MULE TOWN GIRL: A MEMOIR

by

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(Under the Direction of Judith Ortiz Cofer)

ABSTRACT

This manuscript is a memoir in progress. Through a series of retrospective micro-nonfictions, I attempt to tell my life as a truthful story while exploring myself in relation to my family, friends, and small-town upbringing. Some major themes are as follows: relationships, social class, race, illness, death, infirmity, and familial relations.

INDEX WORDS: Memoir; Creative Nonfiction; Microfiction; Family; Relationships; Death; Cancer; Ageing; Coming-of-Age
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APOLOGIA

On Being a Terrible Liar

Whenever I did bad things as a child, I promptly tattled on myself. I did this because I knew my lying skills were atrocious and because I couldn’t stand to live with the guilt. When I was seven or eight, I tried out a few curse words when I was playing outside one afternoon. I yelled the words, felt them in my mouth, and felt grownup. Almost instantly afterwards, there was a heaviness in my stomach. That night, I sat down beside my mother while she was lying on the couch, and I whispered my sins into her ear. She listened to me like a priest, and when I was done, she gave me a hug. “It’s okay,” she said. “Just don’t do it again.”

Even now, not much has changed. I still shy away from lying, especially to my parents. And when I write, I find it easier and more comfortable to tell the truth. Fiction and myself, to put it plainly, don’t get along so well. We never have.

It makes sense, then, that I would be drawn to nonfiction, but this attraction came about slowly. It wasn’t until I took a class with Tony Earley as a senior at Vanderbilt University that I discovered my appreciation for nonfiction and truth. In his class, we were to write two literary profiles. My first profile was a flop, but the second was much better. I wrote about my parents, and Earley told me that the piece was strong, earnest, and genuine. As far as he was concerned, when I wrote about my parents and my hometown, my voice became distinct and purpose-driven. It is with this same voice that I crafted Mule Town Girl.

Mule Town Girl is nonfiction—creative nonfiction, to be precise. In its nascent stages, the manuscript was entitled Stories that are Mostly True. This title was a nod to Tony Earley’s influence on my writing and to his collection of personal essays with the same subtitle:
Somehow Form a Family: Stories that are Mostly True. It was through this book of life, love, and family that I first began to ponder how truth and memory work together in writing.

In the introduction to Somehow Form a Family, Earley explains why all nonfiction must be “creative” nonfiction—no matter how deeply rooted in fact it seems to be. Earley describes his recollection of man’s first walk on the moon: “I felt as if I could almost see Neil Armstrong on the lunar surface, which made the universe seem very large and, simultaneously, very small. It’s one of the most vivid memories of my childhood.” Later, after adapting this memory into an essay to be published in Harper’s, Earley received a phone call from a fact-checker. The moon on the night of July 20, 1969 was not full at all, as he had remembered and written, but a waxing crescent. He writes, “When I looked it up myself and discovered that [the fact-checker] was right, I was faced on one hand with a memory so strong I was sure it had to be true, and on the other hand with an objective truth significantly different than what I remembered” (xvii).

I open Mule Town Girl with an epigraph in which Tobias Wolff expresses a thought similar to Earley’s. At the start of This Boy’s Life, a memoir of Wolff’s childhood, he writes, “I have been corrected on some points, mostly of chronology. Also my mother thinks that a dog I describe as ugly was actually quite handsome. I’ve allowed some of these points to stand, because this is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. But I have done my best to make it tell a truthful story.” When I read Wolff’s words, I laughed out loud. After showing parts of my manuscript to my mother, she too disagreed with several of my memories. I then decided that my mother and Wolff’s mother should get together for lunch to talk about the wayward imaginations of their children. Perhaps the fact-checker at Harper’s should also be invited. Wolff is correct, though. Memory has its own flawed story to tell, and in my opinion, the truth of memory is just as valid and important as Truth itself.
Mule Town Girl is a work of creative nonfiction and memory as truth. It is also a collection of micro fictions—or micro (non)fictions, if you will. In Sudden Fiction, William Peden defines micro (non)fiction as the following: “a single-episode narrative with single setting, a brief time span, and a limited number of speaking characters (three or four at the most); a revelation-epiphany: the click of a camera, the opening or closing of a window, a moment of insight” (233). For the most part, I agree with Peden’s definition. I could dispute the bit about the single episode, the single setting, and the brief time span, as this is reductive and says nothing of flashbacks. But I love the idea of the micro (non)fiction as a snapshot. Mule Town Girl is made up of snapshots, and my hope is that they form a photo album of my life that is both full and interesting.

A friend of mine once told me that baseball is exciting not because of the plays occurring on the field, but because of the moments in between those plays. I like to think that Mule Town Girl is a collection of such moments. For example, I’ve noticed a tendency on my part to write about segments of time coming before or after traumatic events, as opposed to the events themselves. I do this most notably in “Frozen” and “The Visit.” In these stories and others, I strive to capture the tension surrounding events by looking at their beginnings or fallouts. Micro (non)fiction becomes a perfect vehicle for this aim, as “The very short story,” according to Lydia Davis in Sudden Fiction, “… is a nervous form of story” (230). It is frenetic. It has a lot to do in a short space, so it works overtime. This fact isn’t lost on readers either, as they often experience a sort of anxiety while reading the short short. They wonder how a story will be successfully imparted in such a tiny space, so they rush through the words, devouring them like handfuls of movie popcorn during a thriller. Micro (non)fiction comes equipped with built-in anxiety, and this is perfectly in line with my artistic goals for Mule Town Girl. I want to communicate the
uneasiness of events, whether they be funny or sad or unimportant, and I want this uneasiness to be the thread that both binds the narrative together and pulls the reader further and further into the universe I am recreating.

Because Mule Town Girl is made up of creative micro nonfictions, I spent a great deal of time trying to figure out which vignettes to include in the narrative. In “The Art of Memoir,” Mary Clearman Blew likens this process to quilt making. For Blew, writing a memoir is the same as saving scraps of fabric in coffee cans until there are enough pieces with which to make something. She reminds us, though, that the “coffee can of pieces will fill again. There will be another quilt at the back of your mind while you are piecing, quilting, and binding this one” (282). In other words, a memoir, like quilt making, is a never-ending, generative process, and I agree with her fully. There are so many scraps of memory in my head—so many that I know I will never be done with my memoir as long as I am living. New memories are forming daily, so the quilting process is never done. Not really.

The memories I’ve included in Mule Town Girl are those that stick out most strongly in my mind. They are memories that beg to be written. A few of them, I think, are stories that needed to be written. I’m thinking specifically of “Wesley” and “Uncle James” when I say this. By writing these two stories about men who are no longer with us, I am imparting their lives to history. This is especially important to me when I think of Wesley. He died years ago, and he had no surviving family. Sometimes I wonder if there is anyone alive who remembers his life. Because, if we aren’t thought of after we’re gone, what happens to us? Wesley deserves to be remembered, even if it’s through the thesis of a struggling graduate student.

After dealing with what Annie Dillard calls the “two crucial points” of fashioning a text—deciding “what to put in and what to leave out” (286)—I was faced with the daunting task
of ordering my creative micro nonfictions into a cohesive manuscript. The end result is a manuscript with two distinct halves. While the first half deals with childhood memories, the last half deals with more adult themes, namely death. And even though the manuscript is roughly split down the middle, with “Jennifers” cementing the two halves, it is non-chronological. Chronology seems superfluous in a book of memory. Memories are fragmented and fleeting, and they rarely present themselves in perfect sequence. It makes sense to me to group the pieces based upon tone and theme in order to stay true to the memoir. I also attempt to keep the flow of the manuscript as fresh as possible. What I mean is, I don’t want my short pieces to become predictable or feel like punch lines. I want them to remain as powerful as possible. I’m not entirely sure if the organization of my manuscript accomplishes these things, but I hope it does.

I also hope that I have accurately portrayed my family, as they are and have always been the most important force in my life. In a blurb for Tony Earley’s book, The Denver Post & Rocky Mountain News says, “Somehow Form a Family . . . always circles back to home as the fertile ground for the life of the mind. . . . The result is an entertaining book, teeming with insights into the ways the most compelling stories we can tell are our own.” Not only do I agree with these opinions as they relate to Earley’s book, I also agree with the idea that our families make us who we are. I am who I am because I was born to my parents and grew up with two older brothers in Columbia, Tennessee. As I continue to grow older and as the people and things around me shift, there is always one constant: my roots never change.

I love my family, and this fact often makes it difficult for me to tell the stories I need to tell about them. For example, it was a struggle to write about my father’s infidelity and my brother’s drug addiction. I thought, how can I write a story that encapsulates the love and anger and admiration and disappointment I feel, and have felt, for these two people at various times in
my life? More specifically, how can I talk about their flaws without destroying them as characters? How can they stay sympathetic and human in the eyes of the reader? These were the questions with which I grappled while writing some of the more unflattering stories in the manuscript.

This brings me to the inevitable discussion about the purpose of my thesis. Why was it so important that I write *Mule Town Girl*? In the long tradition of nonfiction, my thesis is a confession of sorts. It’s as if I were a little girl again, whispering my life into my mother’s ear and waiting for her response. I am unloading my conscience and spreading my story because it feels good to do so. It lightens me. But it’s more than that.

*Mule Town Girl* is also a way for me to connect to others. According to *The Fourth Genre*, writers of nonfiction “use self-disclosure as a way of opening their writing to a more expansive exploration” (xxv):

> Readers turn to creative nonfiction to find a place to connect to the personal voice, to connect not to art or knowledge alone but to another mind. This means that writers too have a place to connect, a genre that gives them permission to speak in the first person singular, not only about their knowledge and their beliefs but also about their uncertainties and their passions, not only about where they stand but also about the ways they arrived there, not only about the worlds they have either imagined or documented but also about the worlds they have experienced and inhabit now. Creative nonfiction may be the genre in which both reader and writer feel most connected to one another. (xxx)

In other words, writers employ nonfiction in order to connect and resonate with their readers in a way that is new and powerful—even privileged, as such writing allows the reader to enter terrain
that would otherwise be off-limits. I certainly strive for these effects in my memoir, and I hope that I might touch just one person through the words I’ve spilled.

More specifically, though, I wrote *Mule Town Girl* for my parents. A quote from Alex, the protagonist of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, eloquently voices my thoughts when he speaks of his own father: “Where he had been imprisoned, I would fly: that was his dream. Mine was its corollary: in my liberation would be his—from ignorance, from exploitation, from anonymity. To this day our destinies remain scrambled together in my imagination” (8-9). Like Alex, my achievements are not just my own; they also belong to my parents. To receive an advanced degree, and to write about how wonderful my parents are in the process, is something my mother and father will treasure forever. My efforts, in this sense, are for them.

Indeed, I do not write for myself alone. I write for my readers and for my parents. I write for my brothers, my aunts and uncles, and my neighbors. I write for my friends named Jennifer. I write for Columbia and Mule Day. I write for Deshawn Hawkins and Angela Wood. I write for Miss Willa Bee and Ms. Bush Hog. I write and I write. No matter how much I argue against it, however, there is always the threat of narcissism in such personal writing. But I shy away from thinking I’m narcissistic because that word is ugly and narrowing. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a narcissist, and I don’t want to be. I want to be a girl from Mule Town USA who offers her story to the masses in hopes that someone, anyone, might be affected or changed by reading it. As Tony Earley says, “I offer this book as a representative account, and my sincerest hope is that readers will be able to recognize themselves in its pages” (xx).
Works Cited


“I have been corrected on some points, mostly of chronology. Also my mother thinks that a dog I describe as ugly was actually quite handsome. I’ve allowed some of these points to stand, because this is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. But I have done my best to make it tell a truthful story.”

—Tobias Wolff, *This Boy’s Life*
**Big Mama**

Big Mama, my mother’s mother, used to yell at me for disrupting the moss that grew in the shady areas around her cinderblock home in the Projects. She said it was special because it took so long to grow. I loved the way the moss felt: cool and damp and spongy under my fingers.

Big Mama preferred that I gather acorns from her yard. She gave me her empty pill bottles to fill, but this game never entertained me for long. I played in the yard. I stepped on ants. I gathered acorns. I prodded the moss with a stick. Sometimes I’d go next door to Bertha’s and beg for ice cream or wander too far from Big Mama’s sight. This always made her fret.

In the afternoons when my mother got off work and came to pick me up, I’d give her my favorite acorns of the day. I found my mother terribly important. She was the secretary of the boss at Dixie, a large clothing factory in our town. She wore skirts and used the P.A. system at work. Her nails were long and burgundy—or at least they were until Dixie moved to Mexico.

Every day, Big Mama would pay me a quarter to tickle the bottoms of her feet with a bobby pin while she listened to her favorite preacher on AM radio. She was Pentecostal, so she wore long skirts and stockings year-round. She never cut her hair. She piled it on top of her head and gathered it into a thin bun of silvery black. Big Mama believed in the Holy Ghost. Sometimes she talked on the phone to people with names like Sister Viola and Brother Clark. She told them my mother was sinful because she smoked Bel-Air cigarettes and never went to church. She preferred her other children because they had been washed in the Blood of the Lamb.
Deshawn

“Do you remember me?”

I looked into a dark, masculine face as I threw away my leftovers at the university cafeteria. I studied the man in front of me for a moment, and although he was older, he looked very much the same as he had when we attended Highland Park Elementary School together.

“Yeahhh,” I said, taken aback. “I do remember you.” His name was Deshawn Hawkins, and in school, he’d always been small for his age. He still was.

He looked down at his dirty black apron and smoothed it with his palm. “I’m working here,” he said. “What’re you doing here? Going to school?”

I nodded. “I’m a senior now,” I said, fiddling with the straps on my backpack. Not so long ago Deshawn was throwing a pink dodge ball at me in gym class. At least he’d wait until the end of the game to get me out because he was nice. I wasn’t very good at sports, but he always seemed to be wonderful at everything he did.

In fourth grade, our class took a field trip downtown to tour the James K. Polk home. We brought sack lunches and had to couple up with a partner. In pairs, we wandered around the historic house and looked at the paintings, the furniture, the high ceilings. We heard ghost stories and discovered that the main house had no kitchen. The kitchen, the tour guide explained, was part of the servants’ quarters.

At lunchtime, we sat with our partners in the courtyard separating the “big house” from the other. Deshawn’s partner was Angela Wood, a short white girl with brown hair and a purple cast on her left arm from a playground accident. He gave her his apple, and she gave him her sandwich meat. They were boyfriend and girlfriend, but like any elementary school love affair,
it didn’t last long. Angela dumped Deshawn for a mousy white boy named Michael who always wore pants that were too tight and too short for him.

It was the weekend after their breakup, and the telephone rang at my house. My mother answered, read the name “Hawkins” on the Caller-I.D., and made a face. She handed me the receiver.

“Hey,” Deshawn said on the other end of the line.

“Oh, hi,” I said. My mother stared at me.

“Yes,” Deshawn stumbled, “I was just wondering if… maybe you’d be my girlfriend.”

I looked at my mother. She raised her eyebrows, and I mouthed to her what he’d said. She shook her head slowly from side to side.

“Yes, no, Deshawn,” I said. “I can’t be your girlfriend.”

“But I like you.” There was silence for a few seconds. I didn’t know what to say.

Eventually, he mumbled something and hung up.

Now, years later, he was standing in front of me, in uniform, and there was so much I wanted to know, to say. “So are you living here in Nashville?” I asked, glancing at his nametag. It said “De Shawn.” He nodded.

“Well, you look good,” he said stepping back and putting his hands deep into his front pockets. “Take care of yourself.”

“You too,” I said as he walked away. But I don’t think he heard me.
Spooked

One afternoon, a few days before Halloween, I was outside. It was dusk, and I wore an outfit which, I thought, was terribly clever and festive: a black long-sleeved shirt and socks with a pair of white shorts and white canvas Keds. I was bored. My homework was finished, and I couldn’t wait for Halloween. Our family pumpkin was carved, and my mother had already bought the ingredients for her butter cookies with sugar icing. My classmates at Highland Park always swooned over the green and orange treasures during our class Halloween parties. With her cookies, I knew I’d be popular and loved—even if only twice a year, at Halloween and Christmas.

In my clever outfit, I decided to take a walk in the woods behind our house. My mother told me to stay out of them, but I couldn’t help myself. And when I say “woods,” I mean the over-grown weeds and baby trees that sloped down a large hill behind the houses on Hickman Street. There was a clean line of demarcation between the mowed backyards and the infant woods. For the most part, what grew in those woods wasn’t much taller than I was, but to an eleven-year-old, the foliage was thorny, dangerous, and intimidating.

I started walking down the hill and looked for a good point of entry into the woods. There were trails working all through the woods once inside, but many places were too dense to navigate, especially around the woods’ edges.

As I walked, I saw movement further up the hill. I squinted my eyes and realized it was my new neighbor, David Cates, a boy who was already in the sixth grade at Whitthorne Middle. My heart jumped, and I stopped thinking. I darted directly into the woods.

I’d had my first encounter with David a couple of months before when my best friend Bethany came over to spend the night. While we were playing in my oldest brother’s bedroom,
we happened to look up from our Barbie saga to see a grinning boy twenty feet away.

Apparently, my brother’s window faced David’s room directly.

“Oh my gosh,” Bethany said, “he’s kinda cute.”

My stomach churned. I didn’t think he was cute at all. Plus, I wasn’t good with boys, then or now, and I became nervous. Bethany giggled.

“He wants us to lift the window so we can talk,” she said.

“No, it’s painted shut.”

“Well,” he wants to talk to us,” she said.

“I don’t care,” I said. I could feel myself start to sweat.

After a few minutes of back-and-forth with Bethany, David held up a message to the window. On a piece of wide-ruled paper, he’d written “What’s your number?” in purple marker.

“We are NOT giving him my number,” I said.

“Come onnnnn,” Bethany said. “It will be fun.”

I stood my ground that day, and David Cates never got my number. Bethany was highly disappointed in me. He did, however, give us his number.

That’s what I thought about when I scrambled into the woods. Branches scraped my arms and legs, and I regretted my point of entry. After I’d found my way to the easier terrain of the trail, three things became clear in my mind: One, I looked down at my black shirt. It was covered in leaves and cobwebs, and it was no longer as cute or as clever as it once seemed. Two, I prayed to God that David wasn’t coming into the woods and that I wouldn’t have to interact with him in any way. And three, I remembered what my mother said when I told her David’s last name: “Those Cateses are nothing but poor white trash.”
I rushed around the woods for a while until I was sure David wouldn’t find or catch up with me. I came out behind my house. To calm myself, I decided to take a seat in one of the many broken down cars in our backyard. I pulled open the heavy door of a ‘79 Oldsmobile. It squeaked.

I sat down in the driver’s seat and shut the door. I felt safe again. I took a deep breath, and then I pulled down the visor so I could repair myself in the mirror before going back inside. I was in the process of removing a cobweb from my hair when a loud noise stopped me.

It was David. He banged hard on the driver’s side window of the Oldsmobile with his fists. He laughed, a cackle, and ran to his house. I hyperventilated.
The Pool House

In the summer, my mother often let me come along with her when she cleaned Sue’s house every week. Sue’s last name was Bowser, like the villain from Mario Brothers, but she was anything but menacing. She gave me cookies.

The Bowsers lived in Stonybrook, and their classy home was adjacent to a golf course. They had an in-ground swimming pool with a diving board. While my mother was working inside, I would swim with Erica, Sue’s granddaughter who was two-and-a-half years my junior. Erica was a spastic girl who enjoyed whining. She had bright red hair and freckles, and because she spent most days in the pool, her nose was one large brown spot.

Erica had a best friend named Meredith who lived across the street. When I first met Meredith, I decided she was a strange girl. She liked to linger along the sides of the pool where the jets were, and she usually ate everything in sight. Once she wore a t-shirt that said “I’m not fat, I’m fluffy.” When I asked her about it, she explained that her mother had given it to her in June for her birthday.

On a particularly hot day in early August, Meredith did something terrible while Erica and I were swimming. She went into the pool house and used the bathroom on the floor. Two feet from the toilet.

A short while later, my mother came outside and told me she’d be done with her cleaning in twenty minutes. I climbed out of the water and went into the pool house to change back into my clothes. At first I didn’t notice what was in the room with me, but then I saw it. I held my breath, finished changing, and went inside to tell Sue and my mother what I’d found.
Sue came out and yelled at Erica and Meredith. Once she went back indoors, both girls
looked at me in disgust. They decided I was the culprit—that I had done it when I went inside to
change clothes.

“Gross! We don’t want to swim with you anymore,” they said. When my mother came
out to clean the pool house, they laughed at me and pointed. I never went back.
The Mule Capitol of the World Since 1808

It was in Aunt Margie’s house that I discovered the Turd Bird.

Margie was my father’s closest sister, and she often babysat me in the summers when my mother was at work. Margie was married to a man named David Patterson. She and David had gone to Mississippi when she was fifteen so they could be legally married. In Tennessee, Margie had been too young, and David himself had barely been old enough. He was a quiet man, but he let me follow him around the farm in the afternoons. Together David and I fed the chickens and cows. He called me “Blondie.”

The turd bird lived in Margie’s Atari room on a shelf. The room had formerly belonged to her oldest daughter DaVina, and it still held traces of her: white teddy bears, happy and sad theater masks, a Black Sabbath poster with a bloody-mouthed Ozzie. I thought the Turd Bird was the most fascinating artifact of all.

It was a shellacked piece of dung with springs for its neck and legs. It had gray feathers in its hindquarters for plumage. And for its eyes, it had plastic stick-ons with pupils that jiggled as the bird gyrated on its springs. It was fastened to a round piece of wood, and on it, there was a small gilded plate that said “Mule Day, 1988.”

I wasn’t sure what the Turd Bird had to do with Mule Day, but I was excited about it nonetheless. I imagined DaVina walking through the throngs of people gathered for the annual parade. There would be horses and donkeys and mules on the streets of Columbia, our hometown. Horse-drawn carriages. Clydesdales. Marching bands. Floats of square dancers with women twirling and stamping in their patent leather Mary-Janes and ruffled baby doll dresses.
Between racks of t-shirts and commemorative mugs, proudly proclaiming “Mule Day: A Tradition Since 1840,” DaVina would see a booth of souvenirs. There would be a table lined with rows and rows of Turd Birds. Each one unique. Its maker, a man with a calculator and a lock box, would wait for her to make her selection. He would have a long braided ponytail and a flannel shirt. This man would be proud, witty, and slightly askew—gathering perfect nuggets on his farm and sealing them, suspending them somewhere between freshness and decay.

In DaVina’s room, I touched the Turd Bird, and I looked at my fingers. I smelled them. But there was no trace there, nothing to betray the Bird’s existence.
The Cheat

Ms. Bush Hog. That’s what we called our kindergarten teacher. She was short and rotund and had a man’s haircut, and when she was angry at one of us for being bad, her fleshy cheeks would go from waxen to bright red. This happened quite a lot.

For example, Jonathan pulled Joseph’s rat tail so hard one day that he liberated a large section of knotty brown hair. There was also the time Misty colored in her library book and tried to blame it on her best friend Yolanda (pronounced Yo-LAND-uh). Once, Omar stole two dollars from Ms. Bush Hog’s purse and didn’t confess until she found the crumpled bills stashed in his 24-pack of Crayolas during recess.

And one day, I got in trouble. It was wintertime, math day, and we were taking a quiz on addition (or maybe subtraction). I was only five, but already I knew I was one of the smart ones. The boy sitting beside me knew it too. I can’t remember his name, but I can see his face: freckled skin, runny nose, watery eyes that stuck out too far. He’d lean across my paper when Ms. Bush Hog wasn’t looking and write down my answers with his fat blue pencil. Naturally, I was outraged. Before I knew what I was doing, I had slapped him as hard as I could. My hand connected with his snotty face, and the sound it made was loud and wet, shocking. Ms. Bush Hog spun around and glared at me, the pinkness already staining her cheeks.

A minute later, I was bent over in the hall, eyes squeezed shut, listening to the whiz of Ms. Bush Hog’s leather paddle as it swung down through the air, arcing toward my backside. Afterwards, I gingerly sat down in my seat. I looked over at Snotty Cheater Boy. He smirked at me, but his right eye was swollen and leaky with tears.
Tainted Jello

At Mrs. Andrews’ Preschool, no one was more feared than Miss Willa Bee (Willoughby or Willa B., perhaps). She was the cook, and she had a long brown braid and a googly grin. When any of us misbehaved or became picky eaters, she’d smile her crazy smile and threaten us with stories of the boogey man.

One of her tales resulted in a nightmare that drove my mother directly to Mrs. Andrews herself. My mother was reassured that Miss Willa Bee was harmless, a simpleton, but that she would be reprimanded nonetheless. My mother was assuaged for the moment.

It was summer, lunchtime, and my tray was loaded with some innocuous veggies, a roll, and a generous portion of gelatinous country-fried steak and brown gravy. Miss Willa Bee repeatedly told us we had to clean our plates if we wanted dessert.

With an enormous silver cooking bowl full of green jello, she stalked up and down the rows of students. I watched as many of the boys and girls around me finished their meals and happily received a glop of jello for dessert.

I ate my veggies and my bread, but the brownish steak patty mocked me. I began to cry.

“What’s wrong with you, girl?” Miss Willa Bee said as she passed my chair.

“I don’t like country-fried steak,” I said, sniffling. “But I want some jello.”

Miss Willa Bee towered over me with her massive bowl and spoon. After a moment, she smiled and said, “Fine. Eat half of it,” and walked on.

I wanted that green jello more than I’d ever wanted anything else in my four years of life, so I picked up my fork and began the battle.

I chewed the meat as little as possible. It was salty and cold and stringy in texture. I swallowed. Swallowed.
When I had eaten half of the country-fried steak, I raised my hand. Miss Willa Bee approached me and examined my tray. Without speaking, she plopped a heaping spoonful of jello directly onto the uneaten portion of my meat.
After the impact, my father looked over at me and asked if I was okay. The night was quiet, but my heart beat loudly in my ears. I remember telling him I was fine, but then I saw the blood spilling down the front of my new jacket.  

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “You’re not okay.” The cold had already begun to seep into my flesh, but oddly, I felt no pain.  

There had been snow and ice, three boxes of pizza in my lap, and no seatbelt. It was Saturday night, pizza night, and I was fourteen. Dad and I had picked up a supreme, a pepperoni and sausage, and a double order of cheese sticks. Now the pizza was ruined, in the floorboard, and my blood was spattered on it.  

“Don’t look at yourself,” my father barked, his skin as pale as the snow covering the nearby streets. We were on the side of the road against a telephone pole, and he got out of the truck to see if it was drivable.  

I sat alone inside the cab, watching my father look over his truck. Quick puffs of warm air spread out and disappeared in front of him. I touched my numb face with my right hand and started to shake all over.  

You’re okay. You’re okay. You’re okay, I said over and over to myself. I wanted to pull down the passenger side mirror, but I did not.
Daddy’s Little Girl

My father took me to my first movie at Shady Brook Ten Cinemas when I was six-years-old. It was late-July, and we went to a matinee showing of The New Adventures of Pippi Longstocking. I remember the movie and its music and its pig-tailed heroine. I remember the darkness of the theater and the squeakiness of the seats. I remember the lighted walkways bisecting the room. I even remember spilling a large bucket of buttered popcorn on the floor. At this I cried until my father put me on his lap.

This was a few months after he came home. He had been away at a hospital in Nashville for a month, so I stayed behind with my Aunt Claire, then with Aunt Margie. I didn’t know much about what was happening to my family. I just knew that my father was very sick, that they had shaved his head bald, and that he had something funny in his brain called an “aneurysm.”

For a while after he returned home, he scared me. He didn’t look like himself, and our relatives kept coming over. When his hair began to grow back over the scars, he decided he would never cut it again. It grew very long. If I begged enough, he would let me braid it. Sometimes I would even add feathers from my mother’s red feather duster.
Jennifer Beckum was the first Jennifer I ever knew. She was Bethany’s older sister, and her breasts were enormous. She slouched in an effort to minimize them, but it didn’t work.

She told us she was too old to play with Barbies, and after school, she spent her time talking on the phone with her best friend Jamie. Jamie wore face powder that was too dark for her skin. Her neck looked like it belonged to someone else.

Once Jennifer graduated to middle school, she got herself a boyfriend. His name was Tommy, and he was in high school. By the time she was eighteen, she’d already had his baby. Jamie and Bethany had babies too, but I didn’t. I made Honor Roll.

Jennifer Crigger and I became friends when we were at Whitthorne Middle School. She had dark brown hair, pale skin, and a voice that was high-pitched, though not grating.

She had a twin brother named Drew who hated it when I came over to spend the night. I loved it, though, because she had a fat cat named Boober and internet access. Together we listened to music and watched movies, like Titanic and Meet Joe Black, and we hoped for love.

In ninth grade, we had a serious falling out in art class while presenting our personal portfolio projects. Our assignment was to decorate the front of our portfolios with artwork that was unique to us and our personalities. I drew an eye, wrote some song lyrics, and created one of my signature collages. I say “signature” because I thought my collage idea was groundbreaking. From magazines, I cut out tiny squares of color and glued them onto paper in color gradients. The effect was partly collage, partly mosaic.

During our presentations, I noticed that Jennifer’s art project was quite similar to mine—mostly because she, too, had made a mosaic-collage.
Our art teacher was Mrs. Kinser, a tall woman with salt-and-pepper hair and billowy clothing. She went around the room and asked each student to describe his or her portfolio and inspirations. Jennifer was called to present her portfolio first.

“Wow!” Mrs. Kinser exclaimed. “That’s a very interesting collage.” Jennifer looked at me with a stricken face. She knew I was angry, and I murdered her with my eyes.

“Thank you,” she said quietly to Mrs. Kinser.

Once it was my turn, I half-heartedly presented my project. “Wow!” Mrs. Kinser said again, her red lips parting in a smile. “Another one of those fascinating collages! You two are so much alike.”

I nodded my head, and Mrs. Kinser moved on.

By the end of the class period, Jennifer was in tears. There would be no more sleepovers or clothing swaps between us. We would no longer sit together at lunch. I wrote her a note in Algebra II and told her our friendship was over.

We didn’t really talk again until our senior year of high school, and by that time, each of us had our own group of friends. We’d all but forgotten what it was like to love each other—or at least we pretended to, for the time being.

3 I became friends with Jennifer Ashley through her best friend Brittany Carroll. Jennifer was one of the prettiest girls I knew, but she didn’t think so. She was very overweight, and as far as she was concerned, she would never be like Brittany or me.

Brittany had a thing for flaunting her perfect body and running around naked in front of us. I’m not sure why, but I suspect she did it to make Jennifer envious.
After the car accident with my father in January, Jennifer and Brittany came over and told me the latest news. Apparently, everyone at Central High School thought I was in a coma and had broken my neck in the car accident. I thought this was funny and also quite cool. I hoped to be popular when I returned to my classes after the accident, but I wasn’t. The novelty wore off once everyone saw that I was the same girl, only with new teeth.

I met Jennifer “Jen” Cascille when we were sophomores at Vanderbilt. She and I were in the same biology lab. Neither of us had many friends, so once we found each other, we stuck fast. I liked her right away because she wasn’t as pretentious or materialistic as most of the other girls on campus. She was real and just like me—even though her father was a doctor and she drove a Saab.

We soon discovered that we had a few things in common. For example, we shared an appreciation for writing. She was a poet, and I wrote prose. We also shared an obsession for a particular musician (who is famous and shall go unnamed).

After a time, Jennifer began dating this musician’s bassist. She claimed that her relationship with Matt-the-bassist was the best way to get closer to said-musician. And she did.

During the summer, Jennifer and Matt spent the weekend in the musician’s home while he was out of state. While there, Jennifer basked in his belongings. She looked at his clothes, ate with his forks, and used his toilet paper.

Jennifer said she wanted to take something home as a souvenir. She came away from that weekend with a dispenser of waxed dental floss, mint-flavored.
Jennifer “Jenny” North was the first person I met when I began graduate school in Georgia. She and I were fifteen minutes early for our seminar on William Blake.

We sat at the seminar table in silence and waited for the others. I wore khakis and a yellow blouse in an attempt to look scholarly. Jenny wore a skirt, and although I never asked her, I’m sure her outfit was chosen with the same care. We pretended not to notice each other.

A few weeks after our first class, we met for dinner at a Mexican restaurant. The night felt like a job interview or a first date, but we had fun and passed each other’s tests.

I decided that Jenny was the brunette version of me. Except for her phobia of trains, her disgust for Tarantino films, and her love affair with avocados.

Two years later, when Jenny married her college sweetheart in her grandmother’s backyard, I was there. Jenny looked gorgeous in a gown she’d won at a bridal boutique. She thought this stroke of luck was wasted and ironic—mostly because weddings and gowns and invitations seemed silly to her.

It was a brisk October day in Atlanta, and her grandmother’s backyard was beautiful and small. Light filtered through the trees and danced across our crowded faces. The scene was perfect save for one thing. Between the couple and the minister was a gigantic flowerpot, hulking in its orangey-redness. Everyone told Jenny’s grandmother to move it before the ceremony, but she refused. “That flowerpot absolutely stays where it is,” she’d said. And it did, but Jenny didn’t really mind.
Daddy’s Little Girl II

It was Saturday morning, and my mother called me at college. Her voice was unsteady on the other end of the line, and I heard sirens. It took her a few seconds, but eventually she strung together a sentence that contained the words “your daddy” and “heart attack.”

I grew very still. I asked her if he’d be okay, and she said she didn’t know, that my brother would pick me up so I could meet them at the hospital. I hung up, and sort of stood around for a while. I looked at myself in the mirror. My hair was greasy, and I still smelled of cigarettes and liquor from the night before.

I grabbed my towel and toiletries and headed down the hall to my dorm’s community shower. I stepped into the stall on the far right. I shampooed and conditioned. Soaped. Washed, rinsed, and repeated. I brushed my teeth. I scrubbed until my skin was red and angry and hot. I stepped out of the shower and dried off. I could hear girls coming into and out of the bathroom, but they seemed far away. Bouncing off the tiled walls were sad noises, and they were mine.

I went back to my room. Opened the door. Walked in. Put on my makeup. Dressed and combed my hair.
Infidelity

After three years together, my first boyfriend dumped me by taping a letter to my computer screen. He told me he’d left a surprise for me in my room and to look at it when I came home from Kmart on my lunch break. It said:

Dear Christie, I met someone else that I really like, and I’ve been seeing her for a couple of months now. I’m sorry. I want to see where things go with her. I wanted to tell you this in person but you know I hate to see you cry. I’ll be out of town with Dee (that’s her name) until Sunday night. We’re going camping. I’ll call you when I get back. I still love you with every fiber of my being, --Matthew

P.S. Please don’t hate me.

I was devastated. Angry. I wanted to murder Dee and slash Matt’s tires.

When I showed the letter to my mother, she cried with me. She consoled me. She told me stories about other women she knew. She even told me about the times my father had cheated on her—one when my older brothers were little and once right after I was born.

In her Oldsmobile, she had spied on my father while I slept in my car seat. She saw him leaving the other woman’s house late at night. Her name was Linda. Years later, after my mother destroyed the divorce papers and tried to forget about what had happened, Linda called our house. She told my mother terrible things, and my mother denied them all.
I was on the phone with Jennifer Crigger when I lost control of my car. It was a Friday in June, and I was driving from Georgia to Columbia for one of my best friend’s weddings. The rehearsal was scheduled to begin in a couple of hours, and I was a bridesmaid. I was an honored bridesmaid, as I had introduced Rachel to Jesse, her groom, while we were in college.

Jennifer was the maid of honor, and we were best friends, reconciled after an art class falling out that had separated us for a couple of years. She and I were chatting about one thing or another as I took the Highway 31 exit into Spring Hill and Columbia. There were cars in front of me and behind me, and as I went into the final curve of the exit, I felt my tires lose their grip on the pavement.

It had rained earlier in the day, and even though the sun was out, the exit was still slightly damp and slippery. But I didn’t know that yet.

“Oh no—” I said to Jenn as I felt the car begin to slide.

I veered into the inside of the turn, and I jerked the wheel back the other way. I took my foot off the gas, as my father had advised, should something like this ever happen.

I heard Jenn say something before the right front of my car smashed into the exit ramp. I screamed and squeezed my eyes shut. I anticipated a blackout or a terrible pain or a larger crash as my car catapulted itself over the side of the ramp and landed on the interstate thirty feet below. I kept my eyes shut, and I waited. I prayed.

But nothing happened. There was grinding and screeching metal and angry tires, but my car didn’t take flight. At some point, I realized that I’d never pressed the brake, and as I did, some of the noises around me stopped. I’m not sure if the noises were because I was still
moving or if my tires were spinning crazily in place, but either way, there was a stillness after I pushed down my left foot.

I opened my eyes, and I saw smoke. I thought for a moment that my car was on fire, but then I realized that the smoke was from the tires and airbag. I was fine. I was facing the wrong way on the exit ramp, and my car was tilted at a strange angle, but I was okay.

The first thing I did was pull down the driver’s side mirror and look at my face. At my teeth. I bared them at myself in the mirror, and they looked fine.

I started trying to get out of the car. I groped around for the phone that had been in my right hand only moments before, and I found it in the passenger side floorboard. It said it was still connected to Jennifer, so I called out her name. She was gone.

I grabbed my purse, and I tried to open the door. But it wouldn’t budge. Then there was a man pulling it open. I took off my seatbelt and stepped out of my car. My knees were weak. I could hardly breathe.

“You okay?” the man asked, touching my arm as I stared at my car. He had a reddish beard and a farmer tan. He had been in front of me on the exit only moments before. Now his truck was pulled to the side of the ramp, and he was standing in front of me.

“I’m okay,” I said, and my phone started to ring. It was Jennifer. Everyone behind me on the ramp was also parked, and a crowd of people came toward me. One woman was a nurse and asked me if I was okay. Another woman rushed up to me and smothered me against her large bosom. “Bless your heart, honey!” she said into my ear, holding onto me with her motherly flesh.

When she let go, the man with red hair shook his head from side to side and looked at my car. The back bumper of my Hyundai rested on the wall of the exit ramp. The back wheels were
no longer touching the ground. “You almost went over,” he said. “You almost flew right off here.”

“I did?” I realized then that I was crying. My hips were hurting from the snatch of the seat belt, and my neck felt strange, loosened. My breasts and nose throbbed from whacking the air bag. My phone rang and rang. I answered. It was still Jennifer. “Oh my God! Are you okay?” she yelled.

I told her I was fine. “All I heard was a scream and then crashing. And then you were gone! I was so scared!”

I apologized to her. I was sorry she had to hear it. I was sorry that I’d crashed my car. “The rehearsal—” I said. “Did I ruin Rachel’s wedding?”

“No, Christie! Of course not,” she laughed. Her voice softened, and she seemed to calm down.

“I was so scared,” she said again. I talked to her a while longer, and then I hung up so I could call the police. A few minutes later, the Spring Hill Police and Fire Departments arrived and promptly shut down the exit. My car was dumping oil, and the exit was already slick with gravel and traces of diesel fuel. There was a long line of cars behind me. They were being rerouted.

When the paramedics arrived, I told them I couldn’t go to the hospital. I had a rehearsal dinner to go to, and I was a bridesmaid. “Are you sure?” they said. And I told them I was positive.

I issued a statement of the accident to a female cop who was twenty-four, my age. She asked me where I went to high school, and I told her Columbia Central. “I went to Spring Hill,”
she said, “but I knew a lot of people at Central.” She was nice and had kind blue eyes, but I felt sick.

I watched the emergency response people as they sprinkled kitty litter all over the pavement. It looked and smelled like the same stuff my elementary school teachers used to cover up puddles of vomit in classrooms and hallways. I was embarrassed.

I watched the men scurrying around in their special red and yellow suits, and I waited for a wrecker to come for my car. Kelsey, as I’d named her, was two-years-old and officially dead. There was no panel on her that had come through the accident without being ruined.

I tried to call my parents or Keith. No answer. I tried to call Wade. No answer. I called Jennifer, and she said that she and her boyfriend would pick me up and take me to the rehearsal. It would be starting very soon.

As I waited for them to arrive, I spoke to one of the Spring Hill firemen. I recognized him from high school. He had been at Central for a year or so before he moved away—perhaps to Spring Hill. He’d been in my art class. “Hey, Christie,” he said, “do you remember me?”

I told him I did. “You were really lucky today,” he said. “Someone was watching out for you.” We stood awkwardly and talked for a bit. I thought about how he’d written me a love letter in ninth grade and asked me to call him. I can’t remember if I wrote him back or not, but I never called him.

“I’m married now,” he said. “And we just had a little boy.”

“Oh, wow,” I said. “That’s great.” And I meant it. I was proud for him. He seemed happy, and he made me blush when he started talking about how much he’d liked me nine years before. When I left, Jeff gave me a hug and told me to be careful on the exit. “Every time it rains,” he explained, “somebody wrecks here. This road is slicker’n owl shit.”
When Jenn and Aaron picked me up, they gave me hugs, a bottle of water, and a pack of crackers, as they thought I might be in need of sustenance. The three of us made it to Rachel’s church just in time to get changed for the rehearsal.

Jenn and I and another bridesmaid stood around in the women’s bathroom with our curling irons and bags of makeup, and we talked about my brush with death. I made Jennifer tell me again and again that the day was real, but that I was okay.

As I pulled a flat iron through my hair, I noticed a bruise on the outside of my right elbow. I lifted my arm to inspect the marred flesh, and it was heart-shaped. Purple.
**Assisted Living**

Big Mama sat on the end of her bed at Hillview Nursing Home. Pale sunlight slanted in through the blinds.

“There’s a door right there,” she said and pointed at the wall.

“Where, Mama? I don’t see anything,” my mother said.

Big Mama slowly stood and walked to the wall that faced her bed. She ran a gnarled finger over the wallpaper seam and said, “See. They make it look like there’s no door here, but I can see it.” She turned toward us and smoothed a stray wisp of hair into her bun. “They live in _there._”

I looked at my mother’s bottom lip. It quivered. “Who lives in there, Mama?” she asked.

“The people with the sex machines. They come out at night and give us shots, and we can’t do nothing but lay there and watch.” She pushed up the faded sleeve of her dress. “See,” she said, pointing to a purplish spot on her wrinkled arm. “This is where they gave me the shot last time.”

On the way home from the nursing home, I looked at my mother behind the wheel of her car. Her face looked different somehow. Older.

Finally I said, “Don’t worry, Mama. You know she doesn’t know what she’s saying.”

“I know,” she answered. “I know.”

Later that afternoon, I vacuumed her living room and did three loads of laundry. I wondered if secret doors hid somewhere in our walls.
The Manicure

My mother was lying down on the living room couch, and the smell of nail polish filled the room. It was Thursday night, and I was home from graduate school to take care of her. Her right knee was swaddled in gauze and Ace bandages, and the skin around her dressing was vibrant. An every-color bruise.

I carefully applied a coat of iridescent polish to eight of her toes, as her pinkies were fat and basically nail-less. Then I moved on to her hands. I filed and painted them, and when I was done, her nails looked just like mine.

She lay there with her hands and feet splayed for a long while. Carefully rigid. Then we watched a movie, and I helped her downstairs to bed.

When I woke up the next morning, she was already awake and ready to go to Dr. Wiseman’s office for her post-operative check-up. My father had made her breakfast and helped her do her hair.

When I handed Mama into my car, she laughed. “Go ahead,” she said. “Put the damn walker in the trunk, and let’s get to the doctor.”
My First Funeral

I would miss class on Thursday because my grandfather had passed away in his sleep. My sixth grade reading teacher said she was sorry when I told her the news. No one in my family had ever died before, so I didn’t know how to respond to Mrs. Duncan’s apology. I paused and said something about how it was okay. She laughed nervously and pushed her thick gray glasses higher on her nose. She was always doing that, pushing them up.

My mother was one of the six children for which Mrs. Duncan said she was sorry. In my mind, my mother didn’t know her father any more than I did, which was to say, not much at all.

I watched my mother walk slowly down the aisle with her brothers and sisters that day at the funeral home. She took a seat in front, near her father’s casket, but she didn’t look at him. My mother never cried in front of me, but that day, in her sad black dress, she did.
Wade

I was eighteen when we found out about my oldest brother. It was June and hot, and Wade was supposed to come from Nashville to Columbia for a Sunday afternoon visit. He arrived around three p.m., but his “best friend” Jamie was at our house by two.

My mother, father, and I had no idea who this Jamie person was. We’d never met him or spoken to him on the phone, but Wade had mentioned him a few times in passing.

Someone else in our family had spoken to Jamie on the phone though. We just didn’t know it. About a week before Jamie knocked on our front door, he had called our house and spoken to Keith. “Did you know your brother’s gay?” Jamie said into the phone, his voice hushed. Keith hung up and shrugged it off. He assumed the phone call was a prank. Surely his older brother wasn’t gay.

As Jamie sat in our kitchen, we looked at him. He looked at us. The silence stretched, and everyone felt uncomfortable. My mother gave him sweet tea, and my father tried to make small talk. I watched Jamie intently. His hair was beautiful, shaggy, and blonde. Ash blonde everywhere except for the crown of his head, which was platinum and lay perfectly against the curve of his forehead. When Jamie spoke, his voice was high and lispy.

I glanced back and forth from Jamie to my parents. I wanted to scream at them with my eyes: *This guy is gay!* But they didn’t look at me. Probably on purpose.

When Wade entered the house, the tension in the air grew even thicker. Wade’s neck and ears turned bright red, and he left the house with Jamie in tow. We peered out the windows at them and watched as Wade started up his white Pontiac and drove away from our house.

“Jamie is so gay!” I said finally, nearly bursting.

“Hush, Christie,” my mother said, wringing her hands. My father was silent.
“Is Wade—?”

“Just hush,” my mother said to me, her voice firm.

A half hour passed before they came back. We pushed aside my mother’s curtains and watched them from the kitchen windows. Jamie got in his car and drove away, and Wade came inside. He acted like nothing happened.

Later that night, after he’d left to go back to his apartment in Nashville, he called my mother from his cell phone as he drove up I-65. “I’m sorry, Mama,” he said. “I’m so sorry. I just wasn’t ready to tell you.”

My mother told me how Wade cried and apologized. How he’d tried to fight it his whole life. He was thirty-one.

Later, he explained about Jamie. They had been dating a few years, and Wade was trying to break things off. Jamie threatened Wade. He said he’d come to Columbia and tell us everything, but Wade didn’t believe him.

My parents understood everything—even my father. They told Wade not to worry because they loved him no matter what. For the first time, I finally felt like I knew who Wade was, if only a little.
His name was Giles Damron, and he had the most gorgeous brown eyes. We were only a few inches apart, so I could see the color of them perfectly. They were a rich coffee color, and around the pupils, there were flecks of green.

“Just blink a few times if you’re uncomfortable,” he said, “and I’ll stop.” I couldn’t speak, and it wasn’t just because he made me tingly. It was because he had a drill in my mouth, grinding away on one of my molars.

I kept hoping that my breath didn’t smell bad or that I wasn’t drooling all over myself. But who was I kidding? Giles would never love me. I could clearly see the outline of a wedding band underneath his rubber glove. Damn you, Mrs. Damron!

Little puffs of tooth smoke wafted outwards from us, and Giles hummed along to the Oldies playing in his office. I wondered what he’d do if I blinked a few times to get him to stop and then pulled him down on top me.

“How’re we doin’?” he asked, squeezing my shoulder.

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Wesley

Our elderly neighbor had a way with squirrels—or, rather, with one in particular. Twice a day, Wesley sat on a bench at the back of his house and fed peanuts to a squirrel. It would perch on his knee, take what he offered, and drop bits of shell on his brown Dickies.

Wesley’s last name was Rickets, like the vitamin D deficiency, and he lived at 427 Hickman Street in an old white house with black shutters.

My brothers told me that Wesley yelled at them when they rode their bikes across his impeccable lawn. Wesley wasn’t fond of the stripes of crushed grass they left in their wake.

By the time I was old enough to have my own bike, I rode unabashedly in his yard, rocked on his porch swing, and sat on his stoop. My brothers attributed Wesley’s softening to old age and gooey-heartedness. I thought it was because I was cute.

Sometimes in the summer when I was bored and had no one to play with, I’d watch Wesley have his lunch. Peering through his front window, I looked on while he enjoyed a glass of buttermilk-soaked cornbread. He ate it with a spoon and watched television, and afterwards, he would smoke a Winston. Occasionally, Wesley saw me outside his window. He would laugh and wave and bring me a handful of peppermint sticks.

During the spring of my fifth grade year, Wesley’s birdbath ran dry and his old car sat unused in the driveway for weeks. My mother told me he was at Maury Regional Hospital with lung cancer.

I selected a small potted plant for Wesley at the grocery store, and my mother and I took it to him during visitors’ hours. When I walked into the room and saw him lying there, I became shy. His skin was sallow and odd, but his smile was the same. A hospital tray was pulled up to his chest and on it sat a green cup with a bendy straw.
“What d’ya have there?” he asked. My mother nudged me, and I presented the plant to him.

He beamed. “I know just where I’ll plant this when I get back home.” He spun the pot in his hands and set it carefully onto his tray.

But he never made it back. By the summer, his home was auctioned, and I asked my mother what would happen to his plant and favorite squirrel. She shrugged and admitted she didn’t know.
Keith

I cannot write about my brother.

During the summer before my senior year of high school, Keith had one of his “episodes” in our front yard. My mother was at work, so my father and I stood inside our house and watched him from the living room windows.

Keith had just gotten home. He drove his green bronco through the yard. When he got out of the truck, he slammed the door with such force that the cab shimmied for several seconds.

Then he started screaming. He yelled at the cars that drove down our street. He yelled at the neighbors who may or may not have been looking out their windows. He kicked the bronco. He grabbed bags of nails and expensive tools from his truck and threw them into the yard.

“Daddy, what’s wrong with him?” I asked. I could feel tears stinging the backs of my eyes. I was afraid. I had won second place in a statewide essay contest, and I was to be honored at a teachers’ luncheon at my high school in one hour.

My father walked outside and tried to get Keith to come into the house and calm down. He asked him what was wrong. Keith threw a pink piece of paper at him and continued his rant. He grabbed his crotch and shook it at passing cars. “Fuck you!” he screamed. “And fuck you!”

Daddy stopped talking to Keith and came back inside with the pink paper in his hand, and he laid it on the table. It was Keith’s copy of a police report. My father was silent. Keith had been charged with reckless driving and possession of drug paraphernalia.

I imagined how upset my mother would be when she came home and heard the news. She would be even more upset to read the police report in Sunday’s edition of The Daily Herald. Keith’s name would be there, and all the people she cleaned for would finally know what was wrong with my brother. They would know why he never lived on his own or had a real job.
They would know why he acted strangely when he came to their homes to do freelance painting and repairs. Keith was good at his job, but he was flaky. He might spill a gallon of paint on someone’s Berber carpet or break a pane of glass.

Keith had been bingeing on and off for a couple of weeks since he had money from several roofing jobs. A few days before his outburst in the front yard, he’d fallen asleep in the living room while smoking a cigarette. He burned a hole in his jeans, and when Mama woke him up, he staggered around the room with shit staining the back of his pants. He hadn’t slept in days.

I remember the first time I knew anything about Keith’s problems. I was a nosey kid, and I liked to go through the pockets of his leather jackets and jeans. I found bits of tobacco in his bomber jacket, and I tattled.

Then I discovered something more unsettling—more unsettling even than the porno I’d found in his VCR or the screaming matches I’d heard him have with his girlfriend. On the back of his stereo, I found a plastic-wrapped paper towel that was folded into a square. The paper towel was damp and warm, and inside it were seeds. When I showed my mother, she flushed the sprouts and wrung her hands.

Now my brother was throwing a tantrum in the front yard because he’d finally gotten in trouble. My father and I watched him, and I was embarrassed. I couldn’t stop crying. I begged my father to bring my brother inside or take him to the hospital or something, anything. But he wouldn’t. He just watched from the window with a disgusted look on his face. “He’ll calm down once he’s gotten it out of his system,” he said.
I waited for my boyfriend to pick me up and take me to school, and when he arrived, I jumped into his truck and told him to get me out of there as fast as he could. At my high school, they gave me a plaque. I pretended things were fine.
Palliate

On November sixteenth, 2006, you were admitted to the VA Hospital for veterans after an x-ray was taken of your chest. I drove through most of the night so I could get to the hospital the next morning for visitors’ hours. I wanted to be with you and Mama when you found out the test results. At that moment, graduate school and work didn’t matter to me. I drove through Atlanta, rural Georgia, and Chattanooga until I reached Nashville. I talked to God the whole way.

When Mama and I arrived at nine a.m., the nurses told us to put on paper masks before we went into your room. You were quarantined—a possible TB patient, they said. They wanted to check your sputum for three days. The masks were stiff and smelly and tugged on our faces and hair.

When we saw you, we knew something was wrong. You were perched stiffly on the hospital bed. Your long hair was ratty, and you were wearing a pair of blue pajamas that said “Property of the US Government.” Your eyes were puffy and red, and you looked thin and frail. Weak.

“Have you been crying?” my mother asked.

You said no.

“Well, have they told you anything else?” She sat down in the room’s only chair. I stood beside her.

“Yeah,” you said. “They already know.”

My mother and I looked at each other over the tops of our masks. “Know what? What’s wrong with you?” Mama and I said at the same time.

You looked at us with sad eyes. “It’s cancer.”

My mother sank into her chair and started weeping into her hands. I didn’t know what to do, so I hugged her. And then I hugged you.

Your face was pale and tight, and I could tell something powerful was raging inside you. Maybe it was emotion. Or maybe it was the cancer, growing and sucking the breath out of you.

Soon, Wade arrived. A nurse bustled him into the room with a mask on. At first, his eyes were smiling over the top of his mask, happy to see us. But when we told him the diagnosis, he sank down onto your bed. The bottom half of his face was hidden under a paper dome, but his eyes revealed everything.

After a while, all of us relaxed and tried to be tough for you. We decided to take off our masks. You didn’t have TB, but we wished to God you did. I took a seat on your bed between you and Wade. The mattress was strange and full of air. It adjusted itself automatically according to weight distribution. There were hills and valleys. And every few minutes, it would beep and inflate itself in some places and deflate in others. Like a seesaw. We laughed nervously.

Later, after Wade went back to work and we called Keith with the news, a team of doctors came in and told us that your right lung was collapsed. That the lung cancer was in your lymph nodes, adrenal glands, and liver. You said over and over, “I just want to go home.”

They wanted to keep you over the weekend and do more tests first thing on Monday—the Monday before Thanksgiving. You refused. “I want to go home. There are things I have to take care of.” You said this to every doctor who came into your room. And there were lots of them. Pulmonary care physicians, oncologists, general MD’s, nurses, and interns.
They kept filing into the room every half-hour or so. With each visit, they gave us more and more bad news. We kept thinking we couldn’t possibly hear any more, but we could. We took group after group. When they talked to us, you’d stare at something on the wall or floor, Mama would cry softly into a tissue, and I took notes. I didn’t want to miss one word.

Just before you convinced your doctor to discharge you for the weekend, I went into the bathroom you shared with the adjacent room. My stomach hurt. I looked at the green tiles on the wall and the signs: “Caution: This room is quarantined!” I thought about how shitty and unbelievable things were. And I thought about how you had your heart attack four years ago to the day. In 2002, you were at Saint Thomas Medical Center, which was only a few blocks away from the VA and from my dorm at Vanderbilt. You’d sat in a chair drinking apple juice only hours after your chest was cracked open and a cardiologist held your heart in his hands.

I sat in your bathroom, and I tried to cry. I couldn’t. I could hear the man in the room next to yours. His television blared, but underneath the noise, I could hear him talking with a nurse or therapist. “Say your name,” she said, and he moaned. She told him to say many things, but the sounds coming from his mouth were garbled and ineffective.
The Visit

It was late-October, and I was home from graduate school for a weekend visit. My father was sick. He’d been coughing for months, my mother said, and he hardly slept at night.

A week before I arrived, Mama called me in tears. “He’s so sick, Christie,” she said. “I’m afraid it’s something terrible. And—and what would we do if it was?” That night I called my father and spoke to him directly. I begged him to go to a doctor. I told him how worried Mama was and to stop being ridiculous.

In my family, men only went to the doctor if they were forced or dying. Or both. “I promise,” he said, “I promise to go to the VA Emergency Room if I’m still sick in a couple of weeks.” So I left it alone.

When I arrived at my parents’ house that Thursday night, I was shocked to see how thin my father had become. When I hugged him, I could feel the bones in his back. His shoulder blades were sharp, and his face was pale and saggy.

I told my brother about this on Saturday afternoon when I drove to Nashville. We sat outside the home Wade shared with his partner, and I watched him smoke Marlboro Lights and drink whiskey from a thermos.

He had enlisted me as his Halloween makeup artist. He had bits of costume laid out on the table top around him: fishnet panty hose, knee-high panty hose, a wig, fake gold teeth, a bag of rice, and a pair of pink sunglasses. In a couple of hours, he wouldn’t be Wade anymore; he’d be a “crack whore” at a costume party. He had invited me to tag along, but I wanted to go back home instead. I hadn’t been to my parents’ house for a visit since July.
After a while, Wade said, “I don’t know why Daddy won’t go to the doctor.” He took one last draw from a cigarette and snuffed it out in an ashtray. He never smoked them all the way down to the filter so all his castaways seemed premature.

I sat beside him with a blanket around my shoulders. “Maybe he’s afraid of what they might tell him,” I said. Wade nodded, sipping his drink. I knew he was sad and worried. But for all his talk, he too had been putting off a visit to the doctor. My mother’s family had a history of high blood pressure and alcoholism, both of which my brother had been unlucky enough to inherit.

Wade and I went inside and set up shop in his bathroom. He removed his glasses and sat in a chair. I stood in front of him and applied several coats of flesh-colored makeup to his stubbled face. “Remember,” he said, “make it look ugly. I’m a crackhead who needs a hit.”

“Okay,” I laughed. I stopped trying so hard to blend his foundation. I felt like I was in art class all over again, and Mrs. Kinser was looking over my shoulder and telling me to loosen up. A heavy hand ruins art.

I put gobs of blue eye shadow on his lids, and when I lined his eyes with a gray pencil, I made the lines choppy and imperfect.

“You gotta do something about these eyebrows,” he said, taking a look at himself once I’d finished his eye makeup. “Why don’t you take that pencil and draw them way up here,” he said, tracing a high arch onto his forehead with his index finger.

We burst out laughing, and I drew on his eyebrows. Thick and dark. Clownlike.

I thought about my twenty-first birthday and how Wade had taken me to my first drag show. We went to a club called Connection, which had been renamed “Infection” by its loving regulars. During the drag show comedy act, one of the queens plucked me from the audience
while Wade and my friends cheered her on. “I hear it’s your birthday, honey,” she said. Up close, her makeup was thick, and she was sweating profusely under the heat of the stage lights. Her eyebrows were shaved clean and highly arched. She looked perpetually surprised.

And so did Wade. When I finished his brows, I moved on to his lashes. I dabbed the wand against his eyelids and the bridge of his nose. After all, a crackhead would have an unsteady hand.

I finished him off with red lipstick ringed in brown pencil. When I was done, Wade touched his mouth with his fingertips and smudged the lipstick across his cheek. “Perfect,” he said, standing up in front of the mirror. He held his glasses in his left hand and looked through them to study his reflection. “I love it!”

We joked around for a while and took pictures, and then we set about to dress him. He filled his knee-high panty hose with rice and tied them in knots. The knots, he explained, would look like nipples when he stuffed the wads into his bra and faced them outward.

When he was finished, he wore a face-full of makeup, a pink halter-top, short shorts, fishnets, and a bleach blonde wig with black roots. Then I went home. I went home, and he went to a party.
A Letter for Christmas Morning

Dear Daddy,

I’m writing this letter to tell you some of the things I’ve always wanted you to know. I’m sure you already know most of what I’m about to say, but just in case… I feel like I shouldn’t wait to tell you anything anymore. Time and health and everything else are luxuries.

That being said, I want you to know what it’s like to be your daughter. Whenever anyone asks me to describe you, I tell them that you’re tough and tender, all at once. You’re a man’s man. You fix things. You look rough, and you get dirty. But at night, you come home to your family, your cats, your squirrels and critters, and you love them with everything you have.

I have so many wonderful memories of you when I was a little girl. You always brought me a paper bag full of goodies on Friday nights: Bubblicious gum, Melonheads, Red Hots, Blow Pops, Lemonheads, Fun-Yuns, and the occasional root beer in a glass bottle. I remember how exciting it was to hear your truck coming up the street. You spoiled me rotten, and it was fantastic.

Also, there was our nightly tuck-in ritual. I’d stand at the top of the stairs and hop on your back for a piggyback ride down to my bedroom. You’d fluff my pillow and carefully tuck me in, cover by cover. You always made sure I had my stuffed bunny, and sometimes you’d uncover one of my feet and turn on the fan so I wouldn’t get too hot. You’d give me hugs and kisses until I was satisfied enough to let you go. Finally, I’d say, “See ya later, alligator.” And you’d always reply, “After while, crocodile” and “See you mañana.”

When I was little, I thought you were perfect. In many ways, I still do, but things have changed. Now I know you’ve made mistakes. I’ve heard stories from Mama and Wade about the times you drank and gambled and had affairs. And though it hurt to hear those things about
you, I’m not mad or disappointed. I love you even more because they prove that you’re human. Just like me.

I love to hear you talk about your own father. About how good he was and how smart. About how hard he worked. About all the saintly things he did in his short life. And I can’t help but think that you’re just like him. I know, too, that you loved and admired your father beyond description, and that’s exactly how I feel about you.

I remember move-in days at Vanderbilt and how some of the other students and families looked at you and Mama. I’m not sure if they really looked at you differently or if I only imagined it. But either way, I knew our family didn’t look like their families did, but I wasn’t ashamed. I’ve never wanted to hide you away because you didn’t dress a certain way or have the proper haircut. I’ve always been proud of where I come from and who my parents are.

Anyway, I’m sorry you’re sick. I’m sorry you have to go through chemo and bronchoscopies and bone scans. I wish I could do those things for you. I know I wouldn’t be as tough as you are, but I’d do anything to make you well.

Daddy, I love you. I love your hair—both when it was long and now that it’s short and patchy. I love your loaded down trucks. I love the way you watch television with the sound turned down. I love how you answer the phone in silly voices. I love it when you say, “Ya think?” And I love to hear you snore. I love to watch the cats following you around the house, and vice versa. I love your one-pocket Hanes t-shirts and dark blue jeans.

Daddy, no one compares to you. I love everything about you. I always have and always will.

Merry Christmas,

Your Little Girl
P.S. Just in case there’s any confusion: this isn’t a goodbye letter. I love you, Daddy. More
than Friday night treats and tuck-ins. More than anyone or anything I’ve ever known. Please get
well.
Uncle James

When my mother calls with bad news, I know it right away. There’s a tone to her voice, an obvious timbre.

It was seven a.m. in Georgia, and six in Tennessee when she called my cell phone. “I have bad news—but it’s not your daddy,” she said. She appended the last bit of information because she’d scared me a few weeks earlier. I asked her never to call me like that again unless she told me whose bad news it was from the start.

“What is it?” I asked, suddenly wide-awake.

She paused, and I heard her crying. “Your Uncle James died last night.” I asked her to repeat what she said.

It didn’t make sense. I had seen my uncle only a week before. It was Sunday, and I had just showered and come out of the bathroom with a squirrel’s nest of hair on my head and no makeup. I didn’t know my daddy had company, so when I saw James in his usual spot—the green armchair beside the couch—I was both embarrassed and excited. Of course, he took one look at me and laughed. He was his usual self.

I went to the bathroom after he’d teased me about my hair, and I combed out the tangles. When I came back to the living room, he was already gone. That was the last time I saw him alive.

On February fifteenth, James’s wife Brenda found him dead in his desk chair. She woke up in the middle of the night and realized he’d never come to bed. He’d turned off his computer, put out his cigarette, and leaned back. She thought for a moment that he was only sleeping.

When my Aunt Margie called my parents that morning, she had trouble forming sentences. My father answered the phone, but she wouldn’t tell him. She asked for my mother.
My father said he knew it right away, and when my mother hung up with Margie and told him the news, he said, “Oh, no. Not James.”

My father and James were only three years apart in age, and they looked alike. They both had long ponytails and kind eyes, but somehow, James seemed fresher. He looked younger and more carefree than my father. Probably because he lived that way, full of laughter.

One summer, when he was still the maintenance man for Columbia Garden Apartments, Daddy brought home a mound of clothes that a bachelor had left behind in a one-bedroom he was working on. James came over that afternoon for a visit and a beer, and by the time he left our house, he’d taken off his clothes and put on the bachelor’s white tweed suit. He topped the look with a pair of leopard print bikini briefs. Over his pants.

James was the father of two girls, Missy and Mindy, both of whom were in their thirties but had never grown up. Missy had four children by two or three different men, and Mindy was a cocaine junkie who took from James faster than he could give. Our family believed that his daughters finally broke his heart enough to stop it.

Two days after my eighth birthday, James’s first granddaughter had been born, and Missy named the girl Breanna. Having Breanna as a cousin was almost like having a baby sister of my own. I played with her and made her laugh. I taught her to count to ten in Spanish.

I saw Breanna at Uncle James’s funeral. I walked up to her and gave her a hug. I knew how much it hurt to lose him. He was her “PawPaw”—the closest thing to a daddy she’d ever known. So I hugged her, and she cried on my shoulder.

“How do you remember the time he took us to the park in his Jeep?” I said. “And you had a bottle of Avon perfume that was missing its squirter?” She nodded her head and dabbed at her eyes, smiling. “And how he tried to get the perfume out for you, and it shot in my eye?”
She laughed. “Yeah. I remember.”

“That hurt so bad,” I said, touching her forearm.

A silence stretched between us, and I knew that we were both thinking of things we wanted to say, but couldn’t. So I told her I was sorry that her PawPaw was gone.

“I know,” she said. “Me too.” Her teenaged boyfriend stood behind her looking thuggish, and she grabbed for his hand. “It’s not fair,” she said bitterly. “It’s just not fair that he’s gone. He couldn’t stand to see your daddy so sick, and it killed him.”

The rest of our conversation went by in a blur. I was shocked by what she had said, and that she’d had the audacity to say it to me, of all people. Breanna blamed my father for her PawPaw’s death. She blamed a bald man in a wheelchair who weighed less than she did, and I was furious.

I calmed down when I remembered that she was young and only angry about what had happened. She wanted to blame someone, anyone—just as we’d wanted to blame her mother and Mindy. But no one was to blame. Not really.

I thought my father would be the first Stanford sibling to die. That his funeral would be the one to which I’d wear my black dress. That my mother would be the first widow of the family. That I would be the daughter who’d lose her Daddy before everyone else.

At the visitation on the night before the funeral, my mother and I spoke to Brenda, James’s widow. She was hearing impaired, so I usually found it difficult to understand her speech. That night was especially challenging. Brenda showed us a flower arrangement she’d sent to the funeral home on behalf of CoCo & Jasmine, Uncle James’s chihuahua and shih tzu lapdogs. “The dogs aren’t doing too well,” she said. “CoCo won’t eat or use the bathroom, and
Jasmine waits by the door.” The strangled sounds from her throat were liquid grief, not words, and my mother and I hugged her. I read Brenda’s lips that night, just as she read mine.

When my father heard about the dogs and the flowers, the line of his mouth pointed downward, and I knew he wanted to cry. I also knew he was thinking about himself and Daisy, the cat we say he loves more than all of us put together.

Mostly, though, he was thinking about his brother. When I arrived from Georgia and saw my father for the first time after James’s death, I hugged him for a long time. I told him I was sorry for his loss, and he sat there with his mouth turned down, bow-shaped. “I didn’t just lose a brother,” he said. “I lost my best friend.”

During the funeral, Mama asked Daddy if he wanted to view the body, and he said no. He wanted to remember his brother as he had been in life. Not lying in a coffin, not devoid of the spirit that made him who he was. To my father, James would always be sitting in our living room in the green armchair, and he would always be teasing us and making us laugh.