

# **Good Iowa boy**

By

**Lonnie E Carrick**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:  
Linda Hasselstrom, Major Professor  
Steve Pett  
Joel Geske

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2010

For everyone I've ever met.

For my family and my friends, who are really one and the same.

For the Iowa boys and girls.

But way back where I come from, we never mean to bother,  
we don't like to make our passions other people's concern,  
And we walk in the world of safe people, and at night we walk into our  
houses and burn.

- Dar Williams, "Iowa (Traveling III)"

## Table of Contents

Prologue – “Medics Please” - 2

### Book I

The Telling - 10  
 Tattoo U - 14  
 And So I Got Into Bed With Him - 19  
 Sticks and Stones IV - 24  
 To Know Him is to Love Him - 27  
 P-R-I-D-E - 28  
 Branches Like Black Fingers - 33  
 Breaking Up is Hard to Do - 35  
 Money In My Pocket - 38  
 Jimi and Johnny and Elvis and Me - 40  
 The Names - 49  
 What They Told Me - 54  
 A Badge of Honor - 58  
 Driving Back - 61

### Book II

611 North College - 67  
 Where the Rainwater Gathers - 70  
 Sticks and Stones - 78  
 Seeing a Man About a Horse - 80  
 Sticks and Stones II - 82  
 Nothing Solved, Nothing Defined, Nothing Settled - 83  
 I Just Can't Sleep - 89  
 Are You Ready For This? - 91  
 A Different Drum - 95  
 I Left Home and Home Left Me - 98

### Book III

Are You Ready For This? II - 102  
 Panic! - 105  
 But Which Way Do I Turn? - 109  
 A Country Divided - 112  
 He Wrote Me a Letter - 114  
 The Stranger - 116  
 Maybe I've Been Depressed My Whole Life - 120  
 April Rain - 126  
 The Replacements - 129  
 Yoga Saved My Life - 133

## **Table of Contents**

### Book IV

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Sticks and Stones V -                     | 138 |
| A Good Iowa Girl -                        | 139 |
| Just Like Virginia -                      | 142 |
| The Big C -                               | 147 |
| Sticks and Stones VI -                    | 152 |
| Coming Out . . . of The Garage -          | 153 |
| The Forgetting -                          | 160 |
| Sleeping in the Daytime -                 | 172 |
| Sticks and Stones VII -                   | 176 |
| Water Washes Me Clean -                   | 177 |
| Once Upon a Time -                        | 184 |
| Epilogue – We’ve Never Done This Before - | 187 |

## **Prologue**

## “Medics Please”

(Summer 2003) She put one hand on the slumped man’s shoulder and shook him rapidly.

“Robbie, Robbie!” Donna said loudly, bending down with her mouth near his ear.

“Yep!” Robbie sat up abruptly, smacking his saliva-coated lips. His pupils were large and seemed to swim in the redness surrounding them. He wore a grungy baseball cap pulled down to meet his small ears. His nose was slightly rounded and his face was red and shiny with sweat.

“You gotta stay awake if you’re gonna stay in here tonight, okay?” Donna’s hand rested on his shoulder. The fluorescent lights of the shelter buzzed and the sickly sweet smell of stale beer and urine and body odor hung in the air.

“Ya, okay. I’m fine,” Robbie half smiled and looked slowly around the hallway.

Donna turned to me. Her curly brown hair and square, rimless glasses framed a round face. “You check on him every once in awhile and make sure he still responds. If he doesn’t, you come find me.” She looked directly at me, her small eyes sparkling but intense, and pushed her frame through a blue metal door in the hallway and disappeared.

I was only 22, just moved to Seattle the month before. My only experience with homeless people before starting my job at the shelter was giving a pound coin to the street people in London. Once an old man approached our table outside a pub and told us a joke and then asked for a few pence. And another time the bearded and often raving man that sat outside the grocery store we frequented asked us for some change. When we refused, he got angry and threw his hands in the air. We walked away quickly, glancing over our shoulders in the sunshine to be sure he didn’t follow us. There was talk in my childhood about a ‘bum’ passing through my tiny hometown, hitching a ride from nowhere to somewhere, but the concept was completely foreign

to me, and the memory seems spectral now, some tidbit from my mother, perhaps, relating a story she'd heard at the gas station or from Jane at the little store. And so my job at the shelter really was 'trial-by-fire' as I discovered that many social work jobs were. But the fire at the shelter was by far the hottest I'd been thrown into, face-first.

I left Robbie and wandered the floor some more, unsure of myself, unsure of what exactly my duties that day were until it came time to set up the shelter for night services at five o'clock. I paced casually through the crowd, trying to appear confident and not fearful, trying to remember how cool my co-workers seemed – they were all young and hip, friendly and knowledgeable, most of them smoked cigarettes and swore profusely when out of earshot of the clients. Mostly, I walked around and tried to not expose my small-town-Iowa-ness, my extreme whiteness, my gayness. I certainly wasn't afraid to be gay around my co-workers – from that first day on the job I suspected there were others who were "family."

I made a slow arc back to Robbie, who was again slumped over in his wheelchair next to the wall. I grabbed his shoulder and shook him – not as vigorous as Donna had done – and cautiously intoned "Robbie? Are you okay?" And he sat up rapidly, flashing a goofy grin and responded in something mumbled, never quite looking my way, looking around the room as if he were searching for something.

On my third or fourth pass that first hour, I found Robbie as I had before. Only this time, he didn't sit up when I shook his shoulder. I shook him a little harder, put my mouth closer to his ear, said a little louder "Robbie?" My palms got sweaty then and I rushed through the metal blue door and took some quick steps back to Donna's office. She was perched on the edge of her chair as though at any moment her large frame would pitch forward, looking over her glasses at a clipboard on the desk.

“I can’t get Robbie up,” I said rapidly, my voice quavering a bit.

“Okay.” Donna pushed the clipboard away and stood up. “Let’s see what we can do.” She followed me back down the hall and into the shelter. She didn’t seem to be nearly as rushed or as worried as I was. Even though we’d only just met, I could tell that she had seen it all by then. She’d been in the shelter for years and I knew right away that even though she appeared kindly, dressed in a nice blouse and slacks with a white cardigan, she was a tough lady, a woman who would treat you with respect but wouldn’t take shit from anybody. I was afraid that Robbie really was sick, or maybe he wasn’t sick at all; that maybe I just hadn’t been patient enough, that I had run for Donna when Robbie was fine and I was just new and overreacting.

When we reached Robbie, I stood behind Donna as she grabbed his shoulder and shook him, yelling his name. Robbie didn’t respond. Donna positioned herself in front of the wheelchair. She grabbed both of Robbie’s shoulders and began to shake him. She called his name while his head bobbed up and down, his body limp and loose, his arms dangling over the large wheels of his chair, dirty fingers bumping the floor.

“Well, crap. We’ll have to get the Narcan,” Donna said, giving Robbie one last shake. “Get his leg up.” She motioned towards Robbie’s only leg and I pushed down the footrest on his chair and positioned his tennis-shoed foot on the cool metal. I held open the blue door and Donna pushed Robbie down the hallway to her office.

I didn’t realize that Robbie had overdosed. I thought that maybe he was just drunk; that he was a heroin user never entered my young mind. I knew about overdoses from movies and television. I knew about drinking from all the beer and liquor I’d drunk in college. There were drugs in college, too. But the only things I knew about heroin were from all the news stories about the grunge music scene in Seattle in the mid-nineties. I never knew anyone who took

heroin, never saw it in college. The meth explosion began back home in southeastern Iowa about the same time I moved to Seattle; I had a few friends who dabbled, knew some high school classmates who had fallen in deep. But there in the shelter amidst all the madness of my first day, I didn't even think of overdoses. I knew them well by the time my two-year tenure there ended. I knew the sickly sweet battery acid scent of crack smoke – it would waft out from the men's bathroom and I'd duck in and survey the room. The offending party might be perched on a toilet in the far corner, but he'd usually have disposed of any evidence by then. The scent hit my nostrils when I began working the night shift and used the back door in the alley late at night, sometimes passing a shelter client or two huddled together near a dumpster. They always stood up quickly and greeted me kindly, as if we were passing on a small town street corner on a warm summer day. I knew the signs of overdosing in a passed-out person: the "snoring respirations" as the medics called them – loud gasps of breath followed by a violent snore. A client I liked, an older woman named Margery (who could have been my grandmother), died in the shelter the morning before I started on the night shift. A shelter counselor found her when doing the morning wake-ups, her body bloated and cold on her mat in the women's dorm. She had overdosed in the night. But that was a year in the future from my first day in the shelter.

Donna moved deftly around Robbie in her cramped office. She carried her round body with precision, with fluid quickness; but she didn't rush. She pulled a small glass bottle from a cabinet, fished out a needle from a drawer, and poked the top of the bottle expertly. When the needle was full she raised the sleeve on Robbie's shirt, squeezed hard for a vein, and stuck the tiny steel swiftly into his flesh. It was nowhere near as dramatic as the scene from *Pulp Fiction* when John Travolta stabs Uma Thurman hard in the chest. But the result was similar, though

without the audible gasp. Robbie was almost instantly awake and alert, looking quickly around the room again.

“Dammit, Robbie,” Donna capped the needle and pushed it into the red plastic biohazard bin on the wall. “If you keep doing this, you know that you won’t be able to stay here anymore.”

And so, a year later, we stood around Robbie in the small office, the only lit room in the dark shelter. The fluorescent light arced out over the grimy grey floor tiles and cast odd shadows in the corners of the hall. It was after 11 p.m., so the rows and rows of large overhead lights had been turned out for a few hours. Men heaped on the floor on plastic-covered mats snored and farted under grey wool blankets with purple and white threads spider-webbing the surface. The medics in their blue and white vests and fleece jackets took turns shaking Robbie and trying to read the needle on the blood pressure cuff in the low light.

“It’s no big deal, guys. Jesus, I’m ...” Robbie trailed off, his half-open eyes closing, head rolling on his shoulders. His face shone with sweat, the stump where his left leg had been dangling over the edge of the wheelchair. He had been that way since we’d found him slumped over in his chair again in the smoke room twenty minutes before. He came too when I shook him then, but his speech was slurred and he only muttered answers to my questions. Rather than risk leaving him alone, I begrudgingly called 911, realizing as I spoke into the receiver the full weight of my decision.

“Medics please. Yes, we have a fifty-year-old man who is mostly unresponsive. Yes, he’s known to use heroin.”

I spoke into the receiver of the phone in the staff office with the calmness I’d learned to use in a crisis by then. By that night, Robbie had been the topic of countless staff meetings. He’d overdosed in the shelter a few more times, was kicked out of every other shelter in town. We

decided that, finally, we would have to do the same and kick him out for a year as a last ditch effort to try and help him.

And so that night, though I had called 911 so many times by then that I had become an expert at relaying details to the dispatcher, though I had dealt with lots of shelter crises – fights, domestic violence, clients taking and selling drugs, even a trip to testify in mental health court up the hill at Harborview Hospital - even after all of that I didn't feel confident in calling the paramedics for Robbie. I was taken back to that first day in the shelter. Maybe Robbie really wasn't that bad after all. Maybe he was just really high and wasn't overdosing. Maybe I was overreacting by calling 911. I knew with that one call Robbie would be barred from the shelter, the last place in town that would take him in. There was no glamour. Even if I was in Seattle where grunge began in the days when track marks were a badge of honor in some fucked-up way. Kurt led us to wear flannel shirts and stretched-out cardigans, gave us the music that was the soundtrack to my own small town rebellion; heroin led Kurt to make the music. Heroin led Kurt to shoot himself in the face. Heroin would lead Robbie back to the street, back to the sidewalks dark with rain, littered with trash.

I listened as the medics asked Robbie where he shot up because his arms seemed clear of track marks. I watched and listened as Robbie hung his head and told them, ashamed, "I shoot it in my butt." I watched them lift Robbie onto the stretcher, heard him say, "I'm fine, really..." a few more times. I watched them wheel Robbie through the large wooden door in the shelter hallway and out into the rest of the building. I'd gotten to know Robbie; when he was sober he was polite and kind and even cracked jokes. Who was I to decide his fate like that?

Even though my work in the shelter required a certain amount of distance from Robbie and all the clients, a certain amount of coldness, a certain amount of strength – even if in

appearance only – it was still *real* life. Even if it was a reality that, from first glance, was so far removed from my own, I felt it. Felt it all.

## **Book I**

## The Telling

(Spring 1998) I told myself that I was gay when I was lying on the couch in the lounge at our fraternity house in college during my sophomore year. My roommate and his girlfriend pushed me out of my room. He told me that I could stay, could sleep in my top bunk. I declined. I didn't want to be in the same room pretending to sleep while they whispered or kissed or had sex. I've almost always been the quiet one in the corner, the person who blends into the scenery just enough to hear the things no one else knows, things that are told not *to* me, but told in my presence. I've always enjoyed the comfort this brings, the validation of being someone who either *won't tell* (when I was a child), or someone who is trusted (now, as an adult). I'd been in my room at college many times politely pretending to sleep in my top bunk while some intimate conversation went on just inches below. In those times, I felt like a spy. I didn't feel trusted as much as ignored.

I suppose I was a drunk and upset over one thing or another lying on the couch in the dark that night, headphones in my ears. The song began with drums slowly building. A live recording of Peter Gabriel's "Come Talk To Me," the crowd cheers in the background, thousands of voices in the distance. "We can unlock this misery / Come on, come talk to me / I can imagine the moment / Breaking out through the silence / All the things that we both might say / And the heart it will not be denied / 'Till we're both on the same damn side."

It is the song I listened to in college when I needed to escape. I would lie down and turn it up loud and envision myself lying on a cliff, my back resting against cool stone. I'd be looking out over a great savannah, full of lush golden grass blowing in a steady wind. There would be a giant tree in the distance and the sky would be immense, the biggest I'd ever seen. It would be

late in the evening, the sun just beginning to set. I would feel small and unimportant and yet not alone or scared. I'd feel humble.

It was the same when the words floated easily into my mind. "I am gay." In that moment in the lounge in a small fraternity house on a small college campus in a small Iowa town, I finally told myself what I had known all along. With my head on the pillow and my body stretched out on the scratchy plaid couch that smelled like sweat and stale beer, my life became more real somehow, a rebirth of sorts. I had found the part of myself that had been missing for twenty years. I felt comfortable and confident for the first time.

\*

I told some of my closest friends over the course of that year. Mostly, we were drinking beer and sitting on couches. No one yelled or cried. Mostly, everyone was supportive, if maybe surprised or uncomfortable at my openness. I didn't tell anyone in my family for a few years.

\*

I told my little brother in the bar during my senior year in 2001. We were drunk in the Dawg House again on a night near the end of the spring semester. There was loud music and clinking beer bottles and shouts over a game of pool. The bar was small and the walls were painted a dark color. We sat near the large picture windows that looked out on the town square, swiveling on our stools at the tall rectangular tables. I had been talking to a lesbian couple for most of the night, telling them about my secret, about the heartache of a broken relationship. I

felt comfort in being open with them. And so when my brother came over to my table at the end of the night, I told him.

He looked surprised, uttered an “Ok,” and gave me a hug. For graduation he gave me a wooden plaque with Kermit the Frog smiling in front of a colorful rainbow and the words “Have a Rainbow day!” above his head. The picture was faded from age – he’d bought it at a thrift store. His own way to acknowledge what I’d told him, a symbol of acceptance or tolerance or just brotherhood. It hangs above my kitchen sink today.

\*

I told my sister on the way to Madison in 2004. I had driven back to Iowa to pick her up and bring her for a visit – my brother and I and his girlfriend shared a big house on Kropf Avenue. I hadn’t seen my sister in awhile then, I had missed her wedding two years before, hadn’t spent much time with her as an adult. We were somewhere along Highway 20 in northern Iowa, the sun shining on us, the endless rows of new corn and soybeans blurred in the windows.

“How is Steve doing?”

My heart began to race and my stomach turned. I knew then it was *the* moment. That’s the way it always happens. It is never planned – when I have planned to tell people I always decide not to.

“Well, I want to tell you something. We’ve been dating off and on since my junior year in college.”

“Yeah, Jeff asked me once about you. I guess I figured you were.”

And that was the beginning and end of it. Like my brother, I think Haley had always known. She may not have understood, but she accepted me just the same; good Iowa girl she is.

We stopped to eat lunch in Waterloo. I splurged and ordered shrimp; she had steak. We talked and laughed and ate our food, grownups despite ourselves.

\*

I didn't tell my parents for a few years.

## Tattoo U

(Fall 1999) The whir of the tattoo needle stopped and with it, the extended cat-scratch feeling just above my right ankle.

“Is good?” the man with the dark skin asked me in an accent I didn’t recognize. I looked at the sunshine shape with long, pointy rays outlined in black on my reddened skin. The center of the sun was small, and the color seemed less intense than the rest. A circle of my pale skin showed through.

“The middle might need a bit more color.” I gestured towards the fresh ink.

The man looked at me and then the needle whirred again and he poked at the center of the sun. He scrubbed the spot furiously and rapidly, trying to color in the center as if he were using a crayon on white paper. It hurt. I didn’t know if I’d offended him, if I’d criticized his work. I winced and then he was done.

The booth where we sat was a shanty with paper-thin walls and a canvas flap at the front. The sounds of the crowd in the market below wafted in with the warm London fall breeze. My friend Kristine and I had cautiously approached this booth, the first signs advertising tattoos we’d seen in Camden Market. We had walked through the other stalls with their oriental rugs, antiques, jewelry, and found the tattoo booth above the locks on Regent’s Canal, up some ancient stone steps from the rest of the market. We went in and looked around the shop – if you could call it that – and told the men we wanted tattoos.

Kristine – red curly hair, always wore flip flops even on the grimy city streets, from the same town in Iowa where I went to college – had already decided that she wanted a dragon on the top of her foot. I toyed with having the word “Freedom” inked on my arm, but decided that

was too cliché, even for my 20 year old mind. So I paged through the binder of images the men showed us and selected a colorful sun with long, pointy rays and curly flame-like lines circling a small center. The image showed the sun as a part of an arm or leg band. The idea of a tattoo all the way around my leg was extreme and out of my price range, so I asked if I could just have the sun and the tattoo artist obliged.

London seemed like the perfect opportunity to get inked. I had taken my first flight ever and left the United States only a month or two before and arrived in England where every experience was brand new. After the eight-hour flight, I found the train from Heathrow airport that would take me to Victoria station, the directions from the handbook they'd passed out that the study abroad meeting folded and wrinkly in my hand. When I got on the train, I looked around and noticed that my ticket was a different color than those held by other passengers. I panicked, afraid that I'd made a mistake, until the conductor came and punched my off-color ticket without a word. I watched the strange new world unfold out the grimy train windows, ancient brick buildings lining the route. Even the sunshine seemed different in England, brighter, more illuminating somehow.

That semester, in the fall of 1999, I bought roasted chestnuts from a cart in front of the British museum, toured the halls of Parliament, drank pints of beer in pubs even though I was only 20, worked as an intern at an international publishing house. I saw Shakespeare in a reconstructed Globe theater and visited Oxford. I stood on the banks of Loch Ness in the dark, a little drunk and completely amazed by the mystery out in the deep, black water. I dunked my head in a cold stream in Scotland, felt the warm, murky water of a Roman bath in Bath. I gawked at Stone Henge and danced in a multi-floored disco. I sat on the Cliffs of Moher and gazed out over the Atlantic Ocean. I saw Michelangelo's "David" and waited in line to catch a glimpse of

the “Mona Lisa.” I looked out over the River Thames at night and watched the gradual lifting of the Millennium Wheel on the bank. I went to rock concerts and drank beer on the street. I wandered the streets of Dublin until my feet were sore. I drank a pint of Guinness with the Member of Parliament representing the village of Carrick, Ireland. I learned to love baguettes and hummus for lunch, dressed up and went out with friends to pretend we were wealthy, the heavy pound coins clanging in our pockets. I sat with an old man who had fallen outside a pub and waited for the ambulance to arrive. I got drunk on Thanksgiving and passed out in the hallway a few feet from my bedroom door. I sobbed in the shower because I missed my parents. I bought half-packs of cigarettes and black leather shoes. I took the Beatles tour in Liverpool, shopped near Piccadilly Circus during the holiday season. I got high with my roommate in the garden behind our hostel, climbed on the roof of the hotel across the street. I saw a symphony and bought a copy of *Leaves of Grass*. I rode a ferry across the Irish Sea packed with so many people and the sea so rough that I felt like I was on the Titanic, hoping we wouldn’t all go down with the ship. I watched a big black blues singer down a pint of Guinness in one gulp in a bar in Galway. I found great joy in walking out the front door each day, never sure what I’d see, the world I’d known in my 20 years falling away with each step.

So what better way to commemorate my time there than to imprint it permanently on my body? By the time I made friends with Kristine and we shared our desire to get tattoos, I found myself short on cash. And so I called Reid and told him my plan and he sent me some money, US dollars stashed in a heavy envelope. I exchanged them for multi-colored British pound notes and paid the tattoo man when he was finished.

As we left the tattoo stand, emerging into the muted sunshine and the busy crowds in the London streets, I felt liberated. And then I felt scared. What had I done? I had paid a stranger

whom I wasn't even sure spoke my own language to plant colored ink permanently on my body. *Had he used a clean needle?* Before the tattoo gun had started its whiny whir, I watched as the man removed a needle from a plastic package. *But had it been sealed?*

I'd thought about the future a lot before that day, as most kids do. What job I would have after college, where I would live, who I would live with. But walking the crowded sidewalks back to the Underground station that day, the permanence of what I had done floored me. The sunshine on my leg was *forever* – no going back, no changing my mind. Even at that age I had trouble making decisions and committing to the choices I did make. But there I was, marked permanently in a way that I thought I wanted to be.

The ride back to the hostel in Central London was stuffy and quiet on the train; bodies packed in, reading newspapers or staring absently out the grimy windows. Kristine tried to make casual banter, looking down often at her pale foot, now bandaged. I tried to respond, but I felt suffocated. The decision to get a tattoo was mine and mine alone; no one had told me to do it, I hadn't asked anyone if I should do it, no one could have told me not to do it. Had I scarred my body for life in an ill planned attempt to assert myself as an adult?

That night in the tiny shower in the basement of our hostel I watched the warm water run in rivulets over the tender, reddening skin above my right ankle. The black lines were thin and definite, the colors filling in between them bright. My worry began to fade and slowly, I felt proud of what I had done. I *had* marked myself – but not by shame or fear. The sunshine on my leg marked my willingness to take a risk, to exist outside of any boundaries that had been set for me. Later, stateside, when I finally showed my grandparents and they scoffed and said, "People with tattoos are criminals" – only half joking, I knew – I felt a pride in my badness. With that

sunshine I made a choice, *my* choice. I had marked my body, committed to a symbol of myself for all the world to see. I beamed.

## **And So I Got Into Bed With Him**

(Spring 2000) That first night was drunken and clumsy. I remember it now as a jumble of darkness, flashes of flesh, salty taste of sweat on my tongue, sweet smell of maleness in my nostrils. Sometime in the early hours after midnight I sat on the futon, drunk and bleary eyed as Steve crawled into bed. I suppose I knew what I wanted to happen next, but I didn't know what to say, didn't know how to act. "You can come over here and lie with me if you want. But I might grope you," Steve looked at me in the half light, his brown eyes bright and tempting, his lips pursed into a mischievous smile that I'd come to enjoy before that moment and ever since. And so I got into bed with him.

\*

Freshman year I'd put my hand under my friend Lisa's bra one night as we lay in bed in my dorm room, kissing furiously. Her breast was warm and soft, the nipple pert under my fingertips. She touched my arm and said it felt weird. I pulled my hand away and didn't admit then that it felt weird to me too, but that was what I thought I was supposed to do. The same thing happened later that year when I spent the night with another friend. We rolled around on the lower bunk in her room in the dark, the dull glow of the campus lights peeking through the mini-blinds, pawing each other. It felt automatic and strange. It didn't feel sexy or sweet, more like animals struggling in the night. I staggered home the next morning, the sunlight searing my sweaty brow as I tried to walk a straight line through campus on the winding sidewalk, trying not to puke in plain view. I was a good boy who didn't want any trouble from campus security.

That first night with Steve had been building for some time. When we'd first met in the spring semester of 1998, I thought there was something different about him; he seemed to linger a little longer when he looked at me. His dark hair was tipped with blonde highlights and his smile seemed seductive and kind. We pledged a fraternity together that spring and then he spent all of sophomore year studying abroad in London. When I went to London myself in the fall of my junior year, one of my friends told Steve that I was gay. He sent me a letter telling me that he considered himself bisexual and encouraged me to explore gay life in London. I walked past a few gay clubs, felt a thrill when I saw a gay couple walking down the street. But I didn't venture into that world. Something about it was still too new, still too scary. I knew I was gay, but had no real ideas about what that meant.

And so I left London without having any gay experiences, sexual or cultural. Steve was my roommate when I returned to school the following semester and after the night with him, I was constantly terrified that somebody would *find out*. We were fraternity *brothers* after all. Our fraternity wasn't the typical bastion of maleness and general stupidity shown in so many college movies. We were small and local to our college campus; there were fewer than ten of us living together that year. We partied and various girls were in and out of our house. But we were a band of misfits, really. No jocks, just theater and science and English geeks. We were known on campus as the pot-smoking fraternity, a place where mostly everyone was accepted and could feel comfortable, while, of course, having lots of fun. None of us could clearly define 'brotherhood' though we knew it meant a connection to each other that was deeper than friendship. We knew too that it didn't mean having sex with each other.

We were a part of a small Greek system and our college was affiliated with the Reformed Church of America. There was a vocal contingent of very religious students. It was a liberal arts

college and so most campus policies reflected attempts to make campus a diverse and welcoming environment. The reality was far different. I only knew one or two openly gay students. I knew, too, that there were more gay students on campus. Like good Iowans, though, we just didn't talk about it. When I was a freshman, somebody ransacked an openly gay professor's office and scrawled "Faggot" on his desk. So I knew that there was danger in being completely out in college.

Even though Steve and I decided we were dating after that first night together, I made sure the door was locked before we cuddled up in bed, made sure in the morning that my own top bunk always looked slept-in. Steve ordered flowers for me that first Valentine's Day in 2000. A cluster of small, daisy yellow flowers in a green pot; we set them near the only windows in our room. A friend stopped by one afternoon and asked me whom they were from. I panicked, but told her that they were from Steve - as a token of friendship. She gave me an odd look, but didn't say anything more.

Steve thought it would be fun one night to set up the futon for us to sleep in.

"We can sleep together like real people," he said, spreading a blanket on the lumpy mattress and smiling.

"You mean not crammed together in a twin bed?" I replied nervously, trying to be excited by the new experience. Two six-foot bodies on a twin bed, while intimate, didn't make for a good nights' sleep.

I had checked and double-checked the door to our room to be sure the lock was turned before the futon bed was made. Once the sheets had been fitted and the pillows fluffed, we climbed in next to each other.

"This is nice," Steve said, my arm thrown over his chest as I lay beside him.

And then hours later I lay panicked by the party I could hear happening in the hall outside our room. I had to pee, but that meant opening the door. And surely someone would be waiting to run in, to point in horror at the bed for two made on the floor. “I knew you were sleeping together! Gross!” I was sure they would shout and then run to tell the rest of kids at the party down the hall. Steve snored beside me and I tossed and turned at the thought until I couldn’t stand it, and then ran to the bathroom and back as fast as I could when I noticed a lull in the party noise.

My fears melted whenever we left campus that semester. We went with friends to St. Louis over Spring break to visit a lesbian couple that had graduated the year before. We didn’t tell those friends that we were dating, but felt safe enough to hold hands in the car and snuggle up on the floor of their drafty apartment. I lay next to Steve in the morning, half asleep, and heard someone say, “They are so cute together.” And that felt so good to hear. Being one half of a pair – one part of ‘us’ – brought me so much joy in those days. (And it still does.)

\*

And afterwards - after all the rolling around on the narrow mattress, after all the kissing and the talking in the half light of those wee hours of that morning – I lay with Steve’s body behind me, his arm slung over my side and I knew I was different. I was scared – terrified – but also relieved. New possibilities took root in my heart and my mind. Though I would continue from that night forward to always do what I thought I *ought* to do with my life, a part of me reveled in finally doing something that I wasn’t *supposed* to do, but something that I *had* to do. I was doing something that good Iowa boys didn’t do. I was acknowledging and expressing my

gay self for the first time, allowing myself to fall deeply in love with someone, even if it was only lust, even if it was fleeting, even if it would leave me confused for the next ten years. In that moment, my consciousness shifted. Telling myself a story that was true for the very first time.

## Sticks and Stones IV

(Summer 2000) “Do you need another bed in here?” Loretta asked us as we stood in the bedroom we’d be renting for the summer in the basement of the house in Eden Prairie. I looked at Steve, his thin lips curling into a nervous, twitchy smile. *He’s going to do it – tell her that we need two beds!* The words spilled out of my mouth quickly, without thought. “Nope, this will be just fine,” I said. *I did it! She knows that we’re a couple now!*

“Okay then, let’s go upstairs and talk about rent.” And with that, we left the bedroom and climbed the stairs. The summer sun streamed hot in through the large windows that framed the backyard. Our new landlord knew we were a couple, knew that we’d be sharing her home for the summer. And she didn’t look at us disgustedly, didn’t say, “Oh, well, I don’t think this is going to work out.” The sky didn’t fall, the Minnesota ground didn’t break in two to swallow us up, sending our faggot asses to hell. Though it wasn’t the song and dance number I wished I could do proclaiming my gayness to the world, it was a small declaration, an acknowledgement of myself, a declaration of *us*.

“Fucking fags!” That same summer they yelled at us from a car that passed, driving through downtown Minneapolis. I wondered how they could tell. It was dark after all, and we hadn’t been holding hands or kissing or even sitting close. But they knew. They knew that somehow two guys in a car in the dark driving through downtown Minneapolis meant something. Steve screamed back at them, full force, shaking his thin hands on the steering wheel, “FUCK YOU!” through the open window raising an arm and flipping them off as the red taillights sped away. I was surprised. How come he was so tough all of a sudden? Was it because

he had done this before? Because he'd been out for years and I was new to all of it – the sex and love and the danger that dating a man could bring. I didn't say anything and we didn't talk about what had happened, just continued on our way in the car in the dark, the street lights casting an orange glow over the road.

And later that summer we decided to see a movie. We planned to have a beer or two before the show, too tempted by our summer 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays to do much of anything without pulling up a stool at a bar first. We drove from Eden Prairie to another suburb, farther out from the city. We found the theater, the acres of parking spaces lit by bright fluorescent streetlights buzzing and casting hard shadows on the dark pavement in the hot summer air. I spotted a bar sign and he parked the car and we got out and walked towards the building. We climbed the wooden stairs and went in through a propped-open door. I felt instantly tense and sweaty; some kind of alarm bell rang inside me, muffled, but definitely ringing. We stood in that entryway and looked to either side through more open doors. Maybe it was the country music or the guys in baseball caps or the white plastic banners with Budweiser™ and NASCAR™ emblems screaming “Drink Specials! All You Can Eat Fish Fry – Fridays!” in large block letters. These were all things familiar to me, just like every bar I'd ever seen and the few I'd been in. But right then, I felt uncomfortable, anxious. I looked at Steve and without saying anything we both turned and went back out the door.

As we got near the car again, we noticed a lighted sign for a chain restaurant across a stretch of grass and trees. Somehow that was a beacon of safety to me then. What could be harmful amidst plates of overpriced appetizers and walls plastered with pretend artifacts from a generic history that all Americans were supposed to have shared? Perhaps because we could be faceless, nameless there, just a few more customers stuffing our faces in soft, soothing light. In a

chain restaurant near the interstate people are all strangers with no expectations. We began to cross the parking lot, walking on the grass, shimmying between the small trees. I heard a man's voice shout something behind us. I didn't hear what he said, and I didn't look back. I didn't look at Steve and we didn't talk about it after we sat down at the bar in the restaurant. We drank cold beers out of frosty mugs and chatted with the woman behind the bar, bathed in soft light, music in the background, the air-conditioned air a sweet relief from the nighttime summer heat.

After the movie we found a cheeseburger smashed on the windshield of the car. A pickle and yellow mustard had been smeared on the passenger door. I felt afraid and looked around, wanting to be away from that place, that awful suburb. We got in the car and drove away in silence.

## To Know Him is to Love Him

(Summer 2000) The stage lights flashed and the speakers blared a remixed club version of Whitney Houston's "Your Love is My Love." The drag queen was tall and black; her purple sequined dress sparkled, casting tiny bits of refracted light on the red velvet curtains behind her as she danced wildly around the stage. I took a swig of my beer and placed the bottle on the small round table in front of us. The room was electric. A group of bachelorettes holding plastic penis drink glasses and gaudy beads screamed and clapped stage left. Gay couples at the tables in the front of the stage moved their shoulders and bobbed their heads with the beat. I looked at Steve and watched the flashing lights play on his dark hair and beaming brown eyes.

Several people wandered towards the stage out of the darkness behind us, fishing in pockets or purses for a dollar bill as they walked. They formed a line in front of the stage, offering the dollars in the air. The drag queen danced over and bent down to kiss each person, plucking the dollar from their fingers gracefully as she did. I knew then I could do the same, that that was my world. I walked slowly to the back of the line, holding a wrinkly dollar bill in my own hand.

When I got to the edge of the stage, I held my offering up to the queen and she bent down to kiss my cheek. Only then did I notice the protruding Adam's apple, the cracked pancake makeup, tips of the brown bowl-cut wig darkened by sweat. I didn't know the pronouns yet, that *he* could be *she* tonight and be back to *he* by the morning. Thick painted lips brushed my cheek and I went back to my seat. I squeezed Steve's hand under the table, warm with beer and first love. *This* I thought. *This*.

## **P-R-I-D-E**

(Summer 2000) My hand was sweaty there in the summer heat. But I didn't pull away; I wanted to hang onto Steve's slim, tanned hand as long as I could. I liked the feeling of his palm resting in mine, our fingers mingled. It was my own act of defiance, my big "Fuck you!" to the rest of the world, my declaration of my gay self. We walked slowly through the crowd of people gathered along the city street, trying to find the perfect vantage point to watch the parade.

"My hand is getting sweaty," Steve said, annoyance creeping into his voice.

"Fine." I let go and wiped my hand on my shorts. I had made a point of telling him before we got out of the car that morning that I wanted to hold his hand. I didn't make a big deal about it. I didn't tell him that it would make me really happy to hold my boyfriend's hand in a public place, to show the people we'd meet that we were a couple, that there was an 'us' – me, a six foot-few-pound-overweight-kinda weird-sandy haired-stoop shouldered-new twenty one year old, and my boyfriend, a six foot two or three-thin-tanned-tattooed-dark haired-charming-new twenty one year old – and that we were in the midst of our own summer of the love at just that moment. We were living together that summer far away from school, renting a bedroom from a wealthy woman in Eden Prairie, taking our first stab at living our relationship in the real world.

When I let go of his hand and walked beside him, my declaration to the world shattered. The Minnesota summer sun bore down, heat radiating off the concrete. The day was not ruined in that moment, for sure, but I felt disappointed. I didn't tell Steve how I felt.

The crowd was gathering for the annual Gay Pride parade in downtown Minneapolis. It felt like a revolutionary act to me. Free from the weight of our college lives that summer, I felt wide open to whatever the world would send my way. That day, the world sent a crowd of gay

people – in all shapes and sizes and colors, of all classes and abilities and levels of sobriety. For the first time since leaving my life in Agency behind, I felt a part of something new. I was a part of a fraternity back at college, was a part of the group of us who had studied abroad in London the previous fall. But that day, it was my gayness – for the first time – that united me with the people around me. Sure, they were all strangers, but the atmosphere was jovial and accepting in a way that I hadn't yet experienced. It wasn't just about sex, as the people on the other side would have me believe. It was about being who you are in a more full way than I'd ever been. And being gay isn't limited by anything: not race, not gender, not shape, not size, not wealth, not even religion.

We found a metal fence to lean against along the parade route. We stood next to a few older men talking and laughing. Until that day, I'd not been around any large numbers of gay people. Steve and I had been to the few gay bars we'd found in the city before that day – we'd talk about whether we wanted to go 'out' or 'Out out', which meant going to a gay place. But because we were both new to being twenty-one that summer, going to bars of any kind was a new experience. Being with gay people out on the street in the daytime was a different experience for me entirely. Men hugged each other and stood close, women did the same. There were dogs on leashes and kids in strollers. It was just like any other parade I had ever been to, only everyone in the crowd that day was either gay or an ally; except, of course, the protesters that stood at the end of the parade route shouting bible verses and holding large signs that proclaimed we were all sinners bound for the ravages of hell. There was no darkness, no seedy alleyways strewn with garbage and used condoms. There were none of those images of what gay life was all about that had somehow imprinted on my young brain.

I don't know where the images of gay life as something seedy and shameful came from; though I'd gone to church often as a child, I'd never heard any fire and brimstone sermons about evil homosexuals (we were members of the Methodist church). I'd never heard my parents tell mean jokes about gay people. I was teased at school at various times for being perceived as gay, though I really had no concept of what 'gay' meant. There was one gay couple in Agency; they opened and operated a little deli on Main Street that served the best potato salad I've ever tasted. I suppose I knew they were gay; we just never talked about their relationship in my house. We ate at the restaurant often and my parents were always nice to the owners and they were nice to us. Maybe it was the *not telling* that led me to know somehow that being gay was *not okay*, that it was something not even worthy of talking about.

And so to stand with my *boyfriend* in the Minnesota summer heat on the sidewalk of a downtown Minneapolis street felt liberating. I'd acquired a taste for the city while living in London, but being back in the city with my *boyfriend* felt so much more exciting. I didn't share my excitement with Steve. I didn't want my inexperience to show, figuring that he might think I was dumb or immature. Because Steve was my first serious relationship ever, I was of the mind that any kind of disagreement could lead to disaster, any little spat meant that he would walk out and that would be the end of us. We did have a lot of fights that summer – mostly in the car when we didn't know where we were going. But I kept my thoughts to myself on the street that day, beaming on the inside, playing it cool on the outside.

Steve was from Des Moines, after all. He'd been questioning his sexuality since his junior year of high school, first identifying himself as gay, and then coming to identify as bisexual in college. His mom raised him on her own and was disabled in various ways, so he spent a lot of time with an aunt and uncle, who he often called 'Mom and Dad.' He didn't know

really know his biological father and had been living on his own since high school. More than being the first openly gay person I'd met, the fact that he was from the city made him seem, at first anyway, exotic to my small town, rural Iowa self. Some of the kids I knew in high school had similar broken homes, but in small places where life moved slower. And so I often felt naïve with Steve; and I was naive. I had only been out to myself for two years by then, and being in a serious relationship was brand new to me. Negotiating the ups and downs of an 'adult' relationship and realizing myself as a truly sexual being meant that, though I really was having the time of my life that summer, I was doing a lot of thinking – some thoughts I shared with Steve, most I didn't. Even then, I suppose, I didn't want to put too much value in our relationship, didn't want to give Steve too much credit for my own development. In the beginning, I suppose I knew that it wouldn't last; I suppose I knew that, really, 'us' was a public entity, a show for other people. 'Us' seemed to dissolve in private where, unless we were in bed, it seemed to be 'me and him'.

But I stood in the sunshine there on the sidewalk and soaked it all in. I've been to Pride parades in Seattle and Madison, Wisconsin, since that first one in Minneapolis. What has been missing from those other parades, of course, is my sense of wonder. I always watch parades from the sidelines and I do feel a pride for who I am then that I don't always feel in the rest of the year, wherever I may be. But that first parade was a revelation for me. I saw gay people leading lives that were *just like mine* and, perhaps more importantly, living *just like EVERYONE else*.

The parade that day was much the same as the parades I have attended since. The "Dykes on Bikes" were first, lesbians riding loud motorcycles in pairs that lead the parade. The revving of engines and loud popping of tailpipes always elicit cheers from the crowd. The women were mostly leather clad, some very masculine, some very feminine, all smiling, all waving, all

leading the way. As in any other parade, there was a Grand Marshall riding in a nice car, any number of beauty queens waving at the crowd seated in the backs of convertibles. Only in a Pride parade, the queen may be of the drag or male variety. Church groups and PFLAG chapters walking slowly with banners proclaiming: “I love my lesbian daughter!” or a gay couple carrying a sign reading: “Bill and Stan, Together 30 Years” walked down the street. Floats filled with scantily clad men dancing to loud club music, sponsored by the major gay clubs in the area followed. Supportive politicians handed out buttons or flyers, shaking hands as they moved along the route.

The fire and police departments drove a rig in the parade, blaring horns and sirens every few blocks. Seeing this I smiled, waving back at the firefighters and police officers. *To be either a firefighter or a police officer and to be out – and to walk in the Pride parade – what a great thing that must be!* I thought then. And still when I see someone living life openly anywhere – on television, in the newspaper, in the classroom – I feel a sense of kinship, a sense of pride. I suppose I feel a bit of shame at my own life lived partially in the closet. But I feel a sense of hope and a sense of wonder at the diversity life holds. Others who live fully, with no apologies invigorate me. I aspire and attempt to do the same, though I’m not there just yet.

I watched that first parade and felt no fear – of discovery, of abandonment, of conflict with where I was from. There in the summer sunshine on the Minneapolis city street I felt alive in a way that I hadn’t felt before, have felt only rarely since. I was young, I was gay, I was proud.

## Branches Like Black Fingers

(Summer 2000) We sat crossed legged on the concrete outside the sliding glass door. The smoke from our cigarettes ascended lazily, going nowhere in particular in the Minnesota summer heat, the air thick with humidity that July.

The den in the basement opened onto a back yard that sloped sharply up, bordered on all sides by chain-link fence. There was a giant oak at the top of the slope, scrubby bushes and smaller trees along the fencerow. The yard was littered with sticks and leaves and was lumpy with lack of care. We took turns mowing the lawn when the grass was tall, cutting endless loops or crossing back and forth across the neglected plot, fighting a constant battle with the thick orange cord that extended from the whining electric push mower to the side of the house. A graying wooden deck off the living room door collected dust and cobwebs over our heads.

“I wonder if we’ll still date when we get back to school?” Steve inhaled his Marlboro™ light and looked over the yard, the sun just beginning to glow golden in the distance, the branches of the trees taking on a silvery appearance.

My stomach turned a great loop; I felt like throwing up. “I don’t know,” I stammered. My mind reeled, circling loops of ‘what if’s’. *How could you say that? What do you mean you wonder if we’ll still date?* I didn’t want to argue with Steve. *I didn’t wonder whether or not we would still date.* We moved to Eden Prairie that summer and played house in those basement rooms, became exactly the kind of couple I wanted us to be. Our bodies met in the king-sized bed in the middle of the night and we held each other; I hooked my leg around one of his, he rested his arm over my side, traced the vertebrae in the small of my back. The warmth of his tight frame was magic, a gift of some kind that I didn’t deserve. He kissed me in the morning

before he left for work; I made dinner for us in the evening when I got home. I did our laundry, our clothes mingling in the spin cycle. We shopped for groceries together at Rainbow Foods. We drove into the city on Friday nights and went to bars, taking turns staying just sober enough to drive home again when we'd had our fill. It had all been my version of Eden – even if we were Lonnie and Steve and not Adam and Eve and there was no garden, just the basement of a rich lady's house in Eden Prairie, Minnesota.

And here he was, asking *the* one question that messed up the whole story, ruined the fairytale and made me feel afraid, made me worried that the end of summer meant the end of *us*. I watched the sunlight sink behind the trees, the branches like blackened fingers unsure of what to grasp for. The summer air was humid and thick, threatening to suffocate me under its weight.

## Breaking Up Is Hard to Do

(Fall 2000) “So where do we stand?” I asked Steve, lying next to him in the twin bed in his room. The campus lights cast an amber glow into the dark room.

“I think we’ve gotten all that we can out of our relationship.”

I didn’t want him to say that.

“So you think we’re over?”

“We just can’t keep doing this. Sneaking into each other’s rooms when no one is watching. That’s not a relationship.”

We’d left the comfort of our summer domestic bliss in Eden Prairie and returned to college for our senior year. We had separate rooms that semester, down the hall from each other in our fraternity house. Those first few weeks, we snuck into each other’s rooms whenever we could to have sex or just lie next to each other in bed. Our relationship had gone back to where it had begun – behind locked doors, afraid of discovery.

“I just . . .” I began, but couldn’t finish. I started to cry big drunk tears. It felt like my whole world was coming apart.

Steve put his hand on my chest, trying to comfort me, but I pushed him away. I got out of bed and put my clothes on and left his room. I went to my room, tried smoking a cigarette; tried to stop crying. But I couldn’t. It was all too big; the fairytale I told myself was crumbling and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

*I have to get away* was my only thought. I put on my shoes without socks, grabbed my car keys and headed out to my car.

My eyes felt heavy, full of tears, my cheeks wet. I drove too fast in the dark, the tape deck blaring Creed's "Higher" at full volume. The white arc of the occasional streetlight swept across the dark road in front of my car. I didn't have a plan, just to drive. I was headed towards home, back to Agency where I grew up. My parents didn't live there anymore, but I could go to my friend Shaine's house; he'd understand.

As I drove, I began to calm down. My breathing slowed, the tears stopped. *What am I doing? I don't even have socks on.* I didn't know where I was going, didn't even really know why I was going. I pulled off at a familiar exit and turned around, heading back to campus.

When I got back to my room, I felt better, but the panic was still there. *What if this really is the end? What if Steve and I aren't going to be together after all? What am I going to do?* I pulled out my red and white campus directory and found the counselor's phone number. It was well past midnight. But I had to talk to someone. I had talked to the counselor before about a few friends who had troubles during the years I'd been in college.

"Ron?" I said softly into the receiver.

"Yes?" he said, his voice tired and groggy.

"I'm sorry to call you at home this late, but I, uh, just need someone to talk to." And with that the tears came again as I told the whole story – about Steve and I living in Minnesota together that summer, about moving back, about breaking up. He listened, I cried.

When I finished, he gave me advice, tips to deal with the break-up. I wrote them down with a black marker on a scrap of notebook paper.

"Just remember that you have to look at the reality of the way things are and not focus on the way you wish things could be." I nodded with the phone on my shoulder.

After I hung up the phone, I lay down on my bed, exhausted. I slept a good solid sleep that night, but not so well after that.

## Money in My Pocket

(Summer 2001) I drove from North Dakota after graduation in a rented minivan with Nicki, a friend from college, all of our stuff crammed into every available space, nearly reaching the ceiling. My dad had enjoyed solving the puzzle for us; we carried our boxes and bags out of the house the June afternoon before we left, the garage door a gaping maw, the rear doors of the van parted, the North Dakota sunshine intense (but not too hot) and glaring over all. My dad smoked Winston Lights™ and sipped on a Budweiser™ and put everything carefully into place until the light faded. He'd place a few boxes and stop and study the space, his squat, solid frame casting a shadow on the concrete driveway, smoke from his cigarette meandering into the still air, figuring out what would fit best where. He had never complained, only occasionally teasing us: "I don't know, I don't think it will all fit!" and sometimes, holding a bag or a box: "Do you *really* need this?" But I knew he'd enjoyed it, knew that he'd liked helping out, solving the puzzle that would launch his oldest son towards the rest of his life.

Nicki and I had talked in those days before the move about money, mostly that we each had some saved, but not much, maybe not enough. I had never asked for money and neither of my parents offered it. We had never talked about money in my house; as a child I never knew how much Dad made working for the railroad. It was only after college that I would learn my parents accepted assistance for a time to feed us, and only after that a vague memory of saving pennies in a metal Disney™ canister in the kitchen (for gas to get to Grandma's house, they told me) made a shadowy appearance in my mind.

And so, after we'd pulled out of the driveway on the early June morning in North Dakota and driven away from my parents' house, heading west, I found the carton of Camels™ next to

the driver's seat in the van. The sunlight streamed through the windows and heated the dark interior and I laughed and told Nicki – we both stared then at the circular red and white 'No Smoking' sign glued to the middle of the dashboard. "Screw it!" We giggled and rolled down the windows and lit our cigarettes, barreling down Interstate 94 in the mid-morning light. Miles later, Nicki found a carton of Camels next to her seat, too. Dad had probably bought them when he'd gone to gas up the van the night before. Our cartons kept us smoking for those first few weeks in Seattle, but they ran out just about the time we began to really worry about finding jobs because rent was due. And the first time we stopped to get gas – somewhere on the western edge of North Dakota, maybe the gas station at Beach, I opened my wallet and found several crisp fifty and one-hundred dollars bills lined up. It was money I needed but did not ask for. I smiled at the image of my dad slipping the money into my wallet in the early morning light.

## **Jimi and Johnny and Elvis and Me**

(Summer 2001) Steve, Nicki, Nathan and I lay in the cool grass next to the gravestones in the Seattle summer heat. Friends from college and now roommates in our new city, our interactions were easy and comfortable. The sun was bright, the air was warm but not thick; not the humidity of summer that weighed us down in Iowa. The day we'd moved into our apartment, Nicki told us that she panicked when she didn't see an air conditioner in the window. She told us she flashed back to sweaty summer days in an old house in Paradise, Nebraska, the town where she grew up. We laughed and told her – unsure ourselves - that Seattle summer weather didn't need air-conditioning.

We'd been looking for Jimi. We knew that he was from Seattle, thought he'd probably been buried in a cemetery in the city. We found his statue on the corner of Broadway and Pine street, bronze and on his knees, head thrown back, mouth open, guitar pointed to the heavens from his crotch. It was small, on a non-descript corner, and seemed to be mostly a place for birds to roost and take a shit. But it was still very rock and roll. So we all piled into the car on a warm summer weekend and went looking for his grave.

The Evergreen Cemetery was huge, spreading on both sides of Highway 99. We knew the task was immense; we had no idea where to begin. So we parked the car and began wandering. We spread out among the stones, looking for any sign of Jimi. We walked for hours, sweat gathering on our foreheads, darkening the edges of our hair. We took a break, lounging on the grass, smoking cigarettes.

“Do you think it’s disrespectful to smoke in a cemetery?” Nathan asked, the shine shining through the dreadlocks that were gathered and poked up at the back of his head. He lay propped up on one arm, his long body atop the cool grass.

“I don’t know,” I offered, taking a puff and sending smoke lazily into the air.

“I don’t think so,” Nicki giggled, her own strawberry-colored hair shining in the light. She sat cross-legged, leaning against a tree. The rows of gravestones seemed endless.

“Maybe we should just stick to this side of the road today and cover the other side tomorrow.” Steve motioned with his thin, brown arm.

We all agreed and after a few more hours of walking in the cemetery, we piled back into the car as the daylight began to fade, tired and defeated. We didn’t find Jimi. We’d spent the whole afternoon wandering in the cemetery with nothing to show for it. We didn’t return the next day. When I got to work on Monday, I used the Internet during a lull in my shift to find out exactly where we’d gone wrong. Jimi wasn’t buried in Seattle after all, but was laid to rest in the suburb of Renton, Washington, south of the city.

A few weeks later, we headed south from Seattle proper on a grey afternoon, sure this time that we’d find him. We found the cemetery and parked the car. Acres of stones stood before us, only this time they were flat, flush with the ground. We were nervous, afraid for another aimless search. But we spied a few kids standing quietly just over a small rise. We walked towards them, unsure if they were there for a dead friend or for Jimi. As we got closer, they looked up and walked slowly away. And then there it was – a flat stone, *James “Jimi” M. Hendrix 1942 – 1970*, with a guitar etched on the left side, the neck angled to the right. A pile of wilting flowers had been placed haphazardly on the ground in front of the stone along with a

half-burned candle and a red, white and blue ribbon on a wooden stake. We stood quietly and looked down at the flat granite stone.

I didn't know how to feel. Jimi lay beneath the ground, a rock god in the dirt, a body just like all the rest in the cemetery. A stone next to his bore the name of his grandmother, the stone next to that, his father. I wanted to hear the guitar riff from *Voodoo Child (Slight Return)* or Jimi's voice wailing, "I stand up next to a mountain, chop it down with edge of my hand," slice through the clouds. I wanted to feel all the magic that he created in his short life course through my veins. But none of that happened. Instead, what I felt was a sort of sadness, a sort of shame for standing over his grave never having known him in person. It was real, then. No rock god was exempt. He was a human, had a body just like mine. And now it was turning slowly to dust in a box beneath the Washington dirt. We stood there for a few minutes in silence. I snapped some pictures and then we walked slowly back to the car. We'd found Jimi, but I was left feeling empty.

\*

"Did you hear? Johnny Cash is dead, man," my brother's voice sounded far away on my cell phone. I stood outside the dive bar in Madison, the sulfur streetlights casting an eerie yellow glow on the hot summer darkness in 2005.

"Yeah, I heard. It sucks." I took a drag on my cigarette and looked over at my friends smoking on the sidewalk. 'It's Reid' I mouthed to Amy. She rolled her eyes, her blond hair hanging limply in the heat. "I'm with the Madison kids; Amy too."

"Does she look good tonight?" He gave a nervous laugh. He sounded a little drunk, too.

“Of course. She looks great!” Reid and Amy had just broken up a few months before, when Reid graduated college and moved to Colorado. I’d been away for most of it, living in Seattle by then. But Reid had called me to tell me they’d broken up. He cried on the phone. Nothing is quite as hard as listening to your little brother cry.

Amy rolled her eyes again and went into the bar. I stood outside to finish my cigarette. Reid and I went back to talking about Johnny. We talked about our plan to get matching *JC* tattoos. If anyone ever asked if it stood for *Jesus Christ* we’d laugh and proclaim, “No man, Johnny and June Cash!”

I came to Johnny Cash when I was in high school. I’d ordered a ‘Best of’ collection a few years before that. I loved the classics, especially *Ring of Fire* and *Don’t Take Your Guns to Town*. But I found the first of the albums he did for American Records in the early 1990’s at a pawnshop. The album was dark and crusty, and was the first in the series he recorded with Rick Rubin until the end of his life. He was an old man then, but he was still an outlaw. On that album and those that followed, he covered many of the ‘alternative’ songs that populated my teenage years. Something about the old man resonated with me. He was a badass and a nice guy, something I think I aspired to be myself. I tended towards depression even then, but Johnny’s music turned that darkness into confidence, made me feel like taking on the whole world, giving a round “fuck you” to anyone that stood in my way.

And so when I decided to join a few friends from graduate school on a tour of the South during the summer of 2008 – my first ever road trip farther south than northern Missouri – I knew that when we hit Nashville we had to find Johnny and June. I did an Internet search and scrawled directions on a discarded envelope and packed it with my clothes for the trip.

We set out in the blazing sun and thick hot air of the Tennessee afternoon, headed for Hendersonville. There were four of us crammed into my friend's Subaru – the three of us that had made the trip from Iowa, and a friend who'd been living for a few years in Nashville. We ventured off the interstate at Johnny Cash Boulevard (on that trip we'd hit Elvis Presley Boulevard and Dolly Parton Boulevard, too) and followed the directions I'd scrawled. We ventured away from the usual crop of suburban businesses and down a tree-lined two-lane road past stately but modest homes.

I drove us slowly along the curves, sticking to the directions we had. The summer sun was hot; we put the windows down and let the thick air roll over us in the car. We ignored the orange "Road Work Ahead" sign until we found the way blocked by a big dump truck and a paving crew. We'd been driving for several miles by then and everyone in the car looked skeptical.

"Maybe it's just over that rise," I said, still hopeful that we were on the right path. We parked next to a patch of broken and overgrown concrete and walked through the scratchy, dry grass, trying to see over the hill ahead. The large machines and men in orange vests spread hot black asphalt on the road, smoke rising into the summer sun. Unsure, we walked halfway over the hill and gave up, defeated. On the way back to the car, a large man with a beard, ball cap, and crooked aviator sunglasses leaned out the window of the dump truck.

"What are y'all looking for?" He asked us in a thick Tennessee drawl.

"We're trying to find Johnny and June Cash's gravesite," I told him, shielding my eyes from the sun.

“Wish you woulda said something, I coulda saved you walking all that way. It’s back at the Memory Garden, up off the highway.” The man smiled at us, motioning back the way we’d come.

I thanked him and we all walked quickly to car, assured that even though we were off track, we’d find Johnny yet. We turned the car around and began the trek back. Our friend from Nashville wanted to be sure, so he insisted that we ask someone for more specific directions. In our Iowaness-not-wanting-to-bother-anyone, we balked, but when we spied a woman gathering sticks in her front yard, I pulled the car over to the side of the road.

The woman looked up at us, sweat gathered on the edges of her curly hair, her shorts and t-shirt mismatched.

“Can you tell us how to get to Johnny Cash’s grave?” our Nashville friend shouted out the window.

“Just keep heading that way,” she motioned with a gloved hand, “and you’ll see the cemetery off of Main Street.”

“Don’t tell ‘em to go that way!” A man shouted from where he sat on the porch of the house. “Tell ‘em to turn before then.”

The woman waved us on, dismissing the man’s directions and going back to her yard work in one swift motion. We headed down Johnny Cash Boulevard and then found the cemetery, nestled among the big box stores and chain restaurants across the road.

There were no signs, no directions pointing us to the plot. I drove us slowly down the narrow road, stones spread out in neat rows through the short grass. We parked at the bottom of a hill and got out, the sun fading as the evening set in. We spread out, walking in a long line slowly up the hill. I didn’t know what to expect. A simple stone just like Jimi? A stately

mausoleum? A gaudy Nashville statue? We walked around for a few minutes, crested the hill. “Here it is,” one my friends said, motioning us to a black granite bench. We walked slowly over to where she stood.

And there was Johnny, and right next to him, June. Two plot-sized iron slabs laid in the ground, gold letters with the name and dates of each life, a psalm, and a signature printed on each. A low stone wall surrounded the plots on three sides, the fourth side connected to the sidewalk. A black granite bench printed with *CASH ~ CARTER, I Walk the Line / Wildwood Flower, 2003* and a quote from Johnny sat at the head of the two plots. Bouquets of pink and yellow and lavender flowers stood tall in black vases behind each plot. We snapped pictures, the flowers reflecting in the smooth black of the bench seat, the gold lettering glinting in the fading sunlight.

I didn't feel bad this time, like I had when we'd found Jimi. Here lay two music giants that I had never known, had never seen in concert. June played a show in Seattle when I was living there in the early spring of 2003. I didn't buy tickets; probably a lack of money or maybe I had to work. She died a few months later and I kick myself all the time for not going to that show. Standing over them on the dirt did make them real people, but didn't lessen what they had done for music, didn't lessen Johnny's status in my mind as the ultimate outlaw. He lived hard but died an old man, made music until the end. I can only hope to do the same, to always live my life honestly as a gay man, as an Iowan. I want to learn to love and accept myself fully, making no excuses for who I am so that other people can see me and do the same. I want to tell my stories the same way Johnny did in his songs with no apologies. I hope to tell my truth for all the world to hear. I may never be on stage to flip the finger to the camera as Johnny so famously did in the Jim Marshall photograph, but I aspire to give a metaphorical finger to the social

conservatives who think that being gay is something to disagree with, something that is a fate worse than death. Johnny struggled with addiction but came out triumphant on the other side. He rose from the ashes and resurrected himself honestly. There have been few ashes in my life, but I think I can follow his example just the same.

Johnny didn't let fear hold him back. He came from a very small world and continued to grow from that on a much larger scale, never forgetting where he'd come from. I think he recognized the power of his roots and used that power to push past the critics and the detractors. When I walk past the protestors carrying signs that damn me to hell for the sins of homosexuality or hear someone at the bar whisper "Faggot" under their breath, I hope to always remember where I'm from and that, really, nobody but *me* can bring me down.

We stood at the gravesite for a few more minutes, exchanged some banter about Nashville and Johnny's music. Then we walked slowly back to the car as the light faded further. I felt my pocket for my pack of cigarettes and realized that they were gone. "Maybe Johnny doesn't want me to smoke," I joked when we got in the car. We stopped at a gas station and I bought a new pack, took a drag and felt the warm evening wind blow over me through the window. We'd found Johnny after all and I felt a strange comfort.

We went to Graceland that same trip, walked through the house where Elvis lived and died. I looked up at the blue curtain at the top of the stairs - hiding the second floor of the house from public view, looked at the worn spot on one of the stools in the small kitchen and couldn't help but think of Elvis as a regular person, too. Still a mystery, but a human being. We wandered the grounds with our headphones on, listening to the audio tour, and ended by standing at Elvis' grave. A long black plaque with gold lettering covered the plot, too, with *Elvis Aaron Presley*,

*January 8, 1935, August 16, 1977* and a long quote from his father in gold lettering, the *TCB* lightning bolt symbol at the bottom.

Though the gravestone was elaborate, I couldn't help but think of the gravestones of my family and the few friends that have died over the years. They are all less ornate, but the idea is the same. A full name followed by a date of birth and a date of death. The only true information that defines our lives bounds the whole of us into simple letters and numbers. Dead rock stars and dead relatives and friends all the same. Bodies buried in the dirt. In standing at the graves of each, I am looking for myself, some part of my story that is yet to be told, some part that has already been told. A story that is larger than myself and yet so very small, so very much like every story ever told. I watch the sun shine or the rain fall on those slabs of rock and feel humbled and energized all at once.

A story in my mother's family is this: my great great aunt sent a letter to her sister, my great grandmother, and wrote: "It's been so dry here. We haven't even had enough rain to wash the bird shit off the tombstones." My great grandmother was offended; that line makes me smile.

## The Names

(Spring 2002) “The lady, she took my identity,” Robert says to me from the other side of the grimy plexiglass in the entryway of the shelter in Seattle.

“Your identity?” I ask him.

“Yeah. The lady, she took my identity. She won’t give it back.”

I stare blankly at Robert. The toy construction hat sits skewed on his head, the fluorescent lights glinting on the white and red “Tyco” sticker on the front. His aviator glasses are smeared; his wrinkly, tanned fingers resting on the laminate counter are grimy with dirt and cigarette ash. I’m not sure if he is being paranoid, having a delusion about his stolen identity. I had never known Robert to be delusional, just old and cantankerous. We’d heard from his case manager during a meeting that he often displayed ‘sun-downing’ – that his memory and behavior might get worse later in the day, typical for those with dementia.

“Can you give me a new identity?” He points at the computer to my left.

“Oh. You need a new ID card.”

“Yes, a new identity. Make me one.” He smiles.

I punch up his name on the dingy computer and his grainy picture pops onto the screen. I load the machine with a white piece of plastic the size of a credit card. With the push of a button, the machine spits the card out with a blurry black and white picture of Robert and his name, birth date, a bar code, and the shelter logo along the top. I hand him the card through the slot along the bottom of the window and he takes it. He doesn’t say anything as he turns and runs the card through the scanner on the door, releasing the lock. He pushes open the door and wanders back into the shelter.

I repeated that process hundreds of times during my two years working at the shelter. New clients would stand at the window and tell us information as we punched it into the computer system. “How do you spell your name? What’s your birth date? Do you know your social security number? Do you have a case manager here? Do you have any health problems? Are you currently in drug or alcohol counseling?” We dutifully entered any information a person would give us into the computer system, checking first to see if perhaps they had been in the shelter before. Clients in the shelter often lost their ID cards or hadn’t been to the shelter for long periods of time. Sometimes we’d find them in the system and update their record. Other times they would give us false information because they had been barred from using the shelter. Sometimes another staff member would see them walking through the door and ask the front desk person why that client had been let in.

People were often reluctant to give out information, either because they didn’t speak much English or because one delusion or other told them not to give up any personal details. They only told us what they wanted and we accepted that, didn’t push further with questions. We were gatekeepers. We issued ID cards that would allow clients to enter the shelter, the computer system keeping track of each card swipe. We could scroll through the entries from a specific day if the police called or came in looking for someone. Hit a few keys on the computer and the list of names and times would show up. If clients were really trying to hide, they could run someone else’s card during a busy time of day when the person at the front desk would be answering the phone or making an announcement or filling out paperwork.

I probably made hundreds of ID cards, registered just as many new clients for the shelter. The names they gave march always through my memory, sometimes floating to me in the middle of the night. I kept a list in a journal from those years, making asterisks by the names of those

who died while I knew them. More have probably died since I worked at the shelter. I wonder if only their names have remained?

Every day in the shelter, I saw my grandparents, my parents, my brother, my sister, my friends, myself. With only a small shift in the events of my life, I could just as easily have been walking up the grimy stairs from Third Avenue in downtown Seattle to stand in front of a greasy plexiglass window and tell the person behind the counter my name, my date of birth, my social security number. I didn't know homelessness when I stepped into the shelter; more than that, I didn't know how close it really was, waiting just around the corner. I had a large circle of family and friends – even at twenty-two years old. I hadn't fallen into addiction, hadn't yet suffered with mental illness. And yet, at any moment, any of that could change. I hadn't expected to see myself walking through the doors of the shelter every day, but there I was. Tucked in a corner with a ratty duffle bag talking to myself, or enjoying a cigarette in the smoke room talking with a buddy, or sitting on the sidewalk around the corner, a dirty paper cup set before me repeating, "Spare change?" as the downtown work crowd shuffled quickly past.

It was too easy to see myself in the face of the client from the shelter that I would notice wandering the streets in the warm Seattle afternoon, a suitcase clutched tightly to her chest, the pained look on her face showing the demons of mental illness that locked her away from the world.

It was too easy to remember the old man with the messy hair and dingy clothes eating alone in the grocery store cafeteria on a Sunday afternoon. I was in college when I saw him and I remember walking out of the store and suddenly feeling lonely and afraid. I wondered if that would be me someday, faceless, nameless, eating my lunch alone beneath the buzzing

fluorescent lights in the corner of a grocery store filled with people with somewhere to go and someone to go home to.

It was too easy to remember my sister's face that day so long ago when all of my cousins and I had climbed on top of the shed behind my grandparents' trailer. My sister – the youngest kid there - walked up to us and stared up at me, asking “Can I get up there?”

“No, you're too little,” I told her. Her tiny face fell and she looked down at the ground, mashing a pebble into the dirt with her red plastic shoe.

It was too easy to remember when I spent a few days during college in the tiny village of Carrick on the northwest coast of Ireland. I was the only guest at the bed and breakfast; it was October, the off-season. The sky was mostly grey; the wind off the Atlantic was cold. The highest sea cliffs in all of Europe, Sliabh Liagh, were just down the road, and I set off to take a look during my second day there. The proprietress of the bed and breakfast had told me not to climb up to the cliffs if the weather looked unstable; she said the winds could change at any moment and could be dangerous.

I didn't pass a single person as I walked along the narrow road leading along the bay towards the cliffs. I came to the crudely lettered sign pointing me to the cliff and passed through a gate and across a field, following a well-worn footpath up the hillside. The sky was mottled and grey, the ground covered by a patchwork of brown, yellow, and green grass, off-white rocks poking through everywhere. I climbed the path carefully, still seeing no signs of any other climbers. There were only sheep – puffy and round with grungy looking wool. I tried to take a picture of one, but it ran off just as I raised my camera.

Looking ahead, I saw the bend in the trail that led up and around the hill. Fog began to roll in, coloring the sky overhead milky white. The wind picked up. I reached the bend in the

trail, unsure if I should continue. I looked at the fog and the rock-covered hills ahead. I turned and looked down, out over the bay, into the sunshine far off in the distance. I decided in that moment that because I was alone and because my climbing skills were not great, I shouldn't continue. I snapped a picture of the bend in the path and made my way carefully down the hill, passing the sheep but not a single person.

That night, as I lay in the full size bed in my room listening to Peter Gabriel sing in my headphones, I felt afraid. I thought of my family back in the United States, I thought of my new friends from the study abroad program in London. I remembered the phone out in the hallway and I realized that I didn't know how to make a call. I remembered the vague itinerary I'd left with the program directors in London, "just in case." There, in the small bed and breakfast on the northwest coast of Ireland, I was alone, completely. My parents didn't know where I was; the rest of the world only had a vague notion.

I didn't understand that fear then, but I do know. I was afraid because I was alone. And so I was afraid of that loneliness when I saw it in the clients in the shelter or on the street each day and in that old man eating his dinner quietly at the grocery store. Many of those people had been forgotten; maybe no one knew where they were. Maybe the lives they had led were lost to memories that only they held onto. It was – and is – terrifying to me. I hold the names and faces close so I won't forget, hold them closer so *I* won't be forgotten.

## What They Told Me

(Summer 2002) They told me that Khasi had been a freedom fighter in Eritrea. He stood around five feet tall and his hair fell around his ears in large, black, shaggy curls. His features were round – his eyes bulged like tiny globes with dark circles at the center, his nose round as though a button, his cheek bones high and rounded like old mountain tops, his lips thin and almost dark. His skin was deep brown in color and dusty as dry ground.

He wore slick athletic pants, dirty tennis shoes, and a dark colored polo shirt, which was usually pulled up, resting just below his nose. He rarely spoke; when he did, his words came out fast and urgent, sometimes in English, but usually in a language that I didn't understand. I would have called him cute had it been appropriate. He never caused problems in the shelter and I think we all watched out for him, wanting to keep him from the crack smokers and the fighters.

I'd try to talk to him sometimes, but usually he only stared intently at me – I would say that he could see right through me, but it was as if I wasn't there at all, as if he was looking somewhere distant, somewhere I had never been and would never be.

They told me that John had borne witness to the massacre of his entire family. He was a quiet man. His head was shaven, his skin a rich brown color like that of weak coffee. There were tiny gaps between his teeth like cracks in the dry earth; I noticed the gaps only when he smiled. He wore a buttoned-down light colored shirt with khaki slacks and shiny dress shoes. He sometimes wore a tie and usually carried a brown or black shoulder bag.

He was a quiet man until the day of the fight. I didn't see what happened, but the other man claimed that John had attacked him out of the blue, left him on the floor in the corner near

the elevator with a broken nose and a few missing teeth. I was sure that John had meant no harm; that he had probably seen something terrible that no one else had seen or would ever see. He was kicked out of the shelter for a short time and supposedly the shelter paid the other man's medical bills.

They told me that Harvey had been in Vietnam and that somewhere he had children and maybe a wife. He was tall and thin, had pale milky skin and a full beard, speckled with grey. He wore jeans and sneakers, a t-shirt, and sometimes a black leather coat. He was always a nice guy, wanting to talk when he was able. Usually, though, he would shuffle around the shelter, mouth agape, eyes half closed, holding an unlit cigarette loosely between his fingers. At those times, I'd ask him a question and if he'd heard me, he might look in my general direction and his mouth would move but he would only whisper words that I couldn't understand.

I liked him, felt sad that he was in such a state. He cried sometimes about his children, but kept popping pills or drinking methadone that he'd scored in the alley. I knew he'd seen things that I would never see, things that I would never understand if I had.

They told me that Mona had been a performance artist in New York City. She wore dirty sweatpants and a members' only jacket and once walked through the shelter with a hair extension that was so long it trailed behind her on the floor, gathering discarded chicken bones and cigarette butts. She carried herself regally, holding her head high, taking elegant steps wherever she walked. Her handbag overflowed with used Styrofoam coffee cups and wet teabags.

She once held her hand to her ear and when I tried to ask her a question, she said, “Excuse me, I’m on the phone with the office.”

Another night she approached the plexiglass window of the front lobby and said to me in a gravelly baritone, “Lonnie, you need to stop raping and murdering me. It’s very tiresome.”

I used to imagine her in New York City, holding a cocktail party in a cavernous art space and treating her guests to her latest performance. She would captivate them as she captivated me.

They didn’t tell me anything about Fred. He was tall and wide with skin the color of a chocolate milkshake. He wore his hair in giant black dreadlocks and always wore the kind of shoes the hospital gives out to people who have had foot surgery. He always wore tight ivory colored socks pulled up over his calves. It was rumored that both of his feet were infected. Whenever the local dermatology school would hold a clinic in the shelter, they would always request to see Fred. But he never wanted any kind of treatment. I imagine they just asked him to remove his socks to show the students a real-life example of an untreated infection.

Fred got a bad case of body lice one month and his case manager and a shelter staff person shaved off his giant dreadlocks. I was elected to help give him the lice treatment in the handicap accessible shower. They gave me a yellow plastic jacket to cover my clothes with. I wore gloves and helped Fred apply the smelly cream over all of his body. I tried to make conversation with him as we worked.

“That’s a nice bag. Did you make it yourself?” I pointed to the patchwork bag he carried with him everyday.

“Ye..es,” he stammered. That was really all he would ever say.

I tried to imagine where he was from, the nature of his mental illness, what brought him to the shelter. But no one knew anything.

## A Badge of Honor

(Summer 2002)

The sounds of the shelter at dinner time: plastic trays slide against worn wood tables, forks and spoons clanking, voices rising and falling, the fans in the smoking room whirring. The large dining area, where the men will snore on grimy mats later, is full.

Then: slow motion, just like the movies. My glasses fly away from my face, arcing in the air, falling on the grimy floor tiles with a clatter. I feel dizzy, nauseous, confused, my eyes water. The man's face comes into focus, slowly. His pupils large black saucers, drops of sweat beaded on his brown brow, mouth agape showing rows of short, off-white teeth. I didn't see his arm move, his hand open. The rough skin on the palm of his hand stung my face, left side. Do I cry? Shout? Glasses, find your glasses! See them on the floor a few feet away. Scoop them up. Then - Run? *Run*, my body moves, fast motion blur now. Head moves to the side; glasses on the floor three steps to the right. Fingers scoop up glasses. Six steps to the side door, key in the lock, turn twice, push, door swings open. Three steps to the office, key in the lock, push in, turn to the right. Door open, one step to the black office phone. Raise the receiver, push 2, push 5, the two-tone signal on the speakers overhead. Speak forcefully into the handset: "All staff to the south dorm!"

People shouting, liquid, then wood hitting the floor – *the juice table!* More people shouting, Peter yells: "Stop! Thomas, get back!" Back out to the south dorm to help? Not yet. Four steps

back to the tiny bathroom. Light on, stand in front of the sink, look in the mirror. Blood? No. A bruise? No. Skin turning crimson. Fingers on the faucet handles, the metal is cool. Cold water runs, hands lift water to face. A tiny sob escapes my throat. Then the knowing: he hit me!

Hugging Sasha in the basement, two cars parked in the corners, the boss' scooter leaned by the elevator, broken chairs stacked by the dumpster. The sulfur lights shine on the hunks of concrete, broken and scattered on the ground. Smoke from our cigarettes wafts towards the pull-down fences on the wide doors, out into the Seattle night. Tears well in my eyes. "I've just never been hit before!" I laugh nervously, pretending that I don't want to bawl like a little boy. Sara says "Aww . . ." with a little laugh, holding her cigarette away from our bodies.

Peter stares at the ground, a sly grin on his face, kicks at the dirt. He took it on the chin, the skin crimson too. "It was Thomas who pushed him out." Thomas was another client, tall and large. He rescued us. We squish our cigarettes on the concrete and take the elevator upstairs. Sasha heads back out on the floor, Peter and I walk back to the office to sit and wait for the boss and the police. We tell the officers what happened; the boss tells us that we can go home. She calls me the next day to say that I don't have to come to work.

"I'll be okay," I say into the phone, wanting to be tough. I do go to work. The shelter that day and for a few afterwards is more confusing than before. Each person walking up to me causes me to flinch. I smoke more cigarettes during break time, make sure my keys are in my pocket every few minutes. Days later, a letter comes in the mail from the King County Clerk of Courts. I open the envelope carefully. A restraining order, good for a year. I set it aside. Months later, I think

about putting it in a frame on my wall; a badge of honor, a diploma imparting the degree of *the assaulted*.

## Driving Back

(Summer 2002) I lay on the hard bed with beads of sweat and cum pooling on my belly. It felt gross, heavy, heavier than the mid-August heat of the hotel room somewhere in Montana. Orange sulfur light seeped in around the edges of the heavy hotel drapes. Steve's features – his long face, angled nose and jaw, wavy brown hair – looked almost cartoony in the shadows as he hovered over me, breathing heavy. We'd driven nine hours that day, down from our apartment on the hill, leaving Seattle across the Interstate 90 floating bridge on Lake Washington, past the tawny, stately homes on Mercer Island, through the craggy, slate Wenatchee Mountains, out of the Cascade Range and across the rolling gold hills of central Washington, through the industrial ugliness of Spokane and back again into the pine-dotted mountains of the Bitterroot Range in Northern Idaho. I loved that part the best – the mountain towns unfolding as we rounded a bend in the interstate, buildings and houses scattered among the jagged black rock poking through the canopy of lushly green pines. As we careened past in the car, I thought that I'd like to get back to one of those towns, maybe Wallace, Idaho: find a low-wage job and just bum around the rock for a year. A landscape so different from any I had ever known. Maybe I could disappear, reinvent myself, become someone I had never known that I wanted to be.

When I'd moved to Seattle a year before, I had hope that maybe living with Steve would mean that we'd be together again, that we would settle back into the gentle domesticity we enjoyed in Minnesota during our summer of love, even if we had two other roommates in Seattle. But that didn't happen; Steve dated a few guys that first year; I got drunk and felt jealous and angry with him, snuck into his room when he was at work and read his diary or the letters he got from another guy back home, searching for something – some mention of me, some

acknowledgement that I still mattered, that what we'd had still mattered. Sometime in that first Seattle year, we decided that it would be okay if we slept together. We decided that we didn't need to date to have sex, so we had good sex, almost always after we'd been out drinking. Once we came home from the bar and sat cross-legged in my bed in our underwear, leaning our backs against the wall, drinking beers, the florescent gleam of the streetlight slanting through the mini-blinds. We were talking about the sex we were having, how enjoyable it was, and started kissing. But then I was opening my eyes to the hot sun streaming through the blinds and we were both half slumped, still against the wall, our beers listing gently on the mattress beside us. And that's how I felt about us on the trip back to Iowa – that maybe we'd tried to make something work between us, but we hadn't finished yet; we were incomplete.

As we drove east, we counted the miles by the aches in our feet, descending the Rocky Mountains into the flat expanse of central Montana. We discovered that flip-flops were not ideal footwear for cross-country driving. (My mom would laugh on the phone to my grandmother: "They said their feet got sore from all the driving!") We aimed that day for Billings or Miles City, somewhere we could declare 'half-way' and find a hotel room and a hot meal. We collapsed into bed that night and then I felt like I was having sex with a stranger. His slim, tight body felt rough and awkward in my hands; our bodies seemed to clunk together without rhythm or direction. And when we finished, I lay there and wondered what was next. I wondered if this was really the end; Steve was going back to school to finally finish his degree – like a lot of my friends he'd landed a class or two short at the end of four years, but left college anyway – and I wondered, lying there, if we'd ever live in the same place again.

When Steve told us that he was leaving, we moved into a smaller apartment, he and I sharing a bedroom with only a sheet tacked to the ceiling dividing us. He talked about coming

back to Seattle when he was done at Central, but Nicki and I knew that it wasn't really true. We both knew Steve changed his mind a lot, which is why he'd had a broken string of retail jobs in the year we'd been in Seattle, only managing to hang onto a low-paying barista gig at Starbucks for longer than a few months.

So maybe I felt like I was delivering him back to Iowa and out of my life for good. I lay there that night on the hard motel bed with the scratchy sheets and wondered what the fuck it all meant.

In the morning we continued east across the great openness of Montana and into the Theodore Roosevelt National Park near the western edge of North Dakota, with its brown steppe scoria-topped buttes looking like what I imagined Arizona to be. We stopped and snapped pictures of each other at a lookout point, our faces shiny, Steve's body slim and taut and brown, mine paler and paunchy, Steve's hair dark and thick, mine thinning and blonde, blowing in the breeze, the sky pale blue with only a few white, wispy clouds in the distance. We drove over the flat, watery expanses of western North Dakota and pulled into my parents' driveway late in the afternoon. After two long days on the road, I felt relieved. As soon I stepped out of the car into the dry summer air and the fading sunlight, I knew that it would be hard to leave in the morning. I hadn't seen my parents in months, and it felt awful to only stay one night and then leave again in the morning. But Steve had to be back on campus the next day to get settled.

Soon we sat at the picnic table in the garage and drank Budweiser™ tallboys as the afternoon began to fade. I thought it odd that Mom and Dad had stocked the fridge with tallboys. They'd always been beer drinkers – Dad was a Budweiser™ man, Mom drank Miller Lite™ – but always in regular, twelve ounce cans. I suppose that was the beginning of a long line of moments where I'd learn that people can and do change, even after years of doing the same

thing. It would happen again, years later when I was living in Madison, Wisconsin. I decided that I'd like to have a boiled egg with my supper and then realized that I hadn't boiled an egg for years, if I had ever done it myself. So I called my grandma to ask her. "Well, lately I've been doing it the way your Aunt Nick does. Just bring the water to a boil and then turn it off and let them sit covered for twenty minutes." And I hung up the phone and thought about how Gram had been boiling eggs for probably 65 years and here she was, still trying a different method. How lucky I am to be a part of a family unafraid of changes, even if only small ones.

That night we lay in the twin beds in the guest room next to my parents' bedroom in the small upstairs, an industrial strength fan blowing, cooling us and lulling us to sleep, moonlight and the street light on the corner mixing together and streaming into the room through the thin, lacy curtains. I told Steve that I didn't want to leave in the morning, wondered aloud if we could stay for just one more day. But he reminded me again that he needed to get back to Pella with enough time to settle in before the semester started and I agreed begrudgingly, my eyes tearing quietly as I fell asleep.

And so, in the morning we left, heading south on Highway 52 and then east on Interstate 94, crossing into forested Minnesota and turning south again on Interstate 35 at the Twin Cities. When we crossed into Iowa as the sun began to set, the acrid sweet scent of pig shit blew into the car through the open windows and we laughed. "Smells just like home!" and I felt okay again, if only for that moment. We drove through the northern half of Iowa and rolled into Pella, in the south central part of the state, in the dark, the sulfur glow of the street lights making the familiar streets and the red brick buildings of campus seem foreign and uninviting. After awkward, exhausted hugs, I left Steve at his friend's Resident Director apartment at one of the dorms and drove away wondering what it all meant, wondering where I was headed next, leaving my love

behind where it had all begun, the three years before that moment feeling like twenty. I drove away in the humid summer darkness and felt alone again, and unsure.

## **Book II**

## 611 North College Street

(1985) When I was a child, I'd look north from my bedroom window and imagine that the whole world lay, endless, just out of sight over the hill. The narrow highway rose gently to the horizon in a long, wavy ribbon in the summer, and a cold, frozen track in winter, cresting the hill and moving off towards friends who lived on farms, towards the triangle-shaped pond where mom lost her fishing pole to a giant catfish when she was seven months pregnant, towards the lonely looking houses set far back from the highway, towards Grandma's house and the rest of the world. As I got older, I could tick off the names of the families that lived in some of those houses. After a few miles, though, the homes belonged to strangers. I'd peer out the window of the car and contemplate yard sizes, driveway angles, peeling paint colors. Our own property line was bordered on the north by the fence and the creek, on the west by more fence and a tree line and beyond that, a city street, and on the east by the Hedrick-Agency Highway, that line of concrete that killed our cats - ticking them off one-by-one from six down to one, that almost killed a dozen drivers barreling down the hill, drunk or driving too fast, saved only by my mother's 911 calls and a small bunch of First Responders. My mother would gasp and run for the phone at every sound of crunching metal at midnight.

On the south, we were borderless. Our three acres met the neighbors' nine, forming a great green ocean, waves of lawn bubbling in the summer heat between our house and the rest of the world. An old barn stood singular in the middle, demarcating our property line. It was dark grey with a single square pane of glass facing our house. It had listed further to the west over the

years and the Amish came and straightened it one summer, poking at the grey building all day in their funny dark clothes.

The house we lived in is all that remains there now. The new Highway 34 on-ramp paved over where the neighbors to the north lived. The house of the south neighbor was torn down after a few years of neglect. Our house – *my* house – looks mostly the same, the bushes in the front are bushier, the trees my dad planted on the north slope are taller. There might be new windows, maybe an addition on the back, maybe a new shed on the side. I can never slow down long enough to see these things, but I don't want to anyway. Up on the highway, you can see the north side of the yard, where the creek used to run. But driving at 65 mph, you'll miss it if you blink. I usually blink.

\*

The whole of my memories of the first 18 years of my life are contained in that one place, embedded in the roots of the grass and trees that grow there, nailed into the boards that hold our house up. My parents and I moved to 611 North College (when the address was Rural Route 1, Box 76) when I was a year old in 1980. We lived there until I went away to college in the fall of 1997. My consciousness until that time had been defined by those three acres on the edge of Agency, in the southeast corner of Iowa. We traveled to my grandparents' home in central Iowa several times a year, made more frequent trips to my great aunt and uncle's house, only an hour away. We took one family vacation to the Ozarks when I was in elementary school, another trip to Omaha after that. But mostly, we were home. I existed primarily in that small three-bedroom house on those three acres.

My circle widened when I got my driver's license at 16 and began to make trips to friends' houses, all within a twenty-mile radius. And we made occasional trips to Iowa City, about 70 miles away. But mostly, my world was still contained in that small section in the southeastern corner of Iowa.

When I went away to college, I was only an hour from my acres. In October of my freshman year, my family moved to North Dakota and my existence suddenly widened by seven hundred miles. Since that move, I've had eleven addresses, with my circle expanding northwest to the Pacific coast, east to Wisconsin, and further across the Atlantic to London. The longest I've lived at any one of those eleven addresses has been two years. Ninety-five percent of my first eighteen years of life were spent in one spot. Perhaps I could plot my first thirty years on a graph, the addresses I've lived up the side, the years numbered along the bottom. Perhaps then I'd could see my life as a series of plot points, connect them to make a line, calculate the angle of my trajectory. Perhaps doing this would clear some things up. Maybe seeing my life in numbers could help me to add it up, to solve the sum total of my life so far, from age zero to thirty, from 1979 to 2009:

1 year in Perry, Iowa + 17 in Agency, Iowa + 4 in Pella, Iowa + .25 in Ankeny, Iowa + .25 in London + .25 in Eden Prairie, Minnesota + 2 in Seattle, Washington + .75 in Harvey, North Dakota + 3 in Madison, Wisconsin + 2 in Ames, Iowa = Lonnie Evan Carrick.

## Where the Rainwater Gathers

(Summer 1987) We are hurrying around the wagon, my daughter and I. We've tied down the horses, put out the fire. I hold the baby firmly in my arms. My husband runs up the hill, a rifle slung over his shoulder, two dead rabbits in his hands. The wind has begun to blow hard, the sky swirling and turning black.

"Hurry Jim! The storm's coming!" I shout, tipping the wagon on its side. Jim throws down his rifle and dives next to us on the ground. We huddle together, holding the side of the wagon against the wind. We are pioneers, battling Mother Nature in all her ferocious glory. Really, we are my brother, my sister, and I (holding my Cabbage Patch™ doll, Dean) lying together under the red metal wagon with the white wheels and black handle. The storm is not real, just the hot wind of a summer day in southeastern Iowa. Our prairie is the large patch of grass that my dad grows tall, mowing a grid pattern of paths for us to play, in the backyard.

It's a scene we enact over and over again, all through my childhood. Sometimes there are hostile Indians, strangers from out of town (if one of us has a friend over). Sometimes we are the Indians, gathering berries and making fires in front of a small stand of trees that makes a perfect wigwam in the corner of the pasture. Always there is a storm or an illness or some sort of calamity we must overcome. We are products of vivid imaginations, good books, Montessori pre-school, and cable television. But mostly we are products of land, the three acres of ground where our house sits is our entire world.

In the farthest corner of the yard, beyond the rusting hay rake with the giant curved teeth that belonged to the neighbors, beyond the silver maple tree and the big lilac bush, beyond the asparagus patch - but before the fence separating the pasture from our yard - lie the bodies of our pets. Four cats: one whose name I don't remember, Tiger, Gay Gay, Midnight. There's a hamster named Mike. When my brother buried his body in a matchbox, he made a tiny tombstone from a scrap block of wood. He scrawled "Mike Carrick" and the dates of his life in blue permanent marker on the front. Mom told him that he must add "Hamster" so unknowing guests wouldn't think she'd buried a child there. The dog that we grew up with, Charlie is there. His replacement, May Rose is there too. And my best friend from third through twelfth grades, my cat Coco, is there too. It's our own little pet cemetery, I guess, but we don't visit it often. We know they are all there, buried in the dirt beneath the tangled green grass left to grow wild. All the cats were victims of the highway running in front of the house, one dog and the hamster simply got old, the other dog was sick most of her short life and we were never quite sure why. Lessons in death delivered by furry friends.

\*

The barn works great as a prison. There is a small corral with a gate that latches from the outside, perfect for holding criminals from our pretend scenes. There's also a set of rusty lockers hung on the wall, perfect for storing treasures scoured from the pasture or the pond. The tomato cages Dad stores there make neat photographs when the snow falling through the holes in the roof collects on the metal circles. The discarded lawn mower with the tires sunk deep in the mud

floor is great for pretending to drive around town. The chopped top of an old Thunderbird™ car leaned against the wall is great to hide behind during games of hide and seek. If you climb carefully up the fence at the side of the barn and step with one foot on the post, you can scramble up to the roof. There are lots of holes and the shingles are rotting. But if you are careful, you can get to the highest part of the roof at the front of the barn and see the whole property. You can see the neighbors' house really well and the roofs of the houses along the road beyond the trees at the edge of the pasture. Mom doesn't like us to climb up there; she says it's too dangerous and that we could really get hurt. We climb up there when she's not looking. Even if she sees us, we can see her coming first and have plenty of time to get down and run off.

If you lift up the rusty barrel top lying just inside the fence of the pasture, sometimes you'll find a bull snake curled up. Sometimes it will take off through the grass really fast. Other times he might turn and look at you and open his mouth really wide and hiss.

The three-sided weathered wooden box with the curved metal bars on top that sits in the grass behind the barn makes a great backdrop for senior pictures. There's a tall tree stump on the hill that is good to lean your arm on, too, looking cool. Makes another good picture.

If you climb out on the big limb of the willow tree on the edge of the pond in the pasture, you'll be out over the water. You might worry about falling in, but if there is water, it isn't too deep. Sometimes, in the summer, if you using a big seine net, you can sweep through the water of the pond and come up with a bunch of crawdads, muddy colored with big pinchers. One summer, there was a snapping turtle living in the pond. We'd go out there sometimes and see if we could see him; sometimes we'd catch a glimpse as he slid quickly into the murky water. That same summer, somebody shot him with an arrow. We found his body later, stinking and full of maggots.

When the pond is dry, you can wheel the wagon out the middle and pretend you are fishing, casting paperclips tied to fishing line strung on long sticks from the woodpile.

The hill from the pond is really steep. It's great for sledding in the winter, even though the trip down isn't very long. It's fast and furious – the land is shaped like a bowl at the bottom, so you go down in and then sometimes flip over when you come up the other side. Sometimes you can even sled there in the summer on the old metal saucers, once you've smoothed down the tall grass. One winter, the ice had collected thick on the tall grass. When you went down the hill and sailed out into the grass, it sounded like a thousand glasses breaking.

The trees down in the very corner of the pasture, where the fences meet, are snaked with thick vines. You can sit on one of them and swing all day if you want. There's a tree with huge thorns growing right from the trunk. I broke one off once; it was super sharp and smooth, shiny and brown, almost like it was made of metal or plastic.

There's that stand of small trees at the opposite corner of the pasture that grow close together, making a perfect house. There are even two rooms and a doorway in the front.

In the yard, there's the stand-alone fence with the white posts and cable rails where the grapes grow sometimes.

There's the small tree with the black bark and multi-colored berries. It's the easiest tree to climb and the berries make great pretend food.

There's the old doghouse where the kitties lived for awhile. There's a door that latches on the outside and it was fun to play in when we were really little. It smelled dusty and hot inside. The straw on the dirt floor was scratchy.

Just a few feet down the hill is the woodpile. Here is where the fire pit is, too. It's a great spot to roast marshmallows or shoot off fireworks in the summer. It's also where Mom let the

gerbil go after we go tired of him. She was putting some paper out to burn a few weeks after that and saw him running around.

There is a square of lilac bushes that marks the yard behind the house in a square. Here is where the silver and blue swing set stood when we were little. One summer Dad helped us drape the garden hose at the top of the slide, making a rush of water on the cool metal. I climbed up the little ladder and slipped, hitting my chin on the top of the slide. I nearly bit through my tongue. Dad was so scared because of all the blood; Mom knew that it would heal. There is still a little bump in the middle of my tongue.

Inside the bushes is also where the bird feeder stands; the ground beneath is a squishy blanket of black seed shells. There's the little wooden stand in the big Elm tree that Dad built to hold corn for the squirrels. There's the sandbox, the same spot where a smaller version once was. With five outside cats running around for a time, the old sandbox turned into a giant litter box, and so Dad tore it down and built a new one. We only had two cats by then, so the surprises in the sand were fewer.

The sidewalk from the deck used to be fenced on both sides by chicken wire to keep us kids from wandering off, out into the wide world of the rest of the yard. Even when Dad took the fence out, the big wooden gate still stood at the end of the sidewalk for a few years. It was painted red and held in place by massive posts on either side. Reid and I posed there one year for a photo, our curly blonde hair shining in the sun.

The side yard – where I lay on my last night ever at home – is where we'd sunbathe with Mom in the summer. She'd spread a blanket on the grass and we'd lie down or roll around, catchin' some rays. We'd stay out all afternoon, sometimes have a picnic there, right next to the house. One spring night we built a teepee there, too. We pulled branches from the woodpile and

erected them in a great triangle next to the elm trees. We covered the branches with a sheet printed with blue and green and white flowers. In the evening we hauled blankets and pillows from the house, made ourselves a nest inside. It was a great adventure. One by one we all ended up back in the house long before midnight.

My friends sat in a row in that side yard in high school while a band played on the deck one spring day. The railings on the deck had begun to break and rot and so Dad sawed them off, flush with the deck floor. It made a perfect stage. We spent the afternoon watching our friends noodle around on their guitars and drums, our own private concert.

When I graduated from high school, we rented a big red awning and erected it in that spot, too. We set up tables and chairs for the guests that would come to my graduation party. Lots of guests did come, but few sat at the tables, opting mostly to sit on the deck steps or in lawn chairs in the back yard. It seemed to me that the week of my graduation was just an excuse for my parents and my uncles and aunts to get drunk in the backyard, “preparing” for the event.

There, in front of the house, are the wild bushes along the deck that Mom never liked. There are the planters that Mom fills with moss roses and marigolds each spring. There is the even wilder bush near the foundation of the house and the red wooden wishing well that isn't a well at all. Mom plants flowers in there, too, carefully tending the tiny white rocks that surround the base. There's the tall retaining wall that holds back the earth, making room for the driveway. There are the concrete steps with the black metal railing down to the parking pad and the heavy concrete cap that covers the real well. There are two parking spots, side by side, in front of the garage. Dad's work cars parked in the second spot, usually starting to rust when they'd been abandoned until someone would come and haul them away. Those old cars were great to sit in and pretend to drive. I'd have nightmares often that we'd be sitting in those cars, playing, when

suddenly they'd roll down into the street and I'd have to drive us on the road, unsure of how the pedals worked, unable to find the break to avert certain calamity.

There's the steep hill that is great to ride your bike down at full speed. I took to the hill too fast once and wiped out in the dusty white gravel in the driveway, skinning my knee. I still have that scar, too, a tiny 'v' on the skin over my right kneecap.

There's the basketball court nearer the highway. We didn't play a lot of basketball growing up, but every few years Dad would buy a new net and carefully climb the ladder to hang it on the hoop in the fading light of a summer afternoon.

Winter happened at home, too. The giant rolls of red wood and wire snow fence were stored out in the barn. Most winters when we were young, Dad would set green metal posts in a row to the north of the house and secure the fence in a wavy row before the first snowfall. I was never quite sure what the point of the fence was, but I guess the driveway never did drift shut.

Down in the ditch near the highway, Dad spent a whole summer digging and laying in a wall made of railroad ties to shore up the narrow driveway. He was proud of his work and was mad when the son of a neighbor fell asleep behind the wheel of his little pickup truck, careened full speed down the hill, and slammed into that wall when his truck left the highway. It was never quite right after that, no matter what repairs Dad made.

\*

Once when we were talking over beers in a bar in Madison, my brother and I estimated that we have a dream about home at least once a week. Our dreams may start out at some far-away or exotic location, but always we end up back where it all began. My own dreams of home often are some kind of party, a celebration of everything and nothing in particular. The guests at

the party may be from any of the places I've lived since I left, or they may be familiar faces from elementary or high school. There may be relatives we didn't see that often or my old boss from my first job. Sometimes the dreams end at that great party where everyone is laughing and having a good time. Other times some great cosmic event happens, and it is often terrifying – aliens are landing in the back yard or the sky is literally falling onto the grass. But home is still the same – the house, the yard, the trees, the bushes, the barn – all of it is as I remember.

## Sticks and Stones

(Spring 1987) “You’re a fag,” he whispered in my ear after he walked up behind me. I stood at the urinal in the boy’s bathroom, the fluorescent lights buzzing too bright overhead, the pink of the deodorant cake a beacon in the shiny white bowl, the tiny muslin colored tiles a dizzying pattern on the floor. I didn’t react, eyes down, staring at that pink cake. I learned early that good Iowa boys don’t get into fights, or, I decided later, fight back. Sometimes on the playground or when he walked past me in class, Kevin would say, “You’re a queer.” I didn’t know what he was talking about, but I knew that he was being *mean* and I was a *nice* boy. And Kevin was supposed to be my friend.

I had to look those words up in the dictionary my mother kept in the bookcase in the living room. The pages were thin and yellowed – the book a gift for my mother when she’d graduated from high school:

**queer** **1.** Differing in some odd way from what is ordinary; singular; peculiar. **2.**

**a** *Slang.* Spurious; counterfeit. **b** *Colloq.* Suspicious; questionable. **c** *Colloq.*

Eccentric. **3.** Not quite well; qualmish; faint. **faggot** **1.** A bundle of sticks or

twigs, as for fuel or a fascine. **2.** *Ironworking.* A bundle of pieces of wrought iron

to be worked over into bars or other shapes by rolling or hammering at a welding

heat; a pile.

I read those definitions and I still didn’t know what the words meant. He was just a jerk and was jealous of me anyway. But, as it goes in small towns, he was still my friend through

elementary school and junior high. Maybe he was trying to predict the future. Telling me a fortune that I couldn't understand then and didn't want to believe when I did.

## Seeing a Man About a Horse

(Summer 1988) Gram often says this: “You know my father and horses.”

But I don’t know.

The only time I met my great grandfather Seton, he was thin and pale and gaunt, slumped in a recliner at a nursing home in Ord, Nebraska. His hair was thin, lying in scattered wisps on his shiny head, his face long and drawn and sunken. I was with my mother and her aunt, Gram’s sister. Grandpa Seton’s third wife, Alice, was with us, herself thin and pale and ancient. She still lived at their home, a quiet two-story house with no locks on the doors. He sat in the sterile community room, the warm summer sun streaming through the windows blanketing us in a gauzy white light. We approached him and my aunt said, “Hi, Dad.” He raised his balding head slightly and looked at us with milky, watery eyes, squinting.

“Are you the man that sold me those horses?” he asked in a gravelly voice, barely audible.

“No, I’m your daughter, Nicky.” There was no recognition in his face then.

“We need to feed those horses,” he told us, looking away. All that remained of him then were the horses, animals he’d kept all of his life. The story is that he kept horses even as he got old and wasn’t able to take care of them anymore. Kept those horses until the family stepped in and asked him to sell them.

The only time I met him, he didn’t know his own daughter. He was a ghost of who he’d been. Gram and her sisters tell me that he had a wry sense of humor, told off-color jokes sometimes. He was a junker – always using odds and ends to make something new. Recycling decades before it was popular. He made old bed frames into garden gates. He used house paint to

change the color of his car. His first wife, my great grandmother Gwen, used to lovingly refer to him as ‘Peter Tumbledown.’ A story about Seton is this: When my great aunt was a teenager, she backed into his favorite car in the driveway and busted out a headlight. She didn’t tell him about it, and when he noticed the broken glass the next day, he thought that he must have done it with the tractor. So he pounded an old tin pie plate into the spot where the headlight had been. Good enough.

Another story about Seton is this: He bought a farm shed from a neighbor and loaded it carefully – the whole building, standing – onto a trailer. My great aunt watched him from the house as he drove slowly up the lane, trailer and shed in tow. The car and then the trailer hit a deep rut and the shed collapsed, in an instant a pile of boards and nothing more.

And Great Grandpa Seton was like that shed when I met him. Collapsed in on himself, almost nothing left of who he’d been. Only his parts there in that recliner, the Nebraska sunlight making the room spectral. I’d never really known him. I’d never heard him tell off-color jokes or watched him tend the horses. I didn’t think much about who Seton had been; I had no idea of who I would become.

## Sticks and Stones II

(Fall 1990)“You better use a condom when you fuck guys because fags get AIDS.” It was the sixth grade, and we were sitting on the tall, hard wooden bleachers in the gym during lunch period. The bleachers were painted red and white, the school colors, the many coats of paint on the wood worn smooth and covered by slick, thick shellac. The gym doubled as the lunchroom, and the giant fold-up picnic tables lined up in three or four long rows were below us. The scent of fifty pounds of ground beef and smelly pubescent kids hung in the air. I sat next to my friends, a group of chubby kids that weren’t athletic, were in band, and sometimes met on the weekends to hang out and play fantasy board games. Some kids had taken to calling us the fat boys – we laughed about it when we sat down and gradually spread our legs, our thighs too big to be comfortable close together.

Jimmy Miller had walked right over to me, gotten too close to my face and said those words with a sly grin, loud enough for my friends to hear. His aviator style glasses sat far away from his small nose, his eyes deep set and glaring. All I knew of him was that he was a bad kid, one of those kids from Eldon, probably from a broken home, that could and would easily kill me if I looked at him the wrong way. I didn’t respond and he laughed and walked away. My friends laughed nervously and murmured, “What’s that about?” I felt dizzy and sweaty and nervous and nauseous all at once, my mind reeling, wondering how he knew that I fantasized about the other boys in the gym locker room when I jerked off. I knew what a fag was – if only in some abstract way – but *I* certainly wasn’t one. Why was he picking on me? I didn’t recognize then that being a chubby, un-athletic kid in band made me an easy target.

## **Nothing Solved, Nothing Defined, Nothing Settled**

(Summer 1991) We sat on the curb of the drive-through lane at the Agency Savings Bank. The building was empty that day, a weekend, the glass of the drive-up window tinted an odd green color, making the inside appear ashen and gray and old. The papers left on the desk and the hulking metal file cabinets looked like they had been abandoned, artifacts from some forgotten people. The red brick building was small and old. I remember being there only a few times as a child, the lobby with the shiny floor and the high counter where the tellers counted money felt like another world. Inside the bank felt different from the rest of Main Street. It felt like people did business there, actually walked in and out. A spot of life on a street lined with buildings that drivers whizzed by, Highway 34 carrying them to all points southeast: Fairfield, Mount Pleasant, Burlington, Illinois.

Our bikes leaned to the right, fat tires on the hot blacktop, kickstands out. Both bikes were BMX; mine with a jet-black body and squishy white handle bar grips that left red vertical lines in the skin of my palms and a white plastic seat that hurt my butt. My parents had argued about that bike – it wasn't really the one I wanted, or the one my mom thought I needed. The ritual of replacing my first bike with a new one had become a sore spot between Mom and Dad. I don't remember now if I really didn't want that bike or if I really did. It was cooler than my first bike, which was baby blue with a long blue and black striped banana seat, hulking and almost too heavy to lift over the back fence that separated our property from the city street and the rest of Agency.

Reid's bike was dark blue, the body, seat, tires, handlebars all the same shade.

It was summer and the heat floated off the blacktop, the humid July air seemed to hold everything in quiet limbo, the same way the first snowfall does. The sky was overcast so that the sun didn't sear us there, but not so overcast as to be dark in the daytime, the signs of a thunderstorm or tornado approaching that both scared and excited me.

We had been to the "little store" as we called it – really Jim's Kwik n' Easy convenience store - next to the Gallery Deli and the uniform shop that we were never sure was still in business. Sometimes a large orange cat sunned itself in the front window, but the glass was clouded and dusty, and wooden lattice prevented us from ever peering inside to the racks of crisp white lab coats and multi-colored scrubs that I'd find when I went in that store in high school to help run errands for the owner.

Our trips 'uptown' were always to the little store to buy candy, baseball or basketball cards, or something that Mom had asked us to pick up for her – a pound of butter or a carton of milk. We knew all the clerks behind the counter. Jim, the owner, heavyset with dirty blonde hair and a mustache, Jane with white hair and kind eyes (who was also our favorite babysitter's mother), and Cindy with red hair piled in fat curls around a mean face who was Jim's wife and who was also never very nice to us and sometimes made us afraid. Cindy would become my eighth grade English teacher and would still scare me so much that once when she called me into the hall just to ask me a question I burst into tears; she felt bad and apologized and was somehow more human in that moment than she'd ever been to me before. Jane saved the promotional trinkets that came with packs of Virginia Slims™ cigarettes for us: white visor hats, neon-colored sunglasses, makeup brushes, poorly made plastic wallets. We delighted in those little gifts and I think Jane liked giving them to us.

The store seemed to hold everything you could ever need. We liked finding some new candy fad on the shelves, but also liked the old standards like the boxes of chalky, sweet tasting candy cigarettes, and the bubble gum cigarettes that cost a penny a piece, thin pink cylinders wrapped in white paper, just like the real cigarettes Dad smoked. If you blew on the end, sometimes a plume of white powder would cascade out the other end looking just like real smoke. They were relics, though it was the late 1980's when we bought them.

Reid and I sat there on the curb enjoying our haul from the little store, unwrapping candy bars before the chocolate melted in the heat, opening cans of pop to wash them down. But it wasn't our usual trip uptown. Mom had been saying lately that there was a chance the railroad would be sold again and that we might have to move to Kansas City. The news felt enormous to us then, though my mother probably knew that it was only talk; that every few years the same rumor would start among all the railroad families in Ottumwa. The Soo Line would be sold and if the guys wanted to keep their seniority, they'd have to move to another terminal. But as kids, we took Mom's casual observations as gospel, as promises, as the truth.

“What if we move to Kansas City?” I asked.

“I guess that might be cool,” Reid replied.

I don't remember most of our conversation that day, sitting on the curb near the bank drive-through. What I do remember, though, is a feeling in my stomach that made me nauseous. It was a feeling of excitement, a feeling of possibility, but also a feeling I didn't understand then to be anxiety, fear of something new. I imagined us moving away from Agency, living in the city, in a new house, in a new place with whatever else 'new' would bring. We'd lived in Agency as long as I could remember, my brother, my sister, my parents and me.

I still liked my parents on that day, mostly. My feelings of teenage angst and just wanting to *get the hell out* of Agency were still a few years away. I liked my friends, I liked school, I liked church. But the thought of starting over in a new town with a new house and a new school seemed exciting. It would be a change that would happen to all of us, to my whole family. Even further away on that day were the times I would pack up and move with friends to Seattle, would move by myself to Madison (but near my brother), would move back to Iowa for graduate school. The feelings of panic I'd have for days before and after each move – my mind turning with *what am I doing!* – still years away. As a twelve-year-old eating candy and drinking pop, talking about the future with my little brother sitting on the curb at the bank in the summertime, it all felt possible and exciting.

We sat there on the curb for a long time – maybe one hour, maybe two – long after our candy bars were only wrappers and our pops only empty cans. We would have talks as we got older just like we had that day at the bank, my brother and me. One summer when we spent a few days at my aunt and uncle's farmhouse in the country outside Perry, we wandered down the gravel road, away from the house and the noise of the family. The summer sun beat down on us, the grass in the ditches was tall and lush and green, swaying easily in the May breeze. Grasshoppers jumped from blade to blade and we kicked up brown dust as we walked, kicking big rocks to the shoulder when we found them. We talked lazily as we walked, about school, about the family. We came to a t-intersection in the road and looked at the field beyond the fence, the young corn green and supple, only six inches high.

“Is that ditch weed?” Reid asked, gesturing toward a tall green plant with narrow, spiky leaves near the fence.

“It might be,” I said, walking the bumpy farm drive over the ditch to the mouth of the field. “Let’s burn some and see.” I pulled out a cigarette lighter and grabbed a skinny leaf, holding it to the flame until the green began to curl and send up a thin wisp of smoke into the summer air. We each put our noses low to the plant and smelled.

“Yep, it’s weed.” We both smiled then, keen with our taboo discovery. I rubbed the burned leaf between my fingers and pulled it from the stalk, flicking it to the ground. Reid picked a blade of the tall grass from the edge of the field and we stood and looked around, the sky a deep, bright blue, cloudless, three tracks of the brown gravel road splaying in three directions. We started talking about Dad’s family, about the troubles our sister Haley was having in school. We stood, talking like that for an hour or more, an occasional car driving too fast past us, our hands raised in a half-wave.

And years later we were in Reid’s little blue Toyota, Reid driving us down the road from Ames to meet our parents at my sister’s apartment, careening along the same path that carried our parents through their childhood. Reid’s phone rang. I heard the voice of his wife in snippets through the earpiece. I heard Reid say “Okay,” with the nervous laugh he gives when he’s uncomfortable. We were hung-over, ghosts of too many beers the night before. He hung up the phone and ran his hand through his sandy blonde hair and said, “Well, Amy’s pregnant!” with another nervous laugh. And we sat in stunned silence for a few moments and then began talking. We talked the rest of the trip, hatching a plan to not tell Mom and Dad yet, figuring out an excuse for Amy to refuse the beer they would offer her when she drove down the next day.

And again, still later, we stood in the basement of Reid’s house in Madison, sorting through the records and the CD’s, looking for doubles, the extra copy going home with me. Amy was upstairs with the baby, nursing and trying to keep her happy. We didn’t talk as long that

time, parenting taking precedence over our conversation. But it was the same as it had always been between us.

My brother and I still do that, stand or sit and talk endlessly about everything, about nothing. We define and redefine ourselves in those talks, solve all of our problems and invent new ones, answer all of our questions and then ask them again.

We'd done the same that day on the curb at the bank. And when we were finished, when we'd done all the talking we needed to do for that time, we raised the kick stands on our bikes and rode home in the fading light and heat of the Iowa summer day, nothing solved, nothing defined, nothing settled, but comforted just the same.

## I Just Can't Sleep

(Spring 1992) I lay on the floral couch in the darkness of the living room, the single streetlight near the highway spreading white light refracted across the yellow shag carpet. Mom slowly stroked my eyebrows with her thumb. She did that when I was a little kid to help me sleep. I was in junior high, too old to need my mom to help me fall asleep.

“Maybe you’re just nervous about the track meet tomorrow. Just try not to think about it. It will be okay,” she said softly.

“I’m not worried, I just can’t sleep,” I told her.

“Shhh. It’ll be okay.”

After she left my side, I tried to fall asleep. I wasn’t thinking about the track meet, but every time I felt as though I was about to drift off, I’d think *am I asleep yet?* And I’d be awake again to start the process all over again.

I didn’t see – or couldn’t – that night that I really was worried about the track meet the next day. I had always been chubby and awkward and was not good at sports. Reid was the jock in the family. I was the one who could never catch the softball or kick the soccer ball or make a basket. I was the one the other kids – the big, dumb, mean ones – called “faggot” or “dumbshit” on the gym field when I screwed up.

And so my venture into sports – even if it was just the junior high track team, even if I was just a manager – was new and terrifying. I look back now and realize that what I felt that night was extreme anxiety, that I was probably having my first panic attack.

### Sticks and Stones III

(Fall 1994)“You should wash your mouth out, it’s dirty from all those balls you’ve been sucking,” he said as he half-heartedly tried to shove the slivers of soap in my mouth from behind me. The other kids in the locker room laughed, some nervously. We were all band geeks, after all. It was freshman year and we were changing into our marching band uniforms for a halftime show rehearsal. I didn’t say anything, just shoved Scott’s hand away, throwing the soap to the ground. The room smelled damp, a broken fluorescent bulb flickered in the corner, water dripped from a leaky showerhead in the adjacent room. I felt embarrassed and I wanted to run out of the room. I got dressed instead, pretending that Scott didn’t bother me. Funny that he, too, would become my friend the next year. Even though he was a year older than my friends and me (sophomores rarely hung out with lowly freshman at my high school), he took us for rides in his big yellow car a few times. He apologized for the soap incident once, but I played it cool, like it was no big deal. Of course, it was horrifying. I just didn’t understand. *I* didn’t bother anybody. That year I started to dress weird, so I suppose I stood out from the crowd a bit. But that didn’t mean I was a fag.

## **Are You Ready For This?**

(Spring 1996) I followed Shaine around the corner of the dugout on the edge of the dark baseball field. The halogen street lights near the basketball court on the other side of the gravel parking lot backlit the narrow building, casting broken shadows through the cold metallic bleachers. It was June and the air was warm but not so humid as it would be later in the summer that year and every year in southeastern Iowa. The field spread to the outfield fence and the train tracks just beyond in silent darkness; at night there was no “ping” of a baseball off the end of a metal bat, no shouts of “Bad call!” from the overzealous mothers in the crowd, no smell of burnt popcorn and warm nacho cheese wafting out the sagging screen windows of the concession stand. I didn’t like baseball then – I still don’t. But I loved going to those little league games. I liked sitting on the bleachers with my mom or my dad (rarely both at the same time, Dad working at all hours) and cheering for the Agency team, clapping extra loud when my brother was up to bat. I especially loved it when we scored a run or struck out the other team. I couldn’t play baseball, had no skill for it, but I loved feeling a part of something in the stands. When a bad call was made or our team was treated unfairly the parents – usually a mother or two – would shout at the umpires or even stand up and walk over to the fence. I loved those moments.

But on that night I pushed those images out of my head, the family-friendly atmosphere of the daytime ball field had no place with us. I had finally decided – I had wrestled with my guilt and decided: “I’m okay with doing it at the moment” (from my journal, Friday, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1996) – that I was going to smoke pot. Maybe I would do it once and not like it and that would be it. My friends had been smoking for a while and they always seemed to have fun. None of them had murdered anyone or had begun robbing gas stations or liquor stores to get enough cash

to buy another bag of weed. My friend Shaine had already dropped out of school, but there was a whole other set of reasons for that.

So we walked around the corner of the dugout, though the break in the chain-link fence, stepping on the smooth spot in the dirt where the next player up to bat would stand, and stepped down into the narrow building. Willy sat on the far side of the bench, half lit by the flickering glow of his lighter as he made precise adjustments to something he held between his legs. We'd all grown up together, and Willy seemed to move from a dorky little kid like the rest of us into a stoner as a teenager and then onto something a little further out, something on the edge of dangerous. That night he was the high priest of the bong, that passer of the pipe, the giver of Manna from Heaven – or the source for the bit of weed from the plastic sandwich baggie.

“Are you ready for this?” Shaine nudged me with his elbow and gave a gravelly laugh, a bit Ernie from Sesame Street™. I elbowed him back as we sat down next to Willy on the bench, trying to play it cool. But I didn't know the lingo then, couldn't have told you that a hit or a roach or a joint were anything other than violence, bugs, or cartilage. I didn't know the protocol, the rituals of smoking pot with your friends. But I was willing to learn.

So on that night - as I watched Shaine suck on the long plastic tubing jutting from the mangled cap of the Yoo-Hoo bottle, watched the cherry glow hot orange in the bowl (also positioned in the cap), smelled the sweet skunky air when Shaine blew smoke from his mouth – I knew that I was doing something *bad*, in the *coolest* sense of that word. I was doing something that I would not tell my parents about, though deep down I knew they wouldn't care beyond the required “Don't do drugs” moment. Once, I went digging for a screw or a nail in our garage and popped the lid off of a Folgers can and found a plastic bag full of weed. I was smoking pot about every weekend by then, but finding my dad's stash made me nervous, like I'd uncovered a secret

I'd known my whole life. I shoved the baggy back in the can, replaced the lid. My friends asked me later why I didn't steal some, but I couldn't explain to them why I hadn't. So smoking pot felt like a badge of honor to me. Something cool that I did that I wouldn't talk about with my friends from church.

And so Shaine held onto the length of tubing and passed the Yoo-Hoo bottle to me.

"How do I do it?" I asked, no longer so worried about fitting in with my stoner friends.

"Just suck in the smoke." Shaine gave me the tube and held his lighter to the bowl. I sucked in the smoke and it burned my throat. I coughed and Willy and Shaine both laughed. They weren't making fun; they were amused.

"How much should I do?"

"As much as you want." Willy grinned slyly in the darkness, the centers of his squinted eyes barely visible. I took one more hit and gave the bottle back to him. The warm night air was still and silent.

"I better stop there, I don't want to overdo it." I wasn't even sure what 'over doing it' with pot would mean. I'd only been drunk once when my family went camping for a few days the summer after my sophomore year of high school and I'd stayed behind. Two friends and I made mixed drinks with the cooking wines lined up on the back of the stove in the kitchen. We each made a bloody Mary with the tiniest amount of vodka from the 2/3's empty bottle I'd found in a kitchen cabinet. We finished off our drinking with one beer each. We spent the night stumbling around my house, jumping up and down. One friend said that he heard if you jumped up in the air and it felt like you stayed there, then you were drunk. In the morning I woke up in my parents' bed and thought 'I don't feel bad at all.' Then I sat up and my head spun and all of us spent the rest of the morning and on into the afternoon throwing up.

And I knew that getting high wasn't like getting drunk, but I didn't know what to expect. Shaine and Willy finished smoking as much as they wanted and we emerged from the darkness of the dugout to the bright lights from the streetlights cascading over the parking lot, the basketball and tennis court, casting shadows in the shelter house and the playground equipment.

"Most people don't get high their first time," Shaine told me. I spent the rest of the night trying to figure out if I was high or not. After he'd stashed the bong in his car, Willy started tossing small pieces of pea gravel at me. Shaine joined in with a giggle.

"What are you guys doing? Am I supposed to see something?" I laughed and they kept up with the rock throwing.

It was a good June night. And even if I didn't really get *high* that first time, some little piece of my consciousness shifted. Some new seeds of possibility were planted and I felt empowered, felt a part of something new and exciting.

## A Different Drum

(Summer 1996) We drove the gravel roads in the blackness too fast, only the halogen glow of headlights arcing across the ghostly pale of the roadbed and the trees towering beside us. We left home after dark – told Mom or Dad we were headed to Eldon or Batavia or even Ottumwa, the big, bad ass metropolis of 30,000 people that it was then. But mostly, we drove the back roads, listening to lonesome ballads. One night it had been Ozzy Osborne wailing “The Road to Nowhere” and we sang the chorus loud: “The road to nowhere leads to me!” Or another night, when the arc of the headlights swept across our friends standing at odd angles in the parking lot of the Lion’s park, high or drunk, depending on the night, it was Linda Ronstadt singing “The Beat of Different Drum.”

As we drove away, Shaine turned to me and said, “Did you see the headlights on Willy and Don standing in the parking lot when we left?”

“Yeah, right as ‘You and I dance to beat of a different drum . . .’ was on the radio. Hilarious!”

We laughed, remembering the scene: our friends, oddballs, standing stoned in the parking lot of the ball diamond, Linda Ronstadt singing us out.

We were freaks at school, even though that label didn’t stand because we were all freaks. Nobody had any money; most kids’ parents were divorced. Those that were still together were either unhappily married or always at work or devout in their faith to some church their sons and daughters didn’t care about.

We were rebels, I suppose, but we didn’t have a lot to rebel against. Those small towns weren’t lawless, but nobody gave a shit about much. Everyone was working hard just to stay

alive or just to stay high or drunk. Teenage rebellion flowed in our veins even if it wasn't strong, even if it was diluted by a lack of real pressure from anyone or any place to be anything other than who we were.

We got high on the weekends at the Lion's park or on those gravel roads in the country, in the dark. More than once we'd be parked back off the road in a farm field driveway, passing around the homemade bong, when we'd spy that halogen arc of headlights coming fast around a distant bend. "I bet that's a cop!" I'd say, paranoid. Whoever was driving the car would start it up and peel out. We'd drive the speed limit back to town, everyone nervous, sure we'd be pulled over. And we'd hit the sulfur glow of the streetlights on Main Street and there would be no cop in sight and we'd park at the old middle school and make fun of each other and laugh and forget all about cops.

Sometimes we would get high out at Chief Wapello's grave, just outside of town near the train tracks, parking the car in the small patch of groomed gravel. We'd look out the windows at the historical markers, the gravestones under a small roof and behind a chain-link fence and never even think about the Indian Chief and the General buried there. We'd pass the pipe back and forth, hot-boxing as the car filled with smoke. We'd talk about school or television, and always, music. One friend was in a band. They played gigs in basements and poorly organized shows in the Ottumwa Park or sometimes in an old gas station in Fairfield. Such energy at those shows – it was youth and rebellion and abandon and hope, all rolled into one fat joint.

We'd sit in the car and talk too long.

"Did you hear that new Dinosaur Jr. song?"

"Yeah, I like it but not as good as their other stuff."

"Yeah. I wonder if they'll tour."

“We should try to see a show.”

Then we'd realize we hadn't moved enough, that we were good and high, and then the crossing arms near the tracks would begin to flash big and red and slow and the arms would descend and the bells would ring out in the darkness, a beacon telling us to wake up, to look around, to realize we were something more than stupid kids getting high in a shitty car.

“Train's coming.”

We'd step out of the car slowly as the train came barreling down the tracks. Sometimes we would stand close enough to feel the wind that the train cars made. It was hot and smelled of diesel fuel and dirt and it would muss our hair and dry our eyes and though we didn't do it, we should have danced there in that train wind, celebrating ourselves, our young lives free from direction, free from worry. Mostly we just stood still and maybe somebody laughed and maybe somebody wandered off a little way, just out of the light, and took a piss.

## **I Left Home and Home Left Me**

(Fall 1997) I lay in the middle of the yard. The grass was cool on the back of my neck, even though the ground still held the warmth of the late summer day. The wind blew warm and gentle, rustling the blonde hairs on my arms and legs. The night sky was deep blue, almost black, the stars shining brightly overhead. I usually searched for constellations – the Big and Little Dipper, Orion’s Belt. But that night I just tried to take in the whole sky, knowing that in the morning I would leave and never see the sky from that spot again. I was eighteen, yearning for some kind of catharsis in the grass. But all that came to me were the facts: the next day I would drive away from home and a few days later, home would drive away from me. Movers would descend on our house, pack up all of our things and take them away. My family would pile into our two cars and follow, heading north to a state I’d never been, a state I’d never really heard of before, to a house I’d never seen in a town I knew nothing about.

Since I left home and home left me, I’ve seen the Cascade Range from Seattle, I’ve driven over the Northern Rockies in Montana and the Southern Rockies in Colorado, driven halfway up Mount Rainier. I’ve climbed up the steps to Red Rocks Amphitheater and seen Buffalo Bill’s grave near Lookout Mountain. I’ve seen the White Cliffs of Dover, looked out over the Atlantic Ocean from the coast of Wales, looked out over the Pacific Ocean from San Francisco. I’ve stood in the short grass prairie in South Dakota and seen the Badlands and the Black Hills at the same time. I’ve stood on the edge of Lake Michigan in Chicago, watched the edge of the Gulf of Mexico from the car window leaving New Orleans. I’ve crossed the mighty

Mississippi countless times into and out of Iowa and a few times in Louisiana. Each new sight has amazed me, made me feel small and full of wonder.

But none of those mighty vistas run in my veins like the view of my acres there on the edge of Agency. The sun sinking low behind the trees lining the farthest western boundary of our property may just be the prettiest thing I've ever seen. It's a view that I'll never see again. And yet, I can see it still, anytime in my memory. Nowhere else I've lived do I know the smell of the black earth when you cut into it with the sharp edge of a spade. Nowhere else do I know the places where the ground will be soggiest after a rainstorm, where the snow will be the deepest in the winter. I don't know the best spot to hunt night crawlers or the feel of the ground beneath a speeding sled or the wheels of a child's wagon anywhere else on Earth. Those acres were the Earth to me for all those years; nothing beyond our yard mattered. The wanderlust I feel creeping in every few years now started when I was eighteen. It can be frustrating. Just when I feel like I could settle some place, the feeling of needing to get out, needing to pack up and start fresh somewhere else hits me and then I'm off again. It is a certain freedom – not being tied to any one place anymore. Living so many different places has given me a great perspective. I have a stronger sense of who I am, what I want from life, what my country means to me.

But at the end of the day when I crawl into my bed – wherever it may be – and pull up the covers and pet the cats sleeping near me, try as I might, I still don't feel like I'm home. The wanderlust, for me, really is a search for home. I revel in it now; change is always hard for me; staying the same is harder. I do hope the wanderlust fades and stays away. My acres – and the house that still stands there – will always run in my veins, flood my memories, haunt my dreams. I don't want that to stop. But I do want to know another place as intimately. I want to sit outside and survey my surroundings and be able to know just where the rainwater will gather, just where

the snow will drift. I want to put my hands in the dirt, let it fall through my fingers, bring it to my nose and know the smell. This is my one greatest wish. It's simple, and yet pursuing it gets complicated sometimes. But I don't think it will always be.

## **Book III**

## Are You Ready For This? II

(Winter 2003) I sat in the darkened living room staring at the computer screen, sipping my third beer of the night. Mom was a few feet away, in her white bathrobe, legs curled beside her in the reclining arm chair, the blue light flicker of the television creating odd shadows on her face, the Miller Lite can glinting slightly between her wrapped fingers. I was settling slowly into a cozy drunk and checking out the latest Hollywood gossip and music reviews online, letting the bright artificial light of cyberspace lull me into a warm state of non-thought that felt just like home. The North Dakota Now weather report had called for snow all night and it had already piled up around the house. When I'd flipped on the yard light in the back earlier in the evening, I'd watched the tiny snowflakes shining in the amber light, falling at a pace somewhere between quick and slow, giving the neighbors' backyard an eerie glow.

Then the phone rang. Not startled really, but our separate spells broken, Mom looked over at me and I looked at her.

“Are you gonna get that?” she asked me.

“Nope. Are you?”

“No.”

And so we let the phone ring four times and then Mom put the television on ‘mute’ and we listened intently when the answering machine picked up.

“Hey guys, it's Mary Bean. What are you doing tonight? Are you all snuggled up inside? You should come up to the Right Place. We're having a party! It's tropical in here!” The voice sounded as if it were coming from the bottom of a garbage can, the garbled notes of the jukebox and mumbled laughter in the background. “Okay, hopefully we'll see you. Bye.”

Mary Bean never went out. She was the boss at the workshop where Mom and I both worked that winter when I'd boomeranged back home after leaving Seattle. When Mary did go out she was a hell of a lot of fun. She smoked cigarettes, pounded beers, and swore up a storm. At work, she was reserved and stern.

I looked over at Mom and she gave a half smile, her face still in odd blue shadow.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I don't know, what do you think?"

"Should we go?"

"I'm up for it. Just gotta finish this beer and put some clothes on."

"Me to."

And with that, we were off to the races. We didn't exactly run around the house, but there was no time to dawdle. What had been destined to be a night of slow and easy drunkenness at home, each of us in our own beer cocoon, had now become a chance to get out and see Mary Bean in all her glory.

It took about twenty minutes of pulling on pants and shirts and shoes, finding hats and gloves and coats, brushing teeth, and Mom putting on lipstick and running a brush through her hair, and we were ready. We went to the garage and I pushed the orange glowing button for the door opener. The door creaked and groaned and rose up slowly revealing six inches of new snow glowing in the amber streetlight. We looked at each other again and slid into my tiny foreign car.

I turned the key and looked in the rearview mirror. The snow was deep, but I knew the car was light and if I didn't slow down or brake too much, we could skim along the top of the snow all the way to the bar.

One last look at each other to confirm *Are you ready?* And I put the car in reverse, gunning it over the powdery snow and into the street.

We pulled up to the bar, wedging the front end of the car into the small snow bank that had already begun to gather in the parking spot. We opened the door and warm light, loud music, and laughter spilled out into the quiet snow. It was much the same as when Dorothy opens the door to her Kansas farmhouse landed in Oz; the bar was full and alive, everything in Technicolor.

There were shouts of “Hey!” and “There you are!” from faces in the crowd. We found Mary Bean at a table, smoking a cigarette and complaining about work with one of our coworkers.

Her face lit up when she saw us and she gave us each a hug. “Glad you could make it out! It’s a party up here!”

We sat down and ordered beers. And the night continued just like that – laughter and smiles and conversation that meant everything and nothing all at once while the snow piled up outside.

By the time we left, we had to wade through knee-deep snow to get to the car. After we’d bounced over the drifted snow and put the car in the garage, we both sighed.

“Well that was fun,” I said.

“Yes, it was.” My mom smiled.

## **Panic!**

(2004) I drove slowly down the wide Chicago street. We were somewhere in the western part of the city, near the Garfield Park Conservatory, during Fourth of July weekend. My friend Sasha and her boyfriend were visiting from Seattle and I was visiting Steve, so we'd met for lunch and then driven to Garfield Park. The conservatory was closed, so Sasha's boyfriend called one of his old friends and we'd spent the afternoon driving around Oak Park with him looking at the Frank Lloyd Wright homes.

As with most of my visits with Steve in Chicago, he and I had been out drinking until the early hours of the morning and I was hung-over, feeling like a ghost of myself. The sun was scorching that day, reflecting off of the street into my eyes behind the wheel of my little black car. I felt as though I was driving through a foreign country. There seemed to be no markings on the street. Thick black bars and graffiti covered all of the stores we passed. And the people. There were people milling around on the sidewalk and standing in the street everywhere. Most of them were African American, and they looked toward at us with questioning faces as we passed.

"It's probably good we have a black person in the car with us," my friend Sasha said, motioning towards her boyfriend.

"Yeah," I laughed nervously. I was more aware of my whiteness than I had ever been before. I felt as though there was a neon sign strapped to the top of my car that flashed "Iowan! From a Small Town!"

We drove on and I dropped off Sasha and her boyfriend. They left me with vague directions to get back to the freeway.

I found the freeway and headed towards downtown, the only way I knew to get to Steve's apartment. I hadn't realized that Fourth of July weekend that year meant that the city was holding its Great Taste of Chicago festival, which meant that most exits into downtown were closed. I began to get nervous and sweaty behind the wheel of my car as the exit I needed quickly approached. When I saw a large "ROAD CLOSED" sign, I felt like crying. I only had an Illinois state road map in my glove box, had no idea which alternate route to take to Steve's. I pulled off of the only open exit and drove a few blocks through downtown to find a parking lot to pull over.

The only solution I could think of, even after looking at the tiny map, was to get back on the freeway heading away from Chicago and take a different freeway back into the city. After a half hour, I began to doubt my plan. So I pulled off at another exit and called Steve.

"I don't know where you are and I don't really know where to tell you to go." Steve's voice sounded far away on the phone. I knew that he couldn't help me – he'd lived in the city for two years but had never had a car and only knew directions to work and to his favorite bars.

"Okay, I'll just keep driving and see how it goes," I told him. I wanted to cry. I thought that maybe I should just drive back to Madison – I knew how to get there. My mind still felt foggy from the night before and I wanted nothing more than to be back at Steve's apartment in bed next to him.

I got back on the freeway and after another hour, found myself parking my car in front of Steve's building. His roommate buzzed me in and I slid next to him in the bed in his basement room. He was sleeping, but stirred when I lay down.

"That was just awful. I didn't know where to go. I felt helpless," I started to tell him.

“Mmmm,” was his only response. I wanted him to wake up and comfort me. But I rolled over and tried to sleep.

Sometime later, Steve got up to use the bathroom. He flipped on the light in the closet and I woke up, drifting in and out of sleep. When he came back into the room, I felt instantly terrified and began shouting “Oh! Oh!” I sat up and my body shook uncontrollably. Steve stared at me wide-eyed and said,

“What’s wrong with you?”

I stopped shouting but kept shaking, looking around the room still feeling terrified. “I don’t know!” I felt as though I could cry or run away. I felt crazy.

Steve spent the next few minutes trying to comfort me and then I said, “I think I need to go to the hospital. I have no idea why that just happened.”

And so we got back into my car and began driving as I called information to get the number for the nearest hospital. The operator gave me several after I tried to explain what part of the city we were in. When I called each hospital, the person on the other end of the line was either confused or rude and never gave specific directions.

After a half hour of Steve driving us around in the dark, the streetlights casting an eerie glow on the dark concrete, he said, “I don’t think we are going to find a hospital. Maybe we should just go home.”

“But I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Maybe somebody put something in my drink last night.” I wanted Steve to be sympathetic, to be comforting. But I knew that he wasn’t sure how to be. Our relationship had been tense up to that night.

After a few more minutes of driving in silence, we found a hospital and parked the car.

The emergency room was empty and quiet. Steve went with me into an exam room as the male nurse asked me what was wrong. The nurse was attractive and kind. I felt dazed but also relieved to be in a hospital.

The nurse seemed skeptical as I told him what had happened, but he made notes on a form and then said a doctor would be in to see me shortly.

The doctor was a middle-aged Indian man and he seemed sleepy, stumbling slightly when he entered the room.

“It seems that maybe you had a panic attack. I will write you a prescription for something to help you sleep,” he said to me. He scribbled on the scrip pad, handed me the paper, and walked out.

The sun had started to rise by the time we got back to Steve’s apartment. I felt afraid to go back down to his bedroom to sleep, so I took the little pink pills the doctor prescribed and soon felt a great calm sweep over me, a little like the way I felt when I’d smoked a joint, and fell asleep on the couch in Steve’s living room.

## **But Which Way Do I Turn?**

(Winter 2004) What I remember was being together. Steve and I had started dating again, long-distance. He was living in Chicago, I was living in Madison; Seattle was a distant memory. It was Christmas Eve or the night before. We decided to take the L downtown to find a place to have a nice dinner, just the two of us. We shuffled through the snow and braced ourselves against the wind and the snowflakes swirling in the air, tiny white ghosts dancing in the sulfur glow of the streetlights. Chicago was quiet then, or at least as quiet as downtown city streets become after dark. Buildings loomed large and solid above our heads, trees adorned with twinkling golden lights held on bare branches lined the sidewalk. We had no destination in mind, no notions of what we wanted, just some place warm with hot food where we could sit down and enjoy each other.

We found a diner on a street corner casting warm, gold-colored light from large plate glass windows and ducked hurriedly inside. The restaurant was busy, full with all the people you would expect to see on a cold winter night in the downtown of a major US city. Old men and women – coupled or alone, eating quietly and slowly; men in dark blue and black business suits drinking coffee and gesticulating wildly – speaking English, but using the jargon of their high paid downtown jobs; young couples with one or two children – looking fashionable but tired as they cut up meat or wiped tiny chins. The hostess led us to a booth along the wall. The diner was split in two by a large square counter lined with swiveling stools, a dining room with a salad bar just the other side of a half-wall. The interior was paneled in wood with a worn but warm oaken hue. The air smelled of heat and cigarette smoke and hot food. We took off our coats and slid sideways across red naugahyde booths, one of us on either side of the too-close table between us.

“This place is really neat. It could be our place,” Steve said as he slid into the booth across from me. The warm light colored his dark hair golden, made his eyes brighten.

“Yeah, I like it. It has a certain charm.” I smiled. We were always looking for markers to define our relationship – our restaurant, our song, our bar – looking to the world outside ourselves to define who we were together, always believing our story despite ourselves.

The food we ordered was heavy and basic, my hot beef sandwich and potatoes covered in thick, gooey brown gravy. We ate slowly and smiled at each other often. Our waitress was rundown looking but nice and funny – I felt good about tipping her generously. We smoked cigarettes slowly after our meal, tapping our ashes carefully into the cut glass ashtray between us.

“We should try to come back here every time you visit,” Steve said. Smoke from his cigarette billowing in the warm glow of the lights in the diner.

I imagined us years later with jobs and a nice brownstone on a quiet, car-lined street. We’d take a cab downtown to this, *our* place and have a warm meal – still mediocre, really, after all those years - and talk about the day we’d had at work, the plans we had for summer vacation. Understated but solid silver rings would glint on our fingers in the warm amber light as we’d reach across the table and touch hands briefly. We would still have fights then – we’d still be in the car on the freeway in the summer heat trying to find our destination, me reading the map awkwardly unfurled in the passenger seat, trying to give Steve directions as he tried to decode them and yelled at me “But which way do I turn?!” But we’d be happy, comfortable with our closeness, confident in whom we were together.

That is what I imagined for us then, it is what I imagine for us now. The reality, as ever, is and surely will be miles and acres and feet different. We’d break up again a year later; get

back together again after I started graduate school in 2007. Not the fairy tale I'd always hoped for. But I find comfort in the image of us sitting in our diner just the same. We're talking about our wedding these days, five years on. That diner has closed, but we looked for it again, hoping to recapture our night there.

We paid our bill on that Christmas Eve or the night before, put on our heavy coats and headed back out into the dark and cold of the downtown streets, braced solidly against the wind, whichever way it chose to blow.

## A Country Divided

(Summer 2005) We sat behind the brownstone in the dark of a warm Chicago summer night. The florescent yard light cast a purple white glow on the grill and the table crowded with empty beer bottles. Steve and I shared a bench, as two of his friends chatted across the table, smoke lifting in lazy ribbons from our orange glowing cigarettes. I had taken the bus to Chicago for the weekend. As always, Steve had made plans to hang out with his friends that couldn't be changed, no matter how much I sulked and passive-aggressively protested, longing for it to be just the two of us for the evening.

"I feel like I will always have to fight for your attention," I said, looking beyond the high fence to the tall brownstones that cascaded down the block, equally lit by the eerie glow of yard lights in the summer breeze. It was a proclamation of the kind I didn't usually make; I felt hot and sweaty and queasy as always happens when I assert myself in some definite way. We had wandered into talking about "us" and where we were headed, a subject Steve avoided with determination, as if talking about the realities of our relationship were unnecessary and toxic. I felt that talking about it was necessary, but agreed that it wasn't fun and left both of us feeling deadlocked. I knew by then that the air between us was cloudy at best, polluted at worst. We had always had great sex and we both knew we liked "us" – at least the *idea* of him and I together. I loved when we were out on the town and we functioned as a unit, each one half of a happy, fun couple. Steve would introduce me to friends that had heard great things about me, people who hugged me and said how great it was to finally meet me. But we both knew, I suppose, that wasn't enough to sustain us.

“That’s probably true,” Steve replied, taking a long drag off of his cigarette, his dark hair hanging straight, his brown eyes obscured in the darkness. He said it as a proclamation, too, a statement of bold fact with certainty, no room for interpretation. It was an acknowledgement that I didn’t want from him. I wanted him to disagree, to say that no, he loved me and he would try to give me more of his attention that I so desperately wanted. I wanted him to admit again that he was selfish to a fault and that he would try to change things, would commit to spending more time trying to figure out what exactly “us” meant to him. But he didn’t do any of that. He just agreed with me and made no concessions. We were a country divided with little hope for reconciliation.

I took another drag from my cigarette and soon we were back to talking and laughing with the rest of Steve’s friends in the back yard in the dark, our bellies full with the meat we grilled, my mind full with a resolution just out of reach, somewhere above us, floating in the ink black sky, the stars blotted out by city smog.

## He Wrote Me a Letter

(Fall 2005) I pulled the envelope from my mailbox and read Steve's perfect penmanship on the cover. And then I knew. He might as well have penned, "I'm dumping you again" on the outside. I started to sweat, to feel panicked. I walked slowly up the stairs to my apartment and went to sit in the bathroom. My hands shook as I tore the paper. More perfect penmanship in pencil, written on the front and back of a single sheet of notebook paper. I read through the letter, even though I knew what it said already.

I laughed nervously because he'd written me the same letter back in college. "I feel like we've just gotten as much from each other as we can, that our relationship can't go on like this." I felt sick; I felt relieved. With me living in Madison and Steve living in Chicago, our relationship just didn't work. We led different lives, only spent an occasional weekend together, Steve never called me on the phone. When we were together, it was usually tense, neither one of us willing to admit that it just wasn't working.

Though I'd been through it all before, I still grieved. I had a ticket for a Sleater-Kinney concert that night. It was their last tour – tension within the band had led them to decide to break up. I stood in the crowd at the small, dingy theater and shook my fist violently in the air as the lights flashed and the guitars and drums wailed. I shouted louder than usual when they finished each song. I drank too many beers and walked bleary-eyed back home. I called my brother, who lived a block away with his girlfriend, to ask if I could stop by. I went to their house and between gulps of beer I told them that Steve dumped me.

"I'm sorry man, that sucks. Fuck him," my brother looked at me awkwardly as we sat in the living room, the lamplight warm against the dark night out the windows.

“The letter he wrote me was the same letter he wrote me last time. I bet some lines were even word-for-word.” I tried not to cry, tried to remember that I felt relief, too, that our relationship was over.

“I can’t believe he wrote you a letter,” Reid’s girlfriend, Amy, said.

After a few more beers, Reid and I had a heated discussion about copying CD’s for friends. It was pointless, but it helped to distract me.

Amy, now Reid’s wife, reminded me years later of that night. “Remember that argument you and Reid had about copying CD’s? I just sat and listened, but you both sounded stupid.” I laughed and reminded her that was the night Steve dumped me for the second time.

## The Stranger

(Spring 2006) I drove past the gay bar down the street from my house and saw a tall drag queen smoking a cigarette outside. Drag queens usually mean a good time, so when I got home, I called Reid and asked him if he wanted to check it out. We went to Ray's Bar and drank more beers than we planned on. The bar was a dive, just like all the other dive bars in all the other places we'd had beers before. But it was a gay dive bar. There was Latino drag queen to talk to and a creepy old guy who kept bumping Reid's barstool, trying to get his attention. There were videos of Cher playing on the televisions, a rainbow flag tacked to the wall in the corner.

The stranger's friend sat down next to me and introduced himself.

"I'm Brian. My friend here thinks you're cute." He was balding and very animated, pointing at the stranger.

"Well, he can sit down. We'll talk," I heard myself say, nervously.

The stranger sat down next to me then.

"Hi," he said. "Sorry about my friend. He's pretty drunk."

"That's okay," I replied, taking a sip of my beer. "So what do you do?"

We spent the next hour exchanging awkward, drunken conversation. He was attractive in the low light of bar, dark skinned and dark hair, maybe of Indian or Iranian descent. He was a nurse at the state mental institution, a place I'd heard of at my job with developmentally disabled adults. He seemed educated and nice. He asked for my number before the bar closed, and Reid and I walked home in the dark, my head high in the clouds. I hadn't even been looking to meet anyone – mostly because I'd never been any good at it – and I hadn't even showered or changed out of my work clothes. But I had met someone, *someone who wanted my number!*

I waited until Wednesday the following week to call him. I wasn't sure of the protocol. I'd only been on one date in the years after Steve, and though it was okay, it was mostly awkward and didn't lead anywhere. So I called the stranger and he said "Why don't you come to my place on Friday afternoon. We can watch a movie or something." And I wasn't sure if "watch a movie" was code for sex. After all, he said had something else to do on Friday night, and watching a movie in the afternoon with a stranger did seem weird. But maybe casual sex would be fun. Something new and exciting, something to move me further beyond Steve.

The stranger lived in a small town south of Madison, a town I knew about because it was an area we served at my job. But it was a town I hadn't been to. I called him from the parking lot of a Piggly Wiggly™ store, my last client drop-off for the day, and he gave me directions. It was a half hour drive and I drove past his building when I got into town, had to turn around and backtrack before I spied the sign. I was nervous and excited and hung-over – I'd had too many beers the night before when an old friend came to town for a surprise visit. It was an odd frame of mind, almost spectral. I felt present but absent at the same time, my mind cloudy and soft, feeling a ghost from the night before.

I parked my car and went into the sterile condo complex. There was a lobby area and a clean elevator that I took to his floor. The hallway carpet and the walls were a similar shade of pale green, pale pink and beige accents on the wallpaper border. There was a small table holding a fake plant in a glass vase near the elevator. The building seemed upscale and sterile. All the doors looked the same and I found the stranger's apartment, the gold numbers hanging straight and clean.

He gave me the brief tour – it was only a one-bedroom condo. Everything was spotlessly clean, the recessed lighting in the kitchen glinted off the slick granite countertop. There was a

sparkly white Christmas tree in the living room window though it was March. We sat next to each other on the sofa. The stranger had laid four DVDS on the glass coffee table, carefully fanned out as if we really would be watching a movie.

I asked a few awkward questions, alternating between looking at him and looking down at the zipper on my track jacket. He was older in the daylight. Not much older, but older than me. He said he'd been at his job for 13 years. I tried to do the math quickly in my head, but was unsuccessful. After a few more awkward questions, I felt myself coming to a standstill.

"I'm not really sure what to do here," I admitted. I thought about leaving then, my discomfort suddenly rose to the surface. The realization that I really did not know what I was doing rattled inside my skull. I felt hot and nervous. My mouth was dry, my palms clammy.

The stranger put his hand on my knee and said, "I just thought you were really cute. I'm glad you called me." He leaned in and kissed me, very lightly, very softly. His lips were fleshy and warm.

I stood up, my body telling me that perhaps I should leave. I felt awkward and alone. But I didn't move. The stranger stood and took off my jacket.

After we moved to the bedroom and lay down on his perfectly made bed, I kissed him softly and asked him what he liked, what he wanted me to do. "Whatever you do," was his only response. So I gave him a lazy blowjob. His penis was uncircumcised. Meeting the stranger in the bar had been exciting. This was not.

I lay there on top of him and waited for it to be over. *This is what it must feel like to be a bored house wife*, I thought. My pants were around my ankles, my cock limp between my legs. He was naked, his skin dark brown, his chest broad and mostly hairless. His eyes were closed as

he stroked himself. The guy was boring. I was hung-over and I didn't know how to have sex with someone I'd only met once before.

He didn't say anything when he came. When I looked down and noticed drops of cum on his thigh, tiny pearls in the sunlight streaming through the sterile window treatments, he smiled and said "Sorry." That was all I needed to hear to slide to the edge of the bed and pull up my pants. I found my shirt and clumsily buttoned it up. He didn't say much. "We should get together again, maybe go out for drinks."

"Maybe," I nodded. All I could think of was getting out of that condo, getting to my car and driving away.

I called a few friends on the way home. I'd told them about going to the stranger's condo *just in case*. I told them it was weird. I tried to push the experience out of my mind, deciding almost instantly that if I had a *delete* button, I would press it then, erase the whole experience. I don't know if it was a coincidence or a cause, but a few days after that, the panic attacks and depression started.

## Maybe I've Been Depressed My Whole Life

(Spring 2006) “There’s really nothing, uh, medically wrong. All the tests came back fine. It is probably, uh, just anxiety,” the doctor said softly as we stood in the corner of the warmly lit lobby. I leaned against the wall. She looked at me kindly through her rimless glasses and paused. “So, you are clear to go home.” She made a slight move away then as if she would leave me standing there.

“Can you at least give me something? So I can sleep?” My heart was still pounding, though softer than an hour before. My knees still felt weak, my breath was still shallow. My brain felt foggy, as if each thought or word were wrapped in gauze.

“Well, I can probably write you a prescription for clonazepam. The pharmacy here is closed – is Walgreens™ okay?”

“Sure – the one on East Wash.”

“Okay then.” She looked at me one more time and turned and walked quickly away. I walked over to where my brother sat.

“I guess it was just a panic attack,” I told him. I didn’t know how to feel. I felt foolish, I felt sick. I felt crazy. “I’ll have a prescription waiting at Walgreens™ on East Wash.”

“Okay.” Reid stood. I could tell that he wasn’t sure what to say. He looked at me briefly, a bit of fear and awkwardness in his pale blue eyes. We walked back to the car in the rainy March darkness and I picked up my prescription in the harsh fluorescent light at the drug store. I swallowed two of the tiny pink pills after Reid dropped me off at my apartment and fell into a fuzzy stupor, easily drifting off to sleep.

\*

I sat slumped in a dingy office chair and closed my eyes. Maybe shutting out the world, only for a second, would make it stop. I opened my eyes again and everything was still the same. I was at work, just outside of Madison, job coaching two adults with developmental disabilities. The fluorescent lights buzzed quietly in the windowless, cinderblock room. Bill and Cheryl stood at the large plastic sink in the corner, emptying bottles of expired soda down the drain. The “beep beep” of backing forklifts floated in the doorway from the giant warehouse, pallets filled with twelve packs of soda of all varieties stacked from floor to ceiling. The boom box with broken buttons spouted classic rock songs from atop the grimy plastic shelving in the other corner. Bill and Cheryl were fairly independent, so they needed little help with their task. Usually I brought a good book to read, or paperwork to catch up on. But at that moment, nothing seemed to be more important than trying to make it all stop.

I didn't ever really think seriously of suicide. Sure, I contemplated how I could do it, but I never really made a plan. What I did think about, though, for the first time in my life, was what exactly it meant to exist, to be conscious, and what non-existence or unconsciousness would really be like. There were days that ceasing to exist would have been preferable to life. I'd read books about depression; I read a lot more after depression hit me. It's been described in so many ways. They are all true. The description I created was a radio station that just wouldn't fully tune-in. My days were filled with static, occasionally broken by moments when some old song broke through. But mostly there was static. I'd try to tune in the station sometimes, fiddle the knob on the radio with my thumb. But even that was exhausting. I felt numb. No, I didn't feel anything. That was the scariest part for me – the not feeling *anything*.

And yet I sat there on the discarded office chair, listened to the real radio blaring, watched the two people in the corner emptying soda in the sink with a plastic “glub glub” – and I felt everything all at once. My whole body ached, my mind raced with every bad thing I could think of, every sad thing I could think of, every doomsday scenario that would become my life. It was like being sucked down the drain of an old bathtub, like I was following all the old soda down the pipe. I was afraid of the drain in the upstairs bathtub at my great aunt’s house when we were little. If the stopper wasn’t in, I’d cry, afraid that I’d fall down the gaping hole, that I’d be sucked down with the water after the bath was over. At that same house I was afraid to go down the basement stairs because there was an old Halloween costume that I could see hanging from a coat rack. It was a witch costume with a pointy black hat and a green mask with a hooked nose, partly obscured. I knew it wasn’t real, but I’d turn on the light at the top of the stairs and look down and terrify myself every time.

And depression was like that, waiting to get me at the bottom of the stairs. Except that in those days – that spring in 2006 – I’d fallen down the stairs and the witch costume had fallen on me and I couldn’t pull it off, couldn’t toss it to the side and run. Much of time I couldn’t see myself feeling any better ever again. That would happen mostly when I’d have a panic attack. At any time of the day or of the night I’d find my heart racing, my breath shallow. Sunlight became searing, grey clouds grew heavy. The world around me was sped up and in slow motion, all at once. Everything I looked at – the furniture in the room, the trees out the window, the other cars on the road – seemed to be in extra sharp focus. My mind would begin to spin, a tornado of negative thoughts. I’d feel terrified by everything and nothing all at once. If I was at work, I’d think *I have to go home RIGHT NOW! I’ll just call in to the office and tell them I’m sick*. Some kernel of self-preservation would kick in then and I never left work early, never let on to my

clients or coworkers that the panic had set in. Some people having panic attacks will cry or throw up. But I was a good Iowa boy and I was NOT crazy. I'd ride it out. Try a distraction like thumbing through a magazine or walking around the room. After I started going to Dr. Clark once or twice a month, and after I started reading books with titles like *Breaking Free From Anxiety and Depression*, I'd remember to take deep breaths, to think 'STOP!' over and over again, and then, slowly, each time, I'd feel better. My breathing would become measured again, my heart would slow, the doom and gloom thoughts in my head would stop their spin. And for a time, I'd feel a kind of peace wash over me, even if it was only a lull before another panic would come on.

My friend Shaine said to me during that year, "I think you've been depressed your whole life."

When depression hit me full force, when anxiety finally held me hostage, I felt as if I had no sense of myself. I started referring to my "troubles" as my "crisis of consciousness" when talking with friends. And that's exactly what it was – suddenly, my brain seemed to be rebelling, absconding with any sense of identity I'd spent my life constructing. My mind felt dull, clouded. Or it felt on overdrive, full of terror and doom. I'd sometimes imagine a rush of black, oily liquid - a juice made of bad thoughts and feelings - flushing over parts of my brain, pulled from somewhere deep within the grey matter. For the first time in my life, the Iowa-born-and-bred adage of "just figure it out" or some other clichéd phrase about self-preservation failed me. I needed help. I had been the strong one since high school, listening endlessly to my friends' problems, giving advice when asked. I'd made it through college without ending up in rehab or jail. I'd moved out to Seattle and back and managed to always have a fulltime job, always have a bank account, always have a car to drive and a place to live. I had several years of experience

helping social service clients deal with mental health crises. And yet, there I was, 26 years old and I felt like I was falling apart.

I made an appointment to meet with a therapist. Dr. Clark introduced herself over the phone and I told her what was happening to me while I sat in my car in a parking lot, chilly spring sunshine streaming in the windows. I was on lunch break from a training session for work where I'd found it hard to sit still, to focus on what each presenter was telling us. It was a small session – only a handful of us from agencies across the city sat at rectangular tables arranged in a horseshoe pattern. I introduced myself when it was my turn and tried to ask relevant questions, everything I said feeling as though it came out of somebody else's mouth.

“Well, it sounds like we've got some work to do then,” Dr. Clark said. Her voice sounded kind. I never thought that *I* would need therapy. When I realized that I did, I called my insurance company for a referral. I found it funny that when I asked the woman at the insurance company if she could refer me to a therapist with a specialty in gay and lesbian issues, the only name she could think of was Dr. Clark – Clark is my grandmother's maiden name – the same grandmother who sounded worried on the phone each time I talked to her that spring. And I couldn't ease her fears because I didn't know what was happening to me either.

And so I sat down on the couch across from Dr. Clark and I felt defeated and sad and terrified all at once. The room was warm and softly lit, a corner office with large windows looking over the highway and business sprawl of the west side of the city. There were plants in the corners and koosh balls on the table; I absently fingered one. Dr. Clark asked me for my family history, medical history, all the other important details to fill her in on my life. And though it was only my first visit, I felt like a dam had been broken inside me. All the toxic water that had been held back began to rush out and this stranger that sat across from me taking notes

and nodding her head was being paid to do just that – to listen to me. Nothing was expected of me other than to talk and my only expectation from her was that she would listen. I knew the game, but I never thought I'd be playing it. And I never thought that winning would be so important.

## April Rain

(Spring 2006) We converged on Jefferson one week after he was born. Mom called the day he was born and I wrote down his length and weight and time of birth on a scrap of paper that I still keep, in my red leatherette address book: *Eli Patrick, 20" 6lbs 5oz, 10 p.m. April 16, 2006*. There had been one phone call from Haley to tell me that she was pregnant, one visit when her belly was swollen and huge. And then he was there, a whole new person in the family. The first grandchild for my parents, the first nephew for my brother and me. It was hard to grasp that a whole new person was alive, a whole new person who shared some of my blood. He had a different last name, but he belonged to us. A whole new ball of our genes, wrapped in a soft blue blanket.

It was rainy and cool during that week in Iowa in April. We spent our time at my Aunt Lynda's house. We hadn't had a family home in Iowa for almost ten years then. It had been almost that long since we had all been together at once, Mom and Dad, Haley, Reid and me. We felt a little like strangers, carrying out our forgotten family roles in someone else's house. My aunt worked during the day and my cousins were in school. So we were left to our own devices in the town that had seen my parents raised. The town that would now raise that new little boy.

I held him gently on the couch in the daytime darkness. He was so small on my lap. The spring rain fell in big drops outside, turned the ground muddy and the grass slick green. All I could think about was what would happen if I dropped him. He was so defenseless – he couldn't sit, stand, talk, or even feed himself. He was completely helpless in my arms. Depression was poisoning my brain. Prozac was screwing up my synapses, the oily sludge still rushing over my

grey matter, searing doomed thoughts into my soul. I felt bad all over and here was this human, unspoiled by anything other than being conscious, existing in the world brand new.

I slept until it hurt each morning. I didn't want to face the day, even with my family all around. Consciousness was too exhausting. No one asked me how I was feeling, if the pills were helping, even though that is all I really wanted. But I didn't talk about it, just took my pill every day. I'd told them about starting therapy, about the panic attacks. But they never knew how to respond. I felt depression in every fiber of my body and I acted accordingly. I was quiet. I lay around. A lot. I did family things – ran errands, drank beer and told stories - but took no joy. And it rained. That whole week it rained.

I stood in the yard with my dad and smoked cigarettes. Camel Lights™ wouldn't cure depression, but it felt good to smoke.

“I think maybe if I get a new job it would help.” I leaned against the garage, keeping my body out of the rain under the overhang of the roof, grey skies keeping us close.

“Yep, that might help,” Dad said standing on the wet lawn in his flip flops and shorts.

Neither of us said the word “depression,” but that was what we were talking about. I wanted to be a part of them, be excited and happy to be with my whole family, welcoming in our newest member. But I just couldn't clear the fog long enough to find joy. I went through the motions, but nothing felt real. It felt like a dream, each moment new, yet not fresh or exciting.

My brother drove us home after the week was over. I closed my eyes and lay my head against the door of the car and hoped that consciousness would somehow be different when I opened them again. I was disappointed when I opened my eyes and the sun felt too bright and piercing, the fields too green whizzing by the windows as we careened back to Madison on Highway 151, somewhere just across the Wisconsin border. When I finally got home, back to my

apartment, I stood in the shower and let the hot water crawl down my spine and I cried. I cried because I missed my family. I had been with them for a whole week, but I missed what we had been, before. I missed all of us living under the same roof. I missed meals together, even if we hadn't eaten dinner together at the table for years. I missed existing in the same space as my parents and my sister and my brother. *It's all different now. We live in different places, do different things. We talk on the phone, but not everyday. There is a new last name on my sister and her baby, a name that is not ours, it's a strangers'.* Nothing would ever be the same again. The changes to our lives suddenly felt too real, too permanent. The hot water splashed my face and I was unsure, for the first time, if I was going to make it.

## The Replacements

(Summer 2006) I felt someone brush my hand. I pulled away, gave a little shiver. I looked over at Joe and he smiled. A gesture that he assumed would be a tender moment between us in the crowded bar in Madison, the band rocking and rolling on stage. I felt bad that his touch had startled me, surprised me, made me want to run out the door. He was such a nice guy after all. We'd been on a few dates by then; he made me dinner at his house, I did the same for him at my apartment. We sat outside at a restaurant and talked about our lives over noodles and beer in the summer night air. He was a filmmaker; I went with him to a premier for a short film he'd made with friends as part of a competition. I'd taken him to meet my brother and his girlfriend, sitting in the warm light of their tiny living room listening to music and talking. We even kissed awkwardly but sweetly when we parted each time. I imagined him taking care of me, treating me like a prince.

But I just didn't feel it. I didn't feel physically connected to him; I was afraid that made me a bad person. When he dropped me off one night, he said, "I think I'm falling in love with you . . ." and I heard car brakes squealing in my head. I returned his calls less frequently after that, eventually sent him an email to say that I just didn't feel the same way. That he was a great guy, that it was me, all *me*. And it was. I wished I could give him more. He'd been there when I was feeling crazy. Panicked, everything packed in cotton. He could have made me feel safe, but I didn't let him. I pulled away. Terrified that I'd hurt someone who could be so *good* to me. I tried to imagine my life with Joe, tried to imagine the attention he would lavish on me. We'd move in together, make a home. We'd take turns fixing dinner, doing the dishes. He would support me; I would support him.

Only I couldn't really imagine that. It didn't fit the story I'd written for myself. The main characters in that story were Steve and I. *Steve*. Not Joe. It didn't make sense. Steve had left me for the second time. I was getting over him. Starting over. Seeing someone else for the first time. Trying to write Joe into the story, starting a new chapter, turning the page to a new narrative. Problem was, it didn't feel right. Steve was still on my mind, still a part of my life. I had decided years before that even if Steve and I weren't together, I just couldn't stop talking to him for good. I loved him, I always would. It would be easier if I could just forget about him, lose his phone number, stop wondering what he was doing. But there was the story – *our* story, together. And I couldn't ignore it.

And so I pushed Joe away, choosing fiction over fact.

\*

“Are you gay?”

That question still scares me sometimes, always takes me off guard.

I was having drinks with a few friends in a mostly empty bar near closing time in Ames, having just started graduate school in the fall of 2007. A tall black guy had rushed in the door and over to our table. He knew one of my friends and hugged him almost violently. He sat down and after a few minutes he turned to me.

I answered his question, telling him I was gay and he said, “Come here,” and grabbed my hand. We walked around a corner near the bathrooms. He told me to kiss him and I did. It was sloppy and drunken and messy and sexy. We walked home together in the cold with our hands stuffed in our coat pockets after I assured my friends that I'd be fine. I'd figured out that his

apartment was only a block from my own. I knew that I could run away if I needed to. He asked me questions all the way home about being a graduate student, about already being set in my ways. He repeated himself often, but I didn't mind. Even though we'd only just met, he *liked* me!

His bedroom was messy. In the darkness I asked him what his real name was and he flipped open his wallet and showed me his student ID. Through my bleary-eyed drunkenness, the block letters read "Zamboni." I nodded my head, pretending to understand and he put his wallet away. He sat on the bed and said, "Show me your moves." I told him I didn't have any moves, but we ended up lying next to each other on his bed.

I liked the music he played, liked the way he kissed me. He was a stranger; I hadn't ever seen him before that night. But I didn't feel afraid – just aware. *I'm only a block from home, I can run if it gets weird*, I told myself over and over. But it felt good, lying there with him. It felt natural, comfortable like I had been there before. I *had* been there before, only not with him.

We kissed and rolled around on the bed, groping each other in the dark. The streetlight outside cast slanted rays of white light through the mini-blinds. He sucked on my cock, asked if he could fuck me. I said no as politely as I could.

After I told him that I wouldn't be able to fall sleep in a stranger's bed, we walked the two blocks in the cold to my apartment. I still couldn't fall asleep – it was my own bed, but there was a stranger in it. My mind raced as I tried to imagine how this night would fit into my story: *is this the beginning of a relationship? Will we be boyfriends now? Is he the next one, the new one?* I calmed myself: *just relax and enjoy the moment, stop trying to make it more than it is.* I didn't have casual sex; I'd been out for almost ten years by the time I lay in that stranger's bed, but I had only had sex with Steve and the stranger - and I didn't count the stranger.

When we awoke the next day just before noon, the sunlight peeking in the bedroom around the dark curtains, I walked him to the door in my underwear.

He kissed me and said, "It was nice meeting you."

"Yes it was. I'd walk you out, but I don't have any pants on," I told him with a dizzy laugh. I thought for a moment that I should offer him my phone number, but I didn't. He went out the door and then was gone. I wasn't sure how to feel.

I ran into him at different bars during the next few months; we spent a few more nights together. He wanted to date me, said we should be boyfriends. Professed his love for me early, told me he was polyamorous. I didn't take him too seriously. He was black, and I'll admit the idea of dating someone of a different race was tempting. But always, in the morning, I would lie next to him and, as ever, try to fit him in my story. He was younger, seemed to have a lot of drama in his life. Drama I didn't need; I was ready to settle down in comfort. With Steve.

And so I pushed him away, stopped calling him. I chose fiction over fact again.

## Yoga Saved My Life

(Fall 2006) Each class was different. The class at the community center met in a large room with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the tall trees and the lake in the park. Half of the floor was carpeted, the other half cool laminate. The teacher was tall and lanky. He brought jars of honey gathered from his bees to class. I bought one from him; it lasted a few years, until the sticky, golden liquid was cloudy and thick in the bottom of the Mason jar. He showed us positions that the other teachers didn't, talked about the benefits of yoga for athletics, told us that we could assume a position even when standing at the kitchen sink to wash dishes: "Push your hips forward into the counter. Keep your feet strong and shoulder-width apart." The people in that class were everyone: young, old, men, women. It was usually dark and cold those nights. I'd park my car and walk slowly into the building, the weight room on the right of the entry lit with warm light, the cavernous lobby echoing softly with conversations of the people at the front desk and the people waiting in the hall for class to begin.

When the door would open, I would enter the room and lay my bag near the wall, take off my coat, my shoes, my socks, my glasses, laying them in a neat pile. I'd find a place – sometimes on the carpet, sometimes on the laminate - and unroll my mat slowly, sure to smooth out the wrinkles before I lay down. I didn't talk to anyone; I wasn't there to make friends or small talk. I was there to get better. Lying on my back, I'd stare at the high ceiling, watch the fan blades circle slowly at the end of long poles. Depression felt like a blob in the left side of my brain. It was always the left side; it felt as if something – a tumor, a growth, a big bag of that oily black sludge – sat in my head, rearranged my thoughts into gloomy meanderings. Sometimes, for just a moment, the blob would lift or shift, and I'd feel the rush of feelings return to me.

One of the other teachers told us that it wasn't uncommon for people to cry sometimes during a pose; that positioning our bodies in such a way may let emotions rush out all at once. That teacher, Kyro, asked us to fill out a form at our first meeting. The form had a line for previous or current health concerns, and a line to explain why we were there. I wrote "depression" slowly, marking in ink what I thought was happening to me. That class was in the basement of the health center, the building clean and sterile. I felt strange each week, walking through the revolving glass door in my pajama pants, the bag I made from an old towel Gram gave me when I left for college holding the blue mat over my shoulder, walking past the security guards chatting idly at the front desk. Sometimes I said a soft "Hello," but usually I just walked past, down the stairs by the waiting area and the cascading waterfall on the wall.

There was another front desk in the classroom area, and a sterile bathroom with a changing station and a shower. Sometimes, if I hadn't had time to change from work, I changed in the bathroom, replacing my jeans and t-shirt with a soft pair of cotton pants and the faded blue t-shirt with the four-point buck on the front that I'd worn in gym class in junior high and high school. The classroom was carpeted and there were no windows. Kyro kept the lights low and played soothing music from a boom box near his mat. Sometimes he'd switch the song in mid pose, with no explanation. Usually I was the only man in the room, some sessions there would be one or two other men. Some sessions there would only be a few students, other sessions the room would be full and we'd have to arrange our mats carefully so we all had enough space for our poses.

Kyro was small and lithe. Sometimes he would walk around as we did our poses, offering advice on foot or arm placement, sometimes guiding our parts with his hands. When I missed class a few weeks in a row, feeling too awful to attend, Kyro left a voicemail for me: "Lonnie,

this is Kyro, your yoga teacher. I was just wondering why you've missed class and if there is anything I can do." His voice was measured and kind and warm. I returned to class the next week and told him that I had just been feeling bad and he nodded slowly, his blue-grey eyes understanding and kind.

Another class was in the same health clinic as Kyro's class, but held in the room next door. The floor was warm laminate, no windows, and the teacher kept the room dark, one lamp lowly lighting a corner of the room. She played music, too, and spoke in a calm, nice tone. She seemed a little less spectral than Kyro, talking sometimes before class about her life. I was usually the only man in that class, too. Amy came with me each week for one session; we'd talk about poses and the teacher after each class.

What yoga did for me in those days (and does to a lesser extent now) was to give me an escape. Those hours spent in rooms with strangers who expected nothing from me gave me comfort. I felt connected to my body in a way that I hadn't before. I couldn't let it all go – in those poses, lying on the floor or standing with my arms extended, my mind still reeled. The awful thoughts still ran; I still felt bad all over. But I was able to let go, to not let the thoughts overwhelm me. It felt okay to let thoughts come in, felt okay to recognize them and to send them on their way out into the room, on into the darkness outside. One teacher told us – or I read it somewhere – that even thinking about yoga is an action that can bring relief. And that's what it did (and does) for me – brought relief from my life, if only for one hour, three times per week. I drove through the nighttime traffic, headlights glaring and glinting off the road in the darkness, and walked into a quiet and warm room filled with strangers and everything else fell away with each step. I'd leave those rooms feeling tired and hungry, and yet refreshed, freed of the burden of depression, escaped from the madness of anxiety. I didn't feel quite whole again, but close

enough. Each night I felt my bones positioning, felt my muscles tense and relax, letting a little bit of love in. It sounds mystical and corny and impossible but, for me, it was all true. In the car on the way home to my life, the headlights shone a little less harshly, less like annoying intruders and more like signs of lives lived, people going places. And there was joy in that.

**Book IV**

## Sticks and Stones V

(Fall 2007)“This doesn’t seem like quite your scene to me,” the bartender in Ames said, a surly mustache that was either hip or disgusting in the flickering candlelight.

“I just like to people watch!” I smiled as the answer came quickly from my lips. He shrugged and moved down the bar. I picked up my sweaty glass of beer and was instantly incredulous. *What did he just say to me? Who does he think he is! He doesn’t know me! He knows my name and he knows my drink. What would make him say that to me?* I’d picked out the perfect outfit. My AC/DC t-shirt. Cool enough to be hipster in that bar, cool enough to be rock and roll in the bar down the street. And my jeans. They made my butt look good and they were just gay enough to find the interested guys in the room and just metrosexual enough to keep the bullies at bay. Twenty-eight years old and I was still worried about the bullies. I told myself that because I was home again, back to Iowa where I was born, I wouldn’t be afraid of the bullies (the bigots and the backwaters). I was an Iowa fag, come home to roost. I could strut around all I wanted, “cause fella, I was born right down the street!”

## A Good Iowa Girl

(Fall 2007) The voice on the message was my sister. She was crying, was breathing hard, was panicked. “It’s your sister! Jeff and his girlfriend beat me up! I’m in the emergency room! Call the Jefferson hospital!” And then she bleated out the phone number, repeated it again.

My heart began to race as I paced the floor of the old campus building. My mind reeled, reaching for something to do. *What should I do!* I poked buttons on my cell phone. No answer from my sister. I dialed the phone number for the hospital, my hands shaking.

“I’m trying to find Haley Johnson,” I said into the phone, my voice shaking too. The woman on the other end seemed calm, too calm. I wanted to yell at her, I wanted to tell her my sister was in trouble, wanted to tell her that I needed to find out what was happening that very minute. “There is no patient listed by that name here,” she said flatly.

“Are you sure? She called me from the emergency room.”

“There is no patient listed by that name here,” she repeated, irritation creeping in.

“Okay, thanks.” I paced the floor a bit more. *Should I go there, leave right now? I’ve got that baseball bat Reid gave me at home in the living room closet.* I poked Haley’s name on my phone again and this time she answered.

“What happened? Are you okay? Do you need me to get there? I can be there in thirty minutes.”

“I’m okay,” her voice was calmer now, almost jovial. “Jeff’s girlfriend jumped me when I went to pick up Eli. Jeff wouldn’t let me in the door at first and then when he finally did, I went in and she jumped me.”

“What?” Violence didn’t happen in my family. I’d never thrown a punch. Sure, Haley and Reid and I had wrestled around in anger as kids. But never violence: never punching or kicking or slapping or anything that would *hurt*.

“She hit me with a crockpot. Got a big chunk of my hair too. My eye is all bulged out now!” She gave a nervous half-laugh.

“Where’s Eli? Do I need to come get him?” The scene began to play out in my mind then. A woman hitting my sister. A woman I’d never seen at a house I didn’t know in the town where my parents grew up.

“No, I don’t think DHS would let you take him. He’s with Jeff’s parents. Otherwise they would have taken him to foster care.”

“Do I need to come there?” I asked her again, anger building inside me.

“No, I’ll be okay.” After a few more reassurances, I hung up the phone. I went back into my first night class in graduate school and sat down, trying to shake off the worry and anger and panic that had gathered in my bones.

I didn’t understand my sister’s life. She was a good Iowa girl, raised in a stable and loving family. No violence, no poverty, no police. Ever. My brother and I had both graduated from college; I was trying to get an advanced degree. Haley hadn’t finished high school, got married when she was eighteen, had a child at twenty-three, and was divorced at twenty-four. Her life as an adult was dangerous. Her friends, her ex-husband – they all had constant run-ins with the police. I didn’t understand the choices she made. I wanted her to have a good life; the whole family did. We talked about her all the time, wondering aloud how she came to lead that kind of life, wondering what we’d done wrong, wondering what we could do now.

But my sister, like the rest of us, was stubborn. She knew the score, had a realistic idea of what her life was like. I'd understood and accepted her reasoning when she told me that she was going to quit school at sixteen. And I wasn't ever going to give up on her, no matter how much she put me through. I'm a good Iowa boy, who loves his family no matter what.

## Just Like Virginia

(Summer 2008) My sister called just as I was pulling into the driveway near the townhouse. She was crying, telling me that she just needed *help*. Some sort of problem with her ex husband, the police had come, she violated the no-contact order, she might have to go to jail, “Could you take Eli for a few days?” All of this as I was walking to get into the car with Gram and Gramps, having signaled to them with my hands that I was ready to go, my ear glued to my cell phone.

I mostly nodded and said “of course” and “mmhmm” and “sure” into the phone as the car moved down the road. Gram listened, trying to figure out whom I was talking to. I knew that if I hung up and didn’t tell them who it was, she might ask me, and she might not. But she’d want to know – she always wants to know. Gram was notorious for her questions, mostly to strangers or people she had just met. Girlfriends, boyfriends, old friends – it didn’t matter.

“And what do you do? Who are your parents? How long have you had this job? Do you like it here? Where are you from? How’d you end up here? What are you being seen for today?”

Sometimes we would cringe, trying to make eye contact with the victim of this inquisition to signal how sorry we were that Gram was prying that way.

My grandfather drove, I was in the backseat. He was short and broad shouldered, his hair grey and thin. It was late July in Iowa and the sun was bright – almost harsh. We were headed to the annual alumni banquet for Gram’s high school. My back was sweating against the plush car upholstery and I looked between the front seats at the knob on the air conditioning – it sat pointed squarely at “Low.”

I wanted to tell them that I was sweating, that I felt as though I was going to pass out, right there in the back seat of the car, suffocating from the heat and the humidity. But I said nothing and looked out the window, noticing that the corn wasn't as tall that year as it usually was in July. I didn't grow up on the farm, don't know how tall July corn should be. It is a scene that has been repeated over and over again for almost thirty years now. There have been different cars (two Chevrolets - "Chivies" my grandparents would call them – and three Oldsmobiles) and different roads (two lanes built to four lanes, bypasses added) but always the same story. I was almost thirty that day in July, but I could have been five and I could have been fifteen. A grandchild in the backseat, age indifferent.

There's more crying on the phone and I do my best to calm it.

"I just need some time to get my life together. I need to go get on meds again," Haley said between snuffles.

"That sounds like a good idea."

"And I need to get a job again and see about getting my GED. It's just been so hard to do with only me and Eli. I don't know what I'm gonna do when the new baby comes."

"Have you talked to Mom and Dad?" I asked her, rubbing the hole in the leg of my shorts.

"Not yet. I hate to ask them, but I wonder if they would take Eli for a few weeks, so I could have a break."

"I'm sure they would help. I can come and get him for a few days first, if you want."

"That would be great. Thanks so much, Lonnie." She had stopped crying by then, sounded calmer.

"It'll work out," I tried to reassure her, though I was unsure myself.

We said our goodbyes and I hung up the phone. After a few minutes of silence, Gram and Gramps began to offer their opinions – without too much judgment, without too much this-is-what-you-should-do.

“Why doesn’t she go back to school? Why is she still in Jefferson? You aren’t doing her any favors, you know.”

After all, we were a family of only sometimes giving advice, and never one to give directives. Not a family to interfere.

“But you do what you want, we’re not really involved.”

We believed strongly in “to each his own” and would never be so bold as to tell you what we really thought. That was saved for later, when the front door was locked and the lights were dim. We were staunch in our secularity – in politics, in religion. We talked about the issues, but personal beliefs were just that – personal and none of our business. We didn’t really want to know whom you voted for, how much money you made last year, or what you did in the bedroom last night. We were nice and fun and genuine, and yet guarded, private.

“Just like Virginia,” my grandmother turned her head over her left shoulder as she talked. The lines in her face seemed to have deepened suddenly, her permed hair a dampened shade of silver. I didn’t usually notice her age - she was still a few inches taller than my grandfather, still wore modern fashions, was still the same woman she had always been. “Never could find a decent job or a nice man.”

“After awhile, I guess we just gave up.” Gram is saying as she turns back to the road. *That is the difference between then and now* I think to myself. It was a different time, you made due with what you had and who you were, no complaints. (Gramps told the story of his first bicycle one afternoon earlier in the spring that year as we spooned vanilla ice cream from white

china bowls around the kitchen table. It cost four dollars: “I bought it from Zip Koone. I only had three dollars and a quarter when I went, but he wanted four dollars. So I had to go and make seventy-five cents before I could get it. It wasn’t a nice bike. There was no fenders so the mud hit you in the face and your pant leg would always get caught in the chain. And the wheels was warped so you had to get your speed before the tires rubbed. The tires were shot, too. I had to wrap black tape around the holes and air them up. I’d have to do the same thing after an hour.”)

*I won't give up on my sister. I can't.*

Gramps drove too fast and the sun shone brighter, the blue sky intense in late summer color. I silently agreed with Gram. My sister *was* like Virginia. She was disorganized and irresponsible, and sometimes unable to think about the future. From the backseat I told them this:

“Well, I think she has depression. Whether we admit it or not, there is a history of that in this family.”

There was no secret, really. Just no knowledge. I saw it. I’d had depression. I’d worked around the mental health system for a few years, enough to see it, enough to know. Enough to connect the dots. My great grandmother (who I never knew). My grandmother. My mother. Myself. My sister. Great Aunt Virginia. I’m sure there were others I haven’t known, have never met who have been gone for years.

Gram gave a barely noticeable nod, reluctantly agreeing as she looked out the window. The car sped towards a run-down farmstead close to the road. There was a large barn and several out buildings. The walls leaned into each other precariously as if they would buckle at any moment. The paint had sloughed off every wooden surface, exposing great tracts of dull grey between patches of faded blue. The ground in the corral was muddy and lumpy, the fences bent, pieces of machinery rusting in patches of tall grass, their former functions no longer clear.

“This used to be such a nice farmstead. I remember when it was all new, so nicely painted. That family really kept it up. Now it’s all crapped up,” Gram said, her hand to her chin.

*I won't give up on my sister. I can't.*

## The Big C

(Spring 2008) “Maybe you should start drinking whiskey,” I patted her arm softly only half joking.

“Maybe. You suppose that would help?”

“I think it would – take the edge off a bit. They used to give whiskey for whatever ailed you. I think they even gave drops of whiskey to babies to make them sleep when they were restless.”

She stared out the window. The bedroom was grey with early evening light, but the sun shone bright outside. We could hear the loud laughter of children playing somewhere below.

“Or maybe you could start smoking pot. Lots of cancer patients do it.” I offer, smiling.

“I don’t know why they don’t just make it legal. The government always wants more money.”

“And they’d make a killing on that. One of the professors I worked with last semester wrote an essay about smoking pot with her mom who” - *was dying* I almost said – “had cancer. She was an old lady, too.”

She couldn’t – or wouldn’t – tolerate the pills. Everything made her sick. She told me that Xanax was nice, took the edge off her thoughts. But then she got sick – *I felt just awful* – and she stopped taking those too.

“I’ve shed a lot of tears already, but that doesn’t help me much,” she said.

She needed a distraction. I offered to bring down a load of books from school. She didn’t feel like reading.

On the drive home after that visit, I tried to cry in the car. Tears rolled, but on the edge of a sob I stopped. I wasn't ready to lose her just yet.

And I stayed away. Gram had always been rife with questions and full of energy, and now she was an old woman, broken down first by her body and then by her mind. I thought I would go to her, would comfort her, would *be there*. I thought I knew just what to say, just how to act. But I felt myself staying away. "Grad school is just so busy right now, I'll see if I can make time for a visit soon." And I would hang up the phone and feel bad. I just couldn't be there, couldn't see her feeling so awful.

\*

"People expect you to find out that it's gone and that will be it. The cancer goes away but my feelings don't; that's not how I work," Gram told me as I sat beside her on the couch a few months after the radiation treatments ended. We didn't talk about the cancer. The doctor had told her it was gone. She looked older to me; her hair was straight and not held in the perm she'd worn for as long as I could remember, the lines on her face were deeper, her body was thinner, more fragile.

"I have a book of poems up in my room that I've had since I was a little girl. I'm sure you've looked at it," Gram told me, staring absently at the television. We were watching a football game, or really, we just looked at the screen blankly as we talked.

"I don't think so. I used to look at all the Zane Grey novels, but I don't remember any books of poems."

“You haven’t seen it? I had it rebound up at school when they used to do that every once in awhile.” She got up slowly of the couch and walked to the stairs.

“You don’t have to go get it, Gram,” I told her, but she was already gripping the handrail and then disappeared around the corner up the stairs.

She came back carrying a book with an institutional looking brown cover. The spine read “Poetry” in simple white block letters. Gram sat down next to me on the couch again and opened the book. She had marked her favorite poem with a blank receipt and a few small squares of something clipped from the newspaper, all faded and thin, like ghosts. The lamps in the living room bathed us with light.

She began to read to me – hesitating at first as if she would only read the first few lines and then stop.

“I wandered lonely as a cloud . . . That floats on high o'er vales and hills.”

But after each pause she continued.

“When all at once I saw a crowd, a host, of golden daffodils; beside the lake, beneath the trees, fluttering and dancing in the breeze.”

I sat close and followed the words over her shoulder. The living room was warm and I was on the verge of sweating. Gram paged through the poems, stopping at what was familiar.

“Oh, I used to cry when I read this one,” she passed by that page. “You know this one don’t you?” she said of several well-known poems. I told her that I didn’t know them and she seemed surprised. I asked her what poems or books she studied in school, and she said they didn’t study any. Just learned the basic grammar stuff; that was all. I asked her where the book came from.

“I really don’t know. Maybe Aunt Nelly.” I asked her about reading, what they did without television. I suggested radio, but she told me they didn’t even have radio until she was in high school. She talked often of the days they spent in Jamaica, swimming at the river with the neighbor kids.

I imagined them there, at the river, in the Iowa summer heat, jumping in the flowing water or lying lazily on the muddy banks. My grandmother, sixty years before, dressed in ruffled shorts and a bikini top, if she had a swimsuit. All the kids in the neighborhood – those that lived on neighboring farms – would have gathered to escape chores and parents broken down by the work of farming that never ended.

“Oh, we just had so much fun!” Gram said with a dreamy smile whenever she talked about Jamaica.

Each section of the book of poems was labeled with a heading: *Happiness, Hope, Birthdays!* One section was headed with *Death and Dying*. “We’ll skip that section,” Gram flipped the pages and I gave a half laugh.

“Yes, let’s stick with the uplifting stuff.”

“Did I show you my mask? I think I showed your aunt and uncle, but I don’t remember if I showed you.” She’d told me that at the first appointment they had to make a mask for her face to aim the radiation beams into her mouth where the cancer was. I imagined a half hockey-mask like the one the bad guy in *Silence of the Lambs* wore. Gram emerged from the basement carrying what looked like a kitchen strainer, white plastic webbing molded into an odd shape. I looked closer. The plastic was the exact shape of the front half of Gram’s face, neck, and shoulders.

“It’s molded exactly. They had to put a piece of flannel here for my chin.” She rubbed the chin of the mask with her finger. “It was hard to even swallow.” She showed me the row of plastic screws around the outer edge and told me that each time she had to lie on a cold marble slab. Then they would lay the mask over her and screw down all sides so that she couldn’t move. “It was pretty bad at first, but then not too bad once they gave me my pill to take.”

I hadn’t realized how awful it must have been.

When suffering came to my family with Gram’s cancer, it was too hard, too close. At work, illness and disability and disease belonged to other people, not to me, not to my family. And so when the big C came knocking, I didn’t answer. I locked the door, turned out the lights, and waited for it to go away.

## Sticks and Stones VI

(Summer 2008) “Where y’all from?” The young guy behind the counter said to me as I walked past, heading for the cooler to grab a bottle of water. It was dark and we were somewhere in southern Missouri. The floors of the gas station were grimy and my legs felt weak after riding in the car.

I’d never been to the South, and images of “Deliverance” flooded my mind. Surely there was danger in being a gay man in a gas station on a hot summer night in southern Missouri.

“We’re from Iowa, just north of Des Moines,” I stammered, looking at the guy. I just knew that he’d say, “We don’t like queers in these parts.” And that maybe he and the fat woman at the front counter would chase me out of the store with baseball bats.

“That’s cool. I grew up in Iowa. Cedar Rapids.” He smiled.

## Coming Out . . . Of the Garage

(Summer 2008) We always seemed to gather in the garage wherever we met in the years since we'd all left home. Growing up, we were crammed into that small ranch-style house perched on a hill in Agency. The small, windowless garage was a walkout extension of the basement below my bedroom. We had to move bicycles and tires and ladders and oilcans and broken big wheels when my parents needed to pull the car in during the winter. Dad had three workbenches – one he built for us as kids for Christmas – all covered in greasy tools, coffee cans filled with rusting nails and screws, spools of duct tape, bundles of wire. The old furnace they pulled from the basement sat there for years, a giant, jagged, brown, rusty hunk of steel. The whole room was always in disarray and I remember my father rarely spending any time there.

When my parents and my sister and brother moved to North Dakota, the new house had a cavernous two-car attached garage. When I finally went to visit after my first semester of college was over, I was shocked. There were all of my dad's tools, all of our bicycles - all of the same things that I'd always known in our garage in Agency - lined carefully on a pegboard covering three fourths of the back wall. Dad's fishing rods hung on the wall, too. There were so many of them hanging like thin soldiers waiting for deployment. The ladders hung on the opposite wall, built-in shelves held everything else off the floor. Everything was neat and clean and orderly. There was a window and a door to let the sunshine in. And you could pull the car in *every* night. And still have room to sit around on plastic outdoor chairs and smoke cigarettes and drink beer.

"This is really impressive," I told my dad during my first trip to North Dakota during winter break from college during my freshman year. The December air was cold – but the garage was heated.

“Thanks. I’ve had fun getting everything put away.” He smiled and looked around, surveying his work. “Our old garage was so small and crappy.”

And so the garage became a typical gathering point for my family – in the new house in North Dakota, at friends’ and relatives’ houses. There was something too formal about sitting around the house; you could let it all hang out in the garage and enjoy the breeze. So it came to pass, appropriately, that I began to slowly, subtly, come out to my parents in the garage.

During my first thirty years, I never had the talk with them. I never asked them sit down at the dining room table over cups of coffee and then said: “I have something to tell you.” I had never done this because my parents don’t drink coffee.

I didn’t have the talk with them after I came out to myself because it seemed unnecessary. Saying the words “Mom, Dad, I’m gay,” felt too after-school-special. I didn’t feel like I ever hid the facts. I didn’t put on a ball cap and talk about banging chicks I met at bars or tell gay jokes and punch my dad in the arm, that universal expression of maleness. I didn’t tell my mom that I’d like to find a nice girl to settle down with but “I just can’t find the right one.” And she never asked me about any women in my life. Unlike my grandmother, who, when given the chance will say things like “Were there any pretty girls there? And none of them tickled your fancy, huh?” But I never sat them down and told them outright that I was different. In Iowa, we just don’t do such things. We keep our true selves hidden under a bushel. We burn bright in private, where no one can see.

So the summer before Reid and Amy’s wedding we found ourselves – the whole family together for the first time in years – spending whole days sitting in the garage of Reid and Amy’s new house in Madison, drinking beer and talking or just sitting and letting the summer breeze blow over us. They’d bought a roomy four bedroom on a corner lot in a blue-collar

neighborhood on the north side of the city proper. I was so glad they hadn't bought a house in the suburbs. When I'd lived in Madison, we'd drive around outside of Madison and joke, "What color of house do you want? Khaki, taupe, beige, or brown?" Their house had character, was just our style.

Mom and Dad had driven down from North Dakota for a week of vacation. I'd driven up from Iowa with Haley and Eli. I knew that my mom was looking for that week in Madison with Reid and Amy to be relaxing. She expected to drink lots of beer and watch satellite television, eat at fancy restaurants and shop at high-end grocery stores, buying the fancy and exotic foods she couldn't find at Jim's Supervalu back in North Dakota. Instead, Haley called me and needed a break from her sometimes down-and-out life. So I picked her up, strapped her son into a car seat in the back of my car, and we drove to Madison.

As the days wore on that week, our talks in the garage would land on family things, taking stock of our lives together in the past, our lives lived apart in the present. If Haley and Eli had gone to bed, we'd talk about how fucked up her life was. We'd rehash the whole thing – the move to Dakota, her dropping out of school, her failed marriage and lack of a steady job. We'd debate reasons for why it all happened, how it happened.

"She's doing better," I told them one night as we sat in the fading light. "She's looking for work and she even talked to me again about getting her GED." I took a sip from my beer and looked out towards the street, the lights just starting to glow an amber color.

"Yeah, but I sure wish she wasn't pregnant again," my dad said, sitting across from me.

His eyes were half closed and he swept his calloused hand across his face, starting at his forehead and moving down to his chin, sniffing loudly. He did this often when he began to get

tired. The fluorescent glow of the light in the garage tickled the lines in his face, just a little bit deeper than I remembered.

And I said then, emboldened by beer and these, my adult years: “But she is, Dad. So we have to deal with it.” A funny proclamation considering my own life, my own avoidance of telling them outright that I was gay. I suppose I was afraid my parents would say to each other, when they were alone in their bedroom, or in the truck on the long drive back to North Dakota: “I sure wish he wasn’t gay.” In many ways, I suppose that is true sometimes for me too. It would make my life easier. I wouldn’t have to feel like I was half-living sometimes, wouldn’t have to worry about going back home to southern Iowa and saying something too gay for a hick in a racing cap who would swear at me and clench a fist. I wouldn’t have to think about Matthew Shephard or Brandon Teena or any of the other news stories I still read about people being beaten, bloodied, and murdered for whom they love.

“That’s right,” my mom said, waving a mosquito away from her face. The lines on her face seemed deeper, too. “She’ll be fine. She’ll figure it out.” Mom always said that we’d all “figure it out.” I think she was optimistic, but saying that was also a very Iowa thing to do – just not talk about it and hope it all works out for the best.

I looked over to Reid, wondering if he would share his opinion. But he just sipped his beer, too, and looked out towards the street. We sat in silence for a while then.

But I had decided to tell my parents during that visit that I’d be bringing Steve to the wedding as my date. Not the full disclosure that I was gay, but a giant hint. And so, after everyone else had gone to bed, I found myself sitting in the living room across from my mother after we’d given up on the garage for the night. We stared bleary eyed at the television and talked lazily about the wedding.

“Do you suppose Gram will feel up to the trip?” I asked.

“I think so. She’s been talking about it.”

“And Aunt Jane and Uncle Charlie? How will they manage with Uncle Charlie’s oxygen?”

“I think they have a portable tank that they take when they are away from home. He can still drive, at least, so Jane won’t have to.” Mom started flipping the channels on the television.

“I hope everyone can make it. I think it’ll be fun.”

“Oh you know, none of them would miss it for the world if they can help it.” Mom loved her family, but she was never as excited to see them as I was. It wasn’t until years later that I realized when Mom was growing up, her extended family lived all around her. Reid and Haley and I grew up in southeastern Iowa, far away from everyone.

We talked some more, the cool lamp light and the blue flicker from the television cast a warm glow on us, sitting on overstuffed armchairs. And at some point, some moment that I had decided was the exact *right time* in my drunken reasoning, I said:

“Well, Steve is going to be my date for the wedding.”

And my mother didn’t throw up her hands in disgust or run screaming from the room or cry. She simply nodded and took another sip of beer. Then she got up and went into the kitchen. I heard rustling and she emerged with a stack of *Vanity Fair* magazines and a copy of a weekly free newspaper from Fargo that she’d been saving for me. She’d been saving and sending me the *Vanity Fair* magazines for awhile by then. But at that moment, she seemed to be saying *Here are your fashion magazines, honey. I know you enjoy them because you are a big homo.*

“I thought this paper from Fargo was neat. There is some cool stuff in there.”

I said thanks as she handed me the paper and the magazines and we moved on into the night, drinking our beers and idly watching television until we went to bed too. I thumbed through the paper from Fargo some time later and found a few half-page ads for drag shows or drink specials at gay bars, which I think is exactly what my mother wanted me to find.

\*

The next summer it was just Mom and I again, still awake after an afternoon spent sitting in another garage.

“Well, I guess we should talk about it,” I said, rubbing the arm of the plastic chair.

Mom and I sat staring bleary-eyed at the garage door in front of us, closed to keep out the chilly late spring Iowa air. Mom and Dad were on vacation again, and this time they were staying at my aunt and uncle’s house in the country in west central Iowa. My aunt and uncle weren’t home; they were having their own vacation in Arkansas. I drove through the darkness from my apartment in Ames to spend the night with my parents, a twelve-pack of beer in the backseat.

Dad had given in early, as usual, and had gone to bed. Mom and I sat on lawn chairs in the garage, the radio in the corner blaring classic rock hits as it always is in the garages in which we sit. And the moment arrived unexpectedly as it always does.

“Talk about what?”

“That I’m gay,” I felt the words spill off my tongue. I’ve accepted myself as a gay man for a long time, but that proclamation still feels odd.

“I know.”

“Yeah, I knew you did.”

We sipped our beers in silence for a few minutes, an epic moment reduced to something much less.

The knowing hadn't been enough though; this time the telling was more important. I tried to launch into the whole story: me and Steve dating off and on for ten years, my wanting to tell them so long ago when I lived in Eden Prairie with him, my writing about growing up gay. But I'd had plenty of beer by then so my ramble made little sense and the conversation moved on and we had a few more beers and when the chilly air finally got us, we hugged tightly in the fluorescent glow of the lights in the garage and climbed the few stairs into the house and went to bed. I told Mom that I would have the same conversation with Dad in the morning, but I never did.

## The Forgetting

(Fall 2008) I left my second floor apartment in an aging yellow house on the corner of West and Wilmoth Streets in Ames, Iowa, walked down the creaking stairs and across the brown and soggy lawn – being sure to avoid the piles of shit left by the neighbors’ dogs – slid behind the wheel of my car and headed west. I was bound for Jefferson to pick up my sister and drive her to her weekly domestic violence class. I was about to drive to the place where the past and present of my existence collide, the spot on the map marked by a tiny black dot where the arcs of my little life intersect, giving the illusion that I have an exact center, a focus, an axis on which my consciousness turns.

I drove my car onto Highway 30, speeding (only a few miles over), trying to leave my present behind, trying to catch up to my past, trying to avoid my future as it raced up behind me waving at me to pull over. My car left Ames and headed into the landscape typical of much of central Iowa. In the late fall, the farm fields punctured by broken and browning cornstalk stubble, the trees beginning to drop their leaves with branches like barren tendrils holding up an overcast sky. The sights out the window of my little car blurred into one mass, one “Iowa” that congeals in my mind and stands in when I am not really paying attention. Highway 30 was a road I traveled often as a child, then rarely as an adult until I returned to Iowa for graduate school. Absence did make my heart grow fonder for that road. But speeding along that concrete at 65 miles per hour had become rote as I’d driven to my sister’s house many times already that year. My mind wandered, wondered what I’d have for supper, wondered what I’d do after graduate school, wondered how it was that everybody in my family got so *old*.

As I pressed the gas pedal again after stopping at an intersection when the road careened into Boone, I remembered the summer of 1993 when Iowa had the first of its ‘500 Year Floods.’ I was staying with my grandparents during those few weeks, watching the river rise back home in my corner of the state on the local news. Even as a 14 year old, I wanted to be home, in case something bad or exciting would happen. Instead, I was stuck in a drafty farmhouse with my grandparents who spent half of each day reading the newspaper. I looked at the people filling sandbags on television in Ottumwa and I wanted to be there. Instead, Gram drove us over to Boone to look at the water. We stopped the car at the top of the hill on Highway 30, just west of the place where the road descends and cuts across the bottom of the Des Moines River valley. Only in the summer of 1993 the road descended into muddy brown water, ascended from muddy brown water on the other side. An ocean made of brown river water separated us from the rest of the world, or at least all points east along Highway 30.

We stood and Gram said, “Would you look at that.”

I continued west, driving past a gas station that was open when I was a kid, but that has been sturdily boarded up since then. I sped past the sign for Beaver, and looked over at the brick buildings crumbling on Main Street. I thought about my mom and dad at the Beaver Tap, the bar they went to before they were old enough to drink. On a different trip, I left the highway and drove along Main Street in Beaver; I tried to find the sign for the bar. The buildings were all graying and weathered and dead, no markers of my parents’ past remained. I imagined them – both with long hair and smooth, young faces – pulling up to the bar in my dad’s muscle car, the Iowa summer air thick and hot, the two of them beaming with new love.

Farther west, I passed another boarded-up gas station where Gram tells me that Gramps used to play pinochle with his buddies in the evenings after the farm work was done. I imagined

the men gathered around a card table, smoke from their cigarettes hanging lazily in the air, slick playing cards in their hands. They would have showered and shed their farming clothes, talking about local politics or the weather or grain prices. I imagine them tired but glad for the reprieve from the field, if only for a few hours.

Next came Grand Junction – perhaps the town that was the exact center of my existence. My grandparents and my mother lived and farmed south of town; both of my parents graduated from high school there. I turned down old Highway 30 to cruise through town and drove past the tiny park where something was slowly being built for as long as I could remember. It was a monument of some kind. There were narrow triangular structures covered by wooden slats, large concrete blocks arranged at odd angles, a curved gravel driveway, trees planted at equidistant intervals, and a large square block of concrete, sculpted carefully along the top edge, a blank grey face where a sign should be. This monument to something has been in construction for at least the last twenty-five years. Gram told me it was maybe for war veterans, my parents told me it was maybe for fallen firefighters. All these years later it is a monument to something yet to be determined.

Old Highway 30 into Grand Junction was narrow; the yellow line down the middle made a two-lane road, but it was a one-and-a-half-lane road at best. I'll remember my mom saying "You should have driven it when there were still curbs on both sides. It was so hard to stay on your side when I first started driving!" Once into town, I passed the large brown and tan house set far back from the road and tucked among a large stand of trees. Closer to the road stood another, smaller house, with trim and color that matched the main house. Gram and my mom told me as a child that the smaller house was the servants' quarters. I drove as slowly as possible, still fascinated, still trying to see as much as I could without stopping the car. Something about

those houses tucked into the trees fascinated me. Who lived there? Who had servants in Grand Junction? It was such a small place after all.

Some of the houses along that stretch of road were large and rambling, relics of a pretty past. They were mostly run down then, with peeling paint and children's broken toys strewn through the yards. I passed the funeral home where I attended more than one funeral as a child. I passed the house that my mother pointed to casually one summer as we drove through and said, "Grandma Hattie's house doesn't look too bad." She pointed to a two-story white house on a corner. I didn't know that Grandma Hattie even had a house in Grand Junction. She was my great great grandmother, and she lived to be 107 years old. I met her once, when I was two. There was a Polaroid to prove it.

Main Street was next. Most of the buildings were empty; 'FOR RENT' signs perched hopelessly behind greasy, cracked window glass. Some buildings may have been lived in; ugly curtains hung garishly in a few windows, a lawn chair with torn webbing sat on a flat roof top - a perch to observe all the nothing that happened there. The auction house, a can redemption center, a hair salon and a bar were the only businesses I could see – and none of them could definitively be defined as 'OPEN.' Of course the bank, the post office, and the library were all in nice, clean buildings. The only cars on the street were parked at angles in front of these places. I noticed the faded lettering on the side of a brick building on the corner and guessed that was where a grocery store had been. Gram told me once, "Would you believe that Junction used to have *two* grocery stores?"

I passed the other house that always fascinated me as a kid. It was a large, long house, the biggest in town. Gram told me that it had been a hotel and that it was actually two houses built

together into one. Again, it was a relic of an earlier time, when Grand Junction was a bustling railroad town.

Continuing through town, I passed the track and the football field, the “East Greene” logo on the scoreboard was peeling and faded. Weeds poked up through the surface of the track. I imagined my dad playing football, chubby but muscled in his uniform, my mom sitting with her friends in the stands cheering him on. The tall light poles would bathe the whole scene in harsh white light, piercing the fall Iowa darkness; the brightest lights for miles around.

The high school was only a few blocks east. Gram worked there as a secretary for twenty years, until she retired when I was in high school myself, 150 miles away in southern Iowa. I’d go there in the summers sometimes and help her file student records or print up lunch tickets. I felt special, getting a behind-the-scenes view of how a high school worked. The building was older than my high school; the walls were thick with shiny coats of paint, the smooth concrete floors echoing the squeak of your shoes when you walked the halls. It was fun to wander around in the summer, when school was out. It felt strange to wander the empty halls by myself.

The house where Grammie – Gramps’ mother – lived was just across the road from the school. She was pale and confused when I knew her. The kitchen table at her house was piled with lavender colored plastic bingo chips. When she died, Gramps’ sister, my great aunt Arlene, moved in. She still lived there. The municipal pool was a few blocks away; Gram would drop me off there sometimes in the summer and I’d walk over to Grammie’s house when I had finished swimming for the day. I remember the feel of the scratchy concrete bottom of the pool, the smell of the locker room. If I drove around Grand Junction long enough perhaps I’d find more of my story. Perhaps I’d remember things I never knew.

I continued following the ribbon of concrete when it turned south, then I turned west again, onto old highway 30 at the empty motel set back from the road behind the stand of trees, the empty filling station out front where Gramps spent a few years selling dinged and dented groceries collected from stores in Des Moines with a cousin and some buddies. Summers I stayed with my grandparents, we'd get up before dawn and pile into the dusty blue pickup and drive over to the city, backing up to the loading docks at big grocery stores, loading up the damaged and expired food to haul back to Grand Junction. Gram and I would sort through the dented cans and taped-up boxes, looking for exotic products to take home.

\*

When I visit my grandparents now, I will always say “Have you been through Junction lately?”

And they will respond “No, but isn't it just awful?”

\*

After leaving town, I passed the cemetery. I didn't stop there on that trip, but I had the previous fall, on the way home from Jefferson.

I hadn't been there in a long time. I counted the years. Seventeen. It was late afternoon in early October, the sky was slate grey and a light mist had made everything wet, vibrant if the sun were shining. There was no one expecting me at home. I turned into the cemetery and drove slowly along the path. I remembered the story told about great Aunt Pauline. She loved

cemeteries and would insist on stopping at each one she saw, throwing her arms up and yelling, “Stop!” when she spotted one. Uncle John – or whoever happened to be driving - would oblige grudgingly.

*Pana was my age, 18 when he died. He had some sort of liver disease, the sort that makes your skin yellow. He was small, quiet, Asian. Everyone loved him and no one knew just how sick he was. I didn't talk to him often, but we made small talk a few days before he left the program that summer. I think I knew he'd been sick and asked him how he was feeling. I think he said he was okay, too humble to say what was really happening. Two or three or maybe four days later, they gathered us all into the chapel on campus and told us he was dead. We were in high school, we were hysterical. The big black girl named Kitty screamed and fell to the ground. Some kids ran out the door. I hugged my friend Julia and cried. I heard later that Justin from my floor broke a desk chair from his room; he was young and angry and didn't know what else to do.*

Seventeen years was a long time to try to remember the location of a gravestone. I was eleven years old then, and it was my first real experience with death. The phone rang late at night and I got up and my mom was crying. She told me Uncle Rodney died and then I cried too. That was the first time I felt some little piece of me break off and float away. I was young, too young to grasp what death meant. But he had three kids, the youngest, my cousin Chad, was the same age as me.

*It was my freshman year when I got the call about Denise. I was in my dorm room and I answered the phone. My friend Angie told me through sobs that Denise was dead. Her ex-boyfriend, too. He shot her and then himself. Angie's mom got on the phone then, and I asked what I should do, the words heavy on my tongue. Confusion.*

*“Just come,” she said. And I did. I drove down that day or the next. Another friend was there when I arrived. The three of us hugged and cried in the doorway before I took my coat off. It was early November. My family had moved away that same fall. I had been getting stoned and drunk a lot the whole month before and now our friend was dead. Denise was in our class, and then moved away before high school. But she and Angie remained close. I’d seen her during our senior year a few times, had pictures of her in my photo album from a graduation party. She and Angie were eating pickle chips and stuck out their tongues, green wavy circles hanging on the end. I captioned the picture “Look, we have pickles!” I thought it was funny.*

*I imagined then, and still now, how it must have been there in the dark. A lonely gravel road with no lights, no one else around, no sound. He’d convinced her to go with him, said he wanted to talk. He was older – four or five years. They had broken up a few months before. He drove her out to nowhere and shot her in the face. He got out of the car and shot himself. Angie told me later that she had read Denise’s story in some collection of domestic violence accounts. Her thumbs had been shot off because she had tried to push away the barrel of the gun. We went to the funeral home and there were two caskets. There was a crowd in her room, and no one in his. It felt wrong. I wanted to spit on his casket, make some rude gesture. But we just walked past and looked in.*

*It’s been ten years now. It feels like twenty.*

I drove around slowly, taking the square lane around in different configurations. I finally spotted the stone a few rows in. It was black and shiny and granite. The gravestone next to it was for his parents. They were both still alive, birthdates chiseled in next to blank space. It felt odd, knowing that ground was reserved for bodies, for people who still existed. I’d thought maybe I’d

say something. Or that I'd feel sad. But I didn't feel anything, just looked down at the shiny stone and up at the slate sky.

*I was living in Seattle when I heard about Pang. Someone sent an email or called me on the phone. She and her little sister hid in the dark basement of their home, planning to scare her boyfriend. He walked into the dark and they jumped out; he panicked and shot Pang, point blank. How awful it must have been, there in the dark. Shooting your girlfriend while her baby sister watches. Pang was one of the most positive people I'd ever met. She was always smiling, always laughing out loud. She wrote me letters during the school year saying how she would never smoke, drink, or do drugs. I believed her. I lost track of her during college, seeing her only a few times. I hadn't thought about her for a few years when I found out she was dead. It was odd; she existed, and then she didn't. I wasn't sure how to feel. I was far away from home and I hadn't seen her in a long time.*

Walking back to the car, I remembered the others. Grammie was there somewhere. She died in 1986 – I don't know why I remember the year.

*I heard about Uncle Bobby when I was living in Madison. My mom called after it happened. I was surprised that he was dead, surprised that Mom called me right after it happened. Mom usually keeps bad news from us. Maybe she thinks she is still protecting us, maybe she wants to mourn alone. She didn't tell us that Uncle Bobby was even sick. He'd been in the hospital for a few weeks or months before he died. I was angry. I would have gone to see him, could have been there. But no one told me anything. I was angry with Mom for not telling us; but then again, no one else in the family had told us either.*

*They cremated his body and held the service in Perry, at the same church where my grandpa's funeral was held. The reception room felt familiar, though I'd only been there twice, maybe three times before.*

*I drove back to Iowa on a Friday for Uncle Bobby's funeral. I left later than I planned and I drove as fast as I could to be on time. I made the trip in four hours. It usually takes five. I drove fast and then sat in the room with the picture and the flowers and my family and tried not to cry. They played Judy Collins' version of "Amazing Grace". I had never heard it before. It was beautiful.*

I drove around some more. Thompsons scattered around, first names I didn't recognize. Then I approached one, and there she was. Grammie and Great Grandpa Walter. Hattie and Noah, my grandpa's grandparents, were one row over. The stone listed Noah's death in 1948, his birth nearly 80 years before. He was an old man when he died, his wife nearly as old. But she lived another 30 years, a whole other lifetime.

*Mom called to tell me about Bonnie when I was living at my third address in Madison. She existed, and then she didn't. I hadn't seen her for a few years, since I'd left North Dakota. We worked together and spent Monday mornings running the cleaning crew at the Eagle's Club in town. She liked to laugh and we had fun.*

*Bonnie was forty-six, had four kids. The oldest was my age and had a kid of his own, and her youngest son had just started kindergarten. Her husband was younger than her.*

*It was the end of September. Bonnie had a bad headache, and called her husband to come home. He probably complained, bitched about having to leave the bar or the hunting party. By the time he got there, she was almost gone. She died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. It was a brain aneurysm, and there was nothing they could do. She existed, and then*

*she didn't. Mom and Dad couldn't stand being at home after they found out, so they went and stayed at some friends' place until 3 a.m., crying and drinking, endless toasts to their dead friend. They released white balloons at her funeral and they drifted up, up, up into the cold North Dakota sunshine.*

The sky stayed slate, the wind picked up slightly as I got in the car and drove out, leaving the cemetery behind.

\*

If I turned south off the highway near the cemetery, I could have driven slowly along the brown gravel roads, always soft, sucking the tires, daring to pull the car into the ditch. Past the four corners, past Gram and Gramps' neighbors with the hundreds of stray cats and the brick ranch house standing in front of an abandoned two-story farmhouse, a trailer stuffed into the back corner of the lot, almost swallowed up by large trees and wild bushes. Summers I stayed on the farm, all three of those neighbors – a couple and their son - would be walking beans, hoes in hand, sharp blades felling velvetleaf and sunflowers, even in the heat, even when most other farmers sprayed the weeds from the tractor. They even walked beans when they were old. And when I knew them, they were always old.

I could have continued just a few feet south, past the run-down square house where the Scottish couple lived when my mother was a child. She'd visit every afternoon and have tea. The next house would be my grandparents'. I could have pulled into narrow driveway with the smooth black and blue and pink stones nestled in brown earth, now just tire tracks in the grass. I could have driven down by the house, looked to the large peony bushes that sagged in the

summer with heavy white blooms almost to the ground. I could have turned quickly to the north and coast the loop around the pump house, past the giant Morton™ building, the giant door gaping, back around to the driveway past the rest the of the farm yard and back to the road.

I could have headed south, tried to find the other farm Gramps worked, Gram's folks' place near Jamaica. I haven't been there in years, wouldn't be able to find it if I tried. The falling-down yellow house that stood far back from the road, overgrown in the trees and the bushes, left to the weeds, was no longer there; they knocked it down years ago. We went through that house one summer when I was young. Vandals had stolen the cabinets, the fixtures. The carpet was full of dust and dirt and mildew. We found a black and red- checkered suit jacket hanging singly in a closet; Gram said it had been her dad's. I took the jacket home and found it was perfect to wear to basketball games when I played in the pep band – our school colors were red and black.

I could have taken that detour, followed those roads to the farms that inhabited my youth. But I didn't. I stuck to the highway, heading to Jefferson to see my sister, to help her navigate her troubled life. I let the memories wash over me, confident that they would never change.

When I got to Jefferson and picked up my sister, she sat in the passenger seat and said, "How was the drive?"

"Oh, pretty uneventful," was my answer.

## Sleeping in the Daytime

(Fall 2008) The whole weekend of Reid and Amy's wedding had been a blur, a flurry of family and friends, all in one place, all of our 'real lives' – the things we did when *not* with family, when *not* with old friends who knew us when – converging for one event. The entirety of the wedding took place on the grounds of the White Rose Inn, a collection of bed and breakfast houses with a reception hall and regular hotel on site. It felt like college all over again, all of my friends crammed into a small geographic space where our dramas seemed bigger, more intense. Except that weekend, much of my family and the bride's family were there, too. The pressure for all of us to conduct ourselves covertly was not intense, but was pressure just the same. Little groups of friends would wander off into a dark corner of the property to get high or take a piss. The bride walked up to me as I was smoking a cigarette in the cool night air, the lights in the reception hall casting an odd glow on the other buildings.

"Hey, can I bum a smoke?" she grinned, holding the train of her dress.

"Of course dear sister-in-law!" I laughed and handed her a cigarette.

"Do you see any of my family around?"

We both looked around the property, scanning the dark corners for lurking grandparents.

"Looks like the coast is clear," I laughed again.

"I love having everyone here, but it's kind of intense!"

And Steve was my date. All of my friends knew, few of the family did. And I didn't tell them that weekend. I didn't want to distract them from the importance of my brother's nuptials. And so Steve and I didn't spend a lot of time together and met up in the wee hours of the morning in my room.

“This is great. I want our wedding to be just like this,” Steve said as he snuggled in beside me in the soft bed. The room was decorated in a modern country style with billowy curtains and antique furniture.

A few months before, Steve had called me in the early morning, drunk and emotional. “I just realized that I want to be with you for the rest of my life. Let’s get married!” He called me the next day, too, to tell me that he remembered what he had said. And so, I started to include Steve in the plans I made for my life again, even though he’d done this before – said we should be together and then ending it later. I felt smarter and more confident this time, though.

Sloppy rain fell on us all the way to the Illinois state border the next morning after the wedding as we headed back to Chicago. Steve snored in the passenger seat and when I asked him if he would drive, he said no. I knew he didn’t have a driver’s license; he hadn’t had a car since we’d lived in Seattle. When we got into the city, he wasn’t sure which exit to take. He’d only been living in his latest apartment a few months, and had never driven out of the city from there, or back into the city to there either. And so the scene in the car played out as it had so many times before.

“Is it this exit?” I asked, my hands tensely gripping the wheel. The rain continued to fall in rivulets on the windshield. I was exhausted by the weekend and ready to lie down.

“Maybe . . .” Steve stared out the window, looking down the freeway, trying to orient himself.

“Well, should we try it?”

“I guess.”

I gripped the wheel tighter and took the exit. I asked the man in the tollbooth if we were headed to Chicago.

“Nope, you need to be going the other direction.” He motioned with his hand.

After another exit and turning around, Steve finally recognized where we were.

It had always seemed to be that way as long as I’d known Steve. I really couldn’t count on him for much more than good sex and good company. He was terrible with money – the bill collectors called our room in college and our apartment in Seattle for him all the time. He wasn’t great with directions, wasn’t always a good listener when I needed him to be. I could tell when we talked on the phone that he wasn’t listening, just giving the occasional “Mmhm” as I talked. And so we wound our way along the ribbons of freeway and I drove in silence, remembering all the times before, wondering if things between us would ever change. I had hope, though, that they would. We were older then, after all. We’d had plenty of experiences apart, had changed some. I still believed in our fairy tale, with plenty of revisions of course.

When we finally got back to his apartment, we collapsed into the bed, exhausted from the trip. The blinds were drawn, the fall sun shining around the edges in golden strips. We held each other under the covers and fell asleep. I woke up a few hours later, the golden light outside gone. Steve was still asleep; he had always been able to sleep more than anyone I’d known. The apartment was tiny, one large room with a tiny kitchen off one end, a walkthrough closet and bathroom on the other. Steve’s Chihuahua, Mercurio, was curled up in a bony ball between our bodies. The apartment was warm and there was no sound except for the quiet hum of the refrigerator and the tiny stream of water leaking from the shower in the bathroom.

I’ve always relished naps; something about being in bed at a time of day when you aren’t supposed to be is very appealing, very subversive. And so waking up in the evening, knowing that all there is left of the day is a meal and maybe a shower, and then you can go to bed for real

– something about that always makes me feel content, like there is nowhere else in the world that I’d rather be.

And so it was that evening, curled up next to Steve and his little dog in that tiny apartment, tucked along a low-slung hallway with dark colored walls and heavy doors without numbers to distinguish them, somewhere on the north side of Chicago. There was nowhere else in the world that I wanted to be than right there next to him. It was a moment I’d had before with Steve: in our room at college, in the big bed in the basement in Eden Prairie. It felt nice and comforting, it felt like he and I against the world. He’d told me, during that third phone call to begin our relationship again, that he felt that way too, finally agreeing that it really was “us against the whole world.” There in his apartment in bed after the magical wedding weekend, it was.

But I also knew then that though those moments sustained me, made me feel whole and solid in a way that I hadn’t found anywhere else, perhaps that wasn’t enough. Moments of silence and warmth and comfort with Steve and I were what I lived for – they are what I live for sometimes still. But I am left unsure as to whether that’s enough to sustain a relationship, even one that has been maintained in some way or other over the span of almost ten years. But I’m hopeful. I didn’t worry about all that then; I just rolled closer to Steve and put my arm around his thin frame and held on.

## Sticks and Stones VII

(April 3, 2009) “Congratulations! I’m so happy for you and so proud of our state. I’ve been crying all morning. Love you!” My friend Heather sniffled on the voicemail. I wanted to run screaming out of the building, jump in the air and dash through campus, sing all the way downtown, stopping people on the street to say “Did you hear? Did you HEAR?” But of course I did none of those things, good Iowa boy that I am. But I smiled all the way home that day, smiled when I checked my Facebook account, and kept smiling as I read the posts from friends proclaiming their joy. *I mattered*. On that day my state, the Iowa dirt that runs in my veins, told me that I mattered. That my gay relationship counted just as much as a straight one. That I was equal in the eyes of the law.

I watched coverage of the rallies on the news. One of the women in the first couple to be wed legally was someone I knew from a summer program in high school. She and her new wife were right there on the news at noon. I beamed all day. And when I went to a barbeque with a group of straight friends, I could hardly contain myself. We swilled beers and played yard games and when I won, they said, “Well, it is your day after all!” And I beamed. *I mattered*, my life *mattered*. I wished that Steve was with me and that we could drive down to the county courthouse near my hometown and proudly ask for a marriage license. The clerk couldn’t refuse; it was the *law* that two men could get married. Steve wasn’t near me, but that didn’t really matter. What mattered was that, if I wanted to, I could marry him. I could stand on the ground that bore me and proclaim my love for him to the world and it was *legal*. I didn’t need the government to sanction my life. But that fact that it would was almost beyond belief. The Iowa spring sun shone a bit brighter on that day. And it shines brighter still. *I matter*.

## Water Washes Me Clean

(Summer 2009) Traffic stopped, the sky flat and grey, rain fell hard on my little car. I turned off my iPod™ and turned the radio to AM, voices crackling and creaking as it searched for stations. I listened for information on the backup, needing to know instantly why cars sat motionless on the interstate. I looked at the mini-van squatting next to me and watched a small brown bird, feathers ruffled and dripping, standing near the back tire, sheltering from the rain. Sports news, talk radio, an opera song. Finally in the crackle I heard “Backup on interstate 80 in both directions,” and I hit the button to stop the radio search. “There’s a severe thunderstorm warning for Linn County near Iowa City, Black Hawk County near Waterloo...”

I was scared. The rain was falling in great sheets, the windshield wipers slapping furiously to keep up. There was nothing to do but sit; I couldn’t turn my car around, head back the direction I’d come. Nothing to do but wait. The voices on the radio sounded distant, sometimes inaudible because of the crackle of AM radio. A voice telling me something, but I couldn’t make out the message. Then: “water over the road on I-80, the exit at Williamsburg is underwater . . .” I pulled the map from the glove box and unfurled it on the seat next to me. Had I passed Williamsburg? I tried to look around for a mile marker, any indication of where we sat on the interstate, but could see none. I’d driven this trip hundreds of times. When someone asked a family friend if she was going to go to the local Fourth of July parade, she answered: “If I wanted to see a bunch of trucks driving down the road, I’d set my lawn chair on the shoulder of I-80!” So true – that ribbon of concrete seemed to be designed only for long-haul truckers. More than once I’d found myself speeding down the highway through the darkness when the only other vehicles on the road were semis ready to swallow my car at any moment.

I'd driven I-80 so many times that at that moment I had no idea where I was; so many landmarks were burned into my memory so deep that I no longer saw them, the interstate being a means of getting where I was going and not a route to sightsee. I looked at the map and tried to envision every portion of the road along the blue line that cut Iowa almost in two. I decided that no, I hadn't reached the Williamsburg exit, and that we sat still because of water over the road ahead. "We've never had reports of water over the road on I-80 before," a traffic reporter's voice crackled from the radio. I left the map on the seat and cracked the window to let the smoke from my cigarette roll out, the fat raindrops falling into the car, wetting the inside of the door.

Half an hour after we stopped, traffic began moving, rain still falling in sheets, the grey sky beginning to lighten a bit. We crested the hill and then crept down the other side and I saw the water roiling in the ditch on the right side of the road. Foamy brown water turning and swirling, violent with energy. There was no source – no nearby creek or river that I could see, but the water swirled in the ditch. As my car inched closer, I saw the water gushing over the road. Piles of black debris lay in the median, stitched across the westbound lanes; a path showing where the water had been, dragging sticks and grass and whatever caught hold. I watched as tires ahead of mine inched through the still-running water, the deep brown cresting in tiny white waves as it hit the rubber. My turn came and I pressed the gas pedal carefully, gripped the wheel with both hands. A state trooper sat in his car on the shoulder just ahead, headlights on. The rain fell hard and I crossed the water slowly, looking over at the muddy swirl in the ditch. I wondered what would happen if my car were washed into that ditch – how would they rescue me? Could the trooper do anything more than watch as my little white car lurched around in the water, sucked down into whatever lay in the depths? The whole scene seemed crazy to me then.

Dangerous.

Maybe the trooper or some other official had decided the water had fallen to a level that was acceptable to let cars pass through – *but how could they be sure?* I felt afraid and then my tires were up and out of the water and I pushed the gas pedal harder and was soon back up to speed and on my way again.

That muddy water swirling near the road led me think of the water that flowed through my childhood. Growing up in southeastern Iowa meant an awareness of the potential for flooding every spring. People kept an eye on the weather forecasts, wondering when the water would come. We lived on high ground, far from the Des Moines River. But a small creek followed the northern border of our property. When the rain burst from the clouds in early spring or late summer, the little creek would swell. A few times the water rose and rose, eventually rushing through the culvert and up over the highway. Sometimes a trooper or somebody from the fire department would come out and park on the shoulder, watching the water rise, putting up a roadblock if it got too high. I worried sometimes as a kid that the water would keep rising and reach our house. It never did.

During one summer storm, we ran out into the rain, delighted in the cool water wetting our hair and soaking our clothes. We ran down towards the creek and watched the brown water rise and rise. Up to the banks, up over the banks to the fencerow, into the yard. Dad hadn't put in a garden that year, so the long, wide plot was only grass and clover. When the water spilled into the grass we watched as hundreds of fuzzy black and orange caterpillars dotted the water, swirling around as it rose.

“We have to save them!” I or my brother or my sister exclaimed, delight and terror in our voices. I ran back to the garage to find a container for our refugees. I found a coffee can and a plastic margarine container and ran back to the creek, the water still rising. We scooped up the

fuzzy bugs with our tiny hands, the bristly hairs poking our fingers, sticky feet gripping our palms. We scooped and scooped, shaking the caterpillars into the containers I'd found. We waded into the water rising up over our ankles, then to our shins. When the water approached our knees, we waded over to the little square deck that Dad had built to cover an old well. We kept scooping caterpillars until the water topped the deck, and then our feet standing on the weathered boards. And then as quickly as we'd been delighted by our task we were afraid; the water was rising fast. Caterpillars floated on the muddy water all around us, but we realized we couldn't rescue them all. We carefully stepped off the deck and waded back to higher ground.

The caterpillars wriggled in jumbled masses of orange and black fur in our containers. We poked holes in the lids and brought them into the garage out of the weather. I don't remember now if we released them when the rain ended, but I suppose we did. Watching the creek rise from its banks had been exciting, a rare event that we were blessed to see. The water rising over our toes had been sheer wonder, felt funny as it crept up our legs. And then just as quickly, it became dangerous. The brown water inched quickly up to our shins, began to turn more violently. We knew then that we had to get out of the water, to run back to the higher ground in the yard, to watch the water rise from a safe distance.

That same feeling entered my mind again when my brother and my dad and I were walking on the Des Moines River bed just south of the hydro dam in Ottumwa. For some reason that summer, the Army Corps of Engineers had kept the gates of the dam closed and allowed the river level to drop, leaving only pools of water standing where deeper, troubled waters usually ran. We walked for hours that day, inspecting the junk left behind, relics of illegal dumping, artifacts of abandoned lives.

“Look, Dad.” I poked a stick into the sole of an old shoe I found after we’d been walking for awhile. A high-top, just like my sneakers.

Dad walked over to where I stood. “Pretty neat,” he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. I felt proud of my discovery, liked having Dad interested. “You suppose we can find the other one?”

I looked around. “I don’t think so,” I giggled.

For as long as I can remember, Dad had been telling us that the river was no place to play, the you never knew what the deep brown water held. He fished from the shore often, right there in the city, stopping by after getting off the train. A few retired men fished there almost everyday, and Dad befriended them. If we stopped by, I always secretly hoped those old guys would be there: Clarence with his snow white beard and Marlin with his gigantic gut and faded overalls. They’d fish through holes in the ice there in the winter; the only spoonbill fish I’ve ever seen lay dead on the ice one winter, somebody having caught it and discarded it, probably unsure of what it was. The mystery of such creatures swimming deep in that water made me feel fascinated and afraid at the same time.

And so the day Reid and Dad and I walked the riverbed was a delight. The mysteries of the river were uncovered, and I suppose the mystery of my dad was a little more exposed that day, too. I knew he loved me, knew we always did fun things together. But he was still on-call for the railroad in those days, so the time we spent with him was usually short.

At some point, there seemed to be more water around us than there had been when we started. “They must have opened one of the gates,” Dad told us. He kept his calm, but even as a child I could tell he was worried. And that made me afraid. We kept walking and Dad kept an eye on the bank, looking for a ladder or some steps so we could climb up and back to the street.

Because the river ran through the city, the banks were solid concrete, taller than my dad by far. We kept walking and the water kept rising. We didn't talk. No big rush of water came to sweep us away, but the rise was steady and constant. My legs grew tired. Finally we found a stairway and climbed up to the street. I could tell Dad was relieved there in the summer afternoon light. We walked back the way we'd come, only this time we were on streets and sidewalks, the river below us now swirling with brown water. When Dad would tell the story later, his eyes would light up and he'd laugh and say, "We had to walk almost to Vine Street to get out of the river!"

My grandmother was baptized in a river. Dunked in the cold water of the North Raccoon River. We are not a pious family; I've only heard the story once. I need to ask again for more details. It wasn't until I entered confirmation classes that we realized that none of us – my brother, my sister, and I - had been baptized. No big deal, we did it all on the same day. We knelt on the scratchy red carpet in the sanctuary of the Agency United Methodist Church. I was 12 or 13, about to be confirmed as a member of the church. Reverend Sadie asked each of us to hold a strip of paper with our full names in front of us as we knelt; she didn't want to mess up anyone's name. She sprinkled my head with holy water, droplets falling on the lapels of my too-big grey suit jacket, saying something about "God the father." The water running down my cheeks, running rivulets over my ears, falling on my suit was meant to bring me closer to God, to make me one of his children. Water, clean and pure, clear and life giving like His love. What was the water running over the interstate that day in June or the water from the creek or the river rising and rising, becoming more dangerous with each passing moment?

Even today, when heavy rain comes wherever I am, I watch the water rise with the same fascination and fear I had as a child. When the rain swelled Squaw Creek in Ames in 2008, I walked down and stood on the bridge and watched the brown water twist and turn through the

trees lining the banks. I took pictures and wondered what the water would carry away with it. When the street behind my apartment floods in a low spot near a storm drain, I sit in my bathroom and watch out the window, wondering how high the water will go. The water rises and I see my grandmother dunked in the North Raccoon River becoming a child of God. I see the water running over my hair and onto my shoulders when I knelt in front of the minister at the small United Methodist church in Agency. I see the water circling the drain, black with Iowa soil as my grandfather showers after a long day in the field. I see the water roiling in the ditch beside I-80. I feel the water rising over the tops of my feet when we saved the caterpillars. I see my father's face as the water on the Des Moines River bottom begins to rise, covering the soles of our shoes as we walk. I remember, too, the horrific images of water sweeping people away in the tsunami in Indonesia, people standing on rooftops waiting for rescue after Hurricane Katrina. So much power in the water, so much danger, so much life. Water washes me clean, sweeps away my sins, could wash away my life, leaving my body as debris laid gently in the crook of gnarled tree.

## Once Upon a Time

My parents were high school sweethearts when they married in 1976. My father still holds the same job on the railroad he has had since he was seventeen. My mother worked a few years and then stayed home to raise her kids. I came first, with a brother following in 1981, and a surprise sister in 1983. When I was old enough to be aware, I realized that having married parents was not the norm in my rural Iowa school. Most other kids' parents were divorced or, if they were still married, they were unhappily so. My parents fought rarely, or if they fought more than we knew, they did so out of range of our small ears. The fights that we did hear scared us; we didn't like when Mom cried or Dad stormed out. It was just not common in our house. Our parents liked each other. They always greeted each other with a kiss, exchanged glances across the room. As an adult, Mom has told me that things were never perfect, of course. But as far as we were aware as children, they were married happily ever after, just like in the storybooks.

My friends (whose parents are still married) and I joke now that our parents have screwed us; the images they gave us of loving couples with perfect relationships were just not true. We know this, tell each other what our parents have told us: nothing is perfect, a good relationship is hard work. My mother declared on her thirtieth wedding anniversary that the secret to a long marriage is separate televisions. And I believe her. But still we persist in our pursuits of some fairytale idea of what we believe it is to love someone and to have someone love us back.

I tell myself a fairytale about my only real adult relationship. I told myself a story right from the start; something involving two boys who fell in love in college and went out into the world and bought a house and mowed the lawn and loved and loved each other until they grew old and grey. Of course it hasn't turned out that way at all. And I don't think I would have

wanted it to be that way. What once sounded ideal now sounds boring and stuffy and far too comfortable to be worth the effort. The facts of my relationship with Steve are debatable, but this is how I see it: we started dating by sleeping together in our shared room in college one February night in 2000, moved out into the world together that summer, came back to school in the fall and broke up, moved to Seattle together with friends after graduation in 2001, started dating long distance again in 2003 when I was living with my parents and he was living in Chicago, broke up again in October 2005, and then he called me in October 2008 and declared that he was done looking and that we should get married. Though Steve tells people that we've been *together* all that time, I always chime in and say "we have actually been in a 'relationship' for less than three years. We have, though, been fucking for most of that time." Certainly that's a much different story than any fairytale I've ever read.

## **Epilogue**

## **We've Never Done This Before**

(Spring 2009) “We’ve never done this before, stayed under *your* roof,” my dad said as he pulled up the covers on my bed. This was after he’d called from the bedroom: “Lonnie, are all these boxes stacked in the corner full?” and then laughed when I told him they weren’t, that I just hadn’t had time to get to the recycling center that week. He laughed at me because it was something he did too, recycled even though where he and Mom lived didn’t offer curbside recycling. Maybe he laughed at discovering another eccentricity of his oldest son.

We had been just the three of us before: that first year in the grey house on Hull Avenue in Perry. We had been just the three of us again when I moved to North Dakota from Seattle. He was right that night, though – Mom and Dad had yet to sleep under my roof. They hadn’t visited me in Seattle, even though I wanted them to. I was angry then, but understand now that a city of that size is simply too much for them. They’ve spent their lives in small towns in Iowa, and the last 13 years in a small town in North Dakota, no town larger than 7000 people – Perry, Iowa – and there for only a few years. They are small town folks. Mom called Dad a “city kid,” but only because he lived in town and she lived in the country when they started dating in high school.

They came back to Iowa for a week that summer, a quick trip because of Dad’s vacation time, a week traded with a co-worker in exchange for time later in the summer. We spent two nights in a brand new hotel near the highway, a mile from where I live while attending graduate school. Haley and her two kids and even her newest boyfriend were there, Reid and Amy, too. The only thing missing was Steve and my parents’ dog – then we really would have been the whole family together.

We went out for dinner, crowding big restaurant tables just the same as those other families do, dressed in their Sunday best after church. Only we wore our normal clothes and church did not figure into our equation. It was Easter weekend and when someone asked me if my family was coming to visit for the holiday, I had to admit that I had forgotten that it was Easter, and that my family was not coming to visit for that reason. That they were coming to visit and it happened to be Easter weekend. For only the second or third time in ten years – since I'd left home – we functioned as a whole family again. Only this time, we were larger; two new little kids, two new partners. And there I was, still just me.

I felt left out at, a little less important because I didn't have kids, because Steve wasn't there, because I didn't have a great job or a nice house. I was the oldest child, almost 30 years old and much the same as I had been when I left home all those years ago. And so when my parents came to stay with me after everyone else left, under my roof for the first time, I felt, finally, like some kind of adult.

Mom and Dad and I had a nice dinner in a fancy restaurant, complaining about our extended family under warm light amidst modern décor over dishes of locally grown food and nice cold beers.

After dinner, I took them to “have a drink with the college kids” at one of my favorite campus area bars. On the way beneath the bright traffic lights in the Iowa spring darkness, Mom said “We're going to have a beer here before we go back to your place and then walk to the bar, right?” with a laugh.

“Of course. I knew that's what you were thinking,” I told her with a smile. Wherever go my parents, there goes the beer. We went to the campus bar for one beer and stayed for two.

I relate the best to my parents over beers – in the backyard or at the bar. It is when I feel the most real. Maybe it's a reality clouded by alcohol, but it feels honest. My good-Iowa-boy defenses are down and I am just me. We don't drink together and get into fights. We drink together and tell old stories, rehash the past, contemplate the future. Maybe some people – even others in our extended family – don't approve, but it's what we do. It works for us. So when Mom and Dad came to stay I knew it would be a late night and I knew that I would push away the thoughts of going to class the next afternoon. *We don't get to do this very often* rang in my mind as we drank our beers.

After we got back to my apartment, I took them first to the closest bar, the one that I didn't particularly like because of the newness of it, the antiseptic quality it oozed. What had been a dimly lit building with flickering candles and thrift-store couches and weirdoes of all shapes and sizes had since become a brightly lit, shiny-shellacked-wood paneled room with giant screen televisions and a pool table in the corner. The place was almost empty when we got there and the bartender that had once been smiling and kind to me was by then tired and abrupt. We drank our beers and chatted casually. I thought of the bar next door, the usually sloppy drunks and dirty bathrooms, the too-loud music and cramped space. I hadn't taken Mom and Dad there first thinking that they would enjoy a different experience than every bar in their tiny North Dakota town. We emptied our glasses and looked around at the sparse crowd and the episode of "Seinfeld"™ playing above the bar, and I suggested we go next door.

Dad and I smoked cigarettes on the walk across the street, and then sent Mom in to get our beers while we finished smoking in the chilly spring night air. It was a scene played over and over and over again during the course of their thirty-three year marriage, I knew – Mom getting beers, unashamed to use her ample bosom in the process. And even though she's getting older,

she's still more successful getting drinks at the bar than Dad or I will ever be. By the time we stubbed out our cigarettes on the sidewalk and wandered into the bar, Mom was holding two beers and waiting on a third. I spied an open table and we gathered around it, arranging ourselves on the high stools. "We should have come here first!" Mom laughed and I knew she was right. Zeppelin blared from the jukebox; the crowd was a mix of students and townies, young and old.

We drank until closing, Dad humoring Mom and me even though he is usually in bed by ten o'clock most nights. We stumbled home, bracing ourselves against the unexpected coldness of the early April wind. We spent the next hour sitting in our pajamas in my living room talking. We looked at the photo album Gram had given me; she had put school pictures and snapshots of each grandchild into an album. We laughed at those old photos, at Mom and Dad's very 1980's hairstyles, at us kids' neon colored clothes.

"Look at that!" I'd point at a particularly heinous hairstyle.

"Well, that was the style then," Mom would say.

"Looked fine to me," Dad would add, laughing.

On several pages Gram had placed a black and white school picture of my mother next to a color school picture of me. We've always laughed about the similarities. We share almost the exact same smile, held in the same position – lips tightly pursed, no teeth, the corners of our mouths pressed only slightly up into our cheeks.

"You two really did look the same!" Dad said, smiling, holding his hand out to Mom.

I sat next to Mom on the couch as we continued flipping through those pages, drinking slower now from our bottles, dissecting our past together through the haze of beer-induced nostalgia, the golden glow of the lamps in the corner falling across our bodies. I'd like to say that I saw my face in those pictures and didn't recognize it; that I was miles and years away from that

little boy. But that wouldn't be true. I do know him. I still know us, my family. Our lives have all changed so much since those times; there are two new kids now that share our blood. Haley's troubles seem to have subsided. Reid and Amy are married; Amy has become a new daughter and sister-in-law to call ours. There are new cars, new pets, new houses. Steve and I might get married someday. The old people in our family are getting older. My parents are older, too, the lines on their faces a bit deeper these past few years. We are changed, and yet, we are just the same as we ever were, just the same as we'll ever be, I suppose. I looked at those pictures and thought of my struggles with adulthood, my attempts to find out exactly what it is I am supposed to be doing on the verge of my 30<sup>th</sup> year.

And so it was that when we finally turned out the lights – Mom and Dad sharing my bed, the cats and I on the couch – I closed my eyes and thought *this is what it should be. This.*

THE END