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Sanctuary

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Senior Project: Sanctuary

Foreword

In my explorations of art thus far, I have been confronted over and over with the challenge of embracing truth as it is, hoping for what it could be, and holding close the fact that the embracing and the hoping rarely meet. Telling the truth in stories allows space for hard beginnings, painful and messy middles, sad endings. It can be grossly unsettling, even terrifying, to face truth.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lucy asks Mr. Beaver if Aslan is safe. “Safe?” he replies. “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good” (Lewis 86). Like Aslan, truth isn’t safe, but it is good. I want to write things that tell the truth, no matter how unsafe, because that is good. I want to make a *sanctuary*, a safe place to engage with these unsafe things. I want to write with artistry so that my work may be considered beautiful—not to credit my skill, but as an homage to the necessity of aesthetics. Philosophy pursues goodness, beauty, and truth, and I think that great art manifests these three pillars.

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J.R.R. Tolkien shares the truth of good stories being unsafe when Sam and Frodo are climbing the stairs of Cirith Ungol:

“The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull.... But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually—their paths were laid that way, as you put it.... I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?” (Tolkien 696).

When Frodo and Sam left the Shire, they didn’t know what lay ahead of them or what they would come back to. They thought that they would go to Bree, then to Rivendell, give the ring to someone greater than them, and return to the Shire like nothing had changed. But they went to Bree, to Rivendell, even to Mordor. When they come back to the Shire, it is the same place they left; but they are not the same hobbits who had begun their journey in this familiar place now strange.

We cannot live in a world that refuses to acknowledge pain. Thomas Hardy says, “f way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst” (Hardy 168). We have to see Mount Doom before we can understand the beauty of things like the depth of friendship that can bring us there.

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When I was eleven, my mom picked me up from my friend Lily’s house in our 2000 Honda minivan with milk stains on the ceiling from toddler me shaking my bottle directly after Mom told me not to. That day, she was listening to an audiobook read by the same narrator as *Mrs. Piggie-Wiggle*, so I listened contentedly. It was a book for people much older than 11, but it intrigued me. Lord’s Chapel in the small fictional town of Mitford, North Carolina, appeared delightfully quaint and simple for a few chapters, but soon the priest was stuck with a child that wasn’t his, a congregant wrestled with a life-threatening illness that God wasn’t healing, and an alcoholic mom didn’t get sober. These people became so real to me in their struggle and suffering alongside one another that I have since read the 13-book series more than two or three times. Jan Karon was one of the first authors I can remember who wrote articulately about God without oversimplifying him or ditching the craft of good writing in the process. I wanted to be Jan Karon when I grew up.

My mother raised me to accept the truth universally acknowledged that Colin Firth is the one true Mr. Darcy. I had watched the *Pride and Prejudice* miniseries multiple times before turning 10. At 13, I read *Pride and Prejudice* in about three days. I have read *Persuasion* twice and keep Frederick Wentworth’s love letter to Anne Elliot open on my phone at all times.

The rite of passage for turning six was Dad reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* to me before bed. I had ached to be characters in books before, but Lucy Pevensie brought new strength to this desire. I started wearing a belt low around my hips and begged my parents for a knife and sheath. Lewis cultivated my imagination and brought whimsy to a dance with mundanity.

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I was convinced as a child, deep in my soul, that those biologically closest to us would always love us enough to do what is best for us.

When my two brothers and I all struggled with our own mental illness cocktails, we were there for each other for a long time. My older brother, Isaac, sat with me in the middle of the night and told me the story of Jesus weeping, how even though Jesus was omnipotent and omniscient, he still wept. Just because we can be assured an ultimate ending in resurrection doesn't mean we overlook suffering. When my little brother, Sam, had such intense sensory overload that he couldn't watch movies or be near anyone while they chewed and swallowed, I assured him it was good to make space to do what he needed.

His sophomore year, my brother started dating a woman with greater skill in long-con manipulation than anyone else I've met. I slowly became disillusioned about this childhood dream that family would always be there for each other. When his girlfriend came out as bisexual, Isaac decided to isolate himself from my parents because he decided they were homophobic. If only he had taken the time to see them in truth. When they eloped, Isaac told my little brother to lie about knowing anything of their plans; Sam values honesty more than almost anything else.

Barbara H. Solomon says in her introduction to *American Families: 28 Short Stories*, "Essentially [American short stories] dramatize the disparity between the ideal family relationships we want to enjoy and strive to achieve and the imperfect and troubled relationships with which we are faced" (xi). Since the first sons and brothers existed, there has been dissension. Cain murdered Abel and broke the hearts of his parents. The American family does not have a monopoly on dysfunction, but they do seem to achieve it exceptionally well. Many American authors—including Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, Langston Hughes—walk in authentic stories about families with an eloquence so correct it allows readers to see the truth in stories in their own lives. In all these familial relationships, struggle is one of the most potent flavors.

When looking at my own family, those things which cause me distress are too close and nebulous for me to sufficiently grasp. I want to process things but have a hard time doing this when it all remains in my head. I can look at the people with whom I have relationships, but I cannot look at the relationship itself. Writing things down enables me to look at something physical, to hold in my own hands the thoughts which have been turning over and over in my mind like so much rough sea glass. These ideas become words, and this too is a tumbling in the waves, salt grinding away sharp edges. With each story I write and each draft of those, the glass which once was cast into the sea slowly looks more like a collectable. When I can revise and edit the piece no more, I can keep it on my shelf, pull it down when melancholy demands to roll it between my fingers and feel its coolness in my palm; but when it sits on my shelf, I can acknowledge its beauty without letting it be part of my every moment, pockets weighted by that which I carry.

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Later in life, after we have begun our practices in family and friendship, we form relationships that have the potential to be the most complicated, for they involve *phileo* and *eros*. This multilayered love of a romantic relationship can get messy, often contorted, though it has so much potential to be magnanimous. I am far from an expert on this type of love. I tried it once, a boy and I proclaiming our mutual affection for one another. This devolved over four months into what can best be described as hell for beginners. His ex-girlfriend abused me; he didn't care; and even after I deleted his contact, we still lived in the same building.

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Of all relationships, however, the greatest of all is that which a mortal has with an ultimate deity. For two persons so unequal in achievement and grandeur to become the most intimate of friends is greater goodness than a mortal could dream. The greatest of loves is *agape*, that which God feels towards his people: it is infinite, greater than the love of friendship, romance, and parent to child all rolled into one. It defies all laws of humanity for a God so magnificent to descend to the side of a human so incapable as to give up on matching their socks before donning them. This God, though—the one with whom I am friends—wants us to form relationships with people other than himself. He loves us so much that he wants us to love and be loved by those around us.

This God is too big to be made into anything unilateral. He does not hand out spiritual bandaids or frequently fix problems for our lives to be easier. I felt the need to explore my relationship with God when my own existence burdens me: in “Psalm 56,” I sit with how it feels to live in relationship with an ever-loving, all-powerful God simultaneously with anxiety that inhibits such basic functions as breathing. Like a lot of my writing, I didn’t arrive at a final answer; but I got to live in the *maybe’s* of what God might be doing. Maybe he weeps with me and wants to fix my problems but loves me well enough not to be my fairy godmother.

When Frodo sails for the Grey Havens, Sam, Merry, and Pippin must ride home to Hobbiton and continue with life. The final page of *The Lord of the Rings* says, “they spoke no word to one another until they came back to the Shire, but each had great comfort in his friends on the long grey road” (Tolkien 1008). More often than clearly speaking to me, God sits with me. He doesn’t bring back Frodo or make me like I used to be so I can enjoy the Shire like I once had. He brings me “great comfort in” being with me as I walk my own “long grey road.”

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To build a collection of my work meant diving deeply into those themes which have most formed me. What is most important to me? What can relate to the world while being specific enough that it means something for *me* to say it? I looked through my previous work to see what themes may have repeated themselves, with or without my knowing. “To My Brother”; “Papa”; “Out to the Clean Air”; “Psalm 56”: relationships with brother, grandfather, love interest, God. Everyone has relationships, even if just relationship with their surroundings. But only I have lived through my specific experiences in relationships.

“To My Brother” is an epistolary piece I never intend to show to the one for whom it was written. Being honest with my pen was terrifying. It wasn’t *safe* for our relationship for me to write this, but what I tried to write was true. I could have written about what I wanted our relationship to be or what it once had been, ignoring the pain he has created in the past five years, but Christians are not called to write only of ideals. Like Patricia Hampl, “I wished to embody the myth of memoir: to write as an act of dutiful transcription,” recording what is true and seeking something beautiful.

My relationship with writing has always been one charged with emotion and vulnerability. Vulnerability is critical in anything that has a hope of communicating the human condition in truth. Perhaps there can be goodness in my attempts at telling the truth, and if I do it artfully then it might just be beautiful. So *bonum, verum, pulchrum*: these three will survive far longer than any word I may pen.

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Part I

Inheritance

California winter, 1958,
Parked in her drive—
He takes her hand,
Asks what she wants
For Christmas.
She thumbs her bare fourth finger.

California summer, 2018,
Mom hands me
A gray velvet box--
What he gave
Grandma 50 years ago.

The rings inside have bumps
From years of doing dishes
And picking almonds.
Rings bent,
Slightly off from circle,
A more fitting shape
For the fingers
Wrinkled from age and crooked
Like Dad's and like mine,
The third and fourth fingers
Leaning in and overlapping.

Steeple

Mom took my picture on our back step then walked me to the edge of the side yard where the dogwood and forsythia left a gap in their outline of the lawn.

She hugged me tightly and kissed my blonde bangs. “Have fun, Sweetie!”

“Bye, Mom!” I squeezed back and immediately turned to plant my light-up Disney Princess sneaker on the asphalt. Sand and loose pieces of gravel crunched under my glittery pink soles.

The back of the small brick church faced me from the end of the lot. The white steeple was on the other side, facing the quiet neighborhood. Mom said it was old fashioned for the church to be in the neighborhood and the parsonage on the main road behind it, that it was for people to walk to church more easily. But not as many people went to church anymore, so it didn’t make sense now.

The sky was gray today, but big. The woods to the right of the parking lot felt more like a place for infinite exploration than a barrier, and not even Jefferson Street to my left intimidated me. This was all my turf, and soon I’d be able to read the street signs and wield the power of literacy.

I hopped over the curb and ran my hand in the man-height shrubs then tapped the side-top-side of the rusty mailbox. I skipped up the cement steps against the back of the church.

The outer door squeaked when I pushed the thumb latch and yanked it. The wooden door was painted white like our door at home. I twisted the gold knob.

Dad was sitting at his desk. He rotated in the black spinny chair as I came in, spreading his arms and smile wide. “Hello, princess! How are you?”

“Good,” I replied, hugging his neck, the back of which was prickly from recent shaving. He smelled like warm skin, clean polo shirts, and the old books lining every inch of the walls.

“Are you ready for a reading lesson?”

I stood back and put my hands on his bony knees. “Yes!”

“Let me finish this thought, then I’ll be ready.”

“Okay!”

I walked to the closet, and he turned back to his Windows XP with typewriter font.

On the inside of the closet door hung a coat hanger wreath of candy wrappers, few remaining. Hidden among the empty yellow plastic of butterscotch discs there rested a green and white mint, stripes like a tiny windmill. I used the scissors attached by ribbon to cut off all but a nub of the wrapper. Most people were too lazy and unsanitary to take the time to cut it from the wreath first, removing the candy with sweaty, germ-covered palms directly from the wreath-bound wrapper, and these people were the reason there were so many false-hope wrappers left on the wreath.

“Alright, Sweetheart—ready?”

“Ready!”

He rose to his full six feet one inch, two inches shorter than Blaziken. I was still trying to come to terms with my dad being what I perceived as short.

“Isaac was six when he started reading lessons, right?”

“I believe so.”

“But I’m starting when I’m five!”

He smirked. “Yes, dear.”

On the same wall as his desk, there was a door that led to the meeting room between his office and the church secretary’s. We sat on the itchy reddish-brown woolen couch that matched two spinning armchairs. It poked my skin like Dad’s shaving stubble on his neck, but I pretended it didn’t bother me so he wouldn’t feel bad for the church having uncomfy furniture.

We opened the green backpack and put the phonics book with peeling laminate on the brown coffee table tattooed with scratches.

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The crinoline in my poinsettia print dress crinkled with my fidgets in the hard aluminum chair.

“Okay,” Mary Lu, the rosy-cheeked children’s coordinator said, “we are going to sing happy birthday to Jesus, even though Christmas isn’t technically until tomorrow.”

So we joined in song, Mary Lu starting us on no note in particular. I had opinions about celebrating Jesus’ birthday a day early. But I tried to be worshipful because it was Jesus.

“Tomorrow is Jesus’ birthday, but today is Abbey’s birthday,” she said. “So we are going to sing happy birthday again, to her too!”

Sparkles shuddered through my chest and showed in a smile. The cake didn’t say my name, but I liked ice cream better anyway.

“As soon as you finish your cake, go get your Nativity costumes on!” Mary Lu yelled at the end of the song.

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I ran my fingers over the faux fur trim on the angel wings adorning my back. The headband suspending my silver tinsel halo squeezed behind my ears, but it was too essential an element of celestial glory to be removed. I hoped real angels didn’t have to wear pinchy headbands.

Breathing deeply to calm the butterflies in my tummy, the musty air of old linoleum and ancient parishioners and fresh-from-storage costumes entered my nose. It was still cool despite the oodles of sugar-buzzed children in polyester and felt.

“Is Sammy gonna be baby Jesus?” I asked Mom. “Mary and Joseph would be so careful!” I bounced on the balls of my feet, wings flapping.

Mom shifted 18-month-old Sam to her other hip and stroked his strawberry-blonde curls. “I don’t think so. Sammy is gonna stay with me for tonight so we can watch you be an angel and Isaac be a camel.”

“But it’s my birthday, and it would make me so happy!”

“I know, Sweetie.”

The woman devaluing my reign as birthday princess was intolerable. I sighed and protested, but not even eye-rolling changed her mind.

We traipsed upstairs like the pilgrimage to Bethlehem. Moms corralled us into a globular line in the narthex, and we walked down the aisle. Some of the same moms (mostly Mary Lu) helped to arrange us haphazardly across the stage; Mary, holding a *fake* baby, sat in the middle. All the chandeliers were lit, making the room look big and oh-so fancy--neither of which it truly was.

Dad was going to let me light the Christ candle during “O Come, O Come, Immanuel” because it was my birthday. When the piano started, he turned his head to me and gave one, slow nod.

I crept through the cotton-ball clad sheep, shepherds in their boring striped robes, and Isaac with his padded camel hump, to get to Dad. He put his hands on the lighter over my hands which were an almost perfect miniature of his own: calluses, long fingers, middle and ring fingers curved towards each other which allowed us to peek through them like Ninja Turtle masks when we held them to our eyes. He pushed the button and pulled the trigger, a nub of flame poofing out on the fourth try.

I glanced out of the right corner of my eye to see the congregation watching me as they sang their mourning plea.

“Pay attention to the fire,” Dad whispered, pulling my flowing sleeve from near disaster.

~~~

My friends, Kristen and Sarah, and my brothers and I had been waiting at the house for forever. Maybe the adults were taking so long at the meeting because they were figuring out a plan for selling the parsonage and using the money to keep the church from closing.

The green digital clock on the oven said 1:42p.m. when Mom, Michael, and Kate walked from the side yard into the driveway. We ran to the breezeway to meet them halfway, but they stayed in the driveway. Nana was getting in her car, face crinkly like she was mad or crying. They all talked outside. Michael was rubbing his beard and eyes.

“It’s okay, right, Kristen? They probably just said we have to move, but it’s only a few blocks because I found that green Cape house for sale behind Wheeler School.”

Kristen shrugged.

It felt wrong to join the grown-ups’ conversation. Pastors’ Kids know the look that people have when kids aren’t supposed to be there, even if we’re going to figure it all out eventually, whether or not anyone tells us.

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The man a few rows in front of us looked Amish, but he must not have been if he was in a Covenant church.

“Why are there so many people here?” I asked Mom.

“The Covenant sent a bunch of people to make us feel supported.”

“If they actually wanted to support us, they would have sent money instead of people so we could stay open.”

I massaged the hem of my white polo shirt, pinching it between thumb and forefinger, rubbing my finger pads raw on the thick weave.

“If they really loved us they would let us be alone as a church family today and not take away our last chance to be together.” My saliva tasted bitter.

“I know,” she whispered, kissing the crown of my dirty blonde head.”

Eventually, a parishioner called us to the stage. We stood in front of the congregation and the infiltrators from other churches. Dad and Mom had their arms around each other. Mom had her hand on Sam’s tiny shoulder; he was too short for her to be able to put her arm around him. I thought ten was old enough for me to understand the weight of what was happening, so I should be crying in church. It didn’t feel natural, but I made myself cry a little anyway. It didn’t feel natural to put my arm around my mom and my head on her shoulder, but I did. Isaac stood a foot apart from our little clump. The congregation and the infiltrators prayed.

Kristen and Sarah’s family came over for lunch, and we had roast beef. It was Grandma’s favorite, so Mom always had it for big days.

~~~

I had dropped Sam off at church for a youth group event. It was a half-hour drive from home, so I stayed in the area to save money on gas. Jefferson Street was only twelve minutes from our new church, a temptation too nostalgic to resist at Christmas time. It had been more than nine years since the church had closed.

Exit 2 off Route 9 was so familiar my stomach started to tighten and burn. Left at Wendy's with the bad drive-thru; right then right again to go past Mary Lu's gabled house. Herb's house, the white house with red shutters, Andrew's powder blue house. Next lay the church. My chest constricted and forced out a cry of pain at what I saw. I pulled to the curb across the street. A church still stood, but it was the skeleton of my church, stripped of its clothing and skin and redressed till I wouldn't have recognized it.

It was all white, no brick to be seen. The steeple had been removed, replaced by one on each side of the building's front. They were not pointy and had no cross crowning them like a star on a tree.

God found pleasure in the violated building because the people in it still worshipped Him, but surely those steeples gutted Him a little.

**putrescine**

once upon a time i ate  
a cricket and the cricket kicked  
my gut sang a song and poked my skin  
till it died with its spiny legs  
suspending it from the wall  
of my stomach the stench  
of its decomposing body rises  
up my throat and through my lips as  
the notes it would have sung.

## Out to the Clean Air

Sweat trickled down my tear-tracked cheeks from temple to jaw, then plopped to my lap. There was a group of men having wheely chair races outside the door to the classroom I had tried to study in, and even though I *knew* the guys wouldn't do anything to me other than expose me to a wall of their unmasked breath, I was terrified of them--only two things scared me more. 1) Being alone with my thoughts, and 2) being with people who made me want to be alone.

Panic had frozen my bones too strongly to will myself past the boys outside, so I couldn't run away from solitude.

"Scott," I whispered to the air. "If I call Scott, he will come. He will come get me and walk me home and keep me safe."

I stared at his contact on my phone and prayed, wishing I had already called and being too scared for him to see me having a panic attack laced with suicidal nightmares.

~~~

"So you obviously want to get a No Contact Directive against Scott," the chief of police said. "And against his ex-girlfriend Monica?"

~~~

My heart rested warmly within my ribcage. My eyes were burning, and I was so tired my hands shook, but I didn't want to go to bed. The little green clock on the oven said that it was 3:30 in the morning, but it couldn't be possible; that would mean that Scott and I had been talking for three hours about Jesus and books and how his cat Sydney follows him around the house and our hopes for grad school and why it matters that humans share experiences. Our faces were covered with masks and our bodies ten feet apart, but I thought our souls were seeing each other unhidden.

~~~

My friend Meg watched while I scrolled for the right meme to show her. "Abbey, are you okay?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Your hands--your entire arms--they're shaking so bad!"

I chuckled coldly. "I'm fine. My new anxiety meds make my body feel more anxious than my head, I think."

~~~

*Lemonade Kisses: a Haibun*

I'm running down the hall, my traditional 2-5 minutes behind. Mascara, eyebrows, highlight. My hair can demonstrate to the world how put together I'm not. I reach for my boots that look as tired as me. Foot in, zip up, run down the stairs and meet Scott and walk to class. Stepping out the front door, we are greeted by the sunrise.

Pink lemonade sun

Kisses our shoulders and cheeks

In the way we can't.

~~~

Tonight I threw up a middle finger to the universe. Immensely refreshing. I'd never flipped off someone before; lifting my middle finger to the fogged window in a bathroom stall felt like I'd reached the tip of my scuba nostril above the sea, providing a puff of oxygen into my lungs. I was still underwater, but a little something felt like air.

~~~

"I'm so sorry. This feels awful, but I don't think we can date if Monica is living upstairs. I think it would just be too painful for her." His voice was even lower than normal, his gait slow.

Even in this, however, there was hope. His ex-girlfriend was a senior. She would graduate in three months, then he and I could be together. Until then, we could just be really, really good friends.

But I could sense how empty my hand felt as it swung beside his in the air as cold and bitter as Monica.

~~~

"Fuck you," I whisper, allowing my words to roll in with the hundreds of others spilling through the crowded lobby. I'm too quiet for him to hear.

Across the room, his mouth laughs but his eyes steal glances at me. His arms are crossed loosely over his slouchy chest; maybe *he* doesn't even want to be around him.

~~~

I sat on the floor of Monica's bedroom; she was in her bed, surrounded by cushy, comfy blankets and pillows. My roommate Rebekah sat with Monica's roommate, Kelsey, on the other bed.

"I just want to protect you," Monica said. "I don't want to have to do this, because it would be horrible for me, but if you start dating Scott, I will report him to Title IX for what he did to me."

The carpet was scratchy and had a thousand little dots of colors no one cared about.

That night, I laid my head in Rebekah's lap, my soul feeling the same way my body felt having had an Oreo Shamrock McFlurry and a Big Mac--which I had done to drown out the screaming in my head that

*You used me as an alibi  
I crossed my heart as you crossed the line  
And I defended you to all my friends.*

~~~

Dear Scott,

When we were sitting on the stairs and Monica walked by, my blood turned into a thousand buzzing fears. I was so scared that she was going to shove me down the stairs, and that was back when I thought you might care if she did. I thought you would protect me from her bulging, carnivorous eyes.

Dear Monica,

I had another nightmare last night that you came back to campus. You followed me around everywhere I went but told the two women with you that I was the one trying to go wherever you went. Before I had come back to school, Mom and I made a list of people I should call if you showed up. So when I dreamed you were here, dream me tried to call those people, working my way down the list. But my phone wouldn't ring.

Near the end of my dream, I came back to the dorm we lived in together because I didn't know where else to go. You weren't there, but our friends were holding an infant they said was yours. Laughing faces told me *Look how cute!* and *You should hold it!*, and acid gurgled in the back of my throat as they handed it to me. I don't know if it was a boy or a girl, but it had skin the color of a toasted graham cracker and tiny button-hole nostrils. Its eyes were like chocolate syrup. The baby was wrapped in an extra soft white flannel blanket, and the whole bundle smelled like baby powder and chicken broth. I don't think the baby was crying, but I know I was.

~~~

"How did Monica know that Scott and I went on a walk?" I asked Rebekah.

"Jodi," she replied. "Jodi has been texting Monica when she sees you together."

"But how did she know that Scott and I talked about carpooling for spring break?"

Rebekah looked down. "Scott told her."

~~~

Our group of seven laughed around the lunch table. Scott's smile was its homey perfect blend of charming and awkward as hell. I opened my mouth to reference an inside joke about crunchy grapes or mustard, but choked on the memory that you didn't care when I told you that Monica was abusing me.

~~~

It was after 11 p.m. when Monica walked up the stairs, into the hall where I sat with my laptop on my thighs. "Abbey, can you come to the lobby for a minute?"

My hand vibrations increased in frequency. "Sure."

She hurried away.

I got up from my stack of homework and followed on shaking legs.

In the seconds it took me to get to the lobby, she had already assumed a chair between Kelsey and Jodi. They sat behind a high table, and Scott stood, leaning against the side of the table opposite them. He and I exchanged looks, his confusion looking a little too forced.

Silence pelted the air between us.

Kelsey's eyes were about to pop out of her skull, and her mouth was pulled small and trembling.

"What's up?" Scott asked through tight throat.

Monica looked at Jodi, Kelsey, me, back to Scott. "What the *heck* are you two doing?"

Scott and I looked at each other again. Something in how tightly his brow was furrowed made it look like he knew what she was talking about but didn't want me to know.

I shrugged.

“What are you talking about?” he asked her.

“What were you two just doing?”

“Going on a walk.”

“And what did you talk about?”

“We’re co-RA’s,” I inserted. “We go on walks to talk about how to help the dorm function at its best.”

“But was that all you talked about?”

He shrugged. “Mostly.”

*Mostly* wasn’t true. Maybe he was just covering for me. But covering for me didn’t seem like a priority when I’d told him twenty minutes before that she was emotionally harassing me. “We also talked about each other too. Because we’re *friends*. And friends do that.”

Her mouth was a tight, flat line, and it only quivered a bit when she looked again at her cronies. Water filled her accusing eyes when she looked at me and spat, “Abbey, you can go.”

~~~

Kelsey pulled me into the study room.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“For what?”

“For helping Monica. I’m not talking to her after what happened the other night.”

I shrugged. “It’s okay.”

“No. It’s not.”

I looked at the floor and swallowed.

“We followed you,” she said.

I brought my eyes to hers.

“In Monica’s car. When you and Scott were on your walk.” She scratched the inside of her thumb with her middle finger. “She asked me to go on a drive with her, I thought to Wendy’s, then she followed you. She said that God said it was okay for her to hit people she disagrees with.”

~~~

*now i see him*

i want

to say i trust you,

but you sup on lies

for breakfast--

in golden dribbles

treachery manipulates

its slick, its sticky

trail down your chin,

getting caught in the stubble

you woke up too late to shave.

your nostrils flare

when you're insecure;

eyes, dull

as dried horse shit,

shift from wall

to wall  
seeking for a crack  
to squeeze your empty shell in  
and slip  
back to the  
fungus-fused hell  
you call freedom.



## To My Brother

Dear Isaac,

When you left for college, I thought you would come back for all the summers and Christmases until sometime after graduation. But the last time I saw you was your sophomore Christmas because when you went back for spring semester you met Rachel. And she slithered herself into your head so that the Isaac in you shriveled into the back corners of your brain.

You're a sweet one, but I don't know how much of you is left in there. You'd always been one to think for yourself, but if a tiny prune in a dark corner goes up against any sentient thing, it will not last.

I suppose that since you're gone, retreated somewhere inside of you, and I don't know if you're even alive in there anymore—I suppose since you're gone I should really be writing,

“Dear Rachel,

“Get the fuck out of my brother's head and out of his arms and squirm your miserable way to therapy so you can get your shitty life pulled together.

“It's gonna take time to clean your slimy residue out of his skull. I'd think you should stay to clean up your own mess for once, but you would only try to make the slime cement.

“The greatest deceivers are the ones who subtly seduce with simple sweetness and tones too tempered to tell that they're trying to cut out the innocent heart.”

But if I sent that to her, I think you'd never speak to me again. And it's better to have occasional glimpses of your terrified refugee spirit peek out

they glitter, in your brownish-green eyes when

in the laughs that sneak out when she isn't around

in your 10,000 freckles,

in the

way you throw back your head in delight when you eat pizza,

in the sassy pause between

question and answer.

Unless, of course, this Rachel-you was the one hiding shriveled in a corner till you turned twenty-one and met her and she dragged out the truth from the back where you didn't know it existed, repressed your whole life. I suppose that is a possible alternative to the story.

You used to say, “Triple-triple burgers are proof that there is a God.” Now you're a radical vegan and seem to claim that the only God who can be good is one who completely agrees with you. That's how it seems, but I wouldn't know because you don't tell me things that matter about your life. I saw on Instagram you wanted to end your life once. Thank you for not killing my brother's body. But why did you let someone else imprison my brother's soul?

Please pause before your wedding,  
Abbey

## In Search of Lost Milk

Milk. Unassuming cardboard carton. It was simple enough: walk in, walk to the milk, pick up the same milk I always bought, walk to the register. Then I just had to take out my card, put in the chip, punch in my pin, and that was that. From the register, I could let my instinct take over and flee back to my 2004 Honda waiting in the parking lot. Simple.

I pictured myself performing this procedure every time I went to the grocery store, be it for one item or twenty-seven. I would walk through the route in my head, thinking, “Walk 18 feet down aisle 17, then turn left at the Poptarts...”

On what I thought would be a restorative Saturday, a blessed day off from teaching the written word to a group of lethargic 7th graders, I staggered into the kitchen and boiled the magic bean water. Then I poured Pumpkin Spice Life cereal (which I kept stored in my pantry in such a vast quantity that I could eat it all year) into a red bowl with a built-in straw, an engineering miracle highly underrated by the rest of the adult world. I poured the cereal, however, only to find that the cardboard of the carton I pulled from the fridge had kept me from discovering sooner that a mere two tablespoons of milk remained in said carton. Despair welled in me as I felt how light the carton was.

“Half gallon my butt,” I muttered to myself. I always finished the milk long before the due date and repeatedly regretted not purchasing an entire gallon. But trying new things hadn’t been my strong suit for the first twenty-four years of my life, and that wasn’t about to change now.

This deep regret mingled with despair was what brought me to the point of being willing to put on pants that were not plaid, flannel, or lilac purple and interact with life forms in the outside world on a Saturday in mid-November. I donned the essentials: a gray sweatshirt I had permanently borrowed from my brother Charlie before either of us had gone to college, jeans, bra, car keys.

Sitting in the gray Honda in the Meijer parking lot, I breathed on my frigid fingers to warm them. The heat in my car had been on the fritz since last winter, and I’d conveniently forgotten to fix it between April and our unseasonably warm October. Now I sat in my arctic car, regretting every choice I had ever made with regards to domestic success: no heat in my car, no milk in my red straw-bearing bowl, no cozy pajamas on my unshaven legs.

I took a deep breath and pulled the silver door handle, pushed myself up and out of the pleather seat. Bitter cold stung my face and whipped through the fabric of my down coat. It was almost enough to drive me back into my also-freezing car, but the mental image of that dry cereal sitting on my speckled white linoleum countertop gave me the motivation necessary to wrap my arms around myself and leave my car behind.

The snow from Thursday night’s storm now lay packed into slick, mud-stained patches across the asphalt. A shopping cart pushed by an invisible wind monster scurried towards an unassuming Dodge minivan in hopes of being let in out of the cold, the wheels of the cart screeching for help. A toddler screamed at his mommy for not buying green cupcakes.

“It is a hopeless, miserable world, my friend,” I mumbled under my breath. “Get used to it now before you have to pay your own taxes and everything gets worse.”

The boy continued wailing.

Upon successfully entering Meijer, I followed my predetermined path. I power-walked as fast as my sports-loathing self could to the bottom of aisle 17, turned right, and made it flawlessly to where the Frosted Cupcake Pop-Tarts signaled me to turn left. But my plan abruptly died as I wheeled around the corner and smashed my head into something hard. I stumbled back, disoriented, and the solid object put its arm around me to keep me from falling.

“I’m so sorry,” it said. “That was my fault!”

I swore vehemently in my head.

The hand left my back, and I put my own hand on the shelf beside me to steady myself.

“Are you okay?” the thing asked.

I realized I was eye level with a strapping torso in a navy-blue Adidas hoodie and tried to avoid this discomfort by lifting my gaze. Mistake. I now made eye contact with the owner of the torso, and I had not been prepared for this. As stars retreated from my vision, I saw eyes that looked like a piece of spin-art made with mud and melted copper. Above the eyes was a brow furrowed in concern.

“Wha... what?” I stammered, minor dizziness persisting with my social discomfort.

“Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

I looked past him over his shoulder to stave off the dreaded eye contact. His short hair was the same shining copper as his eyes. Words fought to get out of my throat, but it took a few seconds of awkward silence to find the motivation to let them into the world. “Yes, fine. Why?” *Great job, idiot, I thought. You know why.*

“I walked into you. And you seemed unsteady. But you’re okay now?” His concern was somewhere between stupid and sweet.

“Oh, yeah! Everything is great!”

He smiled and shifted the basket on his arm. “Good. Sorry about that again. I’m normally better at looking where I’m going.”

“Cool. Well, milk.” *Well, milk.*

He cocked his head, again furrowing the perfect skin on his forehead. “I’m sorry. Milk?”

“Yeah... I just came for milk, so I’m gonna...” I studied the aglets on my purple Converse. He was wearing Converse too--green. “I’m gonna go do that now. I mean get that now. I am just gonna go over to that fridge section over there and... and get some good old dairy. For my cereal.” *Walk away now, my brain said. Temporarily out of order, my legs replied.*

“Oh, of course.” He turned his shoulders as a nod for me to pass.

I tried to take an especially large step to escape this dreadful situation faster, but the toe of my back foot caught on his green shoe, and I tripped.

He reached out his arms as a reflex and steadied me on my feet again. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yes.” I was relatively certain that my face was the color of Strawberry Pop-Tart filling.

He smiled, turning his cheeks into Shar Pei wrinkles. “Okay, then. I guess I’ll get out of your way so you can go get your milk!”

“K, see you tomorrow.” What I always said to my students when they left. Not my intention here.

I charged out of the aisle, wishing I could die from embarrassment--just pass away on the floor in the middle of Meijer. Prostrate and milkless. Maybe my mom would come to my apartment later to play with the grandcat and make sure I’d fed Gandalf the Gray his delectable canned chicken liver this morning, only to find my lonely Life cereal on the counter: hollow straw, Pumpkin Spice Life spicing no one’s life because I’d be here, lifeless. She might hang around for a while before looking for a physical address list I don’t have in hopes of calling someone who might know where I was. Eventually, perhaps, she would call the police. *Officer, she might say, my hopelessly single daughter seems to have wandered off. No, she probably is not out with a friend; she tells me every time she does something social because she knows how good it makes me feel.*

Before Mom-in-my-head had had a chance to set me up with Officer Dreamboat who rescued children from heartless thugs, I reached the refrigerator wall and opened the door, removing the half-gallon carton. My hands were sweatier than the carton would be by the time I got it home.

“Hello again!”

The voice coming from two yards behind me took me off guard. As I whirled around, the moisture of my palms combined with the rapid-fire stormtrooper shooting of my amygdala, and I watched the full carton leap from my hands. It soared majestically through the air and smashed into a creamy explosion bigger than the cow from which it had come--right at the feet of the man from aisle 17. White liquid launched itself all over his khakis.

My whole body tensed, and my lungs violently expanded before freezing in place.

My milk carton obliterated. Just like my dreams of cereal and not being noticed.

His head began to lift from staring at his soggy shoes.

I fled.

I ran past the man. I sped past the millions of onlookers I felt, their all-seeing eyes drilling into my exposed spirit.

"I just forgot to get cheese!" he called after me.

The floral section blurred past me on my right, the aroma of Gerber daisies not penetrating my humiliation. I wove through people checking out and cashiers ringing up cookies, the beep of barcodes normally insufferable to my ears barely even reached them at this moment of mortal danger.

I came to the parking lot, tiptoeing speedily as I picked my way around the ice. Reaching my car and fumbling in the pocket of my poofy, poofy coat for my keys, I imagined the employees chasing me down the aisles and out the door, pulling out whistles to shriek at me. Maybe they'd call the police because I had broken and not bought, as every third-grader could tell you would be proper protocol in such a situation.

As I screeched around corners and zoomed through lights that had been yellow for too long, I thought about how stupid I was not to look where I'd been going when I had tried to turn left at the top of aisle 17. If I hadn't hit him then he wouldn't have spoken to me when I'd gone to the dairy section and I wouldn't have gotten scared and thrown the fricken-fracken milk at his feet.

I wheeled into a parking space outside my apartment building and took the stairs two at a time to get to the third floor, then shoved my key in the deadbolt and twisted. I jumped inside and slammed the door, locking it for safety. Finally, I dropped my weight against the door and tried to catch my breath.

From there, I could see into the kitchen. I could see the counter. And I could see on the counter a lonely red bowl.

I still had no milk.

## Part II

### Sanctuary

I make myself pull open one of the doors, paint peeling in splinters. The familiar aroma welcomes me; trampled carpet, new hymnals and old Bibles, ancient face powder probably purchased when its owner was twenty-seven and worn every Sunday since.

This had been my home. Returning hurts, but it hurts like lancing an abscess: it stings like hell, but in theory it'll get better. Theories can always be wrong.

I step into the narthex and see stairs on my right. They descend a few steps before they reach a landing and turn 180 degrees to finish their journey to old gray linoleum and a swinging white door in the basement.

Suddenly, I hear music coming from behind the closed doors to the sanctuary, but it isn't Sunday, and the music isn't a hymn. Pitiably piano notes plunk out the tune of an unknown melody, cheerful but played much more slowly than the composer had intended. I step closer to the doors, passing a display of pale yellow, wintergreen, and stark white pamphlets and bulletins. The church library door is to the right, but I choose the door on my left, leading to a small nursery.

Rocking chairs line the back wall. Half the wall to my right, facing the sanctuary, has been replaced with one-way glass, allowing the nursery's occupants to continue watching the pastor even when their babies have no interest. Through this glass I see the sanctuary; it's small, a seating capacity of around a hundred people in the now-empty white wooden pews with brown woolen seat cushions. There are tall windows climbing both lateral walls. The communion table sits on a low stage at the opposite end of the room, a large wooden cross mounted on the wall behind it. It's next to a hexagonal wooden pulpit, and in front of the pulpit, just off the stage, is an upright oak piano. This is where the little pianist sits.

She looks about 10 and is picking her way through a minuet in a battered copy of *Alfred's Piano Lesson Book Level Two*. She wears a purple, blue, and white striped turtleneck, a light brown faux-suede vest, and a purple corduroy skirt. Her long, honey-colored hair droops into a low ponytail. She stares at her fingers as she plays, sneaking glimpses at the notes she must watch herself repeat on the keys. She's almost made it to the end of the song when C, D, and F sharp collapse into each other.

I can hear her wail through the glass as she throws her arms up and flops her entire upper body backwards, so she hangs upside down over the back of the piano bench. She lies there, motionless, eyes closed, for almost than a minute. Her face turns red then purple, blood rushing to her head, but she holds her position, evidently able to persevere better in areas other than music. I count forty-two seconds before she rolls over and lands on all fours on the ancient carpeting. She drops to her stomach, out of sight behind the front pew.

She reappears, army crawling under the pews towards the back of the sanctuary. She stops crawling, sneezes, resumes. Perhaps she is imagining herself in some desperate war situation (definitely involving bombs, blood, and blown-up limbs), a hero saving her fellow soldier (probably a boy who must now feel weak at the humiliation of having a girl rescue him). Her eyes are wide and her mouth a tight line.

The piano rests in silence.

Behind the pulpit is a door labeled "Pastor's Office." Through this door comes a man with church steeple height. He has short, curly, salt-and-pepper hair, eyes with smile lines, and a mouth creased by years of worry. He pads across the stage and down the two steps, ducking his head to find the girl under the pews.

I press my ear to the glass to listen, to partake in this conversation once more.

"Hello, Abigail," the pastor says to the girl, and he kneels beside her current pew of refuge.

"Hi, Daddy," Abigail replies in a moping tone, dismal from being interrupted in saving her comrade and in being caught by her commanding officer.

"I liked listening to your music." He offers her a hand to pull her out. "Do you think you'd play some more for me?"

She ignores the hand extended to her. "What's the point? I won't be able to play after September anyway. When the church closes, I won't have a piano."

At her words, her father's shoulder slumps.

"Your mom and I said that we would try to find another piano for you to practice on. Maybe you could go over to your friends' houses—lots of them have pianos."

Abigail shrugs.

The pastor still holds out his hand. "Why don't you come out and get in as much practice as you can while you still have this piano?"

She sighs. After a moment, she puts her small hand in his very large one. He pulls her out, and she dusts herself off.

She looks down at the cowgirl boots on her feet, then slowly draws her big, hazel eyes up to his.

"Daddy," she whispers, her voice tight. "Daddy... what's going to happen to us?"

He puts his arms around her and cradles her head against his chest. She snuggles against him.

"I don't know, sweetie, but everything is going to be okay," he assures her in his gentle voice. "Because I've got you, and we've got your Mommy, and your brothers--" her face crinkles sourly at this, "--and God has all of us. I know that He has a plan for us. Okay?"

He leans back so he can look in her eyes, but she does not reciprocate.

She only mumbles, "Alright."

As he kisses her hair, tears trickle down her cheeks, chin quivering, and I notice hot tears running in streams down my own face. I close my eyes to try to blink them away, but the world just gets fuzzier and starts swimming into one big blob. The pastor and the little girl and the sanctuary all blend into gray, growing darker and darker each time I close my eyes until everything is black when I open them.

**ga's ditties**

civilization (bongo, bongo, bongo)

grandma,  
ga to me,  
folded laundry  
at the kitchen table:  
yellow terry cloth towels in thirds  
then halves,  
my pink hello kitty underwear  
(girl's size 6).

“you can just sit,”  
mom said, “watch the kids;  
you don't have to earn keep.”  
ga sang off-key  
and under her breath,  
*don't want no bright lights*  
*false teeth*  
*door bells*  
*landlords*  
*i make it clear*  
*that no matter how they coax bim--*  
*i'll stay right here.*

lazy mary

ga's purple pill organizer  
on our speckled beige counter.  
“time to get up, mom,”  
my mom said  
to her mom  
as she walked to the bedroom.  
*lazy mary*, ga replied,  
*get up,*  
*get up--*  
and mom helped her  
to her wrinkly feet  
the color of  
walmart sugar cookies.

**Papa,**

I wish I'd better known the wrinkles of your face and hands,  
Crinkled like golden crust on the pies you ate for breakfast,  
Speckled like freckling spray from your Bay of Fundy.

I wish I knew the roll of your voice  
As more than a distant tone akin to earth you tilled,  
The workhorses, Dick and Dolly, plodding ahead of your plough.

The world would go from dark to pre-dawn when you opened your eyes  
And put your feet on the frigid attic floor,  
Knowing the skin of the earth called for your hands.



### something old, something new

Mid-September oughtn't be so warm that you can smell the sour-sweet asphalt that was laid in July. I pedaled my seafoam bike accented with white daisies and rust up a slight incline on the road rimming campus.

Clarksville College is on the edge of Lake Michigan. Some students like to think that it's similar to going to a large school on the beaches of Malibu or Miami or San Diego. I guess it is, but the Midwest version of that. It's smaller, less overwhelming, made all of renovated farm buildings, and more welcoming (as long as you're white, straight, and cisgender). Clarksville is a little farming community and fishing village, so when a close-knit extended family sold their juxtaposed farms and moved to Florida, someone decided it would make a lovely college. The grounds sprawled hundreds of acres, but the main part of campus was one mile in circumference. Our mascot was a Guernsey cow, our dorms and dining hall in oversized barns, classrooms mostly in farmhouses. Half a mile west of the hayloft I lived in, the clear blue-green waves of Lake Michigan lolloped upon the sand.

But even with such serene surroundings, my chest was still tight and my sternum heavy with grief.

"Obviously this is Endometriosis," the doctor had said yesterday. "So you know you probably can't have children, right?"

His words rang in haunting echoes through my mind. I wasn't in a romantic relationship; I wasn't in a rush to have children. But until that moment, I'd had hope of what could come to be. It felt invalid to be mourning these little people I had never met, who had never existed and now never would.

"It'll be okay," one of my friends had told me. "God knows your body better than anyone." *That doesn't mean He'll fix it, I had wanted to scream. It just means He knows how.*

Sun shining out of a blue sky kept warm my skin, but goosebumps still rippled up my forearms, blonde hair standing on end.

There is a 33-50% chance of people with Endometriosis having trouble getting pregnant, not to mention the pain often associated with getting there ("Endometriosis" 6). I guess statistics weigh more when they're about *your* body. That's why many white folks don't see systemic racism and why more women are feminists. It stops being a number when it starts being your own skin, your own uterus.

~~~

The air conditioning in the library froze the sweat on my brow and under my arms as I stepped from sunshine to buzzing LED's. I wove through fiction shelves to reach the tables by the floor-to-ceiling window in the back. After slumping my backpack onto a chair and sliding into the one beside it, I looked to see who my silent companions might be. At one table, there was a chubby redheaded woman in cutoff denim shorts and a white crop top, a slim blonde in black jeans and lacey blue shirt, a brunette whose brown dress with red and white blossoms curved around and cascaded from her wide hips like a waterfall, magnificent as it fell.

Behind their table was a group of four young men, one with earbuds in and reading, the other three with eyes glazed over and thumbs scrolling and scrolling. But you know what all those boys probably had in common, going off the stereotype of any male at Christian college? They were good Christian boys who wanted to get engaged by the time they graduated and have kids on the way before their one-year wedding anniversaries. I would be a deal breaker.

~~~

I stumbled into my 8 a.m. Bible class, sat in one of the folding theater-style chairs with gray-blue cushions.

"This morning," Dr. Johns said from the podium, "we will be discussing the miraculous story of Samuel and the faith of his mother Hannah."

I sipped coffee from my periwinkle mug with a chubby purple octopus on it.

"2 Samuel 1 tells the story of a woman named Hannah who was one of two wives to one man, Elkanah. The other wife, Peninnah, bore children for their husband, but Hannah couldn't. Elkanah loved Hannah anyway. Every time they went to the temple to sacrifice, Hannah mourned grievously because of her barrenness. So Elkanah said to her, 'Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?' (ESV 2 Samuel 1:8). But still, Hannah wept. One day in the temple, she promised God that if He gave her a son she would give him entirely to God. And God not only heard her but answered her. Elkanah and Hannah had a son together, whom she brought as a young child to be raised in the temple."

The coffee I had brewed fifteen minutes ago brought warmth and life to my insides as I took another swallow. I doodled hideous cows and mushrooms in the margin of my notebook.

"Tansy Carter," the professor said, looking at me, four rows back on the end, "what part of this story stands out most to you?"

"The part where--umm--the priest sees Hannah crying and praying and being so generally distraught that he thinks she's drunk."

~~~

My roommate laid sprawled across my bed, fingering a seam my grandmother had stitched before she died. "Come on, Tans--let's go night swimming."

"Izzy," I sighed. "I just can't."

"Tans, come on--"

"No."

"But--"

I loved her dearly. I walked out of the room and slammed the door behind me. As I walked down the hallway, my green plaid pajama pants brushed across the industrial carpet. The pants were frayed where they had rubbed under my heels for six years.

I hadn't told Izzy yet about my diagnosis, and putting in a tampon was too painful to be worth even something as magical as swimming in the moonlight.

I swept up the hall, down the stairs, and out the large barn doors. As the warm, dark air hit my face and melted into my bones, I clenched my teeth and started running, my feet leaving the cement path and flying through the grass towards the treeline that separated the school from the lake.

Clouds above me were thick with rain yet to fall and lightning yet to dance. The pines trembled in electrified air. I ran under them, amidst the lowest-hanging arms and into the wind that felt like God had shook the lake like a sheet. I turned right to run up the beach, sand churning through my toes. My knees hit the ground when I leaned too far forward in my eagerness.

A mile north rested a shack, weathered gray. It reminded me of how a person's face looks if they stop eating four days before they die--a skeleton draped with colorless flesh as close to cold and empty as one could be while still having a soul. Charles, an old man who had pretty much become the local cryptid, lived there with his ancient German wire-haired pointer, Ephraim. Charles and I had been friends since my freshman year.

I ran until my lungs burned with exertion and sand-dust, then let my knees fall to the sand and sting at the impact. In spite of thin flannel between earth and skin, little grainy dents were going to remain embedded in my flesh after I got up

The wind tousled my hair, running its fingers through it, whipping mist against my skin.

As a seagull screamed above me, I pulled myself to my feet and resumed the path to Charles's, this time at a meander. I strayed close to the water so waves could wash my feet in their storm-excited breath.

I stubbed my toe on an unseen chunk of rock. A seagull swooped low in front of me, a soggy french fry dangling from its beak. I continued my trudge. Sweat trickled down my back between my shoulder blades, rolled into my elastic waist.

Charles answered a few seconds after I knocked. He smiled gently, gave me something of a casual salute (EmmaSigns).

I returned the motion.

He stepped aside to let me in. The scent of smoke and mildew, mingled with lavender from his dead wife Dahlia's favorite candle, embraced me as I entered the one room of the shack. It was lit with three 60-watt bulbs he hadn't changed since I'd come to college.

He went to the woodstove and put on his old tin kettle; he'd had the stove since before it was an antique. He took Dahlia's lavender sprig teacup from the top shelf of his once-white cupboards. Into this, he plopped a chamomile tea bag. I don't particularly like chamomile, but it was Dahlia's favorite, so I never told him I thought it tasted like warm-toned grass.

The ratty, once-overstuffed gingham chair sat across from his navy blue one. Ephraim laid on the braided rug between the chairs, flopping his tail, too arthritic to get up without necessity. Between his crossed paws was his gray-red lobster with stuffing poking out of every hole. On this he rested his chin. I scratched behind his ears and sat on the gingham chair.

When the kettle had begun to scream, Charles poured it into our teacups, water muttering as it came out the spout. Steam rose in clouds, swirling and swirling.

He handed me my cup then lowered himself, creaking, into the navy-blue chair.

I inhaled as big as I could, then let it all rush out of my lungs. "Why are some people so mean, Charles?"

He nodded for a moment, pondering. He touched his temple with straightened fingers, then rotated his wrist 180° as he pulled it away from his face (SmartHandsCA). *I don't know*. Logs shifted in the stove.

I pursed my lips and shrugged. *Me either* (Reagan Moore). I stood up and started pacing from the woodstove to the double bed in the darkest corner.

Through one of the dirty windows on the west side, above the bed, I saw lightning split the sky above Lake Michigan in a dozen tiny fractals. I rotated, crossed the room to the woodstove, and heard thunder as I turned back towards the bed. Ephraim followed me with his eyes.

Sitting down in the middle of the floor, I let my eyes fill with water and the water drip and splash down my cheeks. "Children," I whispered. "The doctor said I might not be able to have kids, that it isn't promising." I looked up to see if he wanted to say anything.

Charles made a fist with his right hand and rubbed it in a small circle on his chest. No one but me ever came to visit Charles.

"It's okay. I mean--like, it really isn't--but--that was something I wanted so desperately." I drew my legs to my chest, rested my forehead on my flannel-covered knees, tried to keep my shoulders from shaking too much. My face began to turn into something akin to a swamp: tears began to run together with the snot I didn't have long sleeves to wipe on, and spit clung to my lips whenever I opened them for heaving breath.

Floorboards creaked between my sobs, and a warm, weather-hardened hand rested on my soft brown hair. He couldn't get to the floor to sit beside me, but he stroked my head and let me lean back gingerly on his spindly legs.

In the darkest corner, at the foot of the bed, stood a baby bassinet yellowing with age and bespeckled with mold. When I squinted through my tears, I thought I could make out thin purple flowers on it.

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Left Early

Dad came to get me when the university sent us home in March because COVID had come to the little town with big cornfields. Jazmin, a girl I didn't know from the other side of campus, rode with us because Indiana to New England was too long a trip for every parent to make. The silver minivan was full of my belongings stuffed in white trash bags.

"We built a blanket fort in the dorm lobby," I narrated. "A bunch of us crawled in and we watched Moana, so it was good to all be together like that when the email came for us to go home."

"That sounds fun," Dad replied.

"Yeah. I guess I'll see my friends in six months. We'll probably be able to make blanket forts again then. Maybe COVID will be gone."

"Maybe! Wouldn't that be lovely?"

"Yeah."

He stared at Ohio U.S. 30.

"I started pulling out my hair a few weeks ago."

He nodded and put his hand on mine.

Jazmin was quiet, and she'd graduate this year, so she didn't pose a confidentiality threat big enough to keep me from talking. That's what I told myself to try to get the awkward feeling to go away because my stream of words alleviated some of the pressure inside my chest.

After an hour, maybe one and a half, the emotional distress of the last week leaked from its prison in my mind into my muscles and made them tight and painful. I slumped in my chair and munched off-brand Triscuit from Dollar General while Dad drove on I-80 East across Pennsylvania. The drive would have taken under thirteen hours, but we pulled off at Trader Joe's to meet Jazmin's mom.

I walked in the door and held teary eye contact with my mom instead of hugging her. As much as our hearts wanted us to embrace, hers had a weak inner wall and was guarded by four stents.

I showered and brushed my teeth, both activities I had neglected the previous night, instead falling asleep in my twin bed with my roommate and Disney Channel. As I padded down the creaky hall to my bedroom, Mom turned into my little brother's room across from mine.

"Is Sam in bed?"

Mom turned to me. "He's actually been sleeping downstairs. Dad is still working at the grocery store, so just to be safe, I've been sleeping in Sam's room."

"Oh." The pressure in my chest pushed harder against the walls of my ribcage. "Okay."

I found over the next few days that Mom and Dad didn't hug when he got back from work, and they didn't kiss goodnight. Instead, they looked into each other's hazel eyes and let the corners of their mouths hang low.

Mom moved back into the master bedroom two weeks after Dad took leave from work.

When assessing the situation partway through our following semester, the university had not had many COVID cases--compared to other schools.

"Annual costume basketball game is a go!" the student announcements email read in late October.

"... limiting to 1000 students... masks required... November 20..."

In a gym, mask-wearing not enforced, four days before Thanksgiving break. Even if I didn't go, I'd be exposed to people who did. And I couldn't bring that home to Mom.

Three weeks passed with no safe answer for how to get home when the semester would end. The pressure had been growing in my chest even before the announcement about the game was made. Finally, Mom and Dad said I was coming home two weeks early; it was the only time he could pick me up before the basketball game. We made the choice on a Thursday, four days before Dad would come.

That night, to burn off the stress, my friend Scott and I walked the road that looped campus.

“So... I leave Monday.”

“That’s really soon.”

“Yeah.”

“Wow.” He walked with his hands in his jeans’ pockets.

“Yeah.”

In the dark, beneath our feet, brown and yellow leaves folded with a disappointing lack of crunch.

“Will you quarantine at home, then?”

“Yep. N-95 in the car on the way home, then quarantining in my room for 5-8 days before getting tested. Researchers are saying that’s the most accurate time to get tested. Then I just have to wait for results.”

The brick science building loomed next to us.

“One of the boys in my building tested positive,” I texted my Mom the next day. My half-eaten spinach salad sat on the floor next to me. “I can go home with someone else.”

“We’ll get you a hotel,” she responded. “You can stay there ‘til Monday. It’ll be less safe for you to stay til the end of term.”

I wanted to protest, but I plucked a hair from my scalp and packed all I would need for eight weeks.

I said goodbye to only three friends because I was afraid people would try to hug me.

My room at the Super 8 is on the first floor, facing the parking lot in the front. Semis roar up and down I-69 just yards from the end of the building.

The muscles running along my spine ache with the stress pinching them. But the hotel is free of ambient gossip and doors slammed by overeager spring attachments. There is no lingering fear that someone will come unannounced into my room to breathe air they’ve shared with a dozen strangers. There is no one here to not care about COVID.

But there is no one here at all.

Psalm 56: An Acrostic

Can't stop trembling, death-white hands, tea splashing in my cup.
Hold my fingers interlaced
And whisper prayers through chattering teeth.
Maybe the blood pulsing
Over my temples is
My answer. Maybe God is
Interlacing His fingers with my ribcage
Like a hug I'm too human to receive.
Even the steam rising from my cup

Trembles in the air. Maybe
Every cup of tea is
A cup of the tears of God.

Absorbed

11:30? 12:30? 2?

Lights out, I pulled down the top half

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Shoving my head into the cold, the blue glow
of moon on snow
lights the birches and pines framing the yard.

My fingers dance in the air, like
running them in a bubble-less stream
or
through my split-end hair.

I read that snow makes the world so quiet
because it absorbs noise that would
otherwise

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through the trees' fingers.

The nature snoring and the screaming in my head--
they melt into the thick white wool
blanketing the world
in its hug that muffles all but
breath,
spinning in steamy twirls,
and falling to the earth.