

Waiting for the end of the world

by

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For my family

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SOMETIMES WE BUILD FORTS

I arrived for my internship at the International Wolf Center in time to watch the captive wolves eat a road kill deer. After training, I would work as an intern talking with visitors, and answering their questions. But that first day I was like most people in the crowd, not sure what to expect. I stood with the other visitors before the wall of high windows in the observation area, with the deer carcass a few feet away. The two wolves, brothers Aidan and Denali, came right up to the windows and looked in at the children. One toddler squealed in delight, bouncing up and down on his unsteady legs. The wolves watched this motion with the interest of hunters.

Nothing could be more natural for a wolf than to rip past the skin of the deer belly into the red meat. The carcass was still partially frozen and they bit past it with their front incisors. It was hard to watch them eat. The bright color of the chest cavity, open and flexible, the salt and pepper mats of fur flying, the creamy sinew stretching off joints were all too vivid, too real. The physical construction of the deer was surprisingly frail under the wolf's jaws. Aidan chewed a rib bone in his back molars, moved jaws up and down, smack smack, crushing it to splinters.

Denali's head was partially hidden inside the red breast of the doe. He emerged, the thick red heart in his teeth. He faced the window and bit down on the muscle. Streams of blood escaped from both sides of his snout. Visitors gasped. Some backed away and most surged forward. Cameras clicked rapidly. It was a marvelous show.

I smiled then. As disgusted as I felt, I was also fascinated by Denali swallowing the heart, and by the different reactions among the crowd. I listened to the visitors too. Some people exclaimed at how voraciously the wolves ate. Others said the opposite, surprised by how calm they looked when they ate.

“They look like my dogs chewing on kibble,” said a man with a cowboy hat.

Denali dragged part of the deer through leaves away from Aidan. I followed him and came to stand next to a woman in a red sweater with a row of moose stitched along the collar. She sat with her back to the window. She looked slightly like my mother, and she was rocking almost imperceptibly forward and back.

“It’s horrifying, isn’t it?” she asked when she saw me looking at her.

“Yes, maybe,” I said. “I can see why people would think so.”

“But you don’t?” she asked. “Think it is horrifying?”

“It’s gruesome, but I also think it is just part of nature. The way things are.”

She tossed her head toward Denali without looking. “It’s just so cruel. How can that be the way things are? It’s not fair that the deer has to die.”

I nodded.

“Is it any fairer for the wolf to go hungry and die?”

“I guess not, but I wish it wasn’t all that suffering, you know?” She glanced at Denali through the corner of her eye and looked away again. I wanted to comfort her, and considered what I could say.

“But with all that suffering there is also cooperation,” I said. “Cooperation is maybe just as important for survival. That’s at least, what I try to tell myself.”

My last boyfriend, Chase, never let me open a door when I was with him. At first I thought it was chivalrous and endearing, but the impracticality of it began to wear on me. Double sets of doors always drove him crazy, especially if I didn’t wait for him to get the second one. It was a quirk of his character that I found embarrassing but mostly harmless.

One night we walked to the entrance of a movie theatre, where a man was holding the door for his family, and continued to hold it for us. Chase couldn't let the man hold the door for us, and took hold of it himself, waiting for the father to pass through.

"Why do you do that?" I whispered as we walked toward the old woman who was tearing tickets behind a stand designed for speeches. She said nothing, didn't even see us as she tore our tickets.

"Do what?" he asked.

"You can't seem to let anyone hold the door for you."

"I just don't want anyone to hold the door for you," he said. "That man was keeping the door open for you, not me, I guarantee it."

"I'm sure he was just trying to be nice," I said. "People can just be nice."

"Every time a man opens a door for you, he does it with the hope, however unconscious, that he will get some future benefit from it. Its especially true if he is attracted to you."

"But is this true of all men? I mean, a man opens doors for all kinds of people," I said "and he isn't attracted to them all."

"I'm not sure he thinks about it, but the benefit is there. It's a public act that announces 'I'm a good guy' to anyone who might be interested."

I didn't believe him and he laughed when I said so.

"So, is that the same when you open the door for me?" I said. "Do you expect something from me in return?"

"Sure. I expect that you will let me do something nice for you, and acknowledge that my role in this relationship is to help you and make your life easier."

"So what if a woman opens a door for a man?" I asked.

“Well, that’s just embarrassing.”

We walked into a dark theater, where the movie had already begun. He took my hand and led me to seats in front of a row of kids middle school age at most. One little boy in a hoodie had his arm around a girl with a high pony tail. The girl looked nervous, her eyes wide with that new excitement of dating, when holding hands is the best, most daring thing in the world.

“So what you are saying ,” I whispered, “is you want a complete dependent who can’t even open a door for herself?”

“No. Clearly I like you, and you are very capable. What I’m saying is that I want you to admit that you shouldn’t have to do everything by yourself.”

“But I like doing things by myself. I need it.”

I asked my friend John, an ecologist, to explain altruism to me. I was back at Iowa State University for another semester of graduate school, and taking an Ecology class with him. I invited him to a coffee shop on campus. It began to snow before our meeting, and he arrived covered in melted beads of water.

“The first question you should probably ask,” he said, “Does altruism exist? Ecologists tend to define it as actions that aren’t adaptive for the individual --meaning they don’t promote an individual’s ability to produce healthy offspring. Take a look at this, which might be an example.”

He pulled out his I-pad. A few seconds of tapping later he flipped it around to show me a picture of a golden retriever lying on her side, nursing several gray kittens.

He said, “Explain that as an adaptive strategy.” He went to get his coffee as I sat looking at the image, thinking about what the picture could mean. He returned with a coffee and four

packets of raw sugar. Outside the flakes fell at a slant, and in the distance the campanile sounded the hour on its bells.

“It doesn’t seem very adaptive,” I said. “I mean, if she is trying to pass on her genes, she’s not doing a very good job.”

“Right. If we look just at her actions, we might say that this is a good case for the existence of altruism. Others do receive benefit, but she isn’t enacting a strategy beneficial for her own offspring, and is losing resources in the process. But what if we try to define altruism as based on selfless intent? Then things get confusing. She may just have nursed pups and had them taken away, and is still producing milk. Maybe nursing kittens makes her more comfortable with all that milk she is still making. She also might get some benefit, some boost in her health and well being. It might even make her a better mother down the road. Which means it could be adaptive and thus not altruistic for the individual.”

He waved his hand as he spoke, in between ripping open sugar packets and dumping them in his coffee.

“There are so many variables. We can wonder what her intent is, what benefit she gets from the experience. We can test some things like the endorphins that come with nursing, but we can never really test other benefits. That’s why biologists stick to observing behaviors. Maybe she doesn’t even know why she is doing it. Maybe she just nursed those kittens because she couldn’t stop herself.”

“That’s a scary thought, John,” I said. “If she was taking care of them on instinct, then she had no choice, no free will to do this nice thing for them. I need to live in a world where someone can *choose* to be kind.”

I snatched the fourth packet away from John before he could add it to his coffee.

“Do you really need it?” I asked. “You are going to get diabetes.”

“I guess not,” he said, frowning. I gave the sugar packet back and he left it on the table.

We sat in silence as he stirred his little wooden stick around the cup.

“Something more to think about,” he said, “is that any trait or behavior has to be adaptive to persist. If it exists, it might in fact be adaptive for a group even if it isn’t for the individual. Like bees that sting. Some people speculate it is valuable for the hive, even though it kills the individual. It may turn out that we all need each other. If you look at fitness on the ecosystem scale, then species really do need each other to maintain ecosystem health and viability. Competition is important, but so is cooperation and altruism might have fitness on that level.”

“That’s not good news for a staunch individualist like me,” I said. “That means we can’t ever really make a choice just for ourselves, and worse we need to rely on others to make choices for us.”

“And needing each other is bad?” John asked, flipping his I-pad shut. “I’d think that that is sort of welcome news. It is sort of beautiful in a way.”

I only nodded then. But the truth was, while I could grasp that we needed other species, it was harder for me to accept that I needed other people. In a way, it’s the cruelest thing to need each other, because it sets us up for loss. We can’t keep everyone from pain, and it hurts our own survival. I don’t want to need other people. I want to choose to be with them.

My grandparent’s marriage was not a happy one towards the end. They lived in separate houses after their children were grown, my grandpa in the farm house on the Kansas prairie, and my grandma in town at her mother’s house. I took me a long time to see their unhappiness. I

justified my Grandma staying in town as a practical way for her to care for her ailing mother. But when Great Grandmother died, and Grandma did not move back to the farm, I began to wonder.

My brother and I took the train from our home in New Mexico to Kansas for many summers to live with my grandparents for several months. My brother worked in the fields driving a combine with Grandpa. I spent the days with Grandma, learning to mend, cook, clean, and garden. We took dinner to the workers in the fields around five each evening during wheat harvest. When they stopped harvesting at nine or ten at night, when the moisture got too high, my brother and Grandpa both came into town for another meal.

I was twelve the night I realized that there was a deep divide between Grandma and Grandpa. Grandma seemed nervous setting out dinner. She fortified herself against his disapproval, which became more frequent with his health problems. Our family would discover years later that his personality changed after a series of imperceptible strokes he suffered over the course of possibly decades. As I lived through those summers, I didn't have the comfort of an explanation. My grandma married a kind, generous man and now lived with an ill-tempered, verbally abusive one. He was mad that day, just like he was mad most days about the major stroke that had debilitated his left side, about all the ways in which he was losing control of his life and body with age.

Grandma worked at the stove with flour and milk, making the gravy the thickness that Grandpa expected. I laid out silverware and plates the way Grandma had taught me with the knife blade facing the plate, and the spoon on the outside of it, and the fork at the other side of the plate atop the folded napkin. She directed me about which salt shakers to put out, and which ones were deemed too small and inefficient. She kept one eye on the fried chicken so that she wouldn't burn it, which was an offense that would receive particular scorn. We had both learned

not to assume he wouldn't want any vegetables, even though he rarely ate them. We didn't dare to deny him dessert, though his diabetes was a growing problem. If he wanted dessert, that was his choice to make and not hers. She knew the thousands of pitfalls and snares to setting out dinner for Grandpa, and she navigated as many of them as she could, while growing increasingly flustered.

Unfailingly, he still found fault in her dinners, no matter how well prepared she was.

"You could have set out the butter so that it would have been spreadable."

"That was my fault, Grandpa," I said.

"You don't know any better. Your grandmother should have known. And I've told you over and over, I don't like the feel of ice against my teeth. Can't you just get me cold water and hold the ice?"

Grandma would occasionally fight back.

"Well, if you don't like the green beans that way, you don't have to eat them."

At the end of the meal, before Grandpa left to go back to the empty farmhouse, he pulled out his wallet and asked Grandma how much money she needed for groceries. Grandma struggled with money. She took as little as she could manage from him, but she needed it, especially when she had my brother and me to feed. It seemed from my perspective that Grandpa kept her poor, and I began to notice that summer that he made her ask for money at every opportunity.

"How much should I give you for groceries?"

"It was 200 this week," she said, her head lowered.

"Sounds like an awful lot," he said.

He took two 100-dollar bills out of a thick fold of money in his wallet, and laid them on the table beside his plate. He said a quick goodbye to my brother and me, and left without looking back.

A wolf is less likely to survive alone than with its pack. Wolves cooperate to survive, to hunt, and to raise pups. The subordinate members of the pack give up the right to mate, and instead care for the offspring of the alpha mating pair. This may be adaptive for their pack, but not necessary for the individual that doesn't breed. A lone wolf is a wolf that is lost, or a wolf looking for a pack. A young wolf often leaves the natal pack when it is old enough in search of a mate, a new territory, or another pack to join. These journeys are often a precarious time in a wolf's life, a time when it could easily starve before finding what it is looking for.

Chase and I drove to downtown Des Moines to meet his best friend from Chicago for a pitcher of Fat Tire. Chase paid for dinner, and so at the bar I tried to pay for the pitcher. I was uncomfortable letting Chase buy me things. It was always a struggle for us.

Chase got his card out and switched it for mine with the bartender.

"The man should pay," he said.

"I don't agree," I said, "but thanks."

"You shouldn't have to say thank you. You should know that this is just something I do, as your boyfriend."

Chase worked at Wells Fargo, in a job he hated. He spent his days reconciling what was paid and owed, weighing debt and profit. He had a strange way of seeing our relationship as an economy. He argued that everything he did for me was ultimately for his own benefit. At first, I

thought that this was a joke, but I realized later he really believed it. We walked back to the table with the pitcher.

“So how does it benefit you, when you pay my way all the time?” I asked.

“It’s biology,” he said. “Women stay with men who can provide. I pay to keep you close.” He said this with a joking smile.

His best friend Charles walked up. He had a round face and thick framed hipster glasses. He insisted on a hug from both of us in greeting. We sat in a booth, talking about their time traveling Germany together, and what they were up to now. Charles had landed a good job in Chicago, which allowed him to buy tickets for the Cubs and The Second City on weekends, and live in a fancy loft downtown. He talked of going to 120-dollar per-person business dinners, and how he had learned to keep his Oxfords shiny, and his Blackberry updated. I wondered if in Chase’s estimation, Charles had done as well with his career as he had not.

Somewhere in the middle of drinks, I could see Chase sink into one of his moods. Chase occasionally grew convinced that at 27, his youth was all but gone. When he was in these moods, he felt that all he had to show for his twenties were his travels in Germany, a stack of rejected job applications, and a feeling of poverty that came with taking a job that didn’t challenge him and barely allowed him to pay back student loans. Everyone was looking for jobs, but Chase took it personally that a good one hadn’t come his way. He felt very strongly that he could not be a real man while sleeping on a futon.

Chase downed glasses of Fat Tire, and when one pitcher was finished, the boys moved on to the next. It made them talk nostalgically about traveling, and everywhere they wanted to visit. They talked about apartments, Chicago, football, their mutual friends who had gotten married. They stumbled onto the topic of weddings and how much they cost.

Chase turned to me and asked, “Your parents have saved money for your wedding, right?” I stopped mid sip, my stomach gone. I ignored the question, guessing that during this mood, he was idly searching for something that would give his life some sense of forward progress. I was the personal success that Charles didn’t have, that was all.

“Personally,” Chase said, “I think that if two people can’t decide within a year whether they want to be married, then they shouldn’t be together.”

“That seems like a lot of pressure,” Charles said.

Chase looked at me. They both did. I pushed the sweet potato fries around my plate and did the math. We had been dating six months. At 23, I still felt too young to marry. When Chase said it, I felt like getting up from the booth and just running, without direction, just moving to refill my lungs. I could feel the weight of some future moment being planted under my sternum. It would germinate and grow, until that time came to tell him that I didn’t want a wedding, that I didn’t live by time tables, that it was too much pressure. The air in the bar was close and suffocating.

“Yeah, but I mean you either know or you don’t, am I right?” Chase said. He caught my wandering eye.

“I guess so,” I said.

I told my grandmother that I had met Chase. The family was gathered at her house for Thanksgiving and she ushered me into a back bedroom and shut the door. We sat down beside each other on the bed.

Much like the rest of my family, she didn’t often talk about what was closest to her heart.

“When I married your grandfather,” she said, “I was in love with his goodness. Your Grandpa took off his own jacket once and gave it to a construction worker who didn’t have one. He was always doing things like that.”

I nodded.

“We got married when he returned from war. I was so happy to see him. He was really the only man I ever dated.” She shifted to face me.

“I want you to be very careful about who you choose to spend your life with. You just have to be absolutely sure.” She got up and so did I. She smoothed the bed spread where we had made indents, and refolded the hospital corner.

When I was 15, Grandpa hired a high school girl named Lisa to work on the farm for the summer driving the grain cart. He would invite her to come to late dinner, and she would sit quietly, and answer his questions about her family and her plans for school.

“You should go into nursing,” he told Lisa. “There is no more honorable profession for woman than nursing. Nursing or teaching.”

“I think I’ll be an astrophysicist,” I said. I had no intention of going into the field, but he had ticked me off again, and I wanted to mess with him. “Or maybe a surgeon. Dr. Keener has a certain ring.”

Instead he ignored me.

“I like how you ladies don’t pluck your eyebrows,” he said. “Some women just go at it with those tweezers making themselves ridiculous. But with you two, it looks very natural.”

My hands were in fists under the table. I fantasized about taking his plate and dumping it into his lap, pounding the table and yelling like a wild thing. Instead I excused myself and went

to fume in my room and write angry poems. I thought about shaving off my eyebrows. I vowed not to become a nurse or teacher, or anything he would approve of when I grew up.

I am now a teacher. I still think of that day sometimes when I sit down to plan a lesson, or grade a batch of papers, and about how my grandma was a teacher, and for a time, my mother too.

At the International Wolf Center, volunteer biology professor Robert, helped us set out humane live-traps so that he could show our seven to ten- year- old campers the small rodents of the forest. He led them onto our trail like the pied piper, and sent them one at a time to retrieve a trap from just off the path and carry it back to him. Each aluminum trap was the size and shape of a Velveeta box, with a spring loaded door at the smallest end designed to snap closed behind the investigating rodent. It was eight-year-old Terry who brought out the trap that had closed on a red squirrel's foot. The squirrel dangled limply from the trap door as Terry carried it out of the forest. Roger took it and extracted the squirrel.

"It's unusual for that to happen. I have never seen it. Usually these traps are very safe."

"Is it dead?" Terry asked.

"It may yet die," Robert said, "But I think it is just stunned." His voice was calm and soothing, and the children were calm and soothed by it, and so was I. "The best thing we can do for it is leave it alone. I'm going to lay him here and then we will walk on."

He laid the squirrel on its belly its limbs stretched out in all directions. It was very still. After we checked all the traps we said goodbye to Robert and I sat with the children on logs in a grove of red pine.

"What will happen to the squirrel?" said Sarah, a girl who wore pink rain boots.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Hopefully it will rest, and then when it is ready it will run off.”

“Are you sure that is what will happen?”

“No, I’m not sure.”

“Is it going to die?”

“It might. But everything dies. That’s a natural thing that happens eventually to everything that is living.”

“That’s so sad,” Sarah said.

They began to build a fort, next to other forts built by the kids that had come before them. The children directed me about where to set the logs. After a while, I sat and watched them, and Terry came and found me resting.

“I can’t stop thinking about that squirrel,” Terry said. He tapped a stick against the red pine trunk where I was sitting, not looking at me.

“Is life always so horrible?” he asked.

“What do you think?”

“Sometimes it is terrible. And sometimes we build forts.”

Chase once asked me what part of his body I liked the best. I told him I liked that he didn’t have chicken legs. His legs were strong and proportionate to the rest of him. I asked him what part he liked most about me.

“Your eyebrows,” he said. “They are the perfect shape.”

Grandpa had a stroke when my brother and I were in college, and had long since stopped coming to stay the summers. He was alone at the farm house the night after his cousin’s funeral.

Too tired to undress from his black suit, he sat down in his chair by the hearth in the living room. My uncle found him in the morning, still sitting in his chair. My uncle asked him why he didn't call someone for help. The phone was right next to him. Grandpa said that he didn't want to call anybody, that he had expected to die.

By the time my parents, brother, and I arrived Grandpa's condition had deteriorated. He was immobile and could no longer talk. We had no idea if he could hear us or not. He was in a hospital room just a five minute walk from my grandmother's house. Our family kept vigil over his failing body for the two weeks. We made the decision together to take him off life support, to stop feeding him. The doctors told us he would die of dehydration.

One night toward the end, I walked out of grandma's house toward the hospital to take a late night shift of waiting with him. My mother had just walked into my grandmother's kitchen with new lines on her face, and I knew Grandpa was alone at the hospital. I was afraid he would die and no one would be there.

It was early September, and a fogging car drove slowly down the street, spraying a white mist of chemicals into the evening air to prevent the mosquito eggs from hatching. I pressed my sleeve to my face and ran from it in full sprint. Even after I had run far from the fogging, I kept running- through the back entrance of the hospital and up the stairwell to his dimly lit room full of the sound of his dry inhaling breaths. My heart was on fire, my blood flushed to the tips of my ears, the skin on my hands warm and pink.

His face was frozen, his eyes shut, and his mouth open. It looked like a cave, and the breaths came in a steady rattle at the back of his throat like wind blowing through a house. His mouth had begun to smell terrible. If he could still feel, it was important to take a little sponge on the end of a stick, dip it in water, and rub it around the inside of his mouth to keep it moist, and

to keep him more comfortable. I gritted my teeth and swabbed, holding my breath. I applied some Vaseline to his lips with Q-tip.

For something else to do, I changed his socks. His feet were hard and waxy and cold. I touched them as little as possible, peeling back a white pair of tube socks and replacing them with a blue pair as soft as two kittens. When the job was done, I watched him breathe for I don't remember how long. His expression seemed troubled, but in a vague way. I hoped that he was not at all conscious of this. He would be so ashamed to be lying there helpless. I tried to rub some warmth into his ankles.

The mosquitoes swarmed the day of the funeral in a quantity I have never seen before or since, even in the rainforest. They were as thick as weather. When I stepped outside, their buzzing was a constant, like a static.

It was a warm day and the guests at the grave site radiated the smell of Deep Woods Off. We spent the entire funeral huddled together, a community of mourners smacking each other lightly on the arms and necks whenever we saw an insect land.

Grandpa had wanted to be buried in a pine box that would be broken down quickly in the soil from which he made his living. The funeral parlor insisted that we keep his body from the earth, pump it full of chemicals, and separate it with a coffin and a water tight concrete box. The water table is shallow here, and they don't want any leeching. So much flowed just beneath us.

As the pastor spoke, the mosquitoes feasted. I spent most of the funeral fidgeting, concerned for every exposed inch of skin, convinced each puff of breeze was a landing invader. They laid Astroturf to cover the ground and keep us from the soil. Beneath it, I felt the corner of a headstone with my toe. We stood on our relatives. We carried them in our genes, we mourned

over their heads. Above us thousands of tiny insects floated carrying our blood, alive now and shared.

We gathered to eat together in the house of my grandpa's cousin, who had died just weeks before him. I spent time wandering the rooms of the great house set back in the wheat and bordered by a creek. I squeezed past old Midwesterners talking about the weather. It was not until that day that I understood the unfailing comfort of the subject of weather.

My brother found a way out of the house for us by volunteering to run an errand. He had the keys to my uncle's Ford F-150, one of the few vehicles not blocked into the drive. We raced from the door of the house up the long gravel drive to where it was parked. My brother beat me, unlocked the truck, and dove into the driver's seat.

"Get in!" he yelled. He flung open the passenger door for me and I tried to jump up. My pencil skirt was too narrow. It wouldn't let me lift my foot high enough to scale into the cab. Already the mosquitoes were biting and filling the cabin.

"I can't reach!" I cried. In desperation, I got a running start and flung my torso up on the seat like a whale trying to beach itself. This is when we started laughing, immediately a tearful, weakening laughter. I laughed and squirmed back and forth on my belly, trying to both pull myself onto the seat with my arms and find some purchase for my feet. My brother, doubled over in throws of hysterics, made a few half-hearted tugs on my arms. Then, he got out, walked around, and gave me a boost into the cab. We laughed and smacked at each other's mosquitoes all the way into town.

In 1995, a 21-year-old college student Lora Shrake risked her life to save a woman she saw being mauled by a bull in a pasture surrounded by electric fencing. She pulled her car over,

went through the electric fence into the paddock, and began to beat the bull with a two foot length of tubing, giving the woman a chance to escape. They both survived (Carnegie Hero Fund Commission).

I heard about Lora Shrake during a radio program called *Radiolab* on National Public Radio. The interviewer, Jad Abumrad, was interested in her motivation for this heroic act.

Jad Abumrad: “When you were there at that fence and you had the choice to either stay put or go through it, what was going through your mind? Was there a calculation there?”

Lora Shrake: “No, can’t really say that, I mean.”

Abumrad: “You didn’t weigh your options?”

Shrake: “I did not. It was just, here is the problem, here’s what I need to do and something needed to happen.”

Abumrad: “So there was no choice moment?”

Shrake: “Not that I recall. No.”

Chase and I lasted seven months. When he ended it, he wasn’t able to explain why beyond the fact that he didn’t see a future for us. Since then, I have asked him if he could explain it.

“I didn’t know until we broke up that you needed me.”

A few weeks before we broke up, a car collided with my parked car, bending the back panel over the rear tire. The person who hit it drove away and didn’t leave a note.

Chase discovered the wreck in the morning when he went out to warm up our cars and scrape off the ice. He came in shaking, almost crying, to tell me.

“Why would someone do that?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“What do I do?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’ll call in late for work and stay with you.” But he didn’t have any vacation to spare. We walked out into the blue February. It was easily negative 20 degrees that morning. Chase was living in the suburbs of Ankeny. The street was plastered with identical town homes, all painted a slightly different shade of gray. They were impossibly narrow and curved around going nowhere in particular, creating blind turns. My car was sitting inside one of those curves. The red tail light glass was sprinkled over the street ice like rubies.

“I’ll stay with you,” he said, rubbing my shoulders. His breath came out in visible puffs. I could feel the frozen hair in my nose, and dryness of my mouth and skin.

“You can’t,” I said. But I wanted him too. I didn’t know how to ask him, but I desperately wanted him to stay.

“You should go to work,” I said. “I can take care of this.” I wasn’t at all sure that I could. I already couldn’t feel my fingers and or my face. I was shaking violently through my two sweaters and my coat.

“Are you sure?” Chase asked.

“I’m sure. I’ll figure it out,” I said.

I watched him drive away, the steam from his tail pipe trailing off. After calling the police and AAA, I wasn’t sure what to do. I didn’t go back inside right away. For a few minutes, I stood dazed in the street, next to my car, focusing on the pain of my frozen fingers as some penitence for not asking Chase for what I needed. I imagined Chase out there in the greater network of suburban arteries, as the office workers made slow forward progress towards jobs

they all despised. Surely their combined tail pipe fumes mixed and thinned above my head. I stomped my feet in the street of identical gray townhomes, waiting for help to arrive.

A deer carcass reclined in the bed of the wheel barrow, as the wolf curator brought it out for feeding time. Its belly was an enormous round bulb, its hind legs splayed outward, hoofs dangling above the lip of the barrow. It took what looked like tremendous effort for curator to lift the wheelbarrow past the balance point and dump the deer on the grass.

The wolves tore into the bulbous deer. I had been at the center long enough now to not be surprised by feedings anymore. I liked that the wolves weren't disgusted or ashamed the way I often am about eating meat. They didn't have, as far as we knew, any human-like emotions. They were wolves being wolves, and that was immensely comforting. Denali was the one to find a baby deer, fresh from the dead womb and covered in spotted fur. He pulled it out of the mother's carcass and the audience gasped. Many people turned away. A family left.

A blonde girl of about six, kneeling on the bench, watched with her hands pressed against the glass.

"What's that, Mommy?" she asked. Her mother stroked her forehead and looked her daughter in the eyes.

"It's a baby deer, honey. There was a baby deer inside the momma deer when she died."

"Why won't it wake up now?" the girl asked. The woman swept the little girl into her arms and carried her to the play room on the other side of the observation area.

"She won't get up, honey," the woman said as she walked away. "I'm sorry."

GRAVE DRESSING

Kansas City, Early 90's

I was too young to remember much of my first funeral, my grandmother's funeral. She was my father's mother. was close to the ground then, and I remember what I saw from that angle. I remember details of shoe buckles and colors of ribbon.

Grandma liked to pinch my cheeks and call me chubby. Grandma had a collection of porcelain and glass figurines that sat in her living room of their house in Kansas City. She talked loudly, and without filter. Grandpa would turn off his hearing aid when she talked to him, nodding in agreement no matter what she was saying at the time. He often retreated with us to the basement, a place where grandma would never go. Instead she had an intercom, and would call down to us when she wanted something, or when a meal was ready. She died in her house one night. She had been fighting cancer. Grandpa called the ambulance. This is all I have ever heard about how it happened. It was some great mystery, this line that was suddenly drawn as fact between grandma living and grandma dead.

During her funeral, I remember my cousin was bothered by his tie, and kept untying it. My aunt Cathy, the oldest of my dad's sisters, kept tying it back up. She wanted everything to be perfect at the funeral. She remarked at how beautiful the roses were in the casket topper.

Before they lowered the casket, they asked if we wanted to keep the flowers. Each of the women and girls of the family were supposed to go and pluck a red rose off the casket to keep. I refused to do so.

"Don't you want one?" my aunt asked me.

"They are grandma's flowers," I kept saying.

“You can save it and it will help you remember her,”

I didn't want to cheapen that pretty thought for her. I had kept a rose once until it dried into a black bud, and the petals crisped and fell off. I didn't say anything, but I knew that rose wouldn't last. The lively flowers that she and my cousins held were already dying, already dead.

Great Bend, KS The late 90's

When my great grandmother Zugg was dying, there was a cloud of monarch butterflies outside her window. The town was coated in black and orange fluttering wings. I remember moving outside into her garden after I told her goodbye. She was always an amazing gardener, with a special love for foxglove. The foxglove had overtaken the other flowers in the bed. I walked the narrow paths between them. I felt like a cat in tall grass. Clouds of butterflies lifted from the foxglove blooms, from the lilac bushes against the gate, from the trees, and from the ground. I took only a few steps before being caught up in the swirl of their bodies. They stirred and settled. I held my breath.

Great Grandmother and I did not know each other well. By the time I was growing and becoming aware, she was forgetting, shutting down, losing interest. I hadn't existed for much of her good memory and lived far away from Kansas. When I was ushered into the east room of the Broadway house to tell her goodbye, she did not remember me. I held her little hand and told her I loved her, and she accepted her confusion about who I was with grace. To me she was the relic of the house on Broadway, part of that magical place that I came to know well after her passing. My grandmother, my mother's mother, cared for her and eventually lived there with her so that she could take constant care of her mother.

What I knew of Great Grandmother came from Grandma's stories. She had raised kids through the depression and had seen two world wars, the cold war, the fall of the Berlin wall, the rise of the Silicon Valley Bubble. She was once asked what, of all the changes she had lived to see, had changed the world the most in her opinion. She said lawn mowers. Before lawn mowers, the whole world was taller, wilder. She still marveled at being able to see so far in either direction from the roadways.

She had also survived her first husband, my grandmother's father, who had died of a heart attack. He had produced the local newspaper and they ran a successful bookstore during the war. They both loved books and their collection intermingled with her second husband's books on the shelf of the house's library.

Her second husband was a doctor named Zugg. In his pictures he looked very handsome. He brought her to live in his house, with its white columns on a stately shaded street of elms and redbuds. She was his second wife.

I have always tried to imagine Great Grandmother, who had raised her children in a humble house, moving into this magnificent affair with its ice room and its expansive garden. There was a coal room in the basement and the attic was full of her elegant crepe dresses and costume jewelry. There were hats, each in their own round box tied with cloth string. They were covered in velvet and stiff, and many had net that draped over the face. There were gloves, purses still carrying tubes of old lipstick, and embroidered handkerchiefs. The doctor had one tri-cornered hat with a men's club medallion, a pith helmet sitting alone in the bottom of a trunk. He had taken her on cruises, and small brass models of the ships on which they had sailed gathered dust on the shelves, next to ceramic windmills from Holland.

Great Grandma had outlived Dr. Zugg too. She outlived most of the people in her life, living well into her 90s. I reckoned her forgetfulness was a way to not be hurt by the memory of all she had lost. The house became my grandmother's after her death, and my domain for the summers when I visited.

We snapped the ends off of peas and read to each other in the tiny kitchen. We planted a vegetable garden next to the foxglove. It may be an accident of my memory, but I remember going to more funerals than weddings as a child.

When the funeral was announced I was excited at the prospect of seeing people's reactions to tragedy. I painstakingly prepared, playing with the idea of wearing one of Great Grandmother's velvet hats, a black pill box with a net veil that draped stiffly and asymmetrically across the face. It looked like a hat Jackie Kennedy had worn. I asked grandmother what I should wear, since I didn't have any black.

"Black isn't the only color for funerals," she said. "I'm going to wear red, because, in a way it isn't sad that Beth has died. She was suffering the pain that comes with cancer, and now she doesn't have to anymore."

"Isn't that sort of against the rules?" I asked.

She chuckled. "Red is the color of bravery," she said, "and Beth was very brave."

The day before the funeral, we went to Beth's family for lunch, and to help finish cooking. Beth's mother, Eleanor, was Grandpa's cousin. She and Grandma had grown up together. Eleanor was free and gregarious. She loved to tell stories of riding around in the rumble seat of boys' cars. They had been roommates at college, and still Eleanor and Grandma were good friends. But that day Eleanor wasn't cracking jokes, she was dealing with the loss of her daughter.

I sat at the table with Eleanor's grandchildren, two older girls and a younger boy I had never met, all of whom had just lost their mother. This was the moment I stopped feeling happy to be going to a funeral. We tried to talk and joke about other things, but the underlying fact of what had happened and why we were all sitting at a card table being encouraged to eat something, was too big to ignore. The perfunctory casserole dishes lined the counter, and Eleanor went over her list of the dishes she would add before tomorrow's guests arrived.

"The church offered to cook," Eleanor said. "But I wanted to do it. This is our house, and we want people to feel very welcome in it."

I settled for going to the funeral in my church clothes. Everyone was surprisingly calm. I saw barely a handkerchief or tissue. The family seated directly in front of the casket had lost a daughter, a mother, a friend and no one cried.

They lowered her casket into a concrete box. We never saw any dirt. I was expecting some bereaved matron to fall to her knees and clench fistfuls of Kansas dirt in her hands, crying unabashedly. There was none of it.

Beth was the first person I saw interred in the graveyard that holds many of my family members. As long as I can remember, I have associated that graveyard with home. The resting place of my family is Kansas. I have always considered my parents to be wanderers who may return there one day. They left the Midwest for the West, for the mountains of Colorado and New Mexico. They raised us in the West, but they are Midwesterners, and when we grew up we learned the behaviors of Midwesterners too. I have always felt like an outsider in New Mexico because of this. When we return to Kansas, I feel like an outsider too. However, there I am surrounded by people who know where I come from, and how the history of my family is intertwined with the dirt.

Other summers, we spent happier days with Eleanor. She helped grandma move away from the old Zugg home, and into a large ranch-style house, where everything she needed would be on one level. She did this after Grandpa had a major stroke, thinking that he might come to live with her, and let her take care of him. He never did.

Eleanor, Grandma, and I enjoyed taking trips to neighboring towns to pick out fabric for the new couches or wallpaper for the house. Eleanor once got pulled over for speeding on the trip, getting out of the ticket by blaming “her darned old lead foot” and smiling with her infectious smile.

Her husband Ralph had left home at 16 to make his own way in the world. He had done well enough in his business to build Eleanor the house of her dreams. She designed the brick building to be set back from the road, among the wheat fields. She had a long gravel driveway, and she surrounded the house in roses. Ralph kept a huge garden that he worked in all morning, bringing in giant cucumbers and cantaloupe. I remember particularly the asparagus, pale green and giant, an experiment he wished had turned out better. As far as I could tell it was only a failure in comparison to his other great garden successes. They had to beg people to take away their bumper crops. Eleanor and Ralph didn't get over their daughter's untimely death as much as learn to live with it. They kept their traditions. On Christmas eve, they hosted the largest Christmas party I have ever known, complete with oyster soup and crackers, and *It's a Wonderful Life* playing in the basement.

I impatiently awaited the call each early August when the cherries were ripe for picking. I relished climbing the ladder and filling my bucket to the brim. Eleanor, Grandma, and I would sit in Eleanor's kitchen pitting cherries for hours to freeze for cobblers and pies. Eleanor would tell me stories of my family, entrusting me with family memories that had been entrusted to her.

I have since forgotten so many of them, and one of my biggest regrets is not asking more questions of her, not writing those memories down.

The one story I cannot forget was of a woman from our family during the Civil War. Upon hearing of her husband's death in a battle, she wandered the yard outside her house all night in her nightgown, sobbing as her child watched from the window. This image haunts me, makes me think about all the unknown stories that have made my life and the lives of all my family what they are.

Great Bend, 2006

Grave Dressing is a term I found in *Intimate Relationships*, a text book by Rowland S. Miller and Daniel Perlman. It describes the process of coping with the dissolution of a close relationship, understanding what happened, and learning from those experiences.

After my mother's father died, the assistant pastor of the Methodist church was put in charge of the funeral service. He didn't know my grandfather and came to our family with a task for the service. He asked us to write stories that described the man as we remembered him. I later found out that it was one of his first funeral services. He was a young pastor just out of seminary. He needed material.

I took the task to heart, and I realized that it was also for me, and for all of us. It got us sharing our stories with each other. I ended up writing a fragment of a memory from when I was four or five maybe. I thought it would be good because it involved leaping and any pastor could make the biblical connection there.

The car ride to Kansas had been an epic journey. We spent 10 hours driving from New Mexico to the farm. We had arrived at the porch of the farmhouse before Grandpa could get out of the fields to meet us. The porch was a concrete slab three or four feet off the ground. It didn't have a railing. Grandpa came walking up to the porch in his overalls, sun burnt, his hands dirty as always under the fingernails. Without a thought in my head other than my excitement to see him, I leapt at him when he got close enough. I leapt into mid-air, convinced without a doubt that he would catch me. And he did. He caught me.

The pastor used the story in his sermon along with most of our stories. After, we all ate lunch in the Methodist Church basement. They had their traditional funeral fare, the comforting reliability of the ham and pineapple casserole, the green beans and bacon, the Jello salads, rolls, coffee and cakes.

Grandpa didn't leave a will or any guidance about how he wished to divide the land he had acquired over his life. The lawyers warned my mom and her brothers to expect squabbles and disagreements to arise over decisions. The land, after all, was very valuable, and there was a lot at stake.

“With all due respect,” my uncle said. “You don't know this family.”

Grandma, Mom, and my uncles decided to incorporate the farm so that they shared the ownership. My younger uncle, who had been putting up with my ailing grandfather and his emotional farming decision for years, was suddenly free to run it as he pleased. Uncle Roger no longer had to answer to his father, who wanted to work the fields in the middle of the night when he couldn't sleep, re-do work that had already been done, who refused to try new farming practices, or to make changes that were desperately needed.

The family sold and rented much of the land. He tore down the old rental house that was already collapsing. He pulled it down into its basement and buried it. My uncle cleaned out each shed of its lifetime accumulation of things. He tore down an unsafe shed, and grain bins that had been damaged in the wind. He gutted the farmhouse, replacing floors and siding, the roof and drywall. He built a geothermal gradient heating system and a tornado shelter. His family was able to move in. He raised two refurbished commercial windmills with towers as wide around as tractor tires near the farm house. They met the farm's electrical needs, and fed energy into the grid. It was as if in Grandpa's passing, all of the bad memories of his last years that had skulked in every dusty corner of the farm were suddenly flushed out. Fresh air began to move again through the old farmstead, its outbuildings, and sheds.

I left to study in Ecuador the semester after my grandpa died. I heard of all of these changes from afar. I returned on the day of the auction when my uncle sold all of Grandpa's antique cars and tractors. The farm was alive in a way I don't remember ever seeing it. It was a showcase of American steel, white-wall tires, turquoise bodies, white leather upholstery. The cars sat in the yard, side by side, representing just about every decade of Grandpa's life. I had never seen any of them before. They had been hiding in the sheds. Most of them, my uncle said, Grandpa probably didn't even remember he had purchased.

Kansas City Summer 2009

My brother and I received news of Grandpa Keener's, our father's father, turning toward death.

All of that spring, Grandpa had called me occasionally to say that he loved me. Each time he called he wouldn't talk for more than a few minutes. He would say that he loved me, and then

he would say goodbye. We both knew why he was calling. We never spoke of it, but it was in his voice, in his insistence that he call and say those words.

I had bought a black dress before I left for Europe because of those calls. As far as I knew, he wasn't even sick, but I bought it because he seemed to be recognizing how close he was to the end. I saw it in a store, a black dress that reminded me of the dress Grandma wore in a picture of the two of them taken just after their wedding. In the picture, Grandma leans back against a telephone pole and Grandpa leans toward her from the curb, smiling. The two dresses have the same tight pencil skirts. The waists surround the narrowest part, just under the ribs, and the seams are hidden and lay expertly.

My dad drove ahead, and I followed him. I drove into Kansas City, into a strange neighborhood, to an uncomfortably fancy hospice. My aunt had insisted on bringing Grandpa into this luxury in order for him to die. She knew they would treat him well, and they did, but I think too she needed the comfort of elegant surroundings to get through her own loss. I marveled at how far she had grown away from the rest of her family in these types of expectations. I was uncomfortable with the excess of the hospice which had differed so much from the humble way Grandpa had lived his life. My grandpa had raised his family on the east side of Kansas City in a neighborhood that grew increasingly tougher as my dad and aunts grew up. My grandpa was a roofer and set tile for a living. He was the best, fearlessly scaling roofs and lifting heavy loads. He once laid some tile in Roger Maris's house. And now he was talking to dead people.

My aunts and father had been taking turns staying with Grandpa. He wanted to get out of bed in the middle of night, which he couldn't do because of his IV. They had to keep him still and try to convince him to lie back down.

I promised to stay with him the night I arrived so that they could get some sleep. He didn't want to be alone. Every time I released his hand, he called out. When he fell asleep I was able to ease my hand out of his, and lay on the roll-away bed next to him, sleeping for maybe half an hour before he would call out or try to stand up. The nurses came in and out, checking levels and giving him more morphine.

In the morning, the sun rose, and when I opened the window, I noticed the catheter at the side of his bed was full of red liquid. The nurses said this was a sign of organ failure. Grandpa and I ate pancakes together, just like two hung-over college students after an all night party. He sat up on the bed, and I pulled the bedside table up to him and sat across from him, cutting his sausage and forking it for him.

He had been making less and less eye contact, but over breakfast he looked me in the face and told me he loved me. It was our last lucid moment together, the last time he was able to sit up, the last time we spoke just the two of us. The ghosts he was seeing and talking to became more real than reality. He started talking about how afraid he was to die.

Family came in waves. My brother cut his trip short and flew back to Kansas City to be with us. We took turns being with Grandpa and catching sleep where we could.

I started to find reasons to leave his bedside and get some distance from the hospice. If we needed any one thing, from more socks for Grandpa, to more paper cups for us, I was on my way to Target before anyone had asked me. Kansas City is muggy and miserable in August. Those summer days near my grandfather's passing, grayness settled over the city. The clouds didn't help with the heat.

On my way back from one such trip to get supplies, I drove down a hill toward the hospice. A red fox bounded into the road, carrying a dead rabbit its mouth. I slammed on the

brakes as it sauntered across in front of me. I thought it looked at me for a moment, but probably was just looking at where I was behind the glass. Then it disappeared between houses. I started to drive forward again amazed, when a hawk launched from a nearby tree and glided straight toward the car. I had only a few seconds to register its sizable wingspan and speckled breast as it soared toward my windshield and lifted up at the last moment, gliding over the top of the car and safely away. I came to tell Grandpa what I had seen, but he wasn't responding anymore. He was sleeping or what looked like sleep.

He died that day. The hospice nurses could tell when he was close and gave us warning. We got up from our lunch to walk into his room and watch him stop breathing.

My aunt insisted on white roses, a color that turned brown fast in the August heat. We were all busy in those next days. Before the funeral there were fruit trays and thank you cards to purchase, Aunt Rene's hotel key to find, Grandpa's tie to deliver to the funeral parlor.

We also had to buy my brother a suit and shoes, since he had come straight from Europe with only vacation clothes and ratty flip flops. My dad, brother and I went to the mall, which strikes me now as a very American way to express grief. Dad bought me shoes, and I chose purple ones, because grandpa deserved a little color in his funeral. The Shoe Circus had only cheap heels. They rubbed at the ankle bones. At the funeral, I aerated the cemetery lawn in them, wincing and trying not to show it. Before they lowered the casket my aunts and cousins took a brown rose to keep and remember. This time they didn't ask me to join them.

Great Bend, Kansas Fall 2011

In my grandmother's kitchen, we arranged the leftover funeral flowers to give to people in nursing homes. The table and counters bloomed with arrangements we were re-arranging into smaller bouquets. My great aunt Dorothy had died just before Thanksgiving, and her daughter had saved them all, even the casket topper, so that she could give them to people in nursing homes. She had stopped wanting to eat when her husband died, and went into a year-long decline after his death. After more than 60 years of marriage, she didn't seem to want to live without him, and she died almost exactly a year later.

The family set up a scholarship fund in her name and asked for donations instead of flowers. People sent flowers anyway. My mother's own carefully chosen bouquet stood by the toaster oven, a beautiful mixture of pink roses with complex petals, white lilies powdered with saffron colored pollen, and sprigs of greenery poking out at carefully chosen angles. It had taken her days of deliberation to decide if she would send flowers against the family's request. In the end, she sent a bouquet, writing to us to say that she just really wanted to order flowers. "I think Aunt Dorothy would have liked them," she wrote, "And Barb and Cher love flowers."

Barb is Aunt Dorothy's daughter and Cher is her daughter-in-law. They were now in the kitchen dealing with those flowers, putting them into Mason jars, getting them ready to pass out. I snipped off the ends of the stems and put them into jars while the women talked.

It took us hours to make the small bouquets. Many people had felt the same need to send flowers. People were able to express their grief by giving flowers, but not in other ways.

When we completed the bouquets, Barb and I set out to deliver them. We started at a rich nursing home where each door was decorated with the name of its residents.

“We’d like to give flowers to those people who don’t get any visitors,” Barb said. The nurses led us to rooms of lonely women propped up in arm chairs, watching TVs. Most of them were confused by the sight of Barb and me.

“Are these flowers for me?”

One long bony woman tried to sit up in bed when we came in. Barb knew just what to do, and helped prop the woman up on pillows. The woman took our hands in her spindly ones, fingers contorted with arthritis.

“Thank you, thank you,” she said. “I’m just an old woman. I’m just an old woman.”

The other nursing home was not as affluent. In the atrium, there was a giant bird cage full of canaries and cockatoos. The squawking echoed down the tiled labyrinth of hallways that smelled of soup and bleach. The caregivers didn’t come into the rooms with us, as they did in the first place. They seem to be overwhelmed, as if they had seen too much. When we told them what we were up to, they looked at us as if we were wasting our time, and waved vaguely at a hallway where there were plenty of people who never get visitors. Many of the patients were uncommunicative. Moaning issued from rooms, and I shied away, suggesting another door, suddenly afraid of our mission. Barb also hesitated, unsure where to go, but still determined to get the job done. One woman asked us to come back when she was in less pain. Another asked who we were five times, looking more afraid of our presence than pleased.

One woman knew what we were doing immediately.

“Are these funeral flowers?” she asked.

“Yes,” Barb said. “They are from my mother’s funeral.”

“I don’t want them,” she said. “No thank you.” She said this suspiciously, as if we wanted to rush her along toward the grave. Our last stop was the house of a young woman my

age, who was fighting cancer and had just had a hysterectomy. She wasn't home, and we left a bouquet of dark purple calla lilies with her mother. We didn't mention they were from a casket topper. I heard from someone once that calla lilies are the flower for death. I hope that this is not true, or that the young lady would know nothing about it and find them cheerful.

My brother flew his Piper Cherokee to Kansas for Aunt Dorothy's funeral. My grandfather had taught him how to fly in the planes he owned, taking off and landing on the Great Bend tarmac. Our family used to own and farm the land on which the airport now sits. The government took it, declaring eminent domain in order to build the runways during World War II. Grandpa and his family were forced to move their home. I imagine my family was not the first. My uncle still farms the strips between the runways, perhaps as a way to remember where we have come from and how things have changed. My brother looks so much like my grandpa as he climbs out onto the wing of his little plane. Every good part of Grandpa is in my brother. Grandpa learned to fly in the war and passed his love of flying to my uncle and my brother. We move around more than we used to now. Our nuclear family has broken our ties with Kansas soil and taken flight. But today it's another windy day in Kansas, and a homecoming for all of us. When my brother walks up, he is grinning.

EVACUATION PLAN

Hot air ballooning is an exercise in controlled falling. There is no comforting hum of a motor, or the powerful thrust of engines. A balloon pilot and passenger are ballast suspended. They have traded thrust for buoyancy, allowing themselves to be pushed by the wind. While pilots practice the art of controlling their crafts, much is still left to chance. Their sport requires fragility, a humble submission of lives to propane flame, corralled air, and favorable winds. The laws of flight seem no less miraculous for their scientific explanations and no less impossible to my gravity loving bones.

Daniel Quinn, in his novel *Ishmael*, compares modern human civilization to an aircraft that won't fly. He says that we built our civilization, shoved it off a cliff to test its flight-worthiness with everyone inside, and then mistook falling for flying. "Everyone is looking down," Quinn writes, "and it's obvious that the ground is rushing up ...and rushing up faster every year."

I took my first balloon flight when I was a freshman in high school. Our neighbors, the Kemps, let my dad, brother and me work as crew members for the balloon team. At the last minute they surprised us, by giving my brother and me the chance to fly with the pilot George. From the air, I followed the shadow of our balloon. The flight was so gentle, it seemed that we were stationary in the air, though our shadow traveled fast. It passed over our chase crew far below, and across people's backyards and turquoise swimming pools.

The sun broke over the spine of the Sandia Mountains, lighting up the snaking green vein of the Rio Grande river valley. Albuquerque relies on the river for life. The city would not be

here without it. I'm told it once lived up to the name the great River, for it was broad and wild, and flowed strongly and flooded at will. Now, it has flat-lined, grown shallow and tame.

It is hard to tell the level of the river from the air. From that height the river is a mirror, in which we could see the glint of the sun, and then ourselves.

In the river valley, we passed over farm plots. The farm plots are thin slivers, split and split again between families. The narrowest part of each borders the acequias that run parallel to the river. These dirt waterways were opened now and then to flood the fields. Long rows of steel flood barriers sat among the cottonwoods like giant forgotten jacks.

"Let's do a splash and dash," George said.

"A what?" my brother asked.

"I'm going to dip down and touch the basket in the river with the basket, and then take off again. All you need to do is hold on."

He began rapidly pulling on chords that let hot air out from the envelope. We descended skimming the bottom of our basket on the tops of the cottonwoods. My brother reached out and snatched some cottonwood leaves off a branch and presented them to me like a bouquet.

We dropped fast, and George was deep in concentration.

"The bottom of the basket will get wet. If you don't want your feet wet, you crash dummies will have to jump up and sit on the side of the basket."

Andrew jumped and reached the railing easily with his long legs. I tried and failed. I was afraid I would overshoot it and fall out of the basket. George jumped up, and though he was a big guy he accomplished it with grace. We were close to the river's surface now. I accepted that my feet would get wet. We landed with a soft squelch on the river bottom. The water where we landed was only a few inches deep, and the water instantly flooded through the wicker and the

canvas of my tennis shoes. It was bracingly cold. George apologized to me for getting my feet wet. I wasn't worried. I was amazed, thankful to be back on the ground. It was the first time I had stood in the water of the Rio Grande.

As quickly as we had landed, the basket squelched out of the mud and we were airborne with long hot blasts of the burner.

Almost every time I have driven over that river with my family, someone remarks about its level. We crane our necks to see the shimmering surface over the concrete barrier and the strips of forest that fringe its banks. We keep a careful eye on it, worried when it is low, elated when it is slightly higher than other times we have seen it. It's like playing the lotto. When we see the bridge we hold our breaths, waiting for a moment of relief or of worry.

That level is a promise. The lush, green cottonwoods on the banks give me hope that life can persist in the desert. The Rio Grande is what drew people to it 25,000 years ago. It is the one reason people were able to stay, settling in the area in 400 A. D. (Torrez). Like many Westerners, I have lived under the assumption that a river is something that will always be there, like a mountain or the horizon. But unlike the many Westerners who came before me, I was born into a time where major assumptions like that no longer hold. The life and promise of the river is evaporating. The Rio Grande once emptied into the Gulf of Mexico. Now it dries up on land in Mexico, somewhere just out of sight downstream.

Ballooning was one of few times I saw our neighbors, the Keiths, truly happy. They were good people, loyal and generous, good friends to my parents. One evening when my parents were out of town, they were kind enough to invite me for dinner. We spent the meal sipping

giant glasses of sweetened iced tea on the back porch, discussing the turtle that lived under their wood pile. We talked about the times of day during which they had seen it emerge, what they had fed it, what it hadn't eaten, how old it might be, and where it might have come from, and the ways its life was constantly endangered by my cat which we let roam wild for who knows what reason.

I assumed that except for the balloon fiesta, the Keiths led a next door life of such details and isolated routine. They seemed to fixate on the small things that upset them, which made them seem to be in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction. They poked their head over our shared wall now and then to list their freshly discovered disappointments and to gossip about the neighbors. I was secretly amazed at the gossip, and learned all sorts of things about our neighborhood, full of strange and wonderful characters.

There was the lady down the block who washed the river stone that covered her front lawn in a carefully orchestrated process. She removed the stones, put them through several baths, sorted, and then placed the acceptable ones on the plastic lining.

There was the family who bought one of the long empty lots on Orlando Street, three houses east of the Keith's. They built a large two-story home of tan stucco, a faux-pueblo style of architecture common in New Mexican construction. The second story casts a sizeable shadow, blocked the western neighbors view of the mountains. The house extends to the very edges of the lot, and at Christmas they blow up giant inflatable snowmen in their front yard, so that the whole property seems somehow swollen. The Kemps dubbed it the castle.

Then there was a Hispanic family that moved in across the street. They paved the front lawn with cement to provide a parking lot for their many cars. There were always different cars there that they fixed up and sold. The owners themselves owned two sizable hummers, one

bright yellow. The husband of the family couldn't work. He had been paralyzed at his job, and had used the compensation money to move his family into what was considered one of the best public school districts. He worked on the cars from his wheel chair, or a rolling board that he could slide under the chassis.

Extended family seemed to flock to the house. The men lived in the front yard and the garage, where they had a TV and lawn chairs set up. They were often the only people we could see out on our street besides the dog walkers. They were porch sitters in a central air culture. Occasionally, they hung a dead deer from the garage door that swung in the wind.

The Keiths perpetuated the theory that the neighborhood was going to seed in general. And perhaps it was. Several times in my youth we saw gatherings of police cars with their lights flashing on my street, and at least one time a swat team parked at a house down the block, where I had heard they had found a meth lab. The Kemps had not owned one but three or four Ford trucks, upgrading models each time theirs was stolen from their driveway. Our own Jeep had been stolen too, used to run over mail boxes, and then abandoned in a sketchy part of town for my parents to retrieve early the next morning. Shortly before my parents gave up on our neighborhood and moved, someone shot a bullet through the Keiths' garage door. The slug embedded in the drywall of their den.

But that, I figured, was Albuquerque. It didn't excuse it, but it helped me to accept it. We lived in a ghetto town.

I remember the moment I realized people saw Albuquerque as a dangerous place. It wasn't the shooting reported in the news, or the meth lab nearby. The realization came from watching an episode of one of my favorite TV shows on Nickelodeon about time traveling teen mystery sleuths. In one episode they were transported into downtown Albuquerque. It was not

the place I knew. There was sinister steam seeping out of the gutters and man holes. The characters were lost in a labyrinth of alleys and streets full of mean looking homeless men that tried to grab them. They looked up bewildered at the dingy sky scrapers and smog that blocked out the sun. These teenage heroes I had so admired in earlier episodes for their unflappable problem solving skills were afraid of my town. They got out of there as fast as they could. I began to look more closely at what was going on in the city beyond my immediate, protected sphere. Slowly, the more I paid attention, the more afraid of the place I became.

In reaction to the neighbors and the general decay of the city, the Kemps shut themselves away. On their front door they had three or four stickers telling sales people and other groups they disapproved of to go away. They kept to themselves. I learned to do the same thing when faced with what scared me about Albuquerque. I shut myself away and pretended not to notice our neighbors or what was happening in the neighborhood.

Once, the kids of the hummer neighbors got their kite tangled high in the cloaked locust in our front yard. I knew it was theirs because they had left it there, the string stretching across the street to their yard. I was able to pull the kite down, but I broke the string in the process. The men of the family were in the garage watching a sports game, their backs turned to me as I walked up. I was afraid of them, afraid they might be angry that I was in their driveway. They turned to look at me.

“Here is your kite,” I said. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to save the string.” I handed it to the man nearest me, who was in his thirties and had tattoos all down his arms. He nodded but said nothing. I walked back down the drive. I can never be sure, but I think perhaps those people were as afraid of us as we were of them. We never knew what to make of each other.

After 20 years of living in Albuquerque, we all moved away.

My brother left for college, and when he comes back, he doesn't remember the city very well. He left young and lived so many other places that it is strange to him. My parents got tired of living in the neighborhood that was getting more dangerous. They were able to sell their house after months of repairs and improvements, on the cusp of the economic downturn, and moved south to Las Cruces, to a house in a nice retiree neighborhood with a view of a new range of mountains to the East, surrounded by a smaller farming community.

I was the last to leave the city. I have lived away from it for three years, and the layout of the streets has faded in my memory. I get the city confused with other places in some of my stories. It doesn't change in my memory, and when I go back I am astonished to see what is different, who has left, how the city has begun to grow into a place where I don't belong.

My family is not from Albuquerque originally. My mother and father are Midwesterners who moved to New Mexico in 1988, when my brother was six and I was two. I am not even a first generation New Mexican, and as such, I will always be considered an outsider by established New Mexicans. I saw our family as explorers, as foreigners.. My parents compared what we discovered of Albuquerque and New Mexico with what they knew of their Kansas and Missouri childhoods.

My father got a job working for Sandia National Laboratories, writing articles and holding public meetings to try and explain to the community what they did at the labs. It was good money, and while my family had their trepidations of moving into a desert city with a bad reputation to align their future on a company known for making bombs, they came as many families did from all over the country and the world. As a kid in school, my classmates' parents were from everywhere imaginable and had moved to work for the Air Force or for Sandia.

In 20 years of living in New Mexico, my family has gotten closer to the landscape and come to understand that it isn't the dead barren place it seems to be from the interstate. We found that the desert is wholly alive. It will never be the boastful abundance of green like parts of the country, but every inch of the American desert crawls and breathes and eats and is eaten. Here there are survivors and innovators, specialists of the extreme, the fragile and the rare. As I grew up, we all gradually fell in love with the colors of the desert, hiking in the mountains and in the granite boulders of the foothills. The land inspired my mother's water color paintings and my father's photography.

In our first home, my mother turned the back portion of our yard into a sweet-corn field. She helped us dig trenches in the dirt to divert the water between the rows. My brother, who would later become a civil engineer, delighted in discovering how water moved downhill, and how he could control the flow with construction of bends and curves. At one point, the whole backyard seemed full of muddy ditches. I enjoyed the unexplainable satisfaction of quenching thirsty soil, nursing plants that would wither and die without our care. One of the threats to what we tried to grow in that backyard was snails.

They were so prodigious that my mother sent me out to the garden with one of her biggest mixing bowls to gather all the snails I could find. Then, when I asked what we would do with them, my mother suggested we take them to the river. She drove all the way to the river so that we could release those snails on the cottonwood leaves instead of killing them.

Rain storms called for rare celebrations. My brother and I ran barefoot out the front door to jump in the gutter and rejoice over a few inches of water running over our feet before it got swallowed by the drain. Rain came suddenly and with gusto, and a few inches seemed like an immense gift.

The parched land had a baked crust which shed water, causing serious flash flooding as it raced off of the mountains and foothills. The city combated these immense surges with concrete arroyos that severed the town. These ditches were huge in the eyes of a child.

One rain storm my mother suggested we drive and see the water rushing down the arroyo. The water moved fast, brown as coffee with cream. Tumbleweeds surfed the rapids, and trash bobbed in the waves. Some jokesters abandoned their boat in one arroyo, and after a large storm, it changed position, moving downhill toward grates and bottlenecks.

In school there was a campaign to keep young kids away from these arroyos. They handed out Ditches are Deadly stickers with orange backgrounds and a picture of a witch. Later these evolved to feature a cute looking monster made out of a wave of water that was attempting to make a scary face. Each year someone playing in the arroyo got swept away in a flash flood. The city watched the rescue operation on the news, which often involved a responder plunging into the arroyo attached to a rope, and trying to catch the person and pull them out. They often succeeded, but sometimes they didn't, or no one knew a person was in trouble until they found them days later drowned against a filter grate.

The central message of Ditches are Deadly is that flash flooding can happen on a sunny day, where it rains on the mountains but not in the city. "No time is a good time to play in the ditches," the police said as they handed out the stickers. But far more effective than the ditch monster stickers was the story of La Llorona. A wailing woman in white drowned her children in jealous rage, and wanders the banks of the Rio Grande and arroyos searching for them. If she finds a child she drowns them too, mistaking them for her own. Parents used the story to get their children home at night for dinner. The story had such power. It gave me a respect for the river, and by association its ditches, as a force that provided life, but could also take it away.

At 10,000 feet, anyone can find fossils of sea creatures- crinoid stems, ancient spiraled shells, and mollusks preserved in limestone. Before the mountains, the sea waxed and waned, leaving layers of sandstone, mudstone, and limestone behind. This area once drowned in water.

Long after these seas and mountains had formed, the river came. It snaked and flooded the land, depositing layer upon layer of rock over the ancient seas, making a valley. Weather took its toll on the mountain, washing gravel down into the valley, creating a soft fan of alluvium. The city stands on this alluvium, a porous material that filters river water down until it can't seep past less porous layers. By the time people arrived on the scene, the Albuquerque aquifer-layers of underground rock were laden with water. But no one knew quite how much.

Albuquerque was lush and habitable in relation to much of the surrounding land. The river allowed people to grow crops, and later to build a farming community that attracted Spanish settlers, the railroad and then route 66. People came to the arid climate for treatment of tuberculosis and later to make their fortune in the burgeoning technology industries. I wonder how conscious people were of the wild gamble the community was taking in its rapid growth. No one person decided to build a large city in the high desert, but when the momentum of growth took hold, people found ways to prolong growth. It is hard to imagine a permanent solution to our water problems if the city continues to grow. Albuquerque is a boom town, and one day it may be a ghost town like so many before it.

Much of modern Albuquerque is defined by what has come from underground. The mountain stones themselves were formed and cooled beneath the surface before they pushed up as the earth buckled like folds in fabric.

At the top of the mountain there are straight bands of limestone that formed under the surface of a vast inland sea and were pushed up with the mountains. These marine layers lay like cake fondant across the jagged granite peaks.

In 1979, the mayor claimed that Albuquerque's water was plentiful enough to support a population of 700,000 people past the year 2000 (*Albuquerque Journal*). People believed that the aquifer was constantly being replenished by the river.

When we moved to Albuquerque, my parents received brochures that advertised water sports, motor boats jetting through crystal water on the covers. They were told, as everyone was, that Albuquerque was an exception among southwestern cities. They said we were sitting on top of an underground lake 30 miles long, 15 miles wide, and 6,000 to 10,000 feet deep (Davis).

In 1993, the USGS finished an extensive test well project designed to better understand the size and chemistry of the aquifer. A year or so later, my Dad took me to a talk at the University of New Mexico where scientists explained the findings of the study. They laid out the problems in graphs that even an eight year old could understand. The aquifer was not the size they thought. Instead it was 20 miles long, 6 miles wide, and only 680 feet deep. Some of that is laden with natural chemicals, or is too expensive to treat. The city pumped the drinkable water four times faster than it was being replenished by the river (Davis). I realized that in my lifetime, my hometown might run out of water unless people changed the way they lived.

I began to imagine what a lack of water would mean for our way of life. The people who couldn't afford the water would have to move, and only the wealthiest would be able to live here, desalinating and treating their water, until it finally was used up all together or became too expensive. Meanwhile, the climate models of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change

forecast more and more drought for the region. These periods may be so long, that drought isn't the right word. The dryness may turn out to be a new climate regime that lasts many lifetimes.

It is hard to find straight answers about how much water there is and what it might mean for the people who live here. I tried to convince myself that most people must not understand the water situation. The people of my city who did understand must have lived in denial or felt powerless to make the necessary changes. Their actions seem to suggest it. After the water report of 1993, people went on washing their cars in the driveway while the hose was running. Developments with golf courses still went up. Once I watched fire hydrant send a gusher into a city intersection for hours.

I couldn't ignore all the ways water was being wasted. I also began to let it make me uncomfortable and panicky. I would grow uneasy watching sprinklers wash water across parking lots. If someone left the faucet running while they were making dinner, I reached over and shut it off, even if I was a guest in their house. I started keeping water near me in a Nalgene. Humans are 75% water. For 20 years, I was 75% Rio Grande Aquifer. It was part of who I was, buried and flowing beneath the surface.

Knowing that people wouldn't conserve on their own, the city set restrictions on the commercial and private use of sprinklers, setting restrictions on the times of day and duration they could water. The city developed a hotline people could call to report water waste, and financial incentives for people who wanted to install low flow appliances or tear out their grass and replace it with xeriscape.

My parents bought their second house in the city when I was in second grade, a time when grass lawns were common in the neighborhood. When I graduated college, only a few people still had lawns on our street. Most had replaced them with rock gardens.

My dad wrote about water for his job. Sandia Labs worked to help develop desalination technology and paid my dad to travel to El Paso and learn about how they were implementing desalination to feed the growth of the Texas city. When I needed cheering up about Albuquerque's water situation, I thought about El Paso's and how much worse off it was than us.

The more my dad learned about the water problems of the southwest, the more interested he became in teaching us what we were up against. We took a road trip across the desert to California as a family when I was ten. My parents showed us the Hoover dam, Lake Powell, the plumbing and engineering that had gone into controlling the great watersheds of the west. One diagram in a museum depicted the dams of the Colorado River Basin as a series of pipes, pumps, sinks, and faucets. We could turn it on and off, and move it. It made me feel powerful to be human, and a troubled at how that power seemed like it couldn't last forever.

In Nevada, Dad pointed out that they charged for glasses of water in restaurants while the fountains on the Vegas strip danced in time to classical music. He took what we saw or what we did and drew the threads of thought toward implications in the long term. On that road trip, he read us *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey who described the abandoned cities and the Bedouins who roamed over ancient, silted dams. Mom and Dad gave us a picture of what was happening, while showing us the beauty of the West we stood to lose.

In high school and college, my classmates all had a plan for getting out. Many of these plans were motivated by the need for independence, their view that Albuquerque was far from

the throbbing pulse of American culture and the undeniably greener pastures. Anyone who wanted to stay was considered strange.

My own evacuation plan began with my worry about water. I figured that if I wanted a comfortable future, I would need to go where there would be the best chance for water long term. In college, my climatology professor joked that it was time to buy real-estate in Canada, which would one day be good wine country. I saw that there was a lot of truth behind that joke. People in the southwest who can't escape their water-based businesses before everyone is fully and undeniably awakened to the issue of water, might find it harder to leave and harder to afford to live where they are.

The persona of Albuquerque has changed in the time I have known it. Its ghetto reputation has been patched up by good PR that downplays things like the mass grave, and focuses on its future. The downtown has seen a renaissance of sorts. In the early part of the new century the governor lured the film industry to town with incentives. Film companies built sound studios on the west mesa, and once in a while now they close off streets around town for filming of the next big blockbuster. A few blocks up the street from the old meth house in our neighborhood, is a fictional meth house, where the star of the TV show *Breaking Bad* plays a high school chemistry teacher with a meth business on the side.

The San Juan- Chama Drinking Water project developed infrastructure to shift Albuquerque's water dependency from the aquifer to the Rio Grande. The city now pipes water from the San Juan River Basin 26 miles along canals into the Rio Grande River Basin. This project coincided with 400 million dollars worth of new water treatment infrastructure for the city which takes the extra water, treats, distributes, re- treats, and then releases it downstream

toward Las Cruces, El Paso, and Juarez. This switch from using aquifer water, along with the city's conservation methods, has seen the level of the aquifer rise these days (Bureau of Reclamation).

Unfortunately this plan comes with potentially troubling consequences. The plumbing and damming of the watershed is costly both economically and ecologically, and it isn't a permanent solution for growth. I worry that people will rest easy now, thinking the solution is fixed, when the shortages have only been delayed.

My last flight in a balloon came as a senior in high school. That day the winds picked up dangerously and the landing was rough. It was late morning, and we were running out of real estate before the balloon began floating over restricted reservation land. We were moving fast and were out ahead of the ground crew. They wouldn't be there when we landed to help us stay on the ground. George and Mr. Keith were in the balloon along with my mother and me. The ground came at us fast and hard. All we could do was tuck down into the basket and hope. The basket bounced once and then lifted, hit again and tipped over, pulling the fabric envelope down. It snagged on a stand of juniper trees. In the forward pitch, a rope wrapped around my neck, and I pulled it off in a panic, thinking it might suddenly tighten. We were safe and on the ground, and minus a few bumps and bruises we were uninjured. The pilots had managed to turn off the burner too, and nothing was burning. The pilots got the balloon deflated before it tore the envelope or dragged us across the desert with its remaining lift. The crew reached us shortly after we landed. They had run across sand dunes from the nearest road, not daring to take the truck into the soft sand.

I rode into the city in the back of the truck, and the sky was beautifully blue. The day had warmed up so that we didn't need our hoods or gloves. Up ahead I saw the radio tower near the launch field and a dark spot at the top of it. As we drove closer, we could tell it was a punctured balloon hanging from the tower. Shortly after that I could see that it was the Smoky the Bear Balloon.

A burst of wind had pulled the balloon into the tower shortly after take-off. The balloon ripped and snagged on the tower's tip. The 69-year-old pilot and his two passengers, a 14-year-old and a 10-year-old, managed to climb out of the swinging gondola and onto the tower. They were 60 feet in the air. From there they climbed down in a stiff wind, a process that took two hours. The balloon had stayed snagged and hadn't fallen down on them as they climbed. They saved themselves, and though so much could have gone wrong, it didn't that day.

WAITING FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

When I was a child I daydreamed. Those dreams seemed more real to me sometimes than reality. I would pretend that it was everyone's last day on Earth. I did this when I was bored and alone, my family engaged in their own activities. I never explained to myself why the world was ending. That wasn't important to the game. I only knew of its inevitability, and that our imminent demise was not so much sad as a challenge to make the best of the last day. I decided not to tell anyone, because I reckoned they would spend the day being sad. Instead, I walked around the house saying goodbye to things that I loved, like the sycamore tree outside, and the rug that was so perfect for spinning circles and falling down dizzy. I slipped the cat a can of tuna, occasionally peeking in at my dad and mom to make sure they were still there. Silently, I would forgive my brother for all the ambush Nerf gun attacks. These days were some of the best. I made an effort to enjoy them, and was often rewarded with a small moment, like the discovery of a leaf, or the way a branch of yellow flowers moved against my window, that wouldn't have seemed special if it hadn't been the last time any of us could enjoy little things like that. I felt important, like I was enjoying them for all of the people who didn't know the end was so near, who wouldn't understand that joy was required.

My freshman year of college in Flagstaff Arizona, I had one real friend. Rena was my dorm-mate, and I'm sure that if we weren't living in the same room, we wouldn't have known each other. She had a mountain of creepy wide-eyed stuffed animals on her bed, she colored in her notebook until 3 am, and she loved Japanese horror films. Her eyes had purple bags under and around them, and they stood out like raccoon eyes on her exceptionally pale face. Most of the time, she looked malnourished and bored.

On Halloween, she dressed up like a vampire and hosted a Poe reading in one of the study rooms of our dorm. I sat with her and listened for a while. Only one other girl ever ventured in, and she stayed maybe ten minutes before she left, deciding we were both freaks. I believe that Rena wanted to be part of the gothic crowd, she had something undefeatable about her, something cheerful that shone through the dark make-up and dyed black hair. We were both deeply cold and unhappy that winter. We traded stories of warmth to get us through the blizzards when we couldn't go outside, when we were trapped in the dorm. She told me how she worked as a bagger in a Phoenix grocery store near her home the previous summer. On August days, when it got hot enough to melt the asphalt, she needed the help of two other employees to wheel a heavy stack of carts off the parking lot. She spent a lot of time scraping asphalt residue from the aisles. She talked about missing home, which made it alright for me to miss it too. I felt like I was supposed to be a grown up all of a sudden, to know how to be alone and independent in the world. Instead I was just afraid of it. I shut myself away.

I didn't have a car when I lived in Flagstaff. I ventured only to the Target once a week, a place that, once I was inside, could really be anywhere. It was comfortably similar to the Target back home. I also walked to the Hobby Lobby whenever I was alone and needing something to do, which became more and more often. I bought a mug, or a new kind of lip balm, Christmas decorations, or crafty projects to try and make myself happy, and keep myself busy. I became a magpie, collecting pretty objects for my dorm, to tack on the walls or keep in the shelves.

I spent my days in class, ate meals alone in the cafeteria or at my desk, and read. I wore a path between my dorm and the library. It was okay to be alone in a library. Rena went away many of the weekends, back home or off to visit friends. Nights when Rena was gone were the hardest. I didn't realize until much later how sick I was making myself in my loneliness. I

watched the university movie channel, where I could call in and order a movie to be played. Everyone tuned into that channel would have to watch the movie some anonymous person selected. They never seemed to be happy movies. It was the way some people expressed themselves. Perhaps they were lonely like me, and these movies were their voice that helped them reach out.

One class I took that year in Flagstaff was an honors English class, focused on writing about environmental change and degradation. Our instructor, a former CEO of a large company, had quit to move to Flagstaff to teach after reading a book about the apocalypse. The book he said, had changed his whole outlook on life and the future of our planet. He assigned us to read *The Rising*, a book self published by its two authors, about a man who survived a series of tsunamis that wiped out the Eastern seaboard and the West coast. It was cheesy but captivating. Our instructor was a catastrophist of sophisticated magnitude, and he wasn't afraid to talk about the changes, however unlikely, we might see in our lifetimes.

"No one is taking about what could happen!" he said. Many of his classes we just sat and listened to him talk. He spent a good half hour one class period discussing his choice to live in Flagstaff.

"Here we are safe from tsunamis and hurricanes, and rising flood waters, and tornados are rare. What we have to worry about here is forest fire, and possibly geologic activity. Of course we still have to worry about rising temperature and pollution, but if populations start to migrate, Flagstaff is more isolated than other places." He was a big proponent for the methods that helped the characters in the book survive. They had an independent water source, a seed bank, a library of how-to books from which they learned to harness hydro electric power. They were also in a hidden cabin that no one knew about, and they had guns, plenty of guns.

“We can learn from this book,” he said, and I could tell he really meant it.

He was endearingly crazy and passionate. He tempered this image somewhat by also assigning very credible readings and leading discussions based on information from groups like the IPCC that laid out scientific evidence for the situation we faced as a result of the increased greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere.

It was these readings that fired up my imagination. He forced me to wonder what could change about the way we lived now, and how quickly that change might come about. I started to dream up my own apocalyptic scenarios where I lived in a yurt and learned how to hunt with a cross bow and cure meat. I started thinking contingently and catastrophically myself. I started questioning what I was doing in college, and whether or not it could prepare me for the future I would face.

That same semester, I fell into my usual pattern of developing a crush on a guy I couldn't have. This time it was my Geology TA. Having a crush on someone unattainable seemed to be the safest way to experience heartbreak. It didn't seem logical to spend all the effort of actually being in love and have it returned, when it could be simulated risk free. He seemed confident and self-knowing in a way freshman boys pretended to be, but really weren't. He was a nerdy guy, but strong. He seemed like he would be good in a crisis. He talked about his bicycle and the indie music he liked. When the movie *The Life Aquatic* came to the dollar movie theater on campus, and he gushed about what a good movie it was. I went to see it three times, hoping to see him at the theater. I walked home each time singing “Life on Mars” by David Bowie softly to get across the dark, quiet campus.

The day of the Geology field trip to Sunset Crater, I spent an hour in front of the mirror before class. I packed and repacked my backpack, reviewing my lab again to ensure I would be able to answer any question he had. Not that I would. I would show restraint. We drove in a white van out to Sunset Crater, a cinder cone volcano that looked like a loose pile of red lava stones. I grabbed my notebook and left the rest of my stuff in the car. We spent blissful hours wandering the sharp dramatic lava flows, deciding whether a segment was Aa and pahoehoe, discussing possible mineral content and trying to determine their relative ages. When we returned to the van, several of the student's backpacks, including mine, were gone. My wallet, cell phone, textbooks, and notes were all gone.

For once, our TA wasn't cool or composed. He apologized the whole way back to campus for not locking the van. He seemed flustered and unsure what to do. It was another student who called and reported the thefts. I got out of the van silently, and walked, trying not to look panicked, back to my dorm room. Thankfully, my dorm key was in my pocket. I slipped into my room. Rena was gone. I sat on the floor without the light. I didn't know where to begin. It was near dinner time, and after an afternoon of walking around, I was pretty hungry. I took out the envelope in my desk drawer and counted my cash. Usually I kept some emergency cash, but I had gotten lazy and emptied it for the movies and a run to Target. I had \$1.34 to my name. I wanted so badly to call my parents, but I didn't have a phone, a phone card, or a soul in the world whose door I felt I could knock on.

I practiced my breathing. I was angry with myself for making my situation so vulnerable. Minutes or hours later, I can never be sure which; I picked myself off the floor, and walked the campus until it was too dark and too cold. I ate popcorn for dinner. The next day I was able to

replace my dining card, which meant I could eat, and that improved my mood dramatically. One step at a time, with the help of my family, I recovered my losses.

In high school, a football player named Shane, who I had admired from a distance for years asked me to homecoming. I turned him down. I liked Shane because I thought he sort of led a double life. He could play the dumb jock card, run with that crowd, yell and smack and butt heads throughout the football games. But I knew differently. We sat together in English class, and though he pretended not to know what was going on sometimes, asking for my help, he knew exactly what was going on, and he secretly loved to read. I said no because I was afraid. I was shy, and completely unsure that I could deal with the very social, very experienced and seemingly adult world he lived in.

I went instead with Amos, a pimple faced geek of my own kind who played the Barrie sax in band. He asked me the colors of my dress, and showed up with a red vest to match the one sorry fake red rose that hung off my black skirt. At his house, his mom tried to politely point out that I was wearing too much foundation. I was in fact. My mother and I had swabbed it on in desperation after I discovered I had sunburn from the homecoming game. I declined in embarrassment at his mother's request, and all of the pictures I have of that night are of Amos looking happy and a little embarrassed, and me looking like his undead teenage prom date.

We spent most of the dance talking on the couch outside the front door with another couple who didn't like to dance. We had a good time. On the drive home he told me the story about how a man who had been shot and had run to his front door a few years ago. He was alone in the house, and hadn't let the man in though he had pounded and yelled for help. Instead, Amos called the police. By the time they arrived, the man was dead.

When we arrived home, I knew what the expectation would be. He would want a kiss goodnight. I was terrified, and shy. I ran out of the car before he could really say goodbye so that he wouldn't have the chance to try and kiss me. It was blind inexplicable panic. I even sort of wanted to kiss him.

I never went out with him again, and I spoke to him only once after that. A few days after avoiding him, I found Amos in front of his locker. He was rubbing his neck. Instead of apologizing for ignoring him, I asked, "What's wrong with your neck?"

"I got stung by a queen ant."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yeah."

We never spoke of that night again.

I don't remember my dreams, and haven't since I was about ten. But sometimes, after I am awake, a dream will come to me. One day, I stood up from my bed and it felt as if standing on the deck of a freighter I had once seen about to tip over onto its side. Another morning I woke up singing. Some ancient wailing song, one I shouldn't have known, a song about crying openly and without shame.

One Iowa winter during graduate school, I woke up with the memory of my abnormal psychology professor's voice. He had once said and was saying now again, "You should always take people very seriously when they say they are going to kill themselves. Even if they seem to be joking, those words are often some of the last warning signs before a suicide attempt."

I listened to him as I walked into the kitchen to heat the water for my drip coffee funnel, a plastic arrangement that sat on the rim of the mug, designed to leach the tannins from the

grounds into a warm brew at the bottom of the cup. I watched the grinds float and sink in their filter as I poured in the water. I thought about everyone I have ever heard say they were going to kill themselves.

One of my students: *“I could have killed myself right then, I was so embarrassed.”*

In grad school, my fellow TAs often joked around in the office, saying: *“I have to grade this weekend.”* Finger gun to the temple.

An acquaintance confessed as we stood like frozen statues at the bus stop, *“I woke up this morning wishing I would never have to wake up again.”*

“I’ll kill myself if he becomes president.”

“I could just die right now.”

“The longer I live the more things I see that are worse than dying.”

“They found him in his closet. I would never just leave myself somewhere where my family would be the first to find me. I would walk into gunfire. Pretend to rob a bank or something. Or at least make it look like an accident. It was really inconsiderate.”

“In a world that is this messed up? Who wouldn’t off himself?”

“I wouldn’t have to pay down my credit card debts. Or talk to my mother.”

People say this so frequently that I imagine they simply can’t be in the last stages before suicide. As far as I know, everyone I’ve heard say something like this is still alive, though I have lost touch with many.

That morning I couldn’t let it go. I watched my coffee drip, and thought about how it seemed like people I met with everyday had inner lives more deeply troubling than they ever let show. As an experiment, I tried to understand what it must feel like for a person weighing one method against another, giving away their possessions, working up to saying goodbye. There is

some unmovable veil between me and them, a gauzy but impassible barrier. Somehow I want to survive, to latch on to my morbid curiosity and see my wager through about how the world will turn out and change. There is in the living some un-dreaming, unreasonable hope that lies dormant in hard times, waiting for some a future moment of color and light.

There is a documentary called *The Bridge* that investigates people who jump from the Golden Gate Bridge. They set up cameras that filmed the bridge for a year. They caught many jumpers; sometimes these people jumped with great purpose and determination and sometimes just fell after clinging for a while, or scratching the paint, signs of a change of heart.

Scientists race to locate neurons and synapses that might be fixed, that thing inside that snaps. This part may be in all of us, like a self-destruct sequence, an impulse waiting to be activated.

I drank my coffee that morning and forced myself to heat up another bowl of steel-cut oats in the microwave. I am often ashamed of my breakfast cereal, the poverty of it, its lack of color. There must be someone in the world somewhere who eats persimmons every day for breakfast. The bright orange skin would be like a bulwark against the matte grayness of this time of morning in winter, when there is little definition between shadow and light.

Over Spring Break of my freshman year, I came home from Flagstaff and asked my parents if I could move back to Albuquerque, live with them for a while, and figure things out. I told them I wanted to go to the University of New Mexico, and not return to Flagstaff in the fall. They were surprised, but supportive of my decision. Rena did something similar it turned out. She moved back to Phoenix, though I'm not sure where or if she continued with school. I felt like a failure, that I had been too scared to give it a chance.

Things went much better back with my family. The University of New Mexico turned out to have accepted many of my high school friends, and that feeling of isolation lessened to manageable background noise.

I started taking more environmental science courses. The more I learned, the more I built up a catalog of potential catastrophes that could befall us. In the desert, the scientists were worried talking about drought. All through the spring our climatology professor started class with the newest stream measurements of snowmelt. They seemed to continually be worse than he had hoped for. Suddenly my eye was always on the sky hoping for rain. I was receiving, along with my training as a scientist, an education in how jaded scientists could become in the face of facts. That any of them had hope for the future; I began to realize, was remarkable.

I got the opportunity to study abroad on the Galapagos Islands, traveling to talk to scientists at the Darwin Marine Institute. Their work and warnings were similar to those of my professors back home, and sometimes even bleaker. Their labs were situated on a black sand beach. The scientists looked out on turquoise reefs, the coal mine canaries of the marine world. The corals were bleaching around the islands at astonishing rates, some of the ocean currents were changing or stopping in ways they had never seen. The isolated species that were so unique and rare to the islands were dying of strange diseases, warmer temperatures, or loss of habitat, or overharvesting. The sea level too was rising, threatening even their labs on occasion with an unusually intrusive wave as they continued their work. One biologist from the center shared the work he was doing to eradicate the feral goat populations that were threatening endemic species on the islands. He had hired and trained sharpshooters to shoot the goats from helicopters.

“We are living in unusual times,” he said “Unusual methods are required. Most of the things our scientists are seeing now, and that you will see in your lifetime, can be predicted. It will be totally different from what we have come to expect.”

We met with another biologist, Gregory, who studied whales around the Galapagos Islands and into the north pacific. He looked like a mad man. His hair stood out on the sides of his head in licks and swirls of wispy white, while the crown of his head was bare and shiny. He had the long crooked nose of a wizard, and he wore a t-shirt with a faded Donald Duck on the front. The Galapagos research station employed Gregory to travel the ocean and lead a team of researchers, observing the whales’ behavior. Around the islands, though, Gregory was known as the man to call to report a whale beaching.

I looked at him as both comic and legendary. Our professor, a research heavyweight himself at the marine lab, described Gregory as the best of the best at what he did. “He has survived a lot of close calls. Really, he shouldn’t be alive. But somehow he is.”

A pair of chained and padlocked doors kept us from Gregory’s storage room. The building was a low octagon, made of concrete, with a window on each side, closed now with storm shutters.

Gregory’s hands were jittery as he unlocked the doors. I couldn’t tell if he was nervous or excited to show us what was inside. I immediately liked him, an impression which grew when the doors opened and he ushered us into the dusty cavern. What had looked like a small storage room was in fact a sunken auditorium-- a large space of circular terraces leading down to a stage. Along the curvature of the stage lay the full skeleton of the Bryde’s whale. The skull was as large as a Mini Cooper. I could have walked, hunched over, under the rib cage. On the tiers

leading up to the door sat skulls of dolphins and whales, situated in such a way that they might have been paying attention to the Bryde's whale's lecture.

"Where do you get these?" someone asked Gregory.

"These are the unlucky ones. Many of these have come from beaching."

"What causes beaching?" I asked.

"Well, that's one of the big things I'm trying to figure out. No one really knows in some cases. Sometimes a boat hits them, or a storm forces them off course. Pneumonia or other illness can cause them to surface. Sometimes if a whale feels it is going to die, it beaches itself. Other times it's less clear. Once I saw a red tide drive a whole pod of killer whales onto a beach. There are some theories that sonar affects them, or ship noise, or pollution."

"Gregory just came from a whale beaching," our professor said.

"Yes. Unfortunately, unless we get backhoes involved, we are limited in what we can do for the larger whales. We managed to get the baby back in the water, but it just lingered waiting for its mother. Eventually we had to kill them. It was very sad."

I ran into Shane, the football player from high school, when I returned to the University of New Mexico from the Galapagos.

We were at the graduation party of a mutual friend, and he offered me a ride home so that my roommate could stay at the party longer. It turned out he was too drunk to drive his truck back, so his best friend offered to take us both. We decided to pile Shane in the middle so that we could keep him steady for the long ride down from the West mesa, over the river, and up toward the mountains.

Shane was lolling back and forth some, but was speaking normally. He started telling me how he should have had his own party that year. He was taking another year to finish.

Coming down off the lava flats, we were elevated above the glittering grid of city fading into reservation land, or washing up at the base of the mountains. He was in the middle, his long legs pinched above the dashboard, straddling the gear shift. His wide shoulders were wedged between ours, so that he leaned hard against his best friend, always the silent guy who rested comfortably in his shadow. I was on the other side, and when he slumped into a turn, I would be pinned against the door before he could right himself. We ping ponged him back and forth like that, and sang to Lady Gaga at the top of our lungs, “Just dance, gonna be OK!,”. It was a mindless chant of rhythm that was soothing.

Seeing Shane at the party had been a surprise. I had expected him to be at Harvard. At graduation he was set to go off and play football for them. He had gotten in thanks to his excellent grades. If he wasn't so heavy, I would have thought of him as a mirage, and I still was nervous around him like I was in high school. Out the open window, I put my face into the hurricane of wind, trying to pull myself out of my past.

He was the giant I remembered, but he had new scars.

“Show her your idiot beer scar,” his friend said. He showed me a half crescent scar on his bicep, red and rough. He showed it off like a badge.

“He did it himself,” his best friend said, “Slammed a beer bottle cap into his arm.

“It looks like a bite mark,” I said.

“Sometimes, the pain, you know,” Shane said. “It keeps you sane.”

He showed me a long white scar on his knee, just below his shorts. It was from a torn ACL that had ruined his chances to play football, brought him back to the state school and his old room in his parents house.

“This one reminds me how much life sucks,” he said “and how much it will continue to suck.”

We stopped for gas, accidentally paid for a car wash by hitting the wrong button. “Hell, he said. Take it anyway.” We pulled into the dark tunnel and a red light flashed in our eyes, counting down. I leaned forward to roll up the window, and faced his scar at the end of his bent knee. I closed the window just before the water hammered the windshield violently, filling the cab with the sound of streaming water.

“Does it still hurt sometimes?” I asked.

Without thinking, I reached out and brushed it with the unsteady tip of my finger. He jerked his knee away from my finger. “Shit,” he yelled, startled, cracking his knee hard against the dashboard. He smiled. Water flooded the outside of the windshield and side windows. We were inside the veil of it. “Well,” he said laughing. “It hurts now.”

He didn’t stop laughing for what seemed too long. The song on the radio switched to a commercial we had heard four times already on the car ride. He hit the control buttons with his fist.

“Hey man!” his friend said. “Cut it out!” He hit the radio again and again with his fist.

“Shit!” he yelled, “It’s just so, so stupid!”

The radio changed station each time he hit it, finally landing on static. We breathed only when the washing arm swung back to rest and the car was still, and so was he. He sat there panting through the spot-free rinse. His hand was red. I wondered if he had broken anything.

Then the truck crawled forward under the dryer. We watched the water drops slide up the glass against gravity, listening to the static.

I was pet sitting for some friends who just moved into a new house in Ely, Minnesota. Their old Labrador, Mack, wanted to sleep longer than I did. I was up by 5:30 and I got him up too. "It's our last day on Earth, Mack. How should we spend it?" Mack wagged his tail. I slipped on my flip flops over my socks and took him outside on the leash. I was afraid that if I didn't keep him on the leash, he might wander off in this new neighborhood and never be able to find his way back. We looked at this new world together. I imagine Mac saw a world of promise and discovery. I saw what would be gone.

We paced sort of aimlessly around the top half of the steep street. The only thing above Ely is boreal forest all the way through Canada to the melting permafrost of the Arctic Circle. It was July and 60 degrees. The town below was misty and quiet. Mack the Labrador and I were basking in the cool death gasps of the world's ice caps.

Mack was bow legged with age. His joints hurt him, but he was excited by the possibility of peeing on someone else's lawn, and morose that I wasn't letting him. He gave me the look, that dogs can give a person, asking for respect. Because it was the last day, I snapped off his leash, and let him bound off to do his business.

Mack ran across the street and promptly peed on the side of the neighbor's garage. Just as he was letting loose, the neighbor walked up the road from a morning exercise regime, and saw the dog peeing on his siding. He said hi and went inside. Mack ran down the hill like a bandit, and I chased after him into the mist, herding him back toward the house.

That last day was a quiet one. I took a nap in the middle of the day, swore to quit my coffee addiction by not drinking one cup, gave in by 3 p.m. and drove into town to a coffee shop where I got a large green cup of joe and sat typing.

There I sat, with my latte and my laptop, the final link in the human evolutionary chain. It had been a pretty good last year. My college town of Ames, Iowa had seen two crippling floods in three-year's time. The one in August, 2010, created an island out of the city, disabling water service to its residents for almost a week.

This spring, a belt of tornados hurtled across the southeastern portion of the United States, leaving behind a scar that has yet to heal. Just a week before, a dust storm that rivaled the dust bowl swept across Phoenix, knocking out power and making mud of the cities characteristic turquoise jeweled pools.

The year had made me think about what is important: water, food, safety, reproduction, gravity.

But on the last day of all living things, I couldn't ignore how distracted I had been by other things that didn't matter. If I could do it all again, I wouldn't have paused, held back, shut out what troubled or scared me. I would have let in every experience. I tried not to think about regrets. That was the least fun part of the game.

It was easier to go back to the house, curl up on the couch with the dog, and watch it rain, secure in the knowledge that I was surrounded by fresh water, more fresh water than I could drink in a life-time. It's easier, on the last day, to fall asleep listening to the heart beat of a Labrador, and to wake up surprised by the early northern light of another day.

I've never been better at being alone than I was in Galapagos. My first morning, I woke up and went for a walk through a set of trails. We had already been hearing in class, about an increasingly familiar story of a world in trouble, of how much we stood to lose. On the islands, what we had to lose was incredibly apparent and heartbreaking.

On the hike, I startled a large white bird that I saw only from the corner of my eye, lunging away with powerful wing bursts in the fog. Later, I would discover it was probably a barn owl, though I will never be sure. They are rare on this island where I lived.

Further down that path, I found a wooden overlook at the end of a long stretch of stairs. From there I could see the wide Pacific. One of these coves was supposedly where Darwin took his first step onto the Galapagos Islands. I imagined it was this one. I wondered if things were adapting now just to survive. I laid out flat on my back on the deck listening to my heart pound from the climb.

There is something different about living near water that I didn't understand growing up in the desert. It regulates the temperature of the island, absorbing the extremes and buffers against them. But it did the same to me. I fell asleep. When I woke up my arm was bleeding, a tiny trickle of bright red blood that started from the middle of my bicep and crept down before drying. I hadn't felt a thing. Something had tasted my arm while I was asleep. I chose instead to see it like a gift; a reminder, that I bleed and was still alive and well. And I walked back wearing the blood, for once unconcerned about what was to come.

IN THE EVENT OF A WATER LANDING

I practiced my breathing in the stuffy fuselage of the 747, trying not to think about all the ways we could crash. I made a list of the things that could go wrong on the flight between Newark and Belize. There could be an electrical fire, an overworked mechanic who missed some loose bolt, a defective part made by the lowest bidder. We could hit a flock of birds, the air traffic controller could fall asleep and let our plane take off right into another, a pet cat in the hold below could break loose and chew through a wire.

Below, men in blue jump suits loaded the bags into the cargo hold. They freely walked on the ground. They looked baked on the June tarmac, tired to the bone, but I envied the location of their feet anyway, so safely on the ground. I counted the bags that rode up the conveyor belt and disappeared beneath.

Before I learned to be afraid, I loved nothing quite like flying. It always marked the start of an adventure. My dad pointed out geologic features far below, and I became fascinated by the layers of mesas, the veins of rivers, the quilts of fields. My mom always had gum to help me get my ears to pop, and if that didn't work she sat there making funny faces with me, trying to demonstrate how to get ears to pop by swallowing. I was headed to meet 22 other undergraduates, mostly from UC Santa Barbara, for a summer trip through the biomes of Belize. I didn't feel much more capable than I had when I was a child, but still this plane would take me away from my family, the familiar New Mexican landscape.

Six rows ahead, a tall blonde stood up and spoke to a girl in the seat in front of her.

"Are you with the Santa Barbara group?" the blonde asked. The girl with the curly hair stood up and nodded.

“Want to sit together?” the blonde asked. They asked another passenger to trade seats and started shuffling around. I looked down and pretended not to notice. I didn’t want to be made out as one of them just yet. We would have six weeks in the study abroad program living and traveling together. For now, just for a few hours even, I wanted to try being alone, like it was some great experiment. On this flight, I could be anyone I wanted.

The safety instructions started and the flight attendant buckled and unbuckled a seat belt, pretended to remove a face mask from the overhead compartment, donned and inflated a ridiculously small floatation vest that looked more likely to choke her than to save her if she was actually in the water. On the safety cards in the seat pocket in front of me, under the heading “In the Event of a Water Landing,” white, lean, and unblemished cartoon people wore similar inflatable necklaces. They slid down a yellow ramp from the plane door into the sea. They had their arms raised over their heads, as if they were at an amusement park, and this was the best time of their lives.

The flight attendants disappeared, the lights went off, and the 747 roared past all possible exits from the runway. The sound of the engines made me sweat, as I listened for any ping or sputter that might be out of the ordinary. I gripped the arm rests, all that practiced breathing forgotten, no air left to even whimper. I couldn’t identify the exact moment when the tires no longer touched the ground. I could only feel the new forces coming from unnatural directions. My brain momentarily struggled to reorient, to save balance. Below, trucks and cars sped along Newark’s veins like worker ants to and from the colony. I watched a Ford truck shrink as it exited the freeway. The plane breached the clouds and continued climbing. I tried to look for topography between the clouds instead, flicking my jaw open subtly to pop my ears.

I entered the Belize airport and was immediately funneled into one line after another with the other passengers. I retrieved my hiking backpack, and kicked it along the floor in front of me as I snaked through the line. The airport was hot, crowded, and the noise of everyone talking echoed against the concrete walls.

Finally we reached the passport line. My passport carried a picture of me when I was 13. My face had changed, grown a little sharper at the jaw, a little harder in the eyes. I worried that the immigration officers wouldn't recognize me as the same person. I didn't even recognize that girl of 13. That girl didn't yet know she needed to be cautious in the world.

Now, my passport was old, and in the back there were stamps from places like Guatemala and Ecuador. Last spring I had spent a semester on the Galapagos Islands. I had done this entry dance before. I knew more now about travel, expected something to go wrong eventually, that mishap was just a matter of when. I knew now that being a young, white female made traveling hard and sometimes scary. In the hot line of travelers headed out toward the daylight of the front doors, I wondered if I was ready. I hoped for a second that something wouldn't be in order, that the officials would find something that would keep me from going out those doors. But the man in the official blue hat barely glanced at my picture before stamping the back.

"Enjoy your stay," he said.

Outside the airport, a couple stood behind the receiving rope holding a white sign that said UC Santa Barbara. The woman was slight with soft brown curls, the man almost three feet taller than her, with a shaved head. They both wore overalls, but he wore his without a shirt and had a barbed wire tattoo around his bicep. Marcy introduced herself as a jaguar biologist, and our professor for the Ecology course. Tim introduced himself as her husband.

“I handle logistics,” he said “and I’m your Anthropology guru.”

The other two girls on the flight walked up and introduced themselves. Jane the blonde was from California, same as the brunette Mandy. They were both decked out in the latest hiking gear, new and glimmering. I wished suddenly I had old tattered gear, instead of gear as fresh as theirs. We all reeked of money in this place where most people had worn sneakers and faded t-shirts. Tim and Marcy led us to a yellow school bus next to a sturdy row of palm trees with leaves that radiated out like great Chinese fans.

“What are those?” Mandy asked.

“Palmetto palms,” Marcy remarked. “And that’s the first species you can put in your field notebook. You will be cataloging the different species you see in the different bio-regions we visit.” She opened the back of the bus and I flung my hiking backpack on top of sacks of concrete lying in the aisle.

“What are those for?” I asked. We sat on the curb to wait for the next flight to arrive with the rest of our classmates.

“I’m doing some camera trapping in the rainforest near the Guatemala border,” Marcy explained. “Guatemalans who come over to illegally harvest Fishtail to sell in flower arrangements. They seem to think my cameras are there to capture them instead of shots of Jaguars. I’m going to build some protective concrete cases for the cameras. But these poachers really don’t want us in Belize.”

New students arrived on the next flight, all from California, tan girls in cotton sun dresses and sandals. There were two boys, Eric and Josh, the only ones in the group. Eric had dark, curly hair and a mischievous smile, whereas John was long, lanky and shy. The new students joined

us, sitting at the curb with their knees tucked under their arms. We waited on the last of our group, a girl from Maine and another from DC.

The students started to talk about getting lunch while we waited, and Tim warned us against going too far into the city. "I can go with you ladies," he said. "This city doesn't have the friendliest reputation toward tourists. At least get one of the boys to go with you."

"They should be fine," said Marcy. "As long as they stick together."

Outside the gates of the airport, we walked in a tight pack, drawn into the brain stem of the country, a long broad street surrounded by concrete buildings, their entrances guarded with armed men. We walked across several temporary foot bridges, over canals clogged with fishing boats.

Every few steps, someone asked me for money. Some of the people pleaded softly, holding their hands out and asking close to my ear as I passed. Others demanded money, claiming an entrance fee to the country. I clutched the small purse I had strapped over my shoulder thinking about the credit card and passport inside, my means of getting home. More than one person grabbed my arm. I was able to pull away firmly, not making eye contact, and keep walking. I was scared, though I wanted so badly not to be. One woman just touched my arm so that I would look her way. Her skin was the color of hazelnuts and her eyes were a cloudy blue. The skin was stretched tight over her arm and cheek bones, and she looked like a walking skeleton. I thought probably she was blind, but she met my glance and returned it as she held out her palm.

I wanted to trust that these people only needed help, and that they didn't want to harm me. But all the same, I could feel my heartbeat in my neck. My legs were restless, aching to break into a steady run that would carry me away from here.

When I was ten, our family planned a road trip from our home in New Mexico to California. My dad took a similar road trip along Route 66 from Kansas City to Anaheim when he was thirteen and wanted to re-create it for us. He fell in love with the West on that trip, with the geology of road cuts, with the stories of the people he met, the electric blue of summer in the desert, and how the road seems to stretch on through the glimmer of heated air. He planned our family's route from Albuquerque, through Arizona and Nevada, all the way to the west coast. From that trip I saw giant red logs that were tree trunks turned to stone. I felt the sinking sensation in my stomach as we drove too fast over sun buckled pavement in Saguaro National Park. We asked for directions from two off-shift pirates on the Las Vegas strip, holding my breath as we drove over the steep concrete drop of the Hoover dam, and forgetting to breathe at the edge of the Grand Canyon.

The day before we left on the trip, my mom took me with her on errands in our silver mini-van. It was Christmas eve, and the city drivers of Albuquerque were out in snarls, cutting through the smog, bent toward the uptown malls, flogged onward by loved one's expectations. A woman made a u-turn through an intersection on a red light, pulling right in front of us. Mom swerved in time to miss hitting the woman's car, setting our van in the path of a light pole as thick as a cottonwood tree. The moment before impact, time slowed and inertia flaunted a lazy surplus of power on my seat belt and sternum. Mom's sunglasses floated forward off the dash toward the windshield, and the smell of burning rubber mingled with the hot screech of breaks. The instant before impact, my mother let go of the wheel with her right hand and flung her arm out in front of me, trying to hold me back. I often think of that mad, helpless gesture when someone mentions a mother's love.

In the stillness after the impact, we were pinned back by our belts. We were okay, and we held hands because we couldn't move in our belts to hug. Out the windshield, the front end of the van was crumpled around the light pole. We were in front of a yard care store, with lawn mowers and leaf blowers lined in neat rows on either side of the walk. We had come within feet of hitting a larger-than-life carving of a lumberjack holding a chainsaw. He stared absently out into traffic, grinning through his beard.

I waited at the curb, huddled at the lumberjack's feet, while my mother talked to the police. My nose started to bleed and I climbed back into the wreck to get the Kleenex box. I sat holding tissue to my face, trying to be invisible. A parade of Christmas shoppers crept by the wreck in their cars. It felt like the faces behind the car glass were all looking at me. Several strangers who had seen the wreck, parked their cars, and waited to make statements. A man and two women came over to me and knelt down.

"Are you okay?" one woman said. "I'm trained in first aid."

"Yeah, I'm okay," I said through the wad of Kleenex. "Just a nose bleed."

"Did you get that nose bleed from the wreck?" the man asked, standing behind the woman. "Because if you did, you can sue that woman for damages."

I shook my head.

"No. I just get these sometimes," I said. "This one isn't even a bad one."

"Well, that woman is getting lots of tickets," the woman said. "At least there is that. She tried to flee the scene." They explained how the woman who made the U-turn tried to drive away. The three of them, none of whom knew each other, chased after her in their own cars, boxed her in, and forced her to drive back.

My parents spent some time with me and my brother, trying to reassure ourselves that we were okay. Then, they started worrying about mechanics and insurance, budgets and reservations, trip plans and money. My dad gave me the job of calling a list of car rental companies and asking them if they had a car to rent. We were looking for a van to rent for the two-week trip.

The first number I tried, I got a man with a Mexican accent.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m looking for an, um, van, to rent?”

“You want to rent a van? How old are you?” he asked.

“Ten,” I said. I told him what we needed. The man apologized, told me he was in the middle of closing for Christmas, and that they had already rented every large vehicle to Christmas travelers.

On the next call, I started inventing a story for myself. I told one woman what happened in the wreck, embellishing how scary it had been, pretending to be more shaken up than I was. She put me on hold while she called around trying to find us something. She apologized when she didn’t find anything.

By the fourth call, I was sniffing into the phone, playing the role of brave survivor with more confidence. The man promised to call back with a car for us. Half an hour later he had rented my dad a van that belonged to his family, but one he promised was in great shape and that we could use with little inconvenience.

From then on, I always associated the start of travel with the invention of a slightly more daring version of me, slightly different than the everyday version. Anything could happen during travel and I spent many a car ride or plane flight deciding which version of myself would be best able to handle the unexpected.

This was especially true when I began to travel by myself with strangers at camp and then later for study abroad. I realized I could pretend to be a storied version of myself and no one would ever know. I could be more decisive, more daring. I could be mysterious, rich, noble, accomplished. During horse camp, I pretended not to be homesick, but instead to be fearless around horses, and an expert rider. But then my partner broke her toe when a horse stepped on it we were cleaning her hoof. It was left to me to finish cleaning them by myself, and my pretended expertise vanished like heat from coffee. I couldn't lift the horse's hoof back up to rest on my knee. The horse knew who I was, and that I was afraid. As much as I wished to be able to pretend to be someone better than myself, the fears came back to me, and I became myself again through hesitation.

We drove out of Belize City, past a penitentiary, its concrete parapets edged in barbed wire. We turned up the road beyond the compound. The Belize Zoo was a modest cluster of fenced enclosures bisected with gravel paths. A woman named Sharon Matola started it for the animals she had cared for during the filming of a movie in Belize. The movie company left her with the animals and nowhere to keep them. The zoo had grown into a national pride. It housed ocelots, harpy eagles, macaws, tree frogs, and howler monkeys. Tim and Marcy gave us time to explore the exhibits. A black jaguar paced back and forth along the fence. Many of the animals were rescued and couldn't return to the wild. The harpy eagle caught my attention, a raptor with talons bigger than my hands. It hung from the chain link fence at front of the enclosure, its talons close enough to touch. It stared at me and the other visitors, the ruff of feathers around its head sticking out in a sort of mane. Once in a while it would stretch its enormous wings and beat them against the fence.

Sharon Matola greeted us at the jaguar enclosure. We were outside the enclosure and she was inside, being nuzzled by a jaguar yearling as it sniffed after something in her pocket. She wore muddy kakis and an old Belize Zoo t-shirt, ripped in a place or two. Her wild curly hair was barely contained under a green bandana. She led the jaguar on a leash and gently pushed the cub down when it tried to jump on her. The yearling looked like it weighed as much as her and she stumbled some when it playfully jumped on her. She gave it a command and it leapt eagerly onto a log beside her. She pulled a chicken foot from her pocket and the jaguar worked the treat through its teeth and swallowed.

She asked who wanted to feed the jaguar. Many hands went into the air, and I hesitated.

“How are we going to feed it?” I asked.

“Let me show you,” she said.

With the help of an assistant, she shut off the jaguar cub in its medical pen. Then she ushered me and a small girl from DC named Lacy into the enclosure. On the other side of the fence, the class watched with their fingers wrapped around the mesh, their faces close like small children outside a theme park. A heavy mesh cage stood in the corner, a heavy duty kennel. Sharon encouraged us to climb into this cage, not more than 7 feet long by 5 feet high. The three of us barely fit inside while crouching.

Once we were in, Sharon secured the cage door from inside with a deft flick of her wrist, a maneuver she seemed to have done many times.

I accounted for my limbs, adjusting them subtly so that no part of me was near the cage mesh. It was hard to do without knocking into Catherine or Lacy. Lacy was crouched and frozen. I was pretending to be fine with how confined we were. Catherine signaled her assistant to

release the yearling jaguar. The cat jaunted into the enclosure and leapt lazily on top of our little kennel.

“Some zoo,” Lacy said. “Where we are in the cage.” Catherine laughed, and took a bloody chicken foot out of her pocket and fed the jaguar through the mesh. The class laughed too, some of the girls gasping when the cat snapped up the chicken foot centimeters from Catherine’s fingers. She gave one chicken foot to each of us.

“Just keep your fingers in here,” she said. The jaguar purred so loudly it vibrated the bars all around us. I held out my chicken foot before I had time to think, and the jaguar lapped it up with its tongue. The bones cracked in our ears a second before it swallowed. The jaguar started down at us, head bobbing in search of more chicken feet. Its front paws were inches above my nose, reeking of old prey and soil. Lacy crouched down even lower, and whimpered. She couldn’t bring herself to put the chicken foot through the mesh. My legs had fallen asleep and I was having trouble finding a place to put my face where I could breathe fresh air.

“Okay,” I said, looking again at how little room I had to move. “Did I mention I have a small fear of enclosed spaces?”

Sharon looked at me and said, “Too late for that, I’m afraid.”

I started to breathe heavily. To try and take my mind off the smallness of the space, I raised my shaking hands and got one blurry image of the jaguar watching Lacy’s chicken foot. All I could make out in the shot are the wildest pair of eyes I have ever seen, deep, amber and undeniably intelligent. The jaguar licked its lips, staring unblinkingly back, until Sharon took the foot back from Lacy and fed it.

“All gone,” she said, and as if on command the cat leapt off our little cage, and minutes later was safely back in the medical pen. It seemed like it took years for Catherine to unhook the

cage and climb out. It wasn't until we were out of the zoo altogether, in the wide parking lot that I got my breathing back under control. I looked for some horizon, some measure of distance. I saw only trees in every direction, a choking jungle that obscured the topography. Nothing was familiar. Lacy spent the day moaning softly and slapping at mosquitoes. She seemed to have liked being in that cage even less than me. She asked for a place to charge her I-pod so that she could listen to music. We drove past a landfill of rotting oranges, we gagged on the sickly sweet smell of the heaps of them. Lacy started crying.

“Why is this place so awful?” she asked.

“It's just different,” I said.

“I just want a plug and hot shower, and maybe a latte. There is none of that.”

I felt guilty, and complicit for having thought the same things. It seemed to me a symptom of being the ugly American, the stereotype I tried so hard to defeat by example when I was in other countries. But perhaps just by being there, I was perpetuating it. Lacy left the group the next day and flew back to California.

The bay of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno is the entry point to the city of the same name on the island of San Cristobal. It is the easternmost island of the Galapagos Archipelago, the one closest to the mainland. It stands against the waves in the middle of the Pacific, the first island to see visitors human and otherwise who have floated from the mainland. Freighters often deliver a lifeline of supplies to island residents in this bay. Many mornings, a freighter would appear in this turquoise shelter from the Pacific, loaded with heavy piles of food, baby diapers, tourist swag, ice cream bars, and Pilsner, Ecuador's national beer. I was living in a pink palace on the beach, the school of the local community. They served the students living here breakfast on the

second floor balcony, that had a tremendous view of the bay and the town. The tanker was looming in harbor, red with rust, with a long flat deck piled with supplies not in shipping containers, but just strapped under netting to the deck. The metal hull was under strain, scraping against something under the water. It made an audible moan, as it lowered on its starboard side, akimbo in the shallows. The open air pile of plastic bikes, food crates, and other supplies shifted on deck. A few straps snapped. It set the boat at more of an angle, and with every moment the load shifted more. My classmates and I were at the railing, watching, speculating what would happen. The men on the boat tried what they could to re-attach the load, but could only do so much without risking injury.

The way the things were piled high and chaotically on the ship reminded me of loads taken from New Mexico across the border into Mexico. Battered trucks raced south on the interstate piled with bikes, furniture, tools, and toys all strapped to the bed or crammed inside for the ride south. The trip was only worth it if the load was big. My father and I drove south following such a load one time, only to watch a swamp cooler break free from the trailer and come sliding past us in the next lane. In this type of business, there is a dangerously gray area between a load big enough to make some money, and a load big enough to get someone killed. The reason this ship was here was because people wanted to live here. I was one of the tourists buying the ice cream bars and post cards that were on board that ship. I would have a stake in the cause of a disaster like everyone else who lived here or visited.

The ship tilted more. It started its motor, as if motion might somehow cure the situation. Instead, it sent the load shifting in a way that left feet between the rail and the water, the load hanging precariously ready to topple in.

A police SUV came roaring down the road with its sirens. In a place where it is usually too hot to hurry, seeing a car move that fast was unusual. Then came the village fisherman.

One man in a fishing schooner came and rammed his almost comically small boat against the side of the tanker, trying to push the tanker to rights. The man stood at the back of the little craft, revving his engine. The water behind him was a white froth. If the load had shifted and broke loose, the man might have been crushed. Instead, more fishing boats came, until they lined the side of the tanker, revving their motors, pushing their bows against the Starboard length of the steel hull. And it worked.

They slowly righted the tanker. The men on board could access the load and started working quickly to re shift and re secure the piles of stuff. I sat back down to my banana and granola with milk, that came from cows thousands of miles away on the main land. Even water was scarce and has to be imported.

My classmates and I took a tour of the other Galapagos Islands over our spring break. We had been living on the island of San Cristobal, but hadn't ventured further into the archipelago. The tour ships were several decks tall, with small bunks and a common dining room. We slept in bunk beds, and landed each day on a new island. Our guides accompanied us and insured that we didn't wander from the paths or harm the wildlife.

I slipped on a rock taking a picture of a marine iguana on black sand beach. I fell flat on my stomach and a lava rock punctured my skin, leaving a deep gash on the underside of my chin. I returned to the ship and asked for medical supplies. The cut was bleeding freely and full of rock algae and sand. The crew looked at me confused by my request, and I thought they didn't understand what I was saying.

“Yo comprendo,” said one of the crew men, but they stood around whispering to each other.

After about 15 minutes of searching they gave me some red liquid and a few band aids one crew member had in her bunk. That turned out to be the extent of their medical supplies on board.

A woman in her thirties, a German paramedic named Claudia, found out what had happened when she returned from shore. She yelled at the Captain. He shrugged. They could go back to the main town, a day or two away he said. We could get what we needed there. She looked at my cut and said that it needed stitches. A Canadian couple had a first aid kit with them, which had gauze bandages, and a small bottle of peroxide. Claudia helped me clean out the wound, scraping deeper into the cut than I would have ever dared, and taping it closed with duct-tape. She checked on it twice a day to make sure it didn't get infected. When we arrived back in the main city she went with me to the drug store and described what supplies we needed.

The whole time, Claudia was furious with the captain.

“He should know better,” she said. “That is some serious neglect on his part, taking people out without medical supplies. What if something worse had happened on that ship? And don't get me started on this backwater pharmacy. They don't even have butterfly bandages.”

Only when my wound was healing well, and I was out of danger, did I allow myself to think about all the things that could have happened if she hadn't known what to do, if she hadn't been there. I marveled at the lack of medical supplies in the largest city on the islands. I thought that part of it might be poverty, but the Ecuadorians living on the Galapagos were some of the richest in their country. It may have also been a different attitude they had toward dangerous.

Perhaps, a cut to them was nothing for concern. Perhaps, they saved their worry for bigger things.

Our class had been staying at a remote research station in the Maya Mountains of Belize. We spent a week completing independent research projects. The broadleaf trees of the moist rainforest shed rain and grew shallow in the soil that was continually depleted of nutrients because of all the plant growth. Things grew voraciously.

Basil was a young man our age from rural Belize. His job at the station was to keep the Belize jungle out of the buildings and lawn between them. Many mornings I watched Basil navigate the mower around the Tarantulas' dens. One night he told us how he had escaped from Belize City after being beaten in the head with a baseball bat for walking down the wrong street at night.

Basil led us to the cave. We followed a long hose into the forest that dipped down into a plunging hole and pumped water up to the research station. I slipped on wet cave mud. The deeper we ventured into the cave the drier it became.

We relied on our flashlights. Layers of stalactites and stalagmites appeared from the dark in the shape of dripping candles, tonsils, columns and lacy chandeliers. The lack of defined space was eerie. I never knew how far back things went. I thought of holes in the Carlsbad Caverns at home. The first explorers could not determine the depth. They dropped objects and never heard them hit bottom. I imaged worse case scenarios, like all of our flashlights going dead at once. The air got older and more still as we walked. Basil led us to a small chamber toward the very back of the cave. He pointed to the bats, small furry specks on the ceiling.

“Hairy legged or elegant myotis bats,” he whispered. “I have never been able to tell which these are.”

As we shone our flashlights on them, they released themselves from the ceiling and flew around our heads. Most of the sound bats make are at registers humans can't hear. I imagined though that they were making quite a racket. I suggested we turn off our flashlights to listen. The group agreed and we stood in quiet darkness, hoping in such quiet air, that I might be able to feel the vibrations of their cries. I could hear their wings beating, then the air from their wings against my cheek, my neck. The group lasted maybe 10 seconds before the lights came on.

Basil led us deeper, where he pointed to a small tunnel we would have to climb through on our bellies.

“There is a boar skeleton back there if you want to see it,” Basil said. “But the air in there is thin. Many people have been breathing it away in order to see the skeleton, and it doesn't replace quickly. You have to crawl in there flat on your stomach.”

I crawled through the small opening, scraping my belly and thighs in the mud. Basil followed behind, the flashlight in his mouth. There was a pig skeleton, but neither of us could enjoy it. I was out of breath instantly upon standing up. I took the deepest breaths I could, hogging it all, and still I didn't have enough. I could only stay a minute, before my body took over, trying to convince my brain to panic. I crawled away from the small room with the perfectly preserved skeleton, thinking about a cricket I had once killed in a jar by forgetting to put air holes in the lid. I slid back into the room with oxygen, my head throbbing. Basil slid out right behind me. We stood there joyously breathing.

“Too many people,” he said, gasping. “I should not bring anyone in there again.”

We pitched our tents on the white sand beach in southern Belize between dunes and sea grass, thirty feet away from the gray Atlantic. In the center of camp a hearty tree with almost perfectly circular leaves, like lily pads, grew in the sand. Two children climbed the tree, dropped from its branches and ate its fruit in the only shade on the beach. We waved at each other and when I got nearer, they brought over what they were eating for me to see.

In their palms were dusky purple fruits the size of shooter marbles.

“Sea grapes,” the little girl said with a grin. She put one in my hand.

The sand flies on the beach were maddening. We stayed on the beach to be close to a village, where the Garifuna people were showing us their culture and telling us their history. The small gnats bit down hard so that when I wandered into a cloud of them it felt like wading through a shower of needles. Dr. Young had taken over this leg of our journey through Belize as Tim and Marcy had to stay to work on Marcy’s research. Dr. Young had grown up in Belize, and he was endeavoring to show us the non-commercial side of his country. The class chose a beach house deck as the spot to hold class because it caught the breeze and was free of the sand flies.

My back was to the deck railing, I enjoyed a good view of the sea as it changed colors under cloud shadows. The rest of my classmates formed a ring, adjusted their sun glasses and prepared their notebooks. Dr. Young began his lecture with questions, until a stomach dropping shift set the students on the other side of the deck at a terrifying backward angle. Notebooks and water bottles slid downhill and off the edge. For a moment, I didn’t believe what gravity was telling me. The deck was collapsing. Dr. Young sprang backward to sit on the corner of the railings as if away from a snake strike. Students stood or got halfway standing, some barefoot,

some in flip flops. I stayed seated and raised my hand, reaching for them, though they were much too far. Then the wood gave in and the students fell away.

My foot dangled over the edge of a large fissure. Far below lay the other students and the wreckage. I was just barely sitting on that part that had stayed standing, Dr. Young and I the only ones that hadn't fallen. I felt grateful for an unexpected gift, and I felt fear for the others, and that I could fall at any moment.

Below, the students groaned. Mandy sobbed on her back, too frightened to be embarrassed. My sense of gratefulness at having been spared emboldened me and I leapt into the new cavern between the standing portion of deck and the part on the sand. Dr. Young leapt down behind me. We helped people out from beneath fallen wood. Most were able to walk out. Mandy's shirt was pinned under a heavy beam, but somehow her stomach was not. She landed on her back and we hesitated to move her because she complained of pain. We convinced her to lie on a board and let us slide her out.

Dr. Young, Nate, and I got our first aid kits and started to tend to the wounded. Mandy was bruised on her back and right side, and purples and blues were swelling under the skin like stains under wallpaper. After a few minutes she was walking stiffly. Jane was most injured. She had a deep cut on the bottom pad of her heel. Blood redder than wine issued from deep tissue that shifted uncomfortably with each heart beat. It mixed with the white sand that stuck there, dripping onto the beach. It needed stitches.

Dr. Young saw the cut and swore. "Please don't send me home," said Jane. "It doesn't even hurt."

We waited for the doctor from the neighboring village. We stood or sat on the sand together, everyone looking for something to do, everyone watching the porch for signs of further

collapse. Nate and James, unable to stand still any longer, grabbed some loose wood and started hitting the last few supporting beams that had somehow held me up. They hammered at it for fifteen minutes before they brought it down. I think if they could have knocked down the beach house, they would have.

Villagers walked up the road and beach to inspect the damage and click their tongues. One of our Garifuna host women strained to keep from yelling at us, saying sternly that the house was condemned and that we should not have been sitting on that porch. It hadn't been marked, some of us said feebly. She kept asking why we hadn't seen the rot. She called us foolish for not recognizing the signs of wood corrupted by sea.

It struck me that not knowing a place can be dangerous. At home I felt competent possibly because I had been overprotected. Here I was only learning about the practicality of the world. Even my training had failed. In emergency response training, step one was to survey the surroundings, looking for danger before rushing in to help. In a training video, the first aid class watched a woman electrocute herself by rushing across a wet floor to help an unconscious victim. Too many people have become victims themselves by not hesitating. I had not assessed the state of the deck before I jumped beneath it, and it could very well have collapsed.

A doctor arrived in a Land Rover and swooped Jane and our professor away to his clinic. They returned several hours later and Jane hopped from the cab using crutches. Dr. Young thanked the doctor in Creole, and waved until the Land Rover was out of sight. Our professor marveled that the doctor had a pair of crutches for Jane.

“You never see crutches here,” he said. “They are just so hard to get way out here.” He was stunned at how efficient and un-Belizean the whole process of getting Jane stitched up had really been. He guessed it was the ex-pats settling into retirement beach houses just to the north

of the village that had much to do with accessible medical supplies in an area where that luxury was uncommon.

We received word later that night that the doctor in the Land Rover who had helped Jane, collided with a drunk driver just after returning Jane and the professor to the beach. The doctor did not survive the crash. He died helping us. The night we got the news, no one wanted to leave the camp fire and go to sleep. We needed each other's company and we started telling ghost stories.

Dr. Young told us one:

“A friend and I were driving down the highway very late one night. It's one of the worst roads in Belize, narrow, only enough for one car at a time. We saw someone on the side of the road where the shoulder was impossibly small. My friend was driving and he started to slam on the brakes in order to avoid hitting the man. He looked green, and at first we thought, well, it must be a trick of light. But we were getting closer and the figure became even greener still. We were going pretty slow, and I was just about to roll down my window and talk to him, when he flickered out of sight. I mean flickered. There is no other way to explain it. He was just there and then he was gone. A few miles down the road we saw a man and his wife. They had struck a walking man with their truck. They cried and yelled and asked us for help. They said that he was walking along the edge of the road, and they had come around a corner too fast. The couple was so upset that no one had thought to cover the body. I used my coat. I tried not to look at the face, but I did anyway. I swear, it was the same man we had seen disappear further back on the road.”

When he finished his telling, he looked at all of us around the fire. Erin had her hands over her eyes. Everyone was tense. A smile spread across his face.

“Look at that!” he laughed. “You all believed me!” I went to my tent and settled into my sleeping bag, shivering.

That was our last night on the beach. Late in the night I woke to heavy winds, and an insistent Dr. Young waking everyone up and telling us to take shelter in a half finished cinderblock building. We huddled against those cinderblocks and watched as a tropical depression flattened our tents, leaving us drenched and exhausted. In the morning, Dr. Young said, “These things will happen.”

The village women brought out our breakfast looking distinctly unflustered by the storm that passed in the night. They looked at our tired faces and our ragged tents and shook their heads at us. I’m not sure I could read what was meant by their shaking heads, but I imagine they wondered why we didn’t stop sticking our hands out to be bitten. They seemed to wonder if we would learn to save ourselves instead of waiting for someone else to save us. Their biscuits were warm. I ate one hungrily, as if it alone was going to keep me alive.

HOW TO BE LONESOME

“Be good and you will be lonesome.”

-Mark Twain

“Be lonesome and you will be free.”

- Jimmy Buffett

The idea of love at first sight is a hard one to explain rationally, and a beautiful one to believe in irrationally. Love at first sight could be determined by pheromones, hormones, or our genetic programming. It could also be cultural, an idea perpetuated by a shared belief in its existence. Perhaps people learn through children’s stories that love at first sight is possible and desirable. Love at first sight is a comforting idea, an idea that minimizes the fear of uncertainty in the formation of relationships. It might be some mass delusion.

I believed in love at first sight. I grew up on a healthy diet of Disney princesses, just like my friends. I didn’t see my belief as delusional then, I saw it as a sign that I was a hopeless romantic, a term I didn’t understand the meaning of as a kid, but that I liked immensely.

For my friends and me, the Disney movies were models for how relationships formed. Down the block, blonde haired Amanda had a dress-up chest full of Disney Princess costumes. She insisted on being Sleeping Beauty, because that dress was pink.

We got along swimmingly, because she never wanted to be Belle.

“I don’t know why my mom got me that costume,” she said. “You can wear it.”

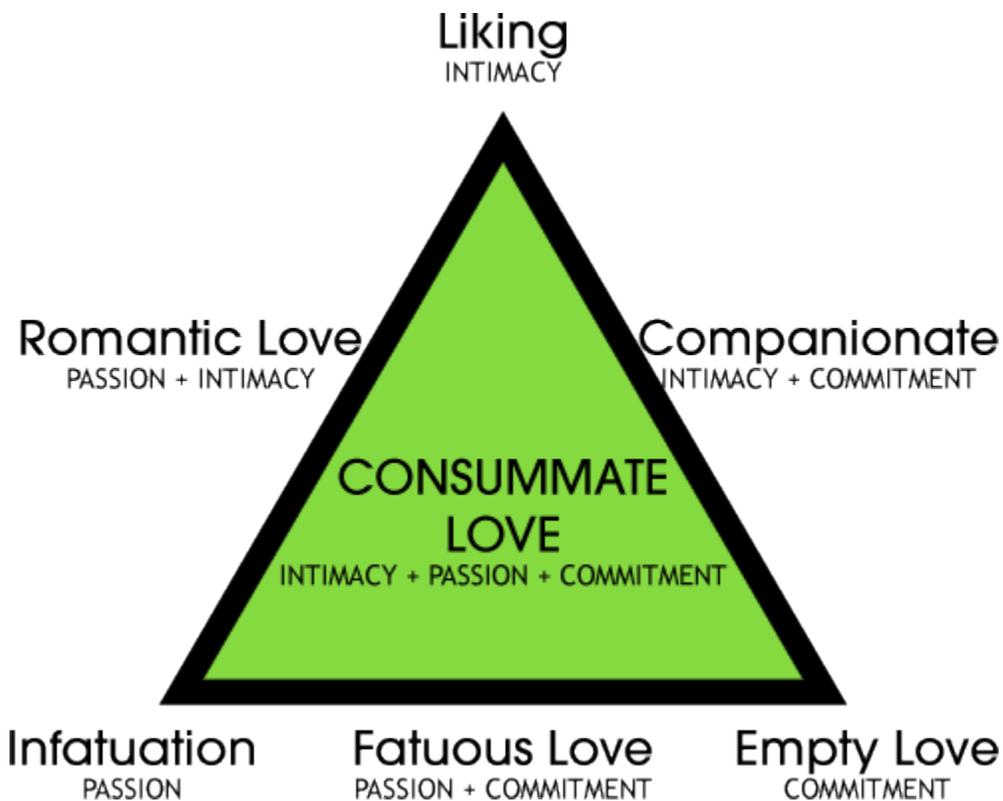
Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* was my favorite princess. Not only did she represent the greatest princess diversity to date as a brunette, but *she* actually did some of the saving in the story by rescuing her father. She liked books, and she stood up for herself.

I didn't particularly like that she was imprisoned, but it seemed somehow okay because she able to live in an enchanted castle full of forbidden passageways, new clothes, dancing cutlery, and most beautiful towering library. Belle was a prisoner with all the luxuries she hadn't enjoyed when she was free, and that was an intoxicating compromise that didn't trouble me the way it does now.

I liked that Belle stood up to the Beast's unreasonable ultimatums. Eventually, she changed him from slobbery animal to a presentable man. This too seemed a fantastic alternative to having to live with a man the way he was. In relation to Belle, the other princesses were boring and worse than passive, asleep for their first kiss or otherwise helpless to save themselves. They waited around for the right man to come along, while Belle ventured into the dark and scary woods. Ariel, the mermaid, changed herself enormously for Eric by splitting her tail in half. She was also stricken silent, something her suitor seemed to enjoy. The pressure to get married as the lawful and social goal of a woman's life consumes the plotlines, and Belle was the first one I saw fight back. She at least knew what she didn't want for herself. The beast may have been shallow in his choice of a beautiful woman, but Belle was able to see beyond appearances.

I try to remember when my friends and I put the dresses away and stopped pretending to be princesses. I started to hear what women had to say about the Disney stories. I learned about Stockholm Syndrome, the syndrome where captives fall in love with their captors. Belle seemed less powerful then, perhaps more the victim than I realized. Then, I fell in love myself, and realized that hoping for a fairy tale was a fast way to jeopardize real life happiness.

Psychologist Robert Sternberg studies love and the range of different feelings associated with the word. He created a model that defines seven different types of love. His idea is that different types of love stem from different combinations of the components: 1) intimacy (how well people know the person they love), 2) passion (physical arousal and desire), and 3) commitment (responsibility and decision making devoted to relationship maintenance). Sternberg created a triangle to show the potential combinations.



The ideal in his model is consummate love, where people have passion, commitment, and intimacy with each other. But the love of the Disney characters falls well outside of consummate love. Many of the early Disney movies promote infatuation, which is the closest thing on Sternberg's scale to love at first sight. Infatuation is pure desire minus any commitment to the

other person or knowledge of the other person's personality or values. Some, like Cinderella and Snow White, move from infatuation to fatuous love, which describes people who have a whirlwind romance and are married and committed before they've really had a chance to get to know each other.

I wondered how the relationships of the Disney princesses fared after the credits rolled. The details of the daily marriage maintenance in the movies are completely missing. I was left wondering what happens after the happy ending. After love is found, how is it kept? As a young girl I had no model for that on the movies or story books.

Once, I was in love at first sight. Or rather, it was an infatuation that I mistook for love, because I still clung to the romantic ideal. All it took was to shake his hand. I was 20 and he was 22. We were classmates on our trip to Galapagos.

We spent time walking the beach that spring, talking about our futures, baseball, and about patterns in the water and stars. He knew the names of the birds on the islands and a great deal about evolutionary biology. He studied as hard as I did, taking the initiative to do his own research project. He volunteered with a local school and the kids found him around town and hung off of him and tried to tackle him.

He borrowed a bike with bad brakes from his host family and raced it down the hill toward the school just to feel the speed. He dove to see the hammer head sharks, and climbed to the summit of Cotopaxi. He was fearless.

We saw markings on the beach that we thought were baby turtles and got up at midnight to see if we could watch them hatch. We discovered instead that what we thought had been baby turtle markings were instead hermit crabs. He had a girlfriend back home. I used this to justify never saying anything about the way I felt. I never knew if it was all on my side. The night

before we left for home our whole study abroad class stayed up till 2am singing 80s rock ballads. We jumped on our beds as we danced. My taxi arrived at 3am to get me to the airport. I went around hugging everyone and telling them goodbye. When I got to him, he whispered in my ear that I was his favorite. I never saw him again.

Back in Albuquerque that summer, I told my best friend Sonya about him. She said that I should go after him. I never did. I worried that if I ever tried to go back and recreate what I felt, I would discover it wasn't real.

The whole experience of being on the Galapagos felt like a dream when I returned to the states. I had loved him, surely, before I had known his name. I had no solid evidence why I should. The scientist in me rejected, rationalized, explained away the feelings as a product of the excitement and adventure. I spent the next years comparing men to the one I met in Galapagos.

I am a skeptic of online dating, though I have engaged in it on and off for a total of about 6 months. Most of my hesitation came from the list of risks it involved. I think people have an intuitive sense for who is dangerous, and who is not based on body language clues and other information gained from meeting in person. I don't have any of those online. Senses are dulled, and confidence is unwisely heightened. Behind screens people are invincible and emboldened. I was also a skeptic that online dating would work for me. I pictured a potential pool of men to be the more-than-pale computer nerds with social disorders and questionable hygiene.

Unexpectedly, my cousin, Alicia, changed my mind about online dating. She is a beautiful Dallas girl, worldly and accomplished. She made it living and working in New York for many years. She is smart, and impossibly thin; and I spent most of my youth in awe of her

and her stylish sister. Alicia never had trouble finding a date, but was having some difficulty finding the right man to marry.

Alicia's incentive to get married had been more urgent than mine. She watched her younger sister Abigail get married before her. Alicia was all smiles and support during her sister's wedding, but perhaps because of the strain of the wedding, or the expectations of her friends and family, she seemed unsettled, her smile somewhat fixed and unmoving. It couldn't have been easy to navigate such a milestone alone. Nearing her early thirties, I imagine she began to really feel that pressure of time. I suspected too that my aunt and uncle weren't shy in voicing their fears for her husbandless future.

My aunt Cathy is an old-fashioned woman interested in appearances, etiquette and proper conduct. For my parent's wedding, she gave my mother the latest edition of *Emily Post's Etiquette*.

I don't know how much Alicia's willingness to please her mother added to the pressure she felt. My uncle, an Air Force officer and then a lawyer, had done well for the family, allowing them to raise their children in a fashionable Dallas neighborhood where my aunt could devote her time to keeping a beautiful home, and performing her duty of raising and marrying off her daughters to suitable men of means. In the pictures of my aunt as a young woman, she stands out in her meticulously sprayed hair and bright trendy outfits of the seventies. She is beautiful, with doe eyes and a vivacious smile. It is Cathy's great joy to see young people marry, and she loves a good wedding.

My uncle told the story of how he met Cathy at a club. He had seen her from across the room in a yellow dress, and fought the rest of the officers to get to her first.

Cathy, Alicia, and I found some time to talk at the brunch the day after Abigail's wedding. Cathy asked if I was dating anyone, and when I said I had been too busy, an answer she wouldn't understand, Alicia saved me by saying, "I'm trying online dating now. I've found that is a great way to meet people with work and everything else."

Those words coming from Alicia was all it took to convince me that online dating was okay. I put my fears aside, and tried it. I became fascinated by the process of setting up an account. I chose E-Harmony because of its ad campaign and promises of scientific basis for their matching. I sat through a lengthy survey of my preferences and personality characteristics. The survey started out with easy questions about my age and height, and moved onto looking at myself and my personality. Do I get angry easily? Do I like to make others happy? Do I leave my room a mess? Am I satisfied with my level of emotional development? Do I like to stop and smell the roses? Do I feel plotted against? Do I sometimes drive faster than the posted speed limit?

I tried to figure out what they added up to. I was sure that these questions all had research and psychological backing to them. I wondered how many people lied to make themselves look better, and I suspected almost everyone did. I tried not to lie by answering based on my first instincts. I'm not sure I succeeded. I suppose that when it comes to how desirable I am as a partner, I lie even to myself.

The summer after I returned from Galapagos, my best friend Meghan met a man named Paul who was working in her office as an intern. I watched them fall in love despite Meghan's acute shyness and Paul's plans to leave for a job in Virginia two weeks after their first date.

He moved away and Meghan followed him a year later when she finished school. They found what those Disney princesses never showed us, a way to make early love last.

At their wedding five years later, Meghan invited me and our friend Gina to be bridesmaids. Gina arrived at ski resort for the wedding fresh from her best friend Jason's wedding. In high school, Gina had been in love with Jason, and I suspected she still was. She abused the open bar at the rehearsal dinner, was sick that night, and crawled downstairs the morning of the wedding still a little drunk.

Snow and freezing rain that night had stranded some of the bridesmaids further up the mountain, and frozen our cars in a shell of ice. We were already late for our hair appointments. I hacked at the bride's car with a scraper the concierge had conjured up. I watched through the window as Gina stumbled downstairs toward coffee, raccoon eyed. Meghan's mother was chasing Meghan around the lobby. They were fighting again, and it looked like Sonya was close to tears.

I finally got the SUV open and we started loading up the wedding dress into the back. Gina slumped into the back seat and looked out the back hatch at me.

"I'm so sorry," she said. She said that again and again that morning.

Meghan's attempts to evade her mother failed and they burst out the doors. Sonya's mother said something and went back inside. Though Meghan had not wanted her groom to see her on the wedding day, she dialed his number and in minutes they were hugging in the freezing parking lot. Gina watched them and started to cry from the back seat. I kept hacking at the ice.

I have worked to replace my belief in love at first sight with something more complex. I looked for other stories on love and found Jane Austen and her novels. I think she is the

champion of single women. If her heroines found love at all, they found it through great trial, heartbreak, and by being true to themselves and their values. Love at first sight is utterly defeated in her work. Most characters rarely realize they are in love until very late in the story. The women are opinionated and uncompromising when it comes to what they want. In a world not so distant from our own, where considerations of practicality and comfort in marriage weighed as heavily as love, Austen's characters accept nothing less than everything they want in one man. Still, she lies to us. Her heroines almost always succeed in finding this perfect man.

Austen had a weakness for emotional justice and happy endings that didn't speak as truly as the story of her own life. A long time friend of the family proposed to her, and she accepted, only to rescind her acceptance after a night considering what she had agreed to. She never married, and died in her family's home. Upon her death, her sister burnt many of her letters, which may have contained some clue into what Austen thought about her own love life, and what she had thought of being single as she died. During her time, marriage was a way to escape the captivity and social scorn of singleness. Not much has changed. I like to think that being single suited Austen, though few people understood it. I like to think she found freedom in it, and uncompromising voice.

My first online match who I met in person was a banker with a wide smile and long eyelashes named Chase. I was late to our meeting at the Thai restaurant, and he gave me a nervous hug. I found him immediately handsome, and just like his photo. I suppressed the butterflies during dinner and tried to be cool headed, and ready to run if he turned out to be a creeper. He seemed to be out to interview me, and the conversation was on his side most of the

dinner. I could tell he was nervous too. I hardly ate anything while I tried to answer his onslaught of questions.

“So, what’s your position on politics?” he asked. I stared at him, as if to ask “seriously?” but he didn’t seem to pick up on my dislike for the question. I asked the waiter for more water while deciding to throw him off.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?” I said.

“What? Oh. No. I mean, I believe you are limited to loving someone you happen to encounter in your life. And the odds of encountering one person, who is, I don’t know, this meant-to-be person you recognize right away is mathematically inconceivable.”

I laughed at the way he said inconceivable. It reminded me of the villain in *Princess Bride*. He is really a nice guy, I thought, but I just don’t think he is for me.

“What’s so funny?” he said

“You reminded me of the movie *The Princess Bride* just then,” I said.

“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” He did a fair impression of the accent. I laughed, and looked down at my crumpled napkin. I had ordered curry for dinner. It was another first date faux pas to add to my growing list. The heat of it made me snuffle, and I spilled curry sauce in my lap.

“So do you?” Chase asked.

“What?”

“Do you believe in love at first sight?”

“Oh,” I said, “not at present.”

We decided to walk outside down the main street in Ames. It was a beautiful day in September, and other people were walking the street, looking in the shop windows. I found that

conversation between us got easier. We had so much in common that it was easy to strike out on new areas of overlap, and we had a similar sense of humor. At the end of a long walk around downtown, he gave me a hug and kissed my cheek. He promised to call me.

“I’m not into wasting time,” he said. “So it will be soon.”

I got into my car and waited for him to leave first so that he wouldn’t follow me. I was paranoid about such things, overprotective of myself. That was part of the problem.

I approached my time on E-harmony as I imagined an anthropologist might approach field observations. It taught me a lot about commonalities between what men looked for in a woman, and what they advertised about themselves. I passed quickly over men who started their description with modesty, stating how hard it was to describe themselves, or who were too lazy to write much of anything, claiming they were really laid back and to just write to them if you wanted more info.

I started to see how much time it did save, finding men with common interests and values. Instead of spending several dates finding out what someone believed, whether or not he wanted children, what he did with his spare time, it was all there on the profile. Some of the men were endearingly vulnerable, revealing quirks about their characters or writing straightforward passages about their fears and hopes for this anonymous audience. There was safety in that anonymity, and also a great deal of uncertainty.

Selection works differently online than it does in person. Some men have a better understanding of the type of things they should say that appeal to women than others. Attractive characteristics by sight are replaced with the attractive characteristics of eloquence, written expression, wit and vulnerability. There is no eye contact or body language online. Men and

women who are at a genetic disadvantage are strong online candidates. People can be braver online, more likely to reach out to more people. But people are also harder to read, their motives hidden.

One moment a man would e-mail me, the next he wouldn't respond. There were lots of dead ends. People who had profiles but who hadn't paid for subscriptions couldn't send or respond to e-mails. Others were dating someone but still had their subscription. Some men were curious but not serious, and mostly I was the same. One time I had set up a date to meet a dentist, and he backed out at the last minute to meet someone else instead.

"That's the way it is with this site," he wrote. "I'm not trying to be dishonest. There are just a lot of options. I bet you are talking to other men the same time you were writing me." And I was. In the real world there were seemingly few appealing choices in my daily routine. Online, there were so many choices. It completely changed the way the game was played.

Chase did call me the moment he got back home, and we made plans to meet again.

"Look," I said. "The weird thing about this online dating is that it's a little backwards. We might have a lot in common and know a lot about each other, but all of that happens before we can assess if we find each other attractive. I'm just not sure that I'm attracted to you."

"Well, that sucks. Because I am, to you I mean."

"I'm willing to try again," I said, "one more time. Maybe it was just nerves. And I did enjoy talking with you. I just don't want to get your hopes up."

We met a second time. Somewhere between that first date and the second one, I decided to let down my defenses and see what would happen. That second date went well. It turned out that those butterflies I felt were genuine, but that I had been trying to ignore them out of fear. I

ended up dating Chase for seven months. I was only online for two weeks when I closed down my account. He asked me not to tell anyone we had met online. He was ashamed to be using it, worried about what people would think.

I hadn't loved him at first sight. My first impression hadn't been wrong exactly, it just hadn't been what I always imagined a first impression should be. It wasn't some inner tremor, some sensational yet unnoticed shift. Over time I grew to love him, and over time I also grew to understand that he wasn't quite right for me. All the questionnaires and personality characteristics hadn't worked for us long term.

The news of my cousin Alicia's wedding reached me through my father who sent me her wedding website, an elaborate production with theme music (L-O-V-E by Nat King Cole) and multiple pages that flipped from one to the next like a virtual scrap book.

The website told the story of how Alicia had met Alan online. They connected and planned to meet in person. Right before the first date, something mysterious (unexplained by the website) had prevented them from meeting. Some time passed and neither of them found love. Then they met again on the same online dating site and had their first date at a trendy downtown Dallas restaurant. A short while later Alan took her to Costa Rica and proposed to her in front of a volcano.

Alicia's wedding reception was at the rainforest room of the Dallas aquarium, and the theme was Costa Rica with coffee party favors and butterfly centerpieces. I wandered the dark corridors of tropical fish tanks, cages of macaws and owls, the monkeys had been let out of their cages and sat on the railing watching the women in ball gowns and men in tuxedos walk past. The center of the large space was open, like a hotel lobby with walkways around the edges. From

above I could look down into large pool with giant old parrot fish and Manatees that surfaced like white ghosts and disappeared. My uncle loved to tell stories. During his speech as father of the bride, he told Alicia's story. Everyone clapped and showed no signs of surprise or dislike for the fact that they had met online. Alicia looked very happy.

I revived my online account a year and a half after Chase and I stopped dating. I thought I might work for me again the way it had sort of worked. I thought it would be a good way for me to move on.

The second online man I met in person was a poet. He had the best online profile I had seen. In his picture he held up a sign that said "Pick me" with a sincere, imploring expression. We e-mailed for a few weeks before he asked to meet in person at a coffee shop. Some of his poetry was online, and it was very good. There was one about him feeding a stray cat. The cat in the poem eventually hid under the car from him. "You and every woman in this town" was the last line.

The time that elapsed between making plans and meeting him was a hopeful time. I imagined that things would go well. I allowed myself to be distracted with happy thoughts about what could be. We met for coffee and when I saw him, my heart fell. His pictures had all been from an earlier time, before he had gained some weight. He seemed shorter than his stated height, which made him about four inches shorter than me. All of that, in Belle-like fashion, I tried to overlook. How shallow was I? I chastised myself and tried to focus on some other sense of connection that might develop. We had a nice conversation, and discovered we didn't have much in common in our families or our childhood. His mother had struggled with an addiction to

pain medication. He had never been close to his father. He had been a troubled kid growing up, setting fires in the woods and dodging school.

He seemed sincere, but I just didn't connect with him. It bothered me that I couldn't explain why. I was another cat hiding from him under the car and he had done nothing wrong.

Toward the end of my second online dating attempt, I stopped checking my online profile. The e-mails kept coming to my mail box with new interests awaiting my reply. I replied to none of them. They were gratifying to see, but I had decided that once my subscription was through I wouldn't renew it. There was something keeping me from taking the same risk.

Two days before my account expired in mid December, a physics grad student with one blurry photo from the neck up (I had learned to take that as a bad sign) e-mailed me and asked me out on the spot for a date to play pool. Perhaps it was the nearness to another Christmas, or the unusually brave request, but I said yes, and gave him my e-mail. I disabled my E-harmony account and picked up a written conversation with him.

We kept up that conversation through winter break, so that when we finally met for coffee and pool, we knew a lot about each other already. He was thin and too tall for his sweatpants that reached his ankles. He held his hands together nervously, and would not make eye contact. He was the kind of guy that would have hung out with Steve Urkle, smart, kind, sensitive and not at all attractive. We talked over coffee and went to play pool. He was a very good pool player and explained how he visualized banking shots by seeing another pool table alongside the actual one which allowed him to visualize angles of incidence. After pool, we sat down and chatted over coffee.

I told him that I wasn't attracted to him, and that I was sorry. He did a curious thing then. He tried to convince me that attraction wasn't important.

He explained his dating history, and how he had gotten into a series of increasingly crazy relationships with women to whom he said he wasn't attracted.

"I like them because we shared similar beliefs. The attraction came later." Soon he was explaining his past, reliving it through the telling. His mother had raised him alone, and struggled with bulimia. He seemed to always date woman who had eating disorders or hated themselves in some other way. He had been in a six-year relationship and was engaged before she left him for another man. He had quit his program in Physics on the West Coast after failing in his courses that semester and moved to this school. Since then he had been tormented by a crazy anorexic who was stringing him along and dating another man in his apartment.

"How you are still willing to date people?" I asked at the end of his story.

"Yeah, I mean, I'm willing to put myself out there. You have to be, don't you? Even if you do get hurt."

"You are a braver person than I am," I said.

We sat in silence for a moment.

"Dating is just awful," I said. "Why is it so hard to meet someone who has everything you are looking for?"

"It's hard to meet women, period, much less someone who has it all. I sat at a bar for most of last year, and never found a girl who shares my views, you know?"

"I don't imagine a bar is the ideal place to meet women if you are interested in someone compatible."

"Then where is?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be online."

He went on to describe his work with artificial intelligence. He is trying to get computers to speak language so that humans can communicate with them better. He spends most of his time in a basement on campus working alone. I wonder then how many lonely people there are in basements here, how many there are in the world.

By the end of my second venture into E-harmony's world, I was taking a human relationships class. I researched some statistics on online dating. It turns out, not surprisingly, that people lie on online dating sites in predictable ways. They lie about their income and their height and their age. They post pictures of themselves at times in their life when they looked better than they do now. Almost everyone does some lying online, to make themselves look better. I learned too that certain people get more attention. Women with controversial looks get more e-mails than women who everyone agrees are good looking. It turns out people target dates based on who they think might accept as well as on attraction, which tends to make unusual looking people extremely popular.

Judgments online are still based largely on looks for the same reasons judgments in person are influenced that way. E-harmony reminds me of the importance of a good profile picture regularly. It gives tips for the pictures you choose which include showing your whole body instead of just your head. Don't show pictures of you with an ex or any person who might be misconstrued as an ex. Think about the lighting. I encountered a surprising number of snapshots of leering men illuminated by the light of their screen as they sat in a dark room. Any man would look creepy that way.

I like that the internet was able to point me toward men with a good foundation of commonality, but I found that it didn't save time. It took me seven months to realize that Chase

and I weren't compatible. The most frustrating thing is that we *should have* been compatible by all their methods and scientific calculation. Relationship scientists put enormous significance on first impressions. But in online dating, the first impression is handicapped without in-person, non-verbal cues that humans have evolved to rely upon.

Online dating started to worry me. I realized that there are a lot of guys in the world I don't want to know, and a lot of men I had to reject, which was taxing for everyone involved. I had to take a lot of rejection myself, which I did better some days than others. I began to realize how many lonely people there are in the world, and how they cluster online, building up to toxic levels in lonely online pools. I worried that I had been lucky so far, that the luck was to run out, and that I might stumble onto someone really crazy and not in a good way. Operating in such a small town also meant that I sometimes saw a man from online in person. One day I sat down on the bus next to a man whose e-mail I responded to with the formula "no thanks" reply that E-harmony provides. Luckily he didn't recognize me or was too embarrassed to say anything. I sat next to him for four or five stops, aware that if I moved, I would draw more attention to myself.

While online dating works for lots of people, I suspect I won't go back to it. What draws two people together I realize now, follows no formula. Online dating steals and cheapens that important first impression, the excitement of discovery. It is a discovery I'm excited to make on my own from now on.

My dad really likes the song, "You Can't Always Get What You Want" by the Rolling Stones. He would play it sometimes, dancing around our living room in some sort of walk like an Egyptian in slow motion prance, never failing to make me laugh. Though the song has a hopeful melody, it made me sad as a teenager. I thought the lyrics were telling me to settle. I reasoned that if you try some times, you just try harder until you get both what you want and

what you need. That was before I knew how complex those moments are when I get either what I need or what I want. It's a blind blunder. I've made my peace with the song. Instead of being captive to my singleness, I'm trying enjoy it.

WOMAN HIT BY TRAIN**Ames, IA October 2009**

The first snow of the season falls on my eyelashes and outstretched palms. Having grown up in Albuquerque, I'm excited by the heavy flakes that cover the giant tree in our back yard where the owl visits to serenade my roommates and me. I imagine that now, the owl will go to sleep for the winter. I rush inside to tell my roommate Rose. She has already lived through an Iowa winter. She shakes her head, and smiles, knowing what is to come.

Two days later, I still can't free my car from the gutter in front of my house, where I parked it for the snow storm. Two college-age kids with a four wheel drive SUV and a tow rope see Rose and me struggling with a snow shovel and pull my car out. They say they have fun driving around pulling cars out when it snows.

Going Out

Rose and my graduate program cohorts go out to the bar. Rose orders a pint and sets it behind her. An old man, skeletal and bearded, walks up, bends over the table behind her back, and looks into her drink. He sees me. I see him. We lock eyes for a second before he wheels around and walks quickly out of the bar. I pick up her pint. No visible signs of tampering. I tell her what happened. She drinks the pint anyway.

A Poem I Found on A Bathroom Stall Door

Dear Iowa,

I will miss
how safe I feel here

Gothic Trope

Our professor shows our gothic literature class the image of *American Gothic*, painted by Iowa native Grant Wood. The farmer stares out at us, bored, or maybe angry.

“Notice the woman beside him,” our professor says. “There is an unnatural amount of white showing in her eyes. Grazing animals warn each other of danger by pointing to it with their eyes. It’s a silent type of communication that won’t alert the predator. Do you think she is trying to warn us of something? Some say she is looking out of frame. Others say she is looking at the man. Notice how much younger she is than the man. There is a similarity to their features. Is she his wife? His daughter?”

“Or both,” a classmate mutters to me under her breath.

I can’t ignore the Grant Wood paintings in the library on campus and the women’s stoic expressions.

Birthday Party

Rose and I throw a birthday party for our other roommate Leslie. Early in the party, a drunk Alaskan with a beard pulls out a hunting knife in the kitchen. He drops the knife on the linoleum in the middle of the circle of people. He bends to pick it up and falls, cutting himself with his own knife.

The next morning Leslie’s phone rings and rings until I wake her up to answer it. Her brother has the swine flu and is in the hospital. My boyfriend drives her to the airport. I watch them leave, finding myself surrounded with party debris: beer and wine bottles, flaccid balloons, discarded toy guns and rope.

White Out, January 22

A blizzard hits central Iowa. Twenty-one-year-old Jonathan Lacina, a senior design student, walks out of a friend's house into the snow. The snow turns the volume down on the world and softens footsteps. Later I will imagine how this must have looked, try to see him walking, try to understand what it may have been like. I imagine him hunched over, in a coat but no gloves or hat, walking past houses in the dark, possibly blinded by flakes. No one in the houses hear him pass, no one looks out the window.

Missing Person

Lacina lives alone and hasn't shown up for class in a week. His father, who lives nearby in Grinnell, reports him missing. The town can talk of nothing else. To establish his actual date of disappearance, officials track his electronic footprint. His last communication was a two second incomplete phone call to a friend at 10:57 pm the evening of January 22nd (College).

My work brings me into the Design College building on campus often that spring. The building opens in the center to a tall atrium capped in a skylight so that all six floors are flooded with natural light and look down on the lobby.

Students who know Lacina or had class with him, or had seen him once, or heard rumor of him gather in clumps and talk about him quietly. I can't seem to forget that he is missing. Fliers with Lacina's friendly smile plaster the doors of the buildings on campus and around town.

I talk with my friends in our own hushed circles. In Albuquerque, I say, if something like this happened it would be easy to separate it from ourselves, easy to say it has to do with people we didn't know in a part of town we never visit. But here, the community is small and it is hard

not to feel somehow responsible. I don't belong in this town, I haven't lived here but a few months, but I feel responsible. I want to do something, though there is nothing to do.

From the fifth floor of the design building, I can stand under the warm skylight and look out on the gray network of trees, streets, small cars, and smaller people. I have never seen a world with so little color.

Hit and Run Insurance

A car smashes into my parked car in the night. My boyfriend discovers the back end metal pressed against the tire. He says he has to leave for work, and I tell him I can handle it. I lie. The air is so cold it hurts my lungs and makes my nose bleed. I ride to Ankeny with the tow truck driver, my mangled plastic beauty strapped behind us. His cab smells like heater air and grease. He says he is from Idaho and I believe him since his face has the hard creases of a cowboy.

Along the sides of the roads, cars lay in ditches with yellow flapping tags. We pass about 15 abandoned vehicles along the rural stretch between Ames and Ankeny.

"It looks like the zombie apocalypse," I say. He nods.

"When they remove the towing ban," he says, "we don't stop working for days. It's hard to just see them sitting there, knowing all the work that's coming."

Spring Break

My boyfriend and I break up. We come to the agreement, right before the thaw of spring, that though we have come to know each other, we don't really understand each other. I have no other explanation for it even now. In the raw post-break up state, I stop listening to the news and

start ordering in pizza. The pizza man sees me answer the door with swollen eyes for the second time that week. He asks if anything is wrong. I say no. I close the door as he tries to step inside.

I go for runs, expanding my route for longer and longer distances. When I run I can breathe. When I run I don't have to think. The planes and helicopters searching for John Lacina are in the sky every time I go out of the house. When I run, they hover like flies at my back.

Sewer Break

Michelle and Christopher's basement floods with sewage water from a broken pipe. All the basements on the street are affected. Brown foulness gushes up through a drain in the concrete floor. Michelle calls me while I'm hosting a dinner for friends. When I tell them what has happened we all immediately get up from our plates and meet Michelle at her front door. The house smells like a hog slurry. All the windows are flung open and we can see our breath from the cold. We form a brigade, passing boxes of tools, Christmas decorations, and anything still above the water line up the basement stairs.

Michelle stands at the top, finding places for things in her living room. She says, "I didn't think so many people would come."

"Oh, whatever," I say from the line.

Michelle and I are both from the Southwest. We bond over our shared oppression under Iowa's winter clouds. We hide out during our lunch breaks in the campus greenhouse, a public jungle in the middle of campus with deliciously humid air and a giant banana tree. We talk about returning to the dry Southwestern deserts.

"All of our friends in this program and this town are leaving or will leave. No one seems to stay very long. It wouldn't be strange if we just left," she says.

“We could go tomorrow,” I say.

“Why not?” she says. “We could add ourselves to the migration that always happens around here. People come in and leave. In our minds we are already in the Southwest most of the time.”

Outside the glass of the greenhouse there is a campus of ice palaces, a perfectly preserved glass figurines of a place, unmoving, asleep. In here with us, things are still alive. The chipmunks skitter thorough the underbrush near the pond, setting the angel’s trumpet flowers swaying.

Lake Laverne

Police cars circle the artificial lake in front of our student union. During winter, it froze over, solid enough that one person walked over it, leaving foot prints in the snow. Now the weather has warmed, and the ice is gone leaving a scummy green pool.

Two years before I arrived, a young man’s body was found in this lake. They dragged the lake then. Today they are searching it again, looking for John Lacina. Police in wet suits, as shiny as seals, walk the bottom, diving with their tanks and regulators. The wide eyes of their masks and the short black beaks of the nose cover make them look like surprised birds. The lights of the police cars flash around the lake, making reflections. I wonder about the training it takes to search for a body in water. It is one of those jobs no one wants to complete with success, but that has to be done well. If they are searching for understanding about his disappearance, I imagine they will never be satisfied with what they find. Two white swans sleep on the shore, heads tucked under their wings. They aren’t watching this. People passing across campus stop and watch. It is the only role we have to play.

Writing I Find on a Desk in the Campus Library

Sharpie: I am so lonely
 In gel pen: Get over yourself
 In pencil: Don't be lonely, be happy ☺
 Sharpie: It's H-A-R-D to be happy

Blue pen, in the corner by itself: These kinds of things happen all the time.

A Mantra

A friend of mine never drinks in public places. Ever. She has rules for herself. She changes her routine. She doesn't get sloppy or let her guard down. She shreds her mail. She walks with friends. She considers what everyday objects she can use in her defense in case of attack. She reminds herself that the violence against her kind has nothing to do with what she really is. She reminds herself that being a woman is not a shameful thing.

Deer

On my running route, there is a trail which dips down into some trees before crossing a stream. It is drizzling this April, and the robins have returned to mine the soil for worms. Their hopping red bodies are some of the first color on the ground. As I run over the hill into this valley, I flush a group of deer who bound across the path and up the hill effortlessly. I stop as the first one bounds one, two, gone and then the next. The third bounds one and then stops, freezing in front of me near the path. A runner appears around a corner behind me. There is something wrong with the deer's leg. As the runner gets closer, he spooks the deer and it hobbles away. Only the movement shows me the extent to which the back leg is broken, twisted backward, and bloody. I am surprised it can run at all.

The runner stops when he sees the deer.

“What should we do?” I say.

“What can you do?” he says.

April 13, 2010

Twenty-two-year-old Travis James Good, an Iowa State student, dies of bacterial meningitis after falling ill a day earlier (Hillenbrand).

April 14, 2010

The tulips in the school colors, cardinal and gold, cheerfully wobble in the warm breeze. I am giddy, lying in a patch of unreasonably generous sunlight and growing grass. The smells of thawed earth and grass have my whole body humming. We have been so suddenly released by winter that enjoyment this spring isn't delicate but acute and forceful. Families wander the greens of the university at the VEISHA festival eating hotdogs and throwing bean bags through cardboard cutouts. Somewhere someone sells miniature cherry pies for cents on the dollar. This festival, designed to celebrate the school, reminds me of some Pagan ritual, the celebration of the return of the sun. The whole town is awake. Everyone is looking for a way to stretch their limbs. Some of these college students will do foolish things this weekend, which for them is an excuse to party.

Not far from the festivities, a campus police officer searches the sunken boiler room of an abandoned dairy farm. He discovers the body of a young Caucasian male authorities later identify as John Lacina. Though police searched this complex previously, the snow covered the entrance to this room. I look at the map they show in the paper (College). I compare the location

of the boiler room where they discovered the body to the route between the friend's house Lacina left during the blizzard and his apartment. This abandoned farm is nowhere near the route he would have taken home. I realize some time later I have been running by this abandoned dairy farm on my new expanded route. I change my route again.

Woman Hit By Train: April 27th, 2010

In this dark time for Ames, my friends and I retreat to the bar. We frequent a British inspired pub. Outside shadows of steam pouring out of the city's garbage incinerator dance on the pavement over the bikes and the smokers. Inside it is dark and familiar, full of young men with mustaches. On the back wall there is a red British phone booth and a sign that says "Keep Calm Carry On."

We heard on the news that morning that 19-year-old Raven Gileau was found dead beside the train tracks after she was separated from her friends during a night of illegal drinking. A male friend volunteered to walk her home. When she said she couldn't walk anymore he left her under the train bridge. It was raining as he went to get his car. When he returned, she was gone. Her body was found in the early morning, up the embankment on the train tracks (McChesney).

We sit in a ring at the back of the bar and keep returning to talk about the deaths. Some of my friends are scared. Everyone has their theories. The most popular include a killer on the loose. I suppose it is natural to think that way, considering what we watch on television.

"But we don't know that is at all the case," says one friend. "We just don't have enough information. It's way more likely that these were just accidents."

“My high school English teacher once told me,” I say, “that the death of a young woman is the most romantic and the most tragic thing there is in the world. We are captivated by these kinds of deaths.”

The news showed the picture of the girl who died that morning. Her face reminds me of the faces of all of my students. In a college town, I realize, there are broods of potentially tragic heroines and heroes, fresh young hopefuls so close to disaster. In the dim light of the pub, in the safety of a circle of friends, I try out a thought. I try out living with the thought that young women and men are being snuffed out for no good reason everywhere every single damn day. But by the end of the night that reality has faded, and I sleep as well as I always do.

Cause of Death

We have been waiting for answers, collectively holding our breath. Finally the coroner comes back with the report. Weeks after they discover his body, John Lacina’s cause of death is ruled hypothermia. Coroner reports no evidence of foul play (Hacker).

Flood Maps

Rose and I decide to rent a new apartment. We find a place near the train tracks. I look up flood maps before signing the lease. We are unpacking boxes when she tells me how funny it is that I think of things like flood maps.

“It’s just like you,” she says. “You always lock the door. You have three first aid kits in this place. The first thing you looked for when we saw this place was the location of the fire alarms and extinguisher.”

“Maybe you are right,” I said. “Maybe it is funny that I do that. I hadn’t thought it was strange.”

Where the Pancakes Are as Big as My Head

I’m swapping gossip with the waitress at the diner that serves wonderfully giant pancakes. I’ve been out of town visiting my parents. She tells me that at a street party, a young woman tried to cross the tracks, and was struck by a train just a few blocks from here. This apparently happened a while ago. I feel somehow betrayed by not having heard sooner.

“It’s a hell of a thing,” the waitress said. The girl crossed after the arms were down. Many people at the party apparently did. Perhaps she thought she could make it. Perhaps she thought it would be safe. I pictured her, head down, leaping. I hope she didn’t have time to be afraid.

Halloween

Rose and I have each other’s backs at the annual party. She drives me through the campus town, the part of Ames where mostly undergraduates live, with bars and loud parties on the weekends. She doesn’t stop completely at a stop sign and the police pull her over. She has had two beers over the course of six hours but they make her walk the line and take the breathalyzer test. She is always a nervous person, and in front of the large cop I can see her shaking because she is scared. I can’t do anything but sit in the car and watch. Around us, college girls in scanty nurse and police officer costumes slump down the street, their arms over each other’s shoulders, trailed by packs of boys. One boy carries a girl in a slutty bumblebee costume slackly in his arms. She is unconscious. They cross the street in front of the car, and

pass behind Rose and the officer. The policeman shines his flashlight in Rose's eyes and doesn't see this couple.

Rose Invites a Band to Stay with Us

After their performance, I offer to ride back with the five guys in their white van, and give them directions to our place so they can stretch out on the living room floor. The handsome banjo player with the dark curly hair piles in next to me in the middle seat. He is talented, he is smooth, he will be gone in the morning. During the drive to our place, he leans over, digging his elbow into my thigh just above the knee as he changes the song. It hurts, but I almost start to laugh without understanding why. He sees me smile. I'm embarrassed that he has caught me smiling. I scoot away across the seat.

"You afraid of me or something?" he asks.

"Don't take it personally. I'm afraid of everything."

Rumor

I hear a rumor that the Alaskan with the knife is married, and that his wife is pregnant. I'm strangely jealous at this news, though I don't really know the Alaskan and certainly don't know his wife. He seems to have achieved such personal happiness despite being a drunken miscreant. I have followed all the rules and am alone.

Flood

I wake up and start to drive through town only to find there are shallow lakes in the low parts of the land where there were once parks, sidewalks, and roads. The heavy rains have

completely saturated the ground, filling basements and causing creeks and rivers to swell like a pregnant woman's ankles.

Getting in or around town proves difficult. For a while we are practically an island. I was excited. I know that people are suffering and will continue to suffer for years in recovery, but it is a happening, and I am lucky enough to be in the middle of it, to be able to react. I drive to the gas station and fill up. I return home, fill pitchers and the bathtub with water. I consider for a moment what I might need if I have to leave town. Then I drive down to Duff Avenue to watch the water rush across the pavement and through the heart of the Ames commerce district. The Target and Wal-Mart are flooded and water gushes out the front doors. I stand in the Panera parking lot, which is now beach front property. Some people are wading in the water.

A woman scolds her little girl when she is about to touch it. "That water is filthy!"

I try to imagine all the hog farms, treated fields, and water treatment plants the rain has washed through upstream. Port-a-jons float near the stadium. Piles of coal near the campus coal plant are under water.

Pipes burst underground, draining the water towers and contaminating the drinking water with flood water. Ames puts the city on a boil ordinance, closing restaurants and public facilities. I drive Michelle to the HyVee grocery store when we hear the news about the water. The shelves are emptied of water bottles and people are buying up Gatorade and juice. One harried employee brings out a pallet of water. People swarm and snatch flats of bottles before he has completely unwrapped the plastic. The water coming out of the tap at home looks clear, but I'm told it is not potable. We are asked to conserve while the tanks refill.

The week becomes a carefully orchestrated dance of water bottle transference. FEMA trucks from Texas arrive full of bottles and gallons of water; distribution centers around the city

are set up. I volunteer to help pass out water. I do this for selfish reasons, to witness the panic, the ugliness and the kindness that comes out in people in a time of strain. Secretly, I love disasters because they make for great people watching. Car after car pulls up with families who get an allotment of water per person. People seem grateful, hot, harried. I'm surprised that after a day of hauling water I feel for the first time a part of the community instead of someone who happens to live here.

People ask for news about when the water might be back on. We warn them to boil what is coming out of their tap and ask them to conserve so that the water will come back on sooner. Some people tell us they were drinking it for a day or two before they heard the news. One man comes back three times in one hour, worried that the FEMA trucks will run out or stop coming. Each time I give him water, I tell him there is nothing to worry about. I do not know if he is comforted.

The End of the Banana Tree

They tear down the greenhouse on campus, and kill all of the plants including the magnificent banana tree at the center of the garden. They say it was unsafe, that the old greenhouse creaked in the wind. Next winter there will be no tropical haven for the chipmunks or for me.

Woman Hit By Train

The town receives news that a wheelchair bound woman wheeled herself onto the tracks in front of the Eastbound Union Pacific coal train and was killed (York). A friend tells me the story of the man who saw her looking at the tracks on his way to run an errand, and then again on

his way back. He said he almost stopped to ask if she was okay when she pulled her chair onto the tracks. When I hear this story, I think that maybe I saw her too, or maybe just wish that I had, wished that I had at least enough conscience to think about another the way that man thought. Most likely I drove by and didn't notice. I wonder how many times she sat by those tracks.

A few blocks away from my apartment, I hear the train strike a car one early morning. The screeching, crumpling sound of metal torn apart wakes me from my sleep. I know that there must have been a car on the tracks. There is no need to invoke logic. It is certain that it has happened and not for the last time. I rub my face and try to go back to sleep. I can't. And yet I can't bring myself to go and see. I wait for the morning, and the comfortless details of a woman who maneuvered her car around the barricade and parked it on the tracks. This one survived (Ames Tribune).

I start to wonder how Ames' safety record compares to other places. I want to know what the relative share of death is ours to endure. I want to know if it is really a risk to live here, or if that risk is just closer and more visible than in some places I have lived. I discover that Iowa has an average number of train related fatalities. Texas and Illinois have two to three times more train related casualties per year than Iowa (Federal Railroad Administration). It seems that this kind of thing happens all the time, or it happens all the time when I am looking for it.

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