cousin. My mom told, not me. And what happened because of that is a whole 'nother story.

*

We're family, one big family in Scotland. We share with each other, we care for each other, and we protect each other. And it's all love. It's all love.

the tragedy

EDGAR ALVAREZ

There I was. It was a hot summer night in Mexico. I was in my backyard playing in the tree house me and my six cousins built together to hide in whenever we got in trouble so that we wouldn't get beaten by our grandpa. Me and my best friend Marcos were talking about the guy who got shot in the forehead last week by a gang called the Shadows.

Marcos was the first true friend I ever had. He and I would chill together during recess at school. After school ended, we would walk home together, playing with the soccer ball his dad gave him for Christmas.

That day we decided to play soccer outside in the street. While we played, his big brother Daniel came running along with his other friend who had a gun in his hand. They were breathing hard and looked mad. Daniel had blood on his bulletproof vest. He was bleeding from the shoulder. He told Marcos he had gotten shot while he was walking through the other side of the neighborhood. Marcos ran home and told his mom what had happened to Daniel. They took him to the hospital.

They took the bullet out. The doctor said he couldn't move his arm for weeks.

The next day, Marcos told me he wanted to get revenge for what they had done to his brother. I told him that they had guns and we didn't; all we had were rocks and a slingshot we had made. He said that his brother had guns in his closet, that we could use to get them back for what they did.

After school ended, we ran to Marcos' house. We searched the closet and found two pistols: one was black and the other one silver. They were both heavy. We could barely shoot them—our arms trembled just raising them. He said his brother told him not to mess with the guns because they were already loaded. We put them in our book bags carefully and ran to the tree house. We made plans so our parents wouldn't notice we were gone. We had told our parents we were going to sleep over at a friend's house.

Around five o'clock p.m. we walked to the next block. There were people on their porches just drinking and talking. We didn't even know who we were looking for. Marcos said he knew what the guy looked like and that he would know him when he saw him. We waited for about thirty minutes. I was getting hungry, so I told him we should go to the store and buy some snacks to eat, at least while we waited. But we continued to wait until twenty minutes later, he saw him.

He was about 5' 4" with brown skin. He was alone.

When Marcos pointed at him and pulled the trigger, it went off, but nothing came out.

Everyone ran into their house and locked the door. As soon as he heard the shot, the guy ran into a two-floor yellow house. Marcos looked mad because he had the chance but the gun was not really loaded. He reloaded the gun and shot at the windows.

I told him I wanted to go back home.

He said, "Alright, let's go back. At least we scared him."

When we got back to Marcos' house, I asked him if I could hold the gun for a while. I wanted to practice shooting with my uncle.

The next day, I noticed Marcos didn't come to school. I went to his house and asked if he could come out and play, but then I saw all the people dresses in black. I asked what had happened.

Daniel told me Marcos had gotten shot by a gang member. I was speechless. I went home to tell my mom what had happened.

I was scared I would get shot since I was with him that day. My mom told me we were moving with my grandma. She was leaving to Texas with my other uncle. I was happy to move far away, to stay away from the Shadows.

the game of life

APOLLO HILL

I remember when I was in middle school, I wanted to be a gangster. I started smoking, fighting, fucking, and drinking. Life took a turn for me. I was finally one of the cool kids. Well I been smoking ever since I was eleven years old. Smoking does not make you cool—it just gets you in more trouble.

The reason I started smoking was to get rid of all my problems. When I was young I got picked on. So I *had* to try smoking weed once. It felt good; when you smoke weed you ain't gotta worry 'bout shit. You are in your own world.

Then came seventh grade. People got more annoying, so I hung with my big brother. One time he threw a party and I got drunk for the first time. When I drank liquor, my world started to change. It was like upgrading to something way better than weed. So there it was: I drank and smoked. I was living the dream; I was living my life. Then trouble came knocking at the door.

My homeboy Zaion, who sold weed, was knocking. I paused the TV and went to the door. I froze when I saw he was high.

My mom came running down the stairs, so energetically. You can believe she noticed he was high. She asked him, "What do you want?"

He said, "Can Apollo come out?"

I looked in her eyes, hoping she would say yes. She said, "Go ahead, Apollo. You got ten minutes." Good. That was enough time to burn. We went outside and burned a blunt.

I came in to see if the coast was clear. As soon as I closed the door, my mom was right there. She looked in my eyes, looking mad as a motherfucker. My eyes were on fire. She said, "Come here, Apollo." I was scared out of my mind. I walked up slowly, looking around the room. Breath of reefer fiery. She looked me in my eyes and said, "Boy, have you been smoking?"

I hesitated and said, "No, ma'am." I couldn't believe it. Usually when I smoke, I'm not scared.

She said, "Let me smell your breath." I leaned in, reeking of marijuana. She smelled my breath and said, "Oh, really?"

I looked up and stood there, just looking at her. I didn't say a word. That's when it began: a spark of evil flashed over me. My mom got up and popped me, hard in my chest. I fell to the floor and looked at her. "Go to your room," she yelled.

I walked upstairs and went to my room. I slammed the door as hard as I could. She shouted, "Boy you slam that door again . . . !" I didn't say nothin', I just sat there. My high had gone down from all the stress. I didn't understand life anymore. I soon heard a voice in my head say, "Welcome to hell!" That's what it felt like too, like I was in hell. A demon had awoken in me.

Then came eighth grade. I was a total badass: I talked different, I walked different, I smoked even more, and I got into even more trouble.

"What up, cuz," I said as I entered the class.

"Wussup, fam," my friend Adriel said. Adriel was my best friend ever since seventh grade. He was the only one I could trust. School was full of drama, so I really didn't trust nobody. I knew I could trust him though. He'd been there for me no matter what.

"Man, another day in school," I said.

Adriel looked at me and said, "Don't worry 'bout it. We got four more years." I looked down and shook my head.

Then an attractive girl came in. I admired her from afar. "Yo, you see that girl?" I said as I looked over there.

"Yeah, that's Aiysha," he said.

"I want to get with her," I said as I stared and smiled.

"You *don't* wanna get with her bruh," he said shaking his head.

“Why not?”

“Cuz she a big girl,” he said laughing.

“I don’t care.” Then the bell rang, sounding like a juvenile detention bell. It was time to start class.

A lady walked in with glasses, looking old as all get out. “Good morning class, my name is Mrs. Brent-Willis. Welcome to Language Arts. I will be your teacher this year.” I laughed at her trying to be funny, but nobody else laughed. I sat there feeling stupid. She explained a lot of school rules, rules that I already knew I was gonna break.

Three weeks of school had passed by. I finally got to know the girl I wanted to get with. Turns out when I talked to her, I liked her for more than just that body. She was cool, freaky, beautiful, and just my type. I loved everything about her. The bell rang and class started. I finally got the guts to ask her out, when this happened:

“Hey, Apollo, can I talk to you?”

“Yeah, sure. Wussup?” I said, looking her in her eyes.

“I like you. Do you want to be my boyfriend?” she said looking at my with faithful eyes. I couldn’t believe it, she asked me before I asked her.

I said, “Yes.” I didn’t want to be the desperate type, but that’s what I made it look like. She smiled and gave me a kiss.

I went home that day happy as hell. I called her number and a strange lady answered, “Welcome to Social Services, how may I help you?”

I thought for a moment and decided to ask, “Hey, may I speak to Aiysha please?”

“Yes, hold on for a moment.”

I waited for a moment, then Aiysha answered. “Hey baby,” she said with a sexy voice.

“Hey baby. I didn’t know you lived in a group home,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s a long story,” she said. She told me everything that happened. I felt bad for her.

The next day came and I was ready to see her. She came to school in some sexy ass tights. First period she skipped, so I skipped too. We went into a computer lab with nobody in there. We made out all period long. I was pretty sure my lips were swollen, but I didn’t care.

Weeks passed and I had turned up. I began going to work with my step-dad. He fixes up houses, so I was expecting to get a couple of bucks in my pocket. That's when trouble came knocking at the door. Again. The house we worked on was a crack house. I found pounds of weed hidden under the porch. I took my book bag and put in two pounds.

The next day, it was time to go to school. I walked in with a lot of weed. "Wussup, bruh? You trying to buy some weed?" I asked this seventh grader. Pretty much all seventh graders smoked at my school.

"I don't have any money," he said.

This white girl that went to my girlfriend's group home asked, "Can I get some?"

I asked her, "How much you need?"

She said, "A blunt." She gave me ten dollars. I handed her a .5. That day I sold a lot of weed, and my girlfriend helped. Then the next day came.

I had just walked in the class when—"Hello, Mrs. Brent-Willis. Is Apollo Hill in here." Oh shit, it was Mr. Rhodes. Mr. Rhodes was the assistant principal that wrote me up last year. Everybody looked my way; they knew what was going on.

I left my bookbag in the class; I thought I was getting away, when all of a sudden—"Here's his bookbag, Mr. Rhodes. Everybody complained about how it smelled like marijuana."

"Bring it here, Mrs. Brent-Willis," he said with a grin on his face.

He opened the bag, and found the weed in it. I didn't know what to do; I felt like running, but it was police all over the school, so I stayed put. Soon, he called my parents. They took me all over the place, just to find out that I was getting expelled and sent to the alternative school.

I was out of school for like three months. I thought I wasn't gonna make it to the ninth grade. On my days out of school, I didn't do anything but smoke and eat.

Then came alternative school. It seemed cool 'til everybody found out my big brother was a Crip. In Georgia, it ain't nothing but Bloods and G'D. There were not many Crips there, but I was still protective about Crip. Everybody there wanted to fight me, so life really just sucked. I avoided it by getting suspended every day.

I remember when I came to school with a red belt on. They all spotted it, asking me, "Yo, lemme get that belt."

"Hell naw. This my belt, bitch," I said popping off with an attitude. He looked at all the bloods in the room, and they stood up like they were going to jump me. I took the belt off and wrapped it around my hand, making sure that the metal piece was sticking up.

I don't know if I scared them, but they backed up and sat back down. The math teacher soon got on the phone and started talking to someone. To my surprise, you can get in trouble over a red belt. The officer came in and took me to the office. I soon got suspended for seven days. On my days out, I chilled and smoked with my big brother.

My break was soon over. I finally returned to the school. "Look who's back," they said as I entered the class.

"Chill, bruh. I ain't got no time for y'all," I said as I sat down.

"You hear this, Red? He ain't got no time for us," someone said looking at the boy they called Red.

Red, he was a dude with red hair. I assume he was supposed to be G or something. I didn't like him for nothing, though. I thought of him as the enemy. I really wanted to murder him, but I had to control my rage. I had a feeling that he was gonna do something crazy on my last days there, and my feelings were right.

I reached over to pull something out my book bag when I dropped my Black and Mild. Now they knew my secret. I sneak a lot of stuff past security.

"Bruh, how'd you get that past the security?" the big dude asked. I looked at him. He looked as if he was gonna do something if I didn't tell him.

I said, "It was easy. I walk in without a belt on, and they don't check me."

"I want you to sneak me in a blunt," he said with a grin.

"Hell, no. I ain't gonna do shit for you."

"I'll snitch on you if you don't do it," he said, looking mad.

"I said no, nigga. I ain't gonna get you shit," I said, keeping my gangsta face on.

"Fine," he said as he made a big scene. The teacher walked over, and he did some stupid ass shit.

"Excuse me, I found this on the floor, by his desk," he said, pointing at me. Now knowing this school, they believed anything that will get you in trouble. She sent me to the office. Everybody told me to "run," but I stood there looking stupid. They came in, took me, and suspended me.

There I was, getting suspended. I couldn't believe it. I just got back. Could this week get any worse? It did though because the only thing on my mind now was trouble, anger, and weed. They tried to contact my mom, but they couldn't though. So the next day I acted as if I was going to school. I got on the city bus and rode off. I didn't know where I was going; all I knew was I was gonna buy some more weed. So I got off the bus and started walking around the bus station.

"Wassup, li'l homie," my homeboy said as he walked up.

"Nothing, trying to find some bud," I said.

"I got you," he said. We started walking to this neighborhood by the bus station. We sparked up two blunts. I was lucky that my homeboy showed up because I did not feel like spending my thirty dollars. I don't know what we smoked, but it was some sticky icky.

I walked back to the bus stop and saw three officers from the alternative school. I didn't know what to do. I looked around to see if there was any place to drift off to without getting caught. I started walking to the left, but another officer pulled up.

I walked back and he yelled, "Stop right there." I kept walking, as if I didn't know he was talking to me.

Another officer walked up and said, "Do you not hear him talking to you?"

"I didn't know he was talking to me," I said, staying put.

"What are you doing out of school?" he said.

I knew that if I told them about the Black and Mild situation, they would've known I smoke. "I got suspended," I said, thinking of a lie to tell them.

"What did you do to get suspended?"

"I got in a fight," I said, lying like hell.

"Fighting . . ." I knew that he knew that we all knew that I was lying. If I had gotten in a fight, I would've been in juvie. They took

me to this office and held me 'til my Aunt Danielle came to pick me up. She pulled up in a silver car.

The day I came back to the alternative school was around Christmas time. I already knew what was gonna happen. I got kicked out of the alternative school that very day. I unfortunately forgot I had a lighter in my pocket, but it felt good to not go back to the alternative school. Why? I got to go back to my regular school in January.

I had to go through a lot, though. I had an interview with the principal, I had to fill out some papers, sign a contract that put me on school probation, and transfer my grades over to my regular school.

I finally got back to my regular school. It was still just drama, though. Everybody recognized I was back, and it felt just the same. It felt like trouble. I expected more of a welcome back, but a lot had changed and nobody cared. I met some new friends. I lost some old friends, mostly to the streets. It was sad too, because most of them I'd considered family. I tried to avoid trouble, but it looked as if trouble always knew how to find me.

I only had five days back in school and I got suspended for pranking a friend. This was some stupid ass shit, but it didn't matter to me. My brother's best friend's mom came to pick me up. Turns out his dad smoked weed, too. That night his connect came in the house and had hella weed. The first thing that came to my mind was, *I wanna smoke with this nigga.*

"Go upstairs, Justin," he said. He turned to look at me, and I was hoping he would smoke with me. "You wanna hit this blunt?"

"Yeah," I said.

We smoked all night, and I felt good. Later on that night, my mom came to pick me up, but when she got there it was a sight to see. I got up out of the chair to open the door and a bunch of smoke ran out. I walked to the car and just sat there. When she got in the car and started talking, I didn't know what she was saying. It sounded like she was mad, though.

She started driving, and it looked like she was headed for the alternative school. She wasn't, though. She was actually headed for the juvenile detention. When she pulled in the parking space she

said, "Get out." We got out the car and walked in. "Excuse me, do you know where I can go to put him in?" she said.

I looked at the officers to see what they were going to say. I could tell they noticed I was high, but I didn't care. They sent us into this lady's office.

"Hello, how may I help you?" she said staring into my eyes.

"I need y'all to do something with this boy. I can't stand him anymore," my mom said.

They sent me out the room, and I couldn't hear a word. An officer walked up to me and said, "You need to apologize to your mom. She might let you off." I thought to myself and decided to apologize.

The lady called me back into her office. "So your mom says you never apologize."

"I'm sorry for my behavior," I said.

The lady explained to my mom how if they lock me up, I will be in there four months. So my mom decided to put me on probation.

I was on probation for months before finally being able to get off. I got out around graduation week. I was so happy because I finally got to graduate. I thought back to all that I had been through. The ceremony was tiring, but I got to sit next to my girlfriend, knowing that we would be together forever.

Now it's time to see what the future holds for me. I stand for what I believe in. You will know me as Apollo Hill, the guy who made it in the game of life.

out of reach

HEIDI YORK

Chapter 1

I don't say very much, and when I do, I am soft spoken. I have always wished I could change that about myself. I just want to be able to talk to people without having to overthink what I am going to say. I find that a lot of the time, "What did you say?" is asked after I say something. I have tried to speak louder, but sometimes my quiet voice makes it hard. I encounter problems with being introverted almost every day.

It was a Monday afternoon and the Bouncing Bulldogs gym reeked of sweat and deodorant. It was like a sauna, but instead of relaxing, we had to work in the heat. My coach walked around the room as he called out older kids to help teach. "Heidi, come turn Double Dutch here," he bellowed out. I jogged over to my spot where I would be turning with my team member, Luke. Luke sent me a smug smile and raised his eyebrows.

Jump rope classes that I can help with take place every Monday, Thursday, and Saturday. Teaching children, as most people know, takes someone who can be loud. Our coach really emphasizes teaching and being leaders. I think that I am a fairly good teacher, and I believe that I talk just enough when I teach, but not everyone agrees.

"You need to turn more," Luke would criticize me while we turned the ropes for the kids. His eyes would punch my soul as he said it. They would say, "Do you understand?" all by themselves. As

we moved on to the next part of the class, Traveler, I could still feel my cheeks burning. Everything seemed to be going fine until Luke decided that it was my turn to tell the kids what to do next. Luke's veins popped out of his stick arms as he handed me the traveler rope. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed my coach pacing in the front of the gym. I tried to project my voice to the eight kids we were teaching, but obviously, that didn't work for Luke. "Louder," he called. I started to say it again, only to be interrupted. "Even louder," pronounced Luke. *Geez Luke, just stop talking. You don't have to be so rude.* Now my cheeks were on fire. Finally, Coach switched another teacher into my spot.

Since so many people can be used as teachers, we tend to rotate in and out. I dragged myself into the other gym where the people that aren't teaching can practice. It felt even hotter and sweatier in that gym. I felt like my whole face could just melt off and slide onto the dirt-blanketed floor. My stomach turned and I just wanted to curl into a ball in the corner. I had only been in the gym for a mere five minutes when the image of my tall, grey-haired coach was reflected in the mirror. He sauntered in and motioned for someone to turn off the roaring fan.

He started babbling on, and then he got onto the subject of being quiet. His giant feet thumped against the floor as he paced, still talking. "Some of you need to speak up more when you teach. The kids aren't going to be able to hear you if you just whisper; you have to actually talk. If you don't learn how to speak up you're never going to travel or get to be on workshop staff." He didn't even have to say my name; I knew that he was talking about me, and I'm sure other people knew too.

A chill shot down my back. I wanted to run out of there as fast as I could. I couldn't wait to go home so that I could rant to my parents and hide myself from the world, underneath a warm, fuzzy blanket. At the end of classes, I exited the gym slowly, watching the smudged mirror behind me. As I walked toward the door, my image in the mirror became smaller and smaller until I disappeared.

Chapter 2

We were about halfway through the school day in Mrs. Frasz's second grade class. I remember that I was wearing one of my favorite pairs of pants. They were light pink and had one white stripe racing down the side of each leg. We were supposed to go to PE for Specials that day. I sat at a table closest to the back of the class with three other people. There were only one or two tables in front of us, but we were still the back table. We sat right near the one stall bathroom in our classroom. Everyone knows that they put those in there for a reason.

It wasn't unusual for someone to ask to use the bathroom during class. All you had to do was raise your hand and ask. The bathroom sat only about three feet away, so you wouldn't be missing that much of class if you went. Even though I knew that it wasn't a big deal, I still felt really scared to ask to go. I think that one of my problems with asking was that I felt like I was interrupting Ms. Frasz's train of thought. Most people would think that if you were sitting down and just asking a short question, that it wouldn't be very scary, but I wasn't the average child.

It started out as just a slight emergency. I needed to use the bathroom, but I didn't feel like it was quite urgent enough and I didn't want to miss anything that Ms. Frasz said. About five to ten minutes later, I started shifting my leg position and trying to prevent my sweaty hands from shaking. Now I seriously needed to go. My body couldn't handle it much longer and it was almost painful, but I really didn't know how to approach asking to go to the bathroom. Just then, I realized that I had reached my limits. I felt my whole body let go and before I knew it, my pants were soaking wet.

I looked down dreadfully to see how bad it looked, only to find a completely visible line where the pee stopped on my light pink pants. I felt like crying and running to my mom in the room that she taught in down the hall. I knew that I had to find some way to change my clothes and do it all very discreetly. I didn't want any of my classmates to notice.

Ms. Stone, our student teacher, could obviously see that I was

upset by something and she came to see what was wrong. She hurried over to my seat with a concerned look on her face. I could barely hold back the tears anymore. "I peed in my pants," I stammered. I had a spare pair of pants stored in the classroom, so Ms. Stone got my bag of clothes and took me into the hallway. She also offered me her jacket to cover up the pants stain and she called my mom's room to have her come down to see me.

It wasn't exactly discreet like I wanted it to be because right then my class had to leave for PE. I had to stand by the side of the door and watch my whole class leave without me. As they were leaving, two kids in my class, Anjili and Jason, asked with confusion, "What's wrong, Heidi?" and Jerry asked, "Are you sick?" Some people just gave me weird looks that spoke for themselves.

Finally, my mom came briskly down the hallway. She hugged me reassuringly and walked with me toward the bathroom. I felt five times better because I could cry and let out everything I had been holding in. I packed my poor, soiled pink pants into a plastic bag and put on a new, dry pair of pants. These were blue, but they still had that same white racing stripe on each leg.

Chapter 3

Maybe it's me and my blind optimism to blame.

- Taylor Swift

I feel like, to some people, I am just Heidi. They all just think of me as the short, quiet girl. Boys don't seem to think of me as dateable. I think they feel like it would be weird to date me or ask me to a dance. It becomes especially annoying when some people make a joke out of asking me out. I can even imagine myself saying, "Are you serious?" to the first boy who actually asks me out.

It was almost time for eighth grade formal, and I had started to hear about people getting asked to the dance. Two of my friends, Abby and Beth, were asked by two guys we all knew as friends.

So many people were getting asked in cute ways: a poem, getting thrown a lacrosse ball with the question taped to it, or even just being asked during lunch. I knew exactly who I wanted to ask me, but I also knew that it would never happen because he barely even knew I existed.

I stared at the blank walls of the geometry classroom and fidgeted with my jacket zipper as I waited for the clock to hit 7:30. Suddenly, a girl in my class ran in gleaming with excitement. Her mud brown hair whipped around as she turned into the room. “Gurrrl!” she shouted across the room to her friend. “Someone just told me that *he* is going to ask you to formal.” They both giggled with joy.

I felt my whole body tense up, and it seemed like they had just turned the temperature up by twenty degrees. My first reaction was anger, but I think it was just to hide how truly hurt I felt. I quickly pulled out my binder to pretend like I hadn’t just been listening to their conversation. I started to braid my hair to give my idle fingers something to do.

The fact that the new formal couple was in my gym class only made it worse. They took a picture for Instagram about three feet from where I stood. His arm draped across her scrawny shoulders. Her short, baby blue skirt showing off her knobby knees. Their friends took pictures and congratulated them. My heart beat fast and I don’t think my hands ever stopped shaking.

It was finally the day of formal. I got into my bright pink and orange strapless dress and put on my silver half-inch heels. A few of my friends and I met at Backdoor Pizza to eat before the dance. I could barely swallow my food as my stomach turned.

When we left the pizza place my nerves really kicked in. I felt so excited to have fun, but in the back of my mind there remained the fact that he wasn’t with me. When we got to Githens, the dance floor stood vacant and most people were eating, taking pictures in the photo booth, or congregating with their friends. Soon, most people had arrived and everyone moved to the dance floor.

The Theater Arts class served as our ballroom. The desks that normally sat in the middle of the floor were pushed aside to leave a wide open patch of floor. It didn’t seem very big, but it accommo-

dated just enough people. The DJ's table stood on the stage. Balloons and sparkly decorations enhanced the festivity of the room. At first the DJ mostly played rap music and my friends and I didn't know what to do. "Come on guys, we should dance," Megan encouraged us. We looked at each other sheepishly and swayed back and forth to the music. We gossiped about other people's dresses until the DJ started playing pop music and songs that already have dances to them, like the Cupid Shuffle. We started to have a lot of fun dancing and lip syncing.

"Party in the USA" had just ended and I heard Jennifer Hudson's "If This Isn't Love" come on. I stood and watched as my crush danced a slow song with someone besides me. Flowers protruded from the band on her wrist. Two blood red roses imprisoned a light pink flower that glistened in the light. In my mind, it had been misplaced. He had put it on her wrist, but I knew it should've been on mine. The corsage gripped her stick-like arm as they danced like no one else existed. I couldn't help but wish that I was the one staring into those ocean blue eyes.

I got lost in the song and remembered that I *had* had some communication with him. In April I had decided that I wanted to do something about my crush. I didn't want to just sit there and watch him go by. One night, I went on Facebook because I knew of only one thing that I had the courage to do: send him a message. For a while, I just stared at the laptop in front of me. The white letters stood out boldly from the keys. My shaky hands drifted over the keyboard as I carefully typed the message. It probably took me half an hour to compose seven sentences.

It wasn't until after I sent the message, that I realized how spastic it sounded. I basically just sent him a bunch of questions and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make it sound like I didn't stalk him on Facebook. Only about an hour later he replied. He answered all of my questions, and he sounded really nice and smart. I remembered how happy I had felt that moment I saw that he had replied. I had felt like I actually had a chance, and I had hope for once. I stared at the powder pink flowers strapped to her wrist as the dance ended.

He seemed to know a lot of people and almost everyone liked him because in the middle of a song he could enter the middle of any group and start dancing. One time he sauntered over to me and my friends and I can remember my heart jumping when I saw him next to me. My whole body froze in that moment.

To this day, I regret not dancing when he came over. Will I ever stop letting my introvert personality get in the way? I realize now, that he was too far out of my reach from the beginning. I realize that I had subconsciously created his personality so that he seemed like my dream guy. I had just imagined everything that I thought I knew about him.

Chapter 4

The rug in Mrs. Gadson's class at Hope Valley Elementary was split into squares with multiple different colors and patterns. Some had vibrant numbers or letters and others just had patterns of jumbled shapes. Every color popped from the rest. Each child liked to try to sit on their own square and we all sat in rows. I sat on a square in between my two best friends, Kyle and Gabriella. The Spanish teacher stood in the front of the room and Mrs. Gadson watched us from the back by her office. The Spanish teacher's name I can't remember, but I remember her lead black hair and tan skin. She could smile when she wanted to, but she only chose to do so every so often. She really didn't like to have any noise when she taught. Even the smallest amount of noise bothered her.

The teacher looked out on us and started to teach us a few new words. One of the words was "boot." For some reason, I found that word, in Spanish, really funny.

"Haha, *bota*," I repeated to Gabriella and then looked up at the teacher.

She scowled at me and scolded, "No talking when the teacher is talking." In the time I had spent thinking that the word sounded silly, I had failed to notice that the teacher had continued teaching. I felt so embarrassed that I wanted to go home. I had never gotten in

trouble before and I could feel the disapproving looks all around me. I felt scared about what Mrs. Gadson would think. I had to squint to keep the tears from rolling out onto the soft rug. I tried not to make eye contact with anyone. I didn't even want to look at Gabriella or Kyle.

At the time, getting in trouble made me feel scared and upset, but now looking back on it, I find it humorous. It was ironic that the quietest girl in the class got in trouble for talking.

Chapter 5

I'm never changing who I am.

- Imagine Dragons

A girl stopped me on the way out of the bathroom before strings class. She was probably a seventh grader (I was in eighth), and she was with someone else. She stood tall and skinny, with straightened black hair, thin eyebrows, and slender arms and legs. She had charcoal eyes and a fake smile.

I have always had trouble with being short. I was shorter than everyone in preschool, I was shorter than everyone all throughout elementary school, and I am still shorter than everyone. As a freshman in high school I am shorter than some kids in fourth grade or even third grade. I would be perfectly fine with it if people didn't make comments about it everyday.

In elementary school, there were a few people that would say, "You're so cute," or "How tall are you?" Back then, it bothered me and I wished that people would stop, but in middle school I really got tired of it. In middle school, everyone's goal is to be normal and to fit in. But being shorter than everyone else can really make you stand out and seem not so normal. For me, it became an expectation that at some point during the day, someone would say, "Oh my gosh! You're so short," or "You're so adorable," or even "What grade are you in? Did you skip a grade?" Some days it wouldn't really bother me, but other days it bothered me a lot.

I stood in the doorway of the bathroom. The scrawny girl had stopped me to ask what grade I was in, and when I responded, she glanced at her friend then said to me, "Wow! You're older than me."

I nodded, breathing, "Yep." I turned away from the two girls and walked swiftly to class. I just wanted to go home and sleep, but I forced my tense fingers to grip the violin bow and play the notes in *The Rosin-Eating Zombies*. I fell asleep on the car ride home after school. When we got there, I walked straight into my older sister Kara's room.

She sat on her bed, staring at her laptop. She greeted me with a joyful, "Heidi!" and I sat down next to her on the bed. I always knew that when I needed someone to talk to, Kara was there. She always had really good advice or a kind comment that made everything better because she could relate to my problems. Her blue eyes shone in the light of the computer screen. I told her all about my incident at school and she told me not to worry about it. We watched YouTube videos to get our minds off of negative subjects. Bad Lip Readings played on the computer screen, showing famous politicians and actors saying things they never actually said. As Kara laughed, that same vein stood out as it always does. Birds and flowers covered her loose-fitted shirt. The sun shone through her open window and its rays highlighted the blonde and red in her chocolate brown hair. The more we laughed, the darker our rosy cheeks became. We sat in her room for hours and let everything disappear.

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