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DESIGN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
The Department of Drama and Communications

by

Melissa Wilkinson

B.A. Louisiana State University, 2001

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To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. What does the worker gain from his toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time.

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-11

A time to die

Afternoons like this one emitted a unique pitch, the aggregate of countless summer tasks. The low, raspy rattle of lawn mowers trimming postcard-shaped swatches of green, suburban grass. Layered a pitch above this, insects droned, the tempo of their chirps directly proportionate to the heat of the sun. The nasal whine of a plane cutting through a hot, blue sky.

Skinny, pale-leafed trees sprouted in nearly every yard, some supported with stakes and protected with little white plastic fences. Every street—smooth black asphalt not yet pocked

with potholes and cracks-- intersected at a right angle; the houses's small, square windowpanes echoed the design of the streets. A tidy grid superimposed on rolling, woody hills--each intersection resembled a weathervane, streets pointing north, west, east and south. Hundreds of little crosses nested in the greater grid of the neighborhood.

The McCormick family lived in Soaring Oaks. Their yard suffered from a modicum of neglect. The grass was kept clipped, but it was a little crispy and ragged around the edges.

The house's interior featured wall to wall beige carpet and wood paneling. Framed pictures lined the bedroom hall. They followed a roughly chronological pattern. In the most recent photograph, Miles, a three year old Gates, and a young, beaming mother, Sarah, sat in front of a backdrop that depicted a forest of aspens in their full, gold and red fall glory.

Gates frowned disapprovingly at the camera, apparently concerned that the flash would burn her young retinas. Miles, though he composed one third of the photo's dignified triad, was the least notable part of the picture. He resembled nothing so much as a stranger who had stumbled into somebody else's family photo. He rested his hand on Sarah's shoulder, gingerly, as though she were a beautiful and expensive prop that he did not want to damage. He looked bewildered by his budding family, stunned by his good fortune in life. Sarah possessed the careless, almost insouciant beauty characteristic of young children, those who have neither the time nor the inclination to notice their own attractiveness. This woman could not have escaped knowing she was beautiful, but she looked as though she had never learned that beauty, like a lawn, was a thing to be fenced off, guarded, maintained, and admired by the world at large. She seemed like the kind of person who bought lemonade from neighborhood kids and picked up litter even when nobody else was looking. Her hair was undyed, and her face bore not a trace of makeup. Except for a simple gold cross necklace, she wore no jewelry..

There were other pictures, each bearing gaudy seasonal backdrop, depicting the family. Besides the backdrops, the only distinguishing difference between them was Gates' age—she grew younger and younger until finally she disappeared from the photos entirely. There were Miles and his bride on their wedding day, she in a long sleeved, high-necked gown, he in a rented tuxedo, this time looking appropriately uncomfortable in his cummerbund and bow tie.

In the front yard, Gates sat in grass that felt warm and frayed. She watched an ant scale a blade of grass. Her father watched her watching the ant scale the blade of grass.

At a gas station, a truck collided with a bicycle. A man was in the truck and Sarah was on the bicycle. The site of the wreck became a magnet; every person who had witnessed it came closer, pulled like bits of iron ore. In her front yard not four blocks away, the toddler turned her head in the direction of the crash, aligning herself with a new polarity. Even the ant ceased its ascent. Her father kept his eyes on his daughter. Minutes later, he went inside to answer the ringing phone.

A time to get

The August sun hung heavy and voluptuous in the sky, like an overripe mango. Gates stood motionless. Her calves and arms burned with lactic acid, each molecule of the stuff chewing at her muscles like a tiny, malicious maw. A strand of hair escaped from her ponytail and stuck to her face. It itched. She refused to scratch it.

“I am a terra cotta soldier,” she thought. “No. Stone. I am made of stone.”

Footsteps crunched on dry, football field grass behind her. She felt the eyes assess the angle of her elbows, the uprightness of her posture, most of all, her motionlessness, before yelling into her ear.

“Feet!”

“Together!” Gates yelled back.

“Stomach!”

“In!” Her scream ripped through her like a long, serrated blade, severing any last ties to discomfort.

“Chest!”

“Out!”

“Shoulders!”

“Back!”

“Chin!”

“Up!”

“Eyes!”

“With pride!”

“I can’t hear you!”

“WITH PRIDE!” Gates repeated.

“Like you mean it!”

“*WITH PRIDE!*” Gates roared.

“Thank you, Gates,” her father said softly. “You can sit down now.”

Gates exhaled and dropped her arms from the horns-up position to join her father’s marching band students on the bleachers.

“Now that, that’s how you should look when you’re marching,” Miles McCormick said, addressing the group of fourteen and fifteen years olds who draped themselves on the bleachers and each other seemingly bonelessly, like a tangle of cats.

“Everyone in formation for a drill-down!” Miles yelled. The kids ran down from the bleachers and assembled themselves into a “block,” or four-by-four step grid.

Miles was a firm believer in the value of drill-downs. A drill-down was essentially a glorified version of Simon Says. Band members could be eliminated for any infraction: falling out of step, turning right instead of left, executing a flank instead of a slide, until only one was left standing. In these final, tense moments, only two band members vied for first place. The pressure was enough to cause any freshman to crack, but it prepared them for the pressures of live performance, taught them the basics of marching, and encouraged group solidarity.

Miles climbed to the top of his stand and held a megaphone to his mouth. His throat felt raspy and sore; he hoped his voice would last until the end of band camp.

“Mark time mark!” he said. The tidy grid of students raised and lowered their heels to the beat without moving forward, marching in place. Three students were eliminated for marking out of step.

“Forward march!”

Gates never participated in drill-downs, though she did enjoy marching with the freshmen, earning their respect with her perfect posture and gliding roll-steps. Gates had attended band camp for the last eight years, because her father disagreed with the concept of daycare centers. Even though Gates was nearly thirteen, her father remained reluctant to leave her at home alone. He considered band camp a wholesome diversion for Gates and thought she set a good example to the incoming freshmen.

“Back march, hut!”

Miles watched two students join his daughter on the bleachers. Gates was such a gifted marcher. At the tender age of five, she had been executing diagonals and flank turns. Even then, her movements had possessed a focus and crispness rare in even the most seasoned upperclassman. She had been a virtual marching *prodigy*. She was never nervous or flustered. She waited with unflappable calm for the next command, and when it came, she followed it.

“Right oblique, hut!” Miles stepped up the tempo to a brisk 150 beats per minute as he issued the command. As a result, a large portion of his band was eliminated.

“Mark time mark!” Miles called.

Once every marching band season, to his students’ delight, he even participated in a drill-down. This final drilldown, held once a year before State Finals, was the stuff of legend. Drum majors used countless tactics to trip Miles up, but after three decades of marching band, he was inured to them all. No student had ever beaten Miles, though all who had ever marched in his band had tried. Band students hotly anticipated this drill-down. They debated probable finalists, set bets on how long each participant would last, and tried to undermine one another’s

confidence. Of course, no student had ever placed higher than second in the final drill down. First place honors always fell to Miles.

Two freshmen soon made the mistake of forward marching instead of marking time. One was the boy who made a point of practicing shirtless each day, perhaps hoping to tan his colorless, skinny chest, and the other a girl, who wore what seemed to Gates an inordinate amount of makeup, considering the strenuous nature of the camp.

“Forward march!”

Miles, instead of watching his three remaining contenders, let his gaze drift to Gates. She sat at a distant corner of the bleachers, a tiny island to the continent of grouped bodies. Miles hoped she would socialize with his students. If she made friends with the freshmen, she might be more likely to undergo a change of heart while there was still time to learn an instrument. Of course, she was a few years younger than the rest. That probably explained it. There was still time.

Miles snapped out of his contemplation when he remembered it had been a while since he last issued a command. Two of his students had ceased forward marching when they reached the endzone; only the shirtless boy had continued. To the amusement of his peers, the boy now marched through the parking lot.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Miles called through the megaphone. “That’s enough. We have a winner.”

The boy threw his lanky arms in the air and jumped in mock exuberance. When Miles announced that it was time for the lunch break, the boy’s exuberance became genuine.

Gates followed a few steps behind her father. “Did you space out up there?”

Miles started; he had not thought she was so close behind him.

“Sorry,” she said when she saw him jump.

“Guess I’m still a little spacey,” Miles said.

“What were you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” Miles said. “Just, you know, the show.”

“That kid, he thinks he’s so funny. Marching in the parking lot.” Gates had unlimited reserves of vitriol for band members she held in low esteem. As a veteran marcher, she felt she had earned the right to be critical. “He thinks he’s so great.”

“It’s my fault for not stopping him,” Miles said. “And I don’t want to hear that kind of talk from you.”

“He thinks he’s so great,” Gates whispered.

“Gates,” Miles said.

“But he’s not.” She mouthed these words.

“That’s enough.”

Gates opened the door for her father.

“Thank you, madam,” he said.

“You’re welcome, sir,” she said as they entered the Band/Choir/Theater/Strings hall.

The Choir Room, Band Room, Theatre Classroom, and Strings Room were all housed in the same hall, which the school administration diplomatically referred to as the Performing Arts Hall. The name the students used was a way to show where their loyalties lay. Band members, of course, referred to it as the Band Hall. Thespians called it the Theatre Hall, and fledgling divas called it the Choir Hall. This disparity of names was a source of many heated debates between the school’s aspiring performing artists. Theatre junkies argued that it was the theatre hall, more so than band or choir, since the auditorium also connected to this space. But band and

choir members pointed out that since the auditorium was utilized for plays and concerts alike, it should be considered a neutral zone. Miles and his band were of the opinion that it was first and foremost the Band Hall, not only because the band boasted more members than any of the other organizations, but also because the band room was the biggest room in the hall. Since most of the hall's real estate belonged to the band, the hall's name should logically reflect that. The debate raged on year after year, but the hall's residents managed to coexist more or less peacefully in their multi-artistic home.

Gates skipped ahead of her father and got her bagged lunch out of the back room where instrument cases were stored. The room was rough but functional: concrete floors, shelving that soared all the way to the ceiling, where piping and wiring components were visible. Teachers and other authority figures rarely entered the back room, so it had the air of a clubhouse or basement, a place teenagers went to escape the tyranny of well-intentioned adults.

The room was filled with signs that had been stolen (or "liberated," as the upperclassmen's euphemism went) from businesses, neighborhoods, and streets. "Cheese is now a request item," proclaimed a sign from the local deli. An inverted triangle encouraged students to "Yield." Another sign, the pride and joy of the tuba section (whose legendary section leader had procured it years before any of the students had joined the band, but whose sign stealing capacity was still spoken of with reverence) had been stolen from a rural area that had a cow crossing. A bovine silhouette rendered in black on a yellow background, urged motorists to decelerate. Added to the sign's allure was the fact that yellow and black were the school colors.

Gates viewed the signs with a mixture of interest and disapproval. She worried about the consequences of their removal. Would deli patrons become angry and riot when they noticed the dearth of cheese on their sandwiches, a dearth that was entirely preventable if the patrons had

simply known cheese must be requested? At the same time, the signs were a tradition, alluding to a shared band history that extended far into the past.

Miles had perfunctorily attempted to curb the sign-stealing habit over the years, making idle threats to alert the authorities. Gates suspected that her father enjoyed his band members' hijinks and saw them as a way to increase camaraderie. Perhaps this explained the feeble nature of his threats.

In the band room, students flopped on the floor and leaned against the walls, lounging like a group of fresh-faced, sunburned teamsters. No chairs assisted their weary forms—only the music stands furnished the band room. The marching band rehearsed its music the same way it performed: standing up.

Gates nibbled a room-temperature carrot stick, watching her father confer with J.D., the drum major. J.D. listened to Miles intently, nodding his head with incisive precision, each nod like a little chop of a chef's knife. Watching the clock on the wall, Gates figured out that J.D. nodded at an approximate rate of one nod every three seconds. When J.D. and Miles stopped their conference, Gates was disappointed; she had hoped to average his nods per minute.

Miles smiled at J.D.'s retreating form. J.D. had been a genuine punk as a sixth grader; when Miles met him, Miles expected that JD would soon trade his snare drum in the Wind Ensemble for a drum kit in a heavy metal garage band. When JD was caught smoking weed and sent to military school for a semester, he returned, amazingly, utterly rehabilitated. Long, greasy hair had been cropped into a crew-cut, and his eyes (not dilated, not bloodshot) held the gleam of youthful ambition and propriety.

J.D. joined ROTC upon entering high school. He anticipated a military career, stoked by his brief experience in military school. However, like any classical hero (and Miles did think of

the young man's struggle and eventual triumph over marijuana addiction heroic), J.D. possessed a fatal flaw. Like Achilles, J.D.'s fatal flaw was a flaw of podiatry. He was missing a bone in his left foot. It was not life-threatening or even disabling, but the Army would not take him. Something about not being able to run the required long distances, they said.

Miles installed himself at the head of the bandroom, leaving the podium for J.D., who ascended it with a mixture of authority and deference to his teacher, like a disciple paying obeisance to his master. Both watched the clock. As soon as the second hand completed its orbit, officially signifying the end of the lunch hour, J.D. called the band to attention.

Miles faced his pupils without speaking for a few moments. He cleared his throat. Gates leaned against a vending machine in the corner of the bandroom, standing apart from the students. She knew what was next. She could recite "The Speech" by heart.

"Been a rough week, huh?" Miles said.

Students voiced their agreement: citing sunburn, blisters, heatstroke (although it was generally agreed that the case of heatstroke was a misdiagnosed excuse to sit in the shade for a while), pulled muscles...

Miles nodded and drew a large triangle on the board. At the top of the triangle, he wrote "State Finals." "That's where we want to be at the end of October. To be there, we've got to have a perfect, polished field show. Perfect music. Solid drill. We've made some progress so far. How far do you think we've come?"

The freshmen murmured, confused. None of them had known parade rest from marking time before that Monday. The skinny, pale boy Gates had avoided approached the board. Now he was wearing his shirt, which depicted a martial artist mid-roundhouse kick and the slogan

“We bust our’s to kick your’s!” Gates decided whatever the people in question were busting and kicking was not grammatical ass. The boy picked up a piece of chalk and drew a line halfway up the pyramid.

“I think we’re right here,” he said, in a burst of confidence.

Miles nodded. “Anyone else?”

A girl whose bangs were sprayed straight up, like those of an eighties rock star, left her mark on the board. Several other students followed, leaving their marks in the same, area, roughly the middle of the pyramid.

“Okay,” said Mr. McCormick, examining their evaluations of their progress with what appeared to be great interest. “Okay. You want to know where you really are?”

He drew a slash mark about an inch from the pyramid’s base. A collective slump washed over the students.

“But what have you learned in that week?”

Students spoke up, hesitantly at first, then chiming in with greater volume and frequency: *To stand at attention. To forward march. To back march. Keeping in step. Guiding left and right. Making diagonals. Flanks. Slides.*

J.D. wrote all these on the board. When the room fell silent, the board was nearly covered.

“Is there anything else you’ve learned?” Miles asked. “Anything that’s not on there at all?”

Band is hard work, Gates mouthed.

One of the girls saw Gates and raised her hand tentatively. “That...that marching band? Is hard work?”

Miles put one finger to his nose and pointed the other at the girl, who looked back and forth as though worried that she had said something wrong.

“Marching band is hard work!” he repeated, with greater emphasis. “There’s this study out about marching band,” Miles continued. “Has anyone seen it? That study? About marching bands and heart rates?”

Everyone shook their heads but Gates.

“Some researchers decided to monitor the heart rate and breathing of a tenor player during an eleven minute show,” Miles said. “Turns out—listen to this—turns out the stresses, heart rate, and breathing are similar to that of a marathon runner. A marathon runner!”

“And you know what’s even harder than the physical part?” Miles continued. “Marching band is a *mental* game, too. Just think about all you’re doing, everything that’s going on, during a performance.”

“You have to know where you are on the field,” added someone else.

“And you have to run to get there, sometimes,” Miles said. Last year, during the show’s drum feature, his students had to run to their positions at 220 beats per minute. “What else?”

“Music. You have to remember music,” piped up a short, skinny red haired girl.

“Note for note. Rests. Downbeats. Upbeats,” Miles added. His face shone from enthusiasm and a generous coating of sunscreen. “You have to make it sound good!”

“You have to breathe.”

“March with proper technique.”

“Play clean with others.”

“Keep your eye on the drum major.”

“So what this means is, don’t listen if other kids call you a geek,” Miles said. “You are not geeks. You are *athletes*.”

The students stood up, forgetting their sore calves, blisters, sunburns, and cheered heartily. Gates had to admit that her father knew how to motivate his students. As the group of freshmen disbanded, Gates crept away. Her father would linger and chat with the students before meeting her at his dented 1994 Honda.

Gates entered big, dark room adjacent to the Choir Room. Before flipping on the fluorescent light, Gates heard the rustle of plastic dry-cleaners sleeves protecting the wool uniforms. So shrouded, lined up expectantly, the uniforms reminded her of some sort of cadavers that were resurrected each fall. The jackets were yellow with black rope trim, and the pants were black polyester. Though many students had noticed the resemblance of the band uniforms to Star Fleet uniforms on Star Trek: The Next Generation, Gates was the only one who knew this resemblance was not accidental. Nor was the fact that she shared her first name with the actress who played Dr. Beverly Crusher on the program. She hoped the band would never discover the nerdy, Trekkie origin of her first name. She decided that if anyone knew the name of the Star Trek actress, they wouldn’t be able to share the sensitive information without implicating themselves in the process. She reassured herself that her secret would remain just that.

Pair after pair of glossy black shoes were lined up, awaiting sweaty high school feet. Gates and her father had spent hours cleaning and polishing those shoes, which resembled black nursing sneakers. Though the band members volunteered to help, Miles was never satisfied with the hurried, second-rate job they did on the shoes. Rather than hassle his cheerful volunteers, he stayed after they had all left, going back over each shoe until even the tiniest scuff mark had

been fixed, the dullest polish imbued with a liquid shine. Although he didn't want to discourage his students by critiquing their polishing skills, he felt no such qualms about critiquing Gates.

He would hold a polished shoe to his eye, comparing it with the Platonic ideal of a marching band shoe he held so dear to his heart, honing in on any infraction with Borg-like precision.

"Right here." Last year he pointed to a miniscule clump of brown embedded in the black crepe soles. "You need to get that out."

"Dad, no one can see the bottom of the shoes," Gates had protested.

"Heels down, toes *up*," he reminded her, invoking the command that described the heel-to-toe rolling motion of the marching step. "A judge should be able to see the bottom of everyone's feet."

"But won't they get dirt and stuff in their feet on the field?"

Miles pretended to ignore the last remark. "You can use a dull pencil to scrape that manure out."

Gates wished he had not reminded her of the brown clump's origin. The band had marched in a parade the previous weekend, right behind a bunch of Clydesdales. Miles told his students to never, ever break rank and file, even when it meant marching through (rather than around) a pile of steaming dung. As an extra incentive, he offered a dollar to anyone who could show him horse shit on their shoes at the end of the parade.

"Not if it's Astroturf," Miles added.

"What?"

"They won't get dirt and grass on their feet if it's Astroturf," he explained.

Gates pondered this. Would a judge really examine the bottom of the band's shoes, see a clump of dirt, really stop and ponder the origins of that dirt, determine that it could not have come from an Astroturf field and thus must be from some previous engagement, in which case it ought to have been cleaned off, and deduct points? She doubted it.

"Judges wouldn't take off points for that."

"GE, Gates. It's all GE."

GE stood for General Effect. Along with music and percussion scores, GE was one of the major categories that determined a band's ranking. Could a band dazzle a crowd? Did the color guard have huge, colorful flags? All these things contributed to GE. While the Regiment had solid musicianship and drill, they routinely failed to rack up GE points, probably because Miles considered a lot of the stuff the judges awarded high GE points to "flashy" and "tacky." That was why he was so sensitive about having the shoes spotlessly polished.

"Gates?" Miles called into the uniform storage room,

Gates put down the shoe and the memory of polishing it and its many brothers. She knew she would be re-living the memory soon enough. "In here."

"Trying to find some more manure?" he joked, trying to sound lighthearted.

"Just poking around," Gates said. She didn't find the manure incidents as humorous as her father did. "Can we get out of here?"

"Hold up a second." Miles had honed in on one of the shoes and was running a fingernail over a frayed lace. "Hmm."

Gates did not like the sound of her father's *hmm*. It was a *hmm* that suggested he wanted to examine the shoes in further detail. Gates made a mental note that in the future, she should

wait for her father in the senior locker hall or on a bench outside, a place that did not present so many temptations. “I’m hungry. Come on.”

“Okay, okay.” He set down the shoe but kept looking at it. “I don’t know how I could have missed that,” he said, shaking his head.

Gates ate a candy bar as they drove home. Miles had repeatedly urged school administration to stock the vending machines with bottled water and granola bars, healthy snacks that would provide sustenance for his band members during their long rehearsals. He eyed her candy bar with distaste.

“So,” he said, shifting into third. “How did we look today?”

“They’re coming along, I think,” she said, chewing a bite of chocolate and nougat. “But watch their slides. They’re not cranking them as much as they should be.”

Miles nodded. “I look out while they’re marching, I see all these heads bobbing up and down.”

“What about the egg exercise?” Gates suggested.

Miles shook his head. “Never again.”

The egg exercise was designed to teach students to keep their upper bodies motionless while marching. Instead of holding an instrument, they held spoons at face level. Each spoon contained a raw egg. The trick was to keep one’s egg from breaking. However, the egg exercise backfired. The band members, incited by the same tuba player who had stolen the Cow Crossing sign, did not balance their eggs, but instead hurled them at each other. This wouldn’t have been so bad, except that the tuba player discovered hurling eggs at inanimate objects (the school, the principal’s car) was even more fun than hurling them at human targets. Eggs rained down like

sulphuric bombs, leaving yolky carnage all over campus. The administration forbade the band from ever doing that exercise again. There were still stains on the school's walls, eternal testaments to the foolishness of combining teenagers and raw eggs.

"That was five years ago. You have a different band now. I think they're mature enough to handle it." Gates enjoyed assessing the maturity levels of her father's students, because such an action inferred that she had maturity herself as well as the ability to recognize it in others.

"I don't know. I don't know."

"They're bobbing when they march. You saw it," Gates said, appealing to her father's sense of order.

"We'll see."

Gates crumpled her candy bar wrapper and put it in the ashtray. "What if we used hard boiled eggs?"

"Hmm." Miles said noncommittally. This *hmm* suggested he was ready to end discussion of the issue. "J.D.'s coming over for dinner Sunday night. I want you to clean your room before then."

"What? Dad, why?" Gates asked.

"Because it's a pigsty in there."

"No, I mean, why does J.D. have to come over?"

"He's my drum major," Miles said.

"You never invited the drum majors before," Gates pointed out.

"That was different," Miles said.

"Different how?"

“Those drum majors didn’t have anything…” Miles paused. “They didn’t have anything *at stake*. “

“And J.D. does?”

“He’s a recovering marijuana addict,” Miles explained. “I’m thinking the pressure of being a drum major could drive him back.” This was partly true. Miles also hoped Gates might strike up a friendship with J.D. Maybe then she would join the band. Or, if not the band, the color guard.

Gates wished she weren’t any only child. She sometimes wondered if the attention her father lavished on the band (and now J.D.) was the result of some misguided paternal impulse. “That makes, like, no sense.”

“Will you just clean your room, Gates? Just do that for me,” Miles said.

“I hope we’re not having stew,” Gates said. “I’m sick of stew.”

Miles cooking ability was limited to the Crock Pot. He enjoyed chopping food into small pieces, placing the ingredients into the pot, and returning home to find a warm, simmering meal. Gates had long since tired of stews, sometimes eating a bite or two, but more often than not retreating to her room with a bag of microwave popcorn or peanut butter sandwich. Miles, however, was perfectly capable of eating the same meal day after day. He continued to concoct Crock Pot meals a few times a week, alleviating the sense of guilt that comes from not preparing home cooked meals for one’s child. This way, Miles was not guilty of negligence; Gates was guilty of pickiness.

“I’m making lasagna. Now look, about your room…”

“I’ll clean it! I’ll clean it!”

“Thank you.” Miles tapped his finger to the beat of Sousa’s *Semper Fidelis*, which emerged tinny from cheap speakers.

“So,” Miles said after a few measures. “Acolyting on Sunday?” It was a foolish question; they both knew Gates acolyted every Sunday. Miles only wanted to change the subject.

“9:45 service.”

“All right, then.”

For some reason, Miles felt as though a problem had been resolved.

A time to plant

When the postcard with a smiling tooth wearing a baseball cap came in the mail, Sarah felt excited. Unlike many children her age, Sarah didn't dread the dentist. She liked his shiny, bald head and the way he said, "Let's see that smile, little lady!" Because she was particularly fastidious about brushing and flossing her teeth, she had never had a cavity, and thus never associated the dentist with pain and suffering. She secretly thought the dentist admired her oral hygiene and afforded her special privileges for it. Once he had given her not only a free toothbrush, he also took her to the special cabinet and let her choose the color. Also, he had thrown in a tube of blue toothpaste. Its flavor, an antiseptic blast of mint, was more exhilarating than any bubble gum Sarah had ever tried.

"It's like a roller coaster ride for your mouth," she had told the dentist. He had laughed and asked if he could quote her on that to his other clients.

"What's quoting?" she asked.

He laughed again and explained it and told her that what she said was pretty clever. Sarah's mom, Grace, smiled ruefully and said "Don't tell her that. She's already too clever for her own good!"

“I bet she’s the class clown!” Dr. Drum said, rumpling her hair. Sarah smiled meekly. She didn’t want to tell him that she was only charming and comfortable around adults, people with whom she felt more of an affinity than her pre pubescent classmates.

So when the tooth postcard came (Sarah wondered if the dentist had taken pains to choose it especially for her) she brought it to her mother eagerly.

“It’s time already?” her mother sighed. But she called and made their appointments.

A week later, they sat in the waiting room. Sarah’s mother knitted while Sarah searched for something to amuse herself. She had read all the issues of Highlights magazine because she had her own subscription, and the brightly colored building blocks had lost their allure long ago. She searched through the magazine rack and found a big book with words and pictures she hadn’t noticed before.

The pictures were beautiful, full color renderings of magical scenes. A handsome man and a beautiful woman lounged in a garden. The woman had flowers in her long hair and they wore only curling, leafy vines. Sarah flipped a few pages. A huge, wooden boat, filled with wise-eyed giraffes, monkeys, kittens and parrots, floated across an endless sea, under a huge, arching rainbow. Sarah pulled her mother’s sleeve.

“Let me finish this row.” She knitted a few more stitches. “What?”

“Can I take it home?” Sarah asked.

Her mother took the book and turned it over. Her mouth tightened a little. “It belongs to Dr. Drum.”

“What if I ask him if I can borrow it? Can I take it if he says yes?”

“Sarah, he’s a dentist, not a librarian.”

“But if he says yes...”

“No, Sarah.” She took up her knitting again, as if to show that the conversation was over.

Sarah picked the book up again. She was glad there was always a long wait. A boy battled a giant. And here was a man walking on water. Sarah read the caption under the picture: “It is I; don’t be afraid.” Sarah was not afraid. She read on, eagerly.

“Sarah?” The dental assistant stood at the door to the office, holding a clipboard. “Dr. Drum will see you now.”

The hygienist chatted while she picked at Sarah’s teeth with a shiny metal hook. Her daughter was in fifth grade, just like Sarah, but they went to different schools. The hygienist liked to compare notes about what Sarah and Lindsey were doing in their respective classes. Though Sarah had never met Lindsey, she knew that Lindsey had made an erupting volcano for the science fair and that she was in the advanced reading group, but that, to her mother’s chagrin, she made C’s in math. Sarah sometimes wondered if Lindsey had similar information about her, that Sarah’s canine tooth had chipped on the merry-go-round, or that she would need braces in a few years.

Finally, Dr. Drum came in. “Hey little lady!” he said, giving her his customary greeting. “Let’s see that smile.”

Sarah grinned so big it looked more like a grimace.

He sat down and inspected her teeth: “Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Looks great!” he said. He looked down at Sarah’s lap. “How’d that get in here?” he asked.

Sarah glanced at the book. She had forgotten to put it back on the rack, so eager had she been to answer to hygienist’s call.

“Sorry,” she mumbled. “I forgot to put it back.”

“Oh, that’s okay!” he said. He looked at her differently, as though she had magic teeth that were tartar repellent and perfectly straight. “Are you interested in it?”

Sarah blushed. She had felt like she was doing something wrong. “Uh-huh,” she managed to whisper.

“Have you ever seen this book before?” he asked. “Or one like it?”

“No,” she said. “We don’t have any books like this at my house.”

“I see,” said Dr. Drum, looking at her. He stood up and went to a cabinet. He brought her back a sparkly purple toothbrush, a small box of dental floss and a pamphlet. “These are for you, Miss Sarah.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“And borrow that book, too, if you want to read it. Just bring it back when you have your next appointment.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Really,” he said. “Gosh, will you look at those teeth? That’s a beautiful smile.”

Grace frowned when she saw the book, but when Sarah explained that Dr. Drum had lent it to her, she said nothing, paying the lady at the desk. In the car, Sarah examined the brochure. It didn’t outline proper flossing techniques, but instead was an illustrated newsletter for Broadmoor Methodist Church. In the back, Sarah saw a picture of Dr. Drum. It turned out he was the director of youth outreach ministries.

A time of peace

Gates walked ahead her father, who had taken his time locking the back seat doors, securing the wheel with an anti-theft device menacingly titled “The Club” (though who would steal a *1990 Honda* from a *church parking lot*, Gates wondered?) and then double-checking to make sure the doors were still locked.

The walk was a lengthy one. Broadmoor Methodist’s proportions rivaled those of a small university. Weekly donations routinely reached thirty thousand dollars and plans for more buildings were underway. The church had expanded along roughly concentric circles. Walking from the outmost edge (which was bordered by parking lots) to the sanctuary at the center, Gates and Miles passed the newest buildings first and then, as they approached the sanctuary, the oldest. It was not unlike walking straight through a log, where the most ancient wood is the center, the newer growth at the edges.

Miles fell further behind when he stopped to greet a few people from his Bible Study class. Many single women had taken note of Miles’ devotion to the church and to his daughter, and they frequently discussed what a great catch he would make. But Miles had eyes for none of them. Between his church, his band, and his daughter, Miles’ life was comfortably full.

Gates did not acknowledge the kids her age. After she began acolyting, she quit attending Sunday School and lost touch with the fashions and habits of the more youthful congregants. She noted, though, that sometime in the past few years, the girls had exchanged their patent leather Mary Janes for heeled pumps, their cotton floral dresses for miniskirts. They wore makeup and had obviously spent a good amount of time on their hair. They looked as though they were going to some exceptionally wholesome dance party. Gates felt certain that

they laughed at her knee length dress and Mary Janes. She kept her head down and her mind focused on her acolyting goals as she passed the middle school girls.

Miles poured himself a cup of coffee when they entered the Fellowship Hall, which resembled a school cafeteria in all respects except for the vaulted ceiling. As an afterthought, he offered a cup to Gates. She declined, but was inwardly pleased by his gesture. It was a sign of her maturity, she thought.

Miles and Gates approached the dusty wooden cabinet where the acolyte robes, along with the choir robes, were stored. It didn't seem long ago to him that the robes were too big for Gates. Now she no longer needed his assistance rolling up the waistband and safety pinning it into place; the robes were actually a bit short following a growth spurt that had left her thin and lanky.

"One green robe, coming right up," he said.

"Pentecost lasts forever," Gates groaned. She preferred the purple robes of Lent or the gold robes of Easter. Gates marked the passing of a year by Liturgical seasons rather than the seasons of spring, summer, fall, and winter. Her father did something similar, dividing the year into musical categories: marching band, concert band, and band camp.

"Advent's right around the corner," Miles comforted her. Gates pulled the long green skirt over her Sunday dress, then the top with its wide sleeves and embroidered bottom. She enjoyed everything about the uniform except for the dickey, which made her neck itch.

"How do I look?" she asked her father.

"More and more like your mother every day," Miles answered.

Mrs. Poltzer, the Sunday School teacher (now youth director) had often reminded Gates that Gates' mother was in heaven with Jesus. Gates did not remember her mother, but she did enjoy the inference that she looked angelic.

Here Miles' and Gates' paths diverged. Miles would stay in the Fellowship Hall with his fellow congregants until the sermon started, while Gates would go wait in the narthex along with the ushers and her co-acolyte. She was a little anxious because she had not seen her counterpart yet, and the other robes still hung in the cabinet.

"The other acolyte's not here," Gates said.

"It's only nine-twenty."

"If you're on time, you're late," Gates said, invoking a marching band slogan she had taken to heart years ago.

"If you're early, you're on time," Miles finished. He knew that if marching band practice was slated to begin in twenty-five minutes and his students weren't anywhere to be seen, he would feel a similar anxiety. "Well." Miles looked at his diligent daughter with fatherly pride. "Do your best." Giving an encouraging slogan to an acolyte was tough work. *Go get 'em, Tiger*, sounded unnecessarily aggressive. *Break a leg* was too theatrical and invited mishaps. *Good Luck* seemed vaguely blasphemous.

Gates shrugged, neither encouraged nor discouraged by the phrase she heard weekly, and headed towards the sanctuary. Miles noticed that the robes were not only too short, they were also a bit too tight. Gates' strides were shorter than normal in the narrow skirt. He decided he would ask Mrs. Poltzer if there was room in the budget for new, more accommodating robes.

Gates enjoyed the walk to the sanctuary far more than the walk to the Fellowship Hall. She gave everyone benevolent smiles which were returned with pleasure and, Gates thought, a

hint of respect not unlike that given to the preachers. Outfitted in robes, childish Sunday School clothes covered, Gates saw herself as holy, angelic, and more advanced in the church hierarchy than the common members. From this lofty position, she offered eye contact and greetings with impunity.

“Hi, Mr. Fensterstock!” She greeted the elderly usher.

“Morning, Miss McCormick.”

Throughout her seven year tenure as acolyte, Gates had seen a lot of changes: ministers came and went, Sunday School teachers were promoted to Youth Directors, church members died, babies were christened. Mr. Fensterstock had remained as constant as the stained glass windows. Gates felt an affection for him that was tinged with reverence. She held him in high esteem because he was the only usher whose diligence came close to her own. But even if he had lacked that quality, Gates would have liked him for his big ears, gentle hands, and cryptic smile.

Mr. Fensterstock, an avowed atheist for the first fifty three years of his life, had undergone what Mrs. Poltzer said must have been a profound, life-altering encounter with Christ. Mrs. Poltzer said that if there was hope for the most hopeless of atheists (and Mr. Fensterstock had been a hopeless case, selling not only banned books but pornographic magazines from his bookstore) then those who already had accepted Christ had a bright future, indeed. But Mr. Fensterstock never disclosed the details of his conversion, only smiled the cryptic smile and said, “God comes in his time. In time, he came to me, too.”

Mr. Fensterstock extended a palm in which peppermints, butterscotch, and Hershey’s kisses rested. Gates thanked him and accepted a Hershey’s kiss. Though she was particularly fond of butterscotch, she worried that walking down the aisle with one cheek distorted, swelling

from its candy cargo, was undignified. She supposed it would be possible to chew the candy, but chomping on butterscotch while congregants filed in would do little to convey the image of propriety she sought to project.

Gates stilled what little qualms she had about eating candy before acolyting by reminding herself that athletes fueling up for a race and scholars fueling up for an exam were encouraged to consume small quantities of high energy food. Viewing her acolyting activities as no less intense than theirs, Gates decided her sweet indulgence served a similar function.

“What time is it?” she asked Mr. Fensterstock.

He examined a heavy, silver pocket watch. The watch was just something else Gates liked about him. “Nine thirty-six.”

“It’s not slow, is it?” She shifted, wrapping the foil into a tight ball.

“Timmy’s gonna make it. Don’t worry.”

Gates did not like the name *Timmy*. She had already decided she would not like her peer acolyte on account of his lateness, and the name only compounded her distaste. It sounded too much like the name of an endearing, consumptive orphan. “Where is he?”

“I saw him out by the fountain. Poor tyke, he’s got stage fright. I told him you’d coach him through it.”

Gates said nothing. She had no intentions of holding a scared young acolyte’s hand, literally or figuratively. She generally disliked her fellow acolytes, viewing the good ones as competition for the role of “Best Acolyte” (a role that existed only in Gates’ mind) and the bad ones as besmirchers of her flawless Sunday performances. If Timmy knew anything at all, he would be more afraid of going up against Gates than going up before the rest of the

congregation, who devoted the same attention to the acolytes as to the minister—that is to say, not much.

“This is his first time?” she asked, horrified.

“He’s been through the training.” Mr. Fensterstock flicked his lighter open and closed.

Gates was of the opinion that beginning acolytes, like beginning drivers, should be subject to a tiered training approach, first learning the basics, then acolyting a few of the slower services: the casual Friday night service, for instance, which drew very few members. “Hmm,” she said disapprovingly, in a tone not entirely unlike her father’s.

“There he is!” Mr. Fensterstock announced.

The figure that graced that door of the narthex could have stepped from a greeting card. Flaxen blond hair framed blue eyes; from the trembling lashes, teardrops glistened. His dear little hands barely protruded from the over-long sleeves, giving the boy a look of doll-like proportions. Even Gates had to admit, grudgingly, that Timmy was *adorable*.

Timmy stood next to Mr. Fensterstock. “Who’s *that*?” He pointed at Gates and shifted the peppermint in his mouth from the left to the right cheek.

“She’s an acolyte, too.”

“But she’s so *old*.”

“Gates has been doing this since you were a little baby. She’s our most experienced acolyte.”

Gates noticed that he did not say *best*. She compressed the silver ball of foil between her forefinger and thumb, squeezing it until a red indentation emerged on the pad of her fingertip.

The first strains of the prelude sounded, a piece Gates immediately recognized as Saint-Saens. Timmy’s tears threatened to reassert themselves.

“Just follow me, kid,” Gates said. Using the casual appellation instead of his name made Gates feel tough and cool, like a gangster of the thirties. Timmy looked at Mr. Fensterstock

“You’ll be fine,” the old man said.

But Timmy was not seeking reassurance. He held his hand out for another candy. Mr. Fensterstock either ignored or did not notice Gates’ glare. Timmy stuffed a second peppermint into his mouth, looking like a mumps afflicted orphan rather than the consumptive variety.

Mr. Fensterstock lit Gates’ wick first, then Timmy’s. “Be very, very careful,” he admonished the boy. Timmy nodded and sucked his candy contentedly.

Gates slipped into the ultra-focused yet meditative mindframe of an operating neurosurgeon. She did not notice her co-acolyte’s enthusiastic candy-slurping or the way the congregation uttered a collective *Aww* at the sight of him. She paid attention only to the details that would directly affect her acolyting. She noticed his shorter stride and adjusted her pacing so that they were walking at a steady tempo (Gates, unconsciously, walked to the beat of the organ pieces). She carried her wick on the left hand side, the side opposite Timmy, to avoid incinerating his robes.

The sanctuary’s vastness always startled her, but when it was filled to the gills it seemed even larger. This Sunday was one of average attendance, but Gates had acolyted on Christmas and Easters and seen it standing room only. The Christmas Eve candlelight service had a special place in her heart, not only because of the beauty of the experience, but because Gates’ role was even more pivotal, as there were not two but thousands of candles to light.

As they approached the circular altar, Gates and Timmy took opposite paths. Gates walked clockwise to her candle in the center of the altar, and Timmy walked counterclockwise. She lit the candle, watching Timmy out of the corner of her eye. She held her wick to the candle

a few moments longer than necessary, waiting for Timmy to light his candle so they would give the illusion of perfect symmetry and timing.

As they settled onto their special bench behind the minister, Gates had to admit that Timmy had done a passable job. She had seen some do worse. Now that one of their major tasks was done, Gates allowed herself to relax a bit in the warm orange glow of the stained glass. She had been, she decided, a bit too quick to judge poor Timmy. After all, she had been new once, too. Gates nudged her young counterpart and gave him the thumbs-up, feeling quite magnanimous as she did so.

Gates folded her hands and assumed the expression of prayerful introspection that she had developed over the years. Unlike other, lesser acolytes, Gates never fidgeted, whispered, or passed notes to her peers. Though any casual observer would assume she was listening to the sermon raptly, Gates was actually counting rafters on the ceiling or recalling favorite scenes from movies. Still, even most adults lacked her ability to maintain a façade of devotion.

Even more impressive was her ability to sustain this façade. Early in her acolyting career, Gates had signed up to acolyte at the 8:30 and 9:45 services. It wasn't uncommon for her to pull a double header. When the 11:00 acolyte called in sick with a cold, Gates stepped up to the plate (or altar, as it was) to acolyte three straight services. Throughout the three sermons, she never displayed a hint of restlessness or discontent. Mrs. Poltzer, the youth director and acolyte coordinator, often spoke of that legendary Sunday, calling it the "Gates Trinity."

Gates glanced at Timmy. He was cheerfully picking his nose. Gates decided to ignore it, rather than risk creating a disturbance by correcting his behavior.

"What we must do," the pastor was saying, "is love one another. This is the lesson Jesus taught us. To love one another."

The task of clearing his nostrils appeared to be endlessly fascinating for the youngster. Gates administered a firm but inconspicuous poke to Timmy's ribcage.

"OW!" The boy said, very audibly. Gates frowned. She hadn't poked hard enough to cause pain. The assistant pastor fixed Gates with a disapproving stare.

"No horseplay!" he whispered.

She yearned to explain herself, but it was impossible with the minister in the midst of preaching.

"But how," continued the minister. "can we love one another? It's hard sometimes. Some of you might not even be loving each other right now. Maybe your neighbor got your favorite parking spot on the way here!"

The congregation chuckled. The burgeoning membership placed an increasing strain on the parking lots, which had not increased proportionally. That was another benefit to Gates' acolyting. Because she had to be at church early, Miles never resorted to parking in the neighborhood. Some congregants had thoughtlessly blocked people's driveways and returned to notes on their windshield of a decidedly non-Christian vernacular.

"To be able to love like Jesus," continued the minister. "We must open our *hearts* to Jesus. He's out there, knocking. Will you—" (here the minister extended an index finger to the crowd in what was later described as an electrifying gesture) "—let Jesus in?"

Gates had heard sentiments of this nature invoked frequently, beginning in her Sunday School classes with Mrs. Poltzer. When Mrs. Poltzer told the children that Jesus wanted a relationship with them, to talk to them, and to live in their hearts, Gates couldn't quite believe it was true. She knew Jesus was generally accepted to be real, but that the son of God was *literally*

dying to be her best friend just seemed a bit implausible. She took it to be one of the many lies that adults tell children.

“It’s make believe, isn’t it?” six-year old Gates had asked her father on the way home from church that morning.

“What’s make believe?” Miles asked.

She waved vaguely at the church. “You know.”

Miles was alarmed. Was his daughter losing her faith even before she had lost all her baby teeth? “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Gates explained the events of Sunday School class.

“Yes,” Miles said. “It is true.”

“Does Jesus really live inside of you?”

“Yes,” Miles said, though her questions stirred up the seeds of uncertainty (remnants from his early life as an agnostic, he was sure) that had long lain dormant.

That afternoon, Gates crept into her father’s office, a room that smelled of Old Spice and Wite-Out, knelt on the berber carpet, and sincerely asked Jesus to come into her heart, imagining him standing outside. Nothing happened. The office remained dark; the air conditioner hummed nonchalantly. Gates was reminded of the time that she had tried with all her heart to summon a Care Bear. With the nubby carpet wearing a pattern of mottled red into her knees, she felt the same sense—not disappointment, not betrayal—but clinical, detached observation. *So this is what happens*, she thought. And she felt a vague sense of relief because she had followed Mrs. Poltzer’s orders.

Gates’ reverie was interrupted by the shuffling procession of gray-haired ushers towards the altar. It was time for the offering. She tapped Timmy (very gently), who was examining the

specimens he had extracted from his nose, and together they gathered the offering bowls. Gates was from the old school, which taught the acolytes to interweave their fingers between the heavy brass bowls, to make the rims easier for the older and sometimes arthritic ushers to grasp. Even though the weight of the bowls crushed her slim fingers painfully, Gates internalized her suffering for the greater cause. Timmy, she noted, had not been taught to handle the bowls in this fashion. The usher struggled a little getting his fingers around the narrow, smooth rim

As the ushers made their retreat, Gates settled once more into what she considered to be her special pew. She shifted her head slightly so she could look at the stained glass windows that were behind her. Jesus and Holy Mother Mary gazed at the congregation with eyes that were wise but inscrutable. The thing that annoyed her about the stained glass was that the artist had gone to great lengths to make baby Jesus look cute. He was too precious, she thought. His eyelashes were so long that they gave him a decidedly feminine quality. She had noticed the girliness of Jesus the first time she acolyted.

“What did you learn about Jesus from acolyting?” Mrs. Poltzer had asked, hoping to encourage the children to follow Gates’ example of Christian service and devotion.

“That he looks like a girl,” Gates said.

After that, though, Mrs. Poltzer never asked Gates to share her acolyting experiences with the class. When Gates eventually phased out of Sunday School, completely substituting acolyting instead, Mrs. Poltzer held Gates up as an example of Christian devotion and sacrifice. Though she never invited Gates to the class to describe her acolyting experiences.

Gates collected the bowls, making sure that she turned clockwise to the altar while her partner turned counterclockwise, to avoid any unseemly clanging of the bowls. She tried not to be too conspicuous about examining the haul. There were a few twenties, and the bowl was

filled to the brim. Once she had seen a hundred dollar bill in there. Gates always judged the quality of the sermon by the quantity of large bills. She figured people paid more for good sermons, rightfully, as they were entitled to good sermons if they paid good money. Even after six years, she could never predict what would be a “hundred dollar sermon.” People did tend to give more on Easter and Christmas, but Gates suspected this was out of guilt.

Soon, the minister was concluding the sermon.

“Go in peace,” he said.

The ministers walked down the center aisle as the organ music began. Gates rose, lit her wick and snuffed out the candle, careful not to use too much pressure lest the wick become embedded in wax, and impossible for the next acolyte to light. She walked down the aisle with her little flame, while the congregation sang:

May the Lord, Almighty God, bless and keep you forever.

Grant you peace, perfect peace, courage in every endeavor.

Lift your eyes to see his face.

Know his grace forever.

May the Lord, Almighty God, bless and keep you forever.

With a sign of contentment engendered by a smooth acolyting performance, Gates headed towards the open double doors and the pure light of a Sunday morning.

Miles watched his daughter walk down the aisle, carrying a long, brass candle lighter. It was an easy mental transaction to replace the candle lighter with a trumpet. Gates, he noticed, even walked to the barely discernible beat of the organ prelude.

She's such a natural, he thought wistfully. *I'm not going to push her. I'm not that kind of father.*

He had envisioned himself being the kind of father his own father was—warm but aloof. Miles' father, Bartholomew, seemed to love best from a distance, but Miles never got the sense that he was not loved. It was more like his father's love was combustible and self-contained as the sun, and that to venture too close to it would compromise the integrity of both the sun and its small, orbiting planets.

Miles often thought that his father, an apiarist, had allowed his personal sense of ethos to be shaped by his bees, rather than parents or religion—the former he had lost very early in life, the latter he never had. Bartholomew's exalted triad was Industry, Stability, Order.

A time of war

Miles remembered his father's award ceremony. He had been three or four years old, young enough to remember the ceremony not as a series of events over time, like many of his later memories, but a collage of images and sensory details. He remembered the cold edge of a folding metal chair pressing his legs exposed in their short pants. He remembered wanting to sit on his mother's lap and her not letting him. He remembered the pattern of her dress, a combination of stripes and tiny flowers, staring at it while being bored. And he remembered the itchy burning in his right foot, the feeling that the skin had been stretched too tight across it. Miles had stepped in an ant pile (or an ant palace, as his mother called them) and had mistaken the itching for the tickle of grass. By the time he looked down at his foot, it was already studded with stinging bites.

Each bite had sprung a round pustule, standing out on his skin like seed pearls. He wanted nothing more than to tear off his sock and rake his nails across them, but his mother wouldn't let him. She made him sit very still. He looked at his feet with longing. The shoes were mismatched. His left foot wore a snazzy black oxford. His right foot wore a sock and a black leather sandal. It was too swollen by ant bites to wear the oxford's twin. His mismatched shoes irritated Miles nearly as much as the itching that was their cause.

He knew he was being made to sit still and somber because this was "a very important day" and his father was receiving "a very great honor." Miles sat quietly while lots of men in uniforms talked on stage. Eventually his father went on stage, too. Miles thought that his father looked nearly as fidgety as Miles felt. After it was all over, Miles hoped it was time to leave. But he and his mother and father were made to stand in front of a bunch of flags and have their

picture taken. In the picture, Miles' father looked uncharacteristically somber. His mother clung to Miles' father's arm as though she were afraid someone would try to take him away. Miles appeared to be looking at something to his right that had caught his interest.

When they left, Miles's father carried him so Miles would not have to walk on his swollen foot. Miles noticed something shiny gleaming on his father's lapel. He reached for it.

"No, sweetie, don't touch that," his mother said. Miles started to cry.

"It's okay," said his father.

"Bartholomew," she said. "He'll lose it. He's too young. "

"I don't want it," Bartholomew said, slow and calm. He unfastened the object from his lapel.

"But the honor..."

"I don't want it," Bartholomew repeated.

Miles looked down at the shiny piece of metal hanging from his overalls. It hung from a bit of red ribbon that had a vertical blue strip, flanked with narrow white stripes, down the middle. It was a five pointed star. He squealed with glee, forgetting his swollen foot for the first time that day. His mother turned the star over and read the words on the back.

"Heroic or Meritorious Achievement," she said. "Your father is a hero. That's what this means."

Is that all? Miles thought. He didn't need a metal star, or a long, boring ceremony, to tell him that. But it wouldn't be for a few more years that Miles would realize that the medal his father had been awarded was the Bronze Star or what that actually meant.

Every year, Miles begged his parents to enroll him at a military school, a request that they routinely denied because of the expense, among other things. Miles loved to look at the old photos of his father in his dress blues and wondered why his father never wore his old uniforms. When asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, Miles answered the same every time: “A soldier like my dad.”

He played with army men, arranging them into ranks and files that would have covered the whole house if he had enough men. His capacity to arrange them into order was stunted only by a dearth of men. The resources of plastic army men always ran out before his patience did.

He loved parades, not because of the floats or the cotton candy, but because he loved watching the military’s ranks, every line crisp, every shoe polished, heels hitting the pavement in unison, gloved hands swinging like pendulums of hundreds of perfectly synchronized clocks.

The ignorance of his toddlerhood had faded away. Miles knew exactly what the Bronze Star signified. It was a high honor, made for “acts of heroism” “against an armed enemy.” He didn’t know the exact circumstances surrounding his father’s act of heroism, but he enjoyed imagining them every night before he went to bed, almost as much as he enjoyed imagining an even more heroic future for himself. Miles would achieve even greater heights: the Soldiers Star, the Silver Star, even, dare he hope, the Medal of Honor. His father would be proud of his son, the soldier, who had honored not only his country but his father, by following in his footsteps. Miles only wished that his father had remained active in the military. He could not understand why Bartholomew, a war hero, was content to spend his time weeding flower beds and tending honey bees.

In the absence of any other opportunities, Miles’ militaristic bend manifested itself in a general love of uniforms, of order. He wore the same thing to school every day: a white polo

shirt and navy blue slacks. He joined the Boy Scouts not because he was interested in nature, but because the merit badges, ranking systems, and salutes were appealingly militaristic.

Miles was in the attic, searching for his father's old uniforms, to take to school for show and tell. He had asked his mother if he could bring the Bronze Star, but she said no. He did not particularly enjoy being in the attic. It was hot, dusty, and disorderly, and fraught with unseen threats. He might place a bare foot on an exposed, rusty nail. He might whack his head on one of the low-hanging beams. He might not watch his step carefully enough and move from the plywood covered floor to the part that was just insulation, and fall through the ceiling. Less physically threatening than the physical space of the attic but similarly intimidating was the presence in the attic, as though his ancestors had left some part of their consciousness in their old photographs, dolls, and cooking pots. Miles, who was uncomfortable with anything that could not be accounted for with physical senses, tried to ignore this feeling, but it ended up just making it worse. Generally, the attic gave him the creeps. He could not figure out why, so he tried to avoid both the attic and the feeling.

Consequently, he had not explored the attic in a great amount of detail. He opened a small box that was marked "Bartholomew," hoping to find the olive green fatigues, and hoping even more fervently that he would soon be big enough to wear them. Instead he found a bunch of old photographs.

A time to kill

There were pictures of Bartholomew, a barefoot, solemn eyed child in overalls. And some pictures of Miles' mother and father on their wedding day. He had not known that his mother's hair had hung almost down to her waist. She also appeared enormously pregnant. Perhaps this was why the photographs were not displayed in the living room or in the photo albums. Miles wondered if his parents had spent their honeymoon in the women's hospital.

He found a faded rectangle of paper. One side was written in a language Miles could not read. The other side said, "THE BEARER HAS CEASED RESISTANCE. TREAT HIM WELL IN ACCORDANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL LAW. TAKE HIM TO THE NEAREST COMMANDING OFFICER. C-IN-C ALLIED FORCES."

Miles would have to get his father to explain its function before he brought it to show and tell. The thought sent a shiver through him.

Miles had asked his father about the war once: "Dad, how many bad guys did you kill? I bet you killed a bunch of bad guys. Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang!" He pointed his finger like a gun and took aim at his army men, all of whom were very bad.

Bartholomew did not answer the question, nor did he smile. He acted like he hadn't heard his son's question.

"Hey, Dad. Did you throw grenades like this? POW!" Miles looked at his father. "Well, did you? Did you? Huh?"

Just then, Miles' mother came inside carrying a load of laundry. She put it down when she heard Miles and grabbed him by the arm and told him to quit bothering his father and go play outside. Miles obeyed. Outside, he rubbed his arm. It was sore where she had grabbed it.

"Don't ever, ever ask your father about the war." His mother had re-appeared and was clipping wet laundry to the clothesline.

"Why?" Miles watched his fathers' white undershirt hanging next to his small one.

"Because it hurts him to think about it. You don't want to make him hurt. Do you?"

Miles thought about that now as he found a newspaper clipping, yellow, laminated, and curling at the edges from being rolled inside a cardboard tube. "World War II POW Awarded Bronze Star."

Bartholomew had told the reporter all the things he never told his son. Bartholomew's unit had been captured in the Phillipines. Bartholomew made the Bataan Death March and became a prisoner of war. When sent on to fetch water, he and two other prisoners escaped. They lived with Phillipine headhunters for a year. Bartholomew enjoyed this time because he had all the mangos he could eat. When he and his fellow prisoners were recaptured, the Japanese soldiers asked whether any of them would be so stupid as to try escaping again.

"Yes," Bartholomew said.

"No," said the other two. They were bayoneted on the spot.

Bartholomew was quoted as saying that he did not know whether he had been spared because of his honesty or his courage. Or whether there had been no reason at all. But it had never occurred to him to lie.

Bartholomew remained a prisoner of war for forty two months. When he returned to the United States, he weighed one hundred and two pounds.

Miles read the article quickly and set it aside, eager to explore the box and see what else he could uncover. He found a yellowed photograph. A truck full of men drove down a palm-lined road. Miles could not see any of their faces, only their backs. Hanging over the truck, a sign announced:

KILL THE BASTARDS!

Down this road marched one of the regiments

Of the United States Army

KNIGHTS SERVING THE QUEEN OF BATTLES

Twenty of their wounded in litters were

Bayoneted, shot and clubbed

By the yellow bellies.

KILL THE BASTARDS!

Miles tucked that photograph, too, into his pocket alongside the piece of paper. The photograph was impressive because it had swear words, and he thought maybe his father had been part of that regiment, a Knight Serving the Queen of Battles. He wondered who the Queen of Battles was. That was one thing he had never heard of. If his father was a knight, did that make Miles some sort of nobility as well? He thought it probably did.

The next photograph looked like something out of National Geographic. A woman with a shaved head and a pipe and a baby cradled by her naked breasts, regarded the camera with hostility. Miles tried not to stare at her breasts. A small boy stood next to her. He also smoked a pipe. He recognized his father's handwriting on the back: Philippines, 1942.

In another, five little naked boys stood beside a tall, gaunt man. There was some sort of shed-like structure in the back that appeared to be made of hay. Miles stared at their bellies. He didn't think it was possible for children to get pregnant, especially male children, but their bellies swelled like his mother's had in her wedding pictures. Maybe these were just a different sort of children, ones with different figures than the ones he knew. The picture gave him an oily, sinister feeling and he quickly flipped to the next.

Soldiers, smoking cigarettes, held guns as they stood outside a huge, gated wall labeled "BUREAU OF PRISONS." Two soldiers walked behind a man whose hands were folded behind his head. The soldiers held guns; the man was naked. There were palm trees in every picture, like in the brochures from tropical resorts that Miles had seen. There were beaches too, and people lying on them, but the people were fully clothed and half buried by the sand and tide. Their mouths were open; their limbs splayed in awkward positions. There were tanks, and dead horses, dead bodies, which the pedestrians and soldiers paid no more mind than a fire hydrant or cigarette butt. A bearded man, grinning, held a severed head up to the camera like a prize flounder, while two other men looked on, apparently impressed by their friend's trophy.

Miles felt something long and dark and slimy rustle in his intestines, a creature that he had inherited along with his flesh but that had perhaps lain dormant until this moment. Now, it stirred to life, eyeless and earless, possessing only a hungry mouth at each end, like a tapeworm. It scooted up his intestinal tract in peristaltic spurts, to coil around his stomach. It churned the contents of his stomach into a hot froth. Miles knew it would nibble away at him all his life, that when he died, the worm would feast on his flesh, and he would be bloated and rotten as the soldiers in his father's photographs. Very slowly, Miles put the photographs back in the order in which he had found them. He removed the piece of paper from his pocket and closed the box's

lid, then placed it back in the corner where he had found it. He climbed down the ladder and closed the door behind him.

Back in his room, Miles sat on his bed. His floor was covered by orderly files of plastic army men, which he gathered, one by one, into a garbage bag. Each plastic army man, each rank and file, was a lie. Their neatness, precision, ideals of service, of sacrifice to a lofty ideal, was fool's gold. They were all host to the worm. Their job was to propagate it, to increase its territory, and if they failed, to feed it with their bodies. They had nothing to do with order.

The offering plate was passed to Miles; he paused a moment before accepting it, seeing in its tarnished brass a manifestation of the Bronze Star. He placed in the bowl a check for a sizable amount, folded so no one else could see the sum. Even before he became a Christian, Miles had donated a good portion of his money to charity. His motives, though, were not purely altruistic. The worm that had awakened in him thirty years ago still probed. Greed was food for the worm. Hatred was food for the worm. Ignorance was food for the worm. With the same fervor that he pursued Industry, Stability, Order, Miles fled from Greed, Hatred, Ignorance. At church, he found respite. Watching his daughter rise to accept the offering plate, he found hope.

A time to sew

Sarah's wardrobe consisted mostly of corduroy pants, coveralls, and T-shirts. Her mother deemed all other clothes impractical, choosing only the most rugged articles, clothes designed for children who climbed trees and rode bikes. Sarah favored neither of these activities, preferring to read quietly on the park bench. But just in case she decided to brave the monkey bars, her wardrobe would be ready.

But there was nothing in her closet that fit the description of Sunday School Dress, except for a flowered sundress that Sarah's mother had picked up at a garage sale. Sarah had worn the dress for the past three years on Class Photo Day. Since she was one of the shorter students, she stood in the front row. The dress's length functioned as a rudimentary chart of her growth. In the second grade, it hung below her knees. As a third grader, the dress hit the appropriate right-above-the-knee-mark. And as a fourth grader, Sarah looked visibly uncomfortable in the picture, straining to stretch the dress down past a bright white slip. Though the dress was well past its prime, Sarah decided it would have to do.

In the next room, Sarah heard her parents talking. She sneaked up to their door and put the base of a glass against its door, leaning her ear in to the open end. She had heard once that this was a good way to eavesdrop, but she was never sure whether one's ear was meant to go against the base or the open end.

"Dr. Drum..." her mother was saying. "handing out Bibles...evangelist... brainwashed."

She turned the glass around to see if that would help. Her father, James, spoke in low, soothing tones from which she could identify no single words. When she felt footsteps, Sarah scooted back to her room and opened the book to a random page.

“What’re you reading, sweetie?” James asked, feigning innocence. She knew that her mother had told him all about it.

“Just something Dr. Drum lent me,” she said, feigning innocence right back. He sat down beside her and looked at the picture. A group of men sat around a table, flames coming out of their head.

“What’s going on here?” he asked.

“Um...” She was reluctant to expose her half-lie. “The disciples are crowned with flame, speaking in tongues,” she said, reading the caption.

Her father’s chuckle rang false to Sarah’s ears. “Sounds pretty silly, doesn’t it.”

“I guess,” said Sarah, though it didn’t sound silly to her at all. But she couldn’t tell her father that. “Is Mom mad at me?”

“She’s a little confused. That’s all,” her father said.

“You could talk to Dr. Drum,” Sarah said. She removed the pamphlet she had been using as a bookmark. “I bet he could make you understand.”

Her father flipped through the pamphlet. “No, I don’t think he could.” He settled on the picture of Dr. Drum in the pamphlet.

“He teaches Sunday School,” Sarah offered eagerly. “Dr. Drum.”

“I can see that,” her father said.

“It sounds pretty neat,” Sarah said. Sarah squeezed her toes together tightly. Here was the time that her father should offer to drive her to the class.

“Hmm,” her father said noncommittally. “That’s something to think about, isn’t it?” He put the pamphlet down and left. She heard his truck pull out of the driveway.

Sarah wondered if she could hitchhike to church. She considered calling Dr. Drum for a ride, but was far too shy to ask for a favor from somebody who was practically a stranger. She reconciled herself to devotion in solitude, prayers offered as an individual and not as a group. From what she had read in the book, Christians had suffered much worse. She liked to offer her small sacrifice as a way to test the strength of her desire to become a Christian.

That evening, Sarah found a long, rectangular box on her bed. She pulled out a dress made of blue cotton, with a wide white collar and a rose colored satin sash. It was the quintessence of a Sunday School dress. It was neither too long nor too short. The sleeves puffed out around her arms, making them look slender and graceful, and the white collar was as immaculate and pure as a halo. Sarah found her father downstairs watching a soccer game.

“Very pretty!” he said, muting the game. “Turn around.”

She spun so he could admire the way the full skirt flared out, and the big satin bow in the back.

“What time’s Sunday school?” he asked.

“9:45,” she said.

“Then I guess we should leave at 9:30.” He turned the TV back up.

Sarah stood awkwardly for a few moments, wanting to thank him or hug him. Instead she fled back up to her room and took off the dress, careful not to muss it. She pushed all her other shirts back on the closet rack, leaving enough room on the rack for the dress to hang untouched.

A time to lose

“Great job,” Miles said when he met Gates in the fellowship hall.

She handed him her stick and the shirt portion of her robes. Gates felt a bit like a the rock stars her peers often spoke of. The church was her stage, her father the adoring groupie, the fellowship hall the restricted, backstage area.

“That other acolyte—Ugh!” She took the robe from her father, now arranged on a coat hanger, and placed it alongside the other robes.

“I noticed he was out of step,” Miles said. It was one of his personal peeves.

“Probably he thinks he doesn’t have to because of the robes,” Gates said with authority. “But people can still tell.”

“Well, he’s lucky you were there to keep him in line,” Miles said. He wondered if there was a future for his daughter in acolyting, if she might develop and head a training staff, eventually flying around the country, going from church to church to lead acolyte workshops. Drill writers did that for marching bands. It was from a drill writer who had flown in from California that Miles had learned of the now infamous egg exercise. Perhaps students in California were too laid back to hurl eggs at one another.

Miles saw Mrs. Polzter approaching while Gates scanned the acolyte schedule, reading it as intently as though it were Hamlet and she were an English graduate student.. Mrs. Polzter’s plumpness suggested buoyancy rather than mass, as though she were a round balloon. Her feet, encased in loafers, lightly touched the ground before lifting her into a bounce. They were also capable of bearing her weight with great stealth; loud footfalls rarely betrayed her presence. She

would sneak up on people (though she never acted as though stealth was her conscious wish) and cry, “Oh, I’ve surprised you!” with mirth as she saw her target flinch.

Miles didn’t want her to succeed in startling his daughter. “Good morning, Patty,” he said, louder than was necessary.

Mrs. Poltzer halted, frozen. This time it seemed it was she who was surprised. “Oh, hello Miles,” she said, with what Miles thought was a hint of disappointment.

“How about that sermon?” Miles said.

“Electrifying,” Mrs. Poltzer pressed a hand to her bosom. “Simply electrifying. When he said we need to have love in our hearts...”

“Even for those we don’t like,” Gates piped up, casting a pointed glance at Mrs. Poltzer. Mrs. Poltzer had been the grief counselor a few years back, but Miles had repeatedly turned down the counseling sessions that she insisted his grief required. Gates thought Mrs. Poltzer still harbored a secret crush on her dad.

Mrs. Poltzer watched Gates slide the robes onto a coat hanger. “Getting a little big for those robes, I noticed.”

“Maybe you should order new ones,” Gates suggested.

“Maybe...” Mrs. Poltzer said noncommittally.

“Is there something I can help you with, Patty?” Miles asked.

“Actually, I came to speak to Gates,” Mrs. Poltzer replied.

“Okay.” Gates suddenly found her interest in the acolyting schedule rekindled and she returned to it with vigor.

“Why don’t you come into my office, Gates?”

Gates’ father gave her a mystified shrug.

“You too, Miles,” Mrs. Poltzer said.

Gates, seeing Miles’ questioning look, returned the shrug.

Father and daughter settled themselves on folding chairs. Both crossed their legs, resting left heel on right knee.

“So. Gates,” Mrs. Poltzer said, smiling warmly from behind a WWJD paperweight.

“Why I haven’t seen you at any of our junior high youth group events?”

She looked at Mrs. Poltzer’s generous bosom, upon which a pair of reading glasses, dangling from a rhinestone chain, rested. “I don’t know,” Gates mumbled.

“We have pizza parties, lock-ins, camping trips, and of course, service work. Sounds fun, hmm?” Her smile went from pleasantly to stifflingly warm as she handed Gates the youth class schedule.

“Sure does,” Miles said with enthusiasm.

“The sixth grade youth classes are not only fun, they are a crucial time in the life of any young Christian,” Mrs. Poltzer continued. “This is when our youth begin to take confirmation classes, after which they become full fledged members of the church.”

Gates frowned. “Confirmation class meets at nine forty-five. That’s when I acolyte.”

“Don’t you think the class would be more fun?”

“No.”

Mrs. Poltzer touched her index finger to her jaw in what appeared to be a pensive gesture. She was actually rubbing two short, stiff hairs that sprouted from her chin, Gates noticed.

Touching the hairs appeared to help her crystallize her thoughts, like massaging a worry stone.

“Gates,” Mrs. Poltzer leaned in closer. “Young men and women enjoy their own Sunday activities. Once they reach a certain age, they leave other ones to the children for whom those activities are designed.”

“Good for them,” Gates said.

Mrs. Poltzer cast a pointed look at Miles, who was examining the schedule.

“Wow. The youth group is going to Six Flags this summer!” he said.

“I hate roller coasters,” Gates reminded him.

“You know, Gates,” Mrs. Poltzer said. “The Bible says, “To every time there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven””

Gates frowned. “Dad, was that in the sermon?”

“Uh,” Miles did not want to reveal that he hadn’t listened to the minister.

“No, but it’s good to think about, don’t you think?” Mrs. Poltzer said. “And just as there are seasons in the *year*, there are seasons of our *life*. Sometimes we can’t tell when the seasons have changed until someone tells us. And Gates, the spring of your childhood has passed. You are now in the summer of your adolescence.”

Gates cast a frantic look at her father. Was Mrs. Poltzer about to lecture on the facts of life?

“Look, Mrs. Poltzer, what are you getting at?” Miles asked.

“Gates has been a devoted acolyte,” Mrs. Poltzer said. “But I think it’s time for her to sample some of the other offerings the church has—“

“What?” Gates’s apprehension turned to disbelief. “Am I too old to acolyte?”

“Not too old. Too *mature* for a child’s activity,” Mrs. Poltzer explained.

“Why don’t you just say it? Why don’t you just I’m *fired*?”

“Think of it as another way to serve Jesus. When our Lord closes a door, he opens a window,” Mrs. Poltzer said.

“*Bullshit!*”

Gates, for a second time, had managed to render Mrs. Poltzer completely shocked. The curse rang throughout the fellowship hall, where at least twenty spiritual conversations halted, and at least thirty donut holes paused in their progress from hand to mouth.

“Gates, apologize to Mrs. Poltzer,” Miles said. He had suspected this day was coming, had seen it come a little closer with each centimeter that Gates’ bony wrists protruded from the robes, with each pimple that marked her forehead and took her further and further from the cherubic acolyte ideal.

“I’m not apologizing! She’s the one who should apologize!” Gates said.

“Maybe we can discuss this later,” Mrs. Poltzer suggested.

“There’s nothing to discuss!” Gates argued.

“We should be leaving,” Miles said.

“Yes, we should!” Gates said, eyeing Mrs. Poltzer with hostility. She stood up; the flyer fluttered to the ground.

“Gates, don’t forget your schedule—“ Mrs. Poltzer said to Gates as the girl left.

“I’ll take that,” Miles said in a low voice.

“I’ll call you,” Mrs. Poltzer said. “We’ll figure something out.”

“Okay,” Miles said, though he did not like her conspiratorial tone or the way she said *we*. Gates was his daughter, his alone, and the only woman who was qualified to use the pronoun *we* when referring to Gates was dead.

“She wouldn’t even come out and *say* it!” Gates fumed when they were in the car, out of Mrs. Poltzer’s earshot. “She wouldn’t even tell me that I was... that I was *fired!*”

Gates had always assumed that resignation was voluntary, and that she would be venerated for her lifelong devotion to acolyting. She had imagined herself on the cover of the church newsletter at age seventy, giving an interview in which she expounded upon the wisdom culled from decades of acolyting experience.

“You weren’t exactly fired,” Miles said carefully. “It happens to everybody.” Although he wondered if this was true. Most acolytes recognized that acolyting was uncool when compared to the youth group and quit before middle school.

“Can I sue her?” Gates asked, brightening. “For, like, age discrimination?”

“Gates, you are not allowed to sue the church,” Miles said.

“I can’t believe she wants me to go to *Sunday School!* And hang out with those *snobs.*”

“You don’t have to go to Sunday School. You can come to church with me instead. But you do have to take the confirmation classes.”

Miles wondered if his decision, years ago, to permit her to skip Sunday School in favor of acolyting had been a sound one. At the time, he thought participating in actual church events was more important than making construction paper crosses. He had not anticipated that Gates would so become alienated from her peers. She felt more comfortable talking to Mr. Fensterstock than the girls her age. And she was the same at school. Why? Because she never had any siblings? Because her only company growing up had been that adults?

Gates pondered attending church as a congregant, a *commoner*. She decided she couldn’t bear to watch while other children lit the white candles without being synchronized, walked down the center aisle at different paces, and scratched and shifted in their special pew behind the

minister. Confirmation classes were completely out of the question. She doubted she could feign interest in them as easily as she had feigned interest in the sermons.

“No, thanks.”

Miles wondered how to clarify the terms of her rejection: was she was rejecting his invitation to accompany him to services or the confirmation classes? Years of acolyting devotion had assured Miles that Gates was Christian.

“Why not?” he asked tentatively.

“Why not what?”

“Why not go to the confirmation classes?”

The kids are snobs. I'd have to hang out with Mrs. Poltzer. I'm not interested in the classes. They sound boring. The Bible is boring. I don't think I believe what the minister tells us. I don't know what I believe. I just know I don't want to go.

“I don't want to,” Gates said.

“How come?” Miles asked, carefully regulating the tonal modalities of his voice to suggest open-mindedness and nonjudgmentality.

“I just don't!” Gates said testily.

“Well, I hope you feel like cleaning your room,” Miles said. “You seem to have forgotten that J.D.'s coming over tonight.”

“J.D.! Well, that's just *great!*”

The rest of the drive passed in silence.

The doorbell rang at 7:01 p.m.

“Gates. The door,” Miles called from the kitchen.

Gates opened the door to find J.D. standing on the porch. His hair had been wet-combed and he was holding a bottle of what looked like wine.

“Here.” He thrust the bottle at Gates.

She gave him a questioning look. “I’m twelve. You know that, right?”

“It’s sparkling grape juice,” J.D. said. “Is Mr. McCormick here?”

“In the kitchen,” Gates said.

“Okay.” J.D. made no move to enter.

A daddy long legs tried to fly in the front door. Gates batted it away. “Are you coming in?”

Miles emerged, shook J.D.’s hand, and accepted the proffered bottle of sparkling grape juice. While Gates set the table, Miles gave J.D. a tour of the house. The McCormick’s house looked like it could have been a model home when the neighborhood was built, but in the ensuing years, the house’s burlap couch, macramé plant holders, and harvest gold kitchen appliances had become unstylish, as gradually and imperceptibly (to Miles) as a clock winding down.. The boy nodded politely at the wood paneled walls and framed photographs in the hall. Miles was relieved to see that Gates had kept her promise to clean her room.

J.D., Miles, and Gates stood around the table for a moment, each waiting for the other to sit down before picking a spot. Gates moved first, towards the chair nearest the door.

“No, I should sit there,” Miles said. “So I can get to the kitchen more easily.”

“Am I in your spot, Mr. McCormick?” J.D. asked, rising to vacate the chair he had picked. “Or yours, Gates?”

“No,” they said together.

“Where do you usually sit?” J.D. asked.

“Well, we don’t... I mean, dinner’s pretty casual around here, usually,” Miles said.

Gates and Miles faced each other across the dining room table. A timer in the kitchen dinged.

“That’s the bread,” Miles said. “Gates, sit wherever you want.”

Miles emerged from the kitchen and served hot bread and vegetable stew.

“What happened to lasagna?” Gates asked.

“I thought stew would be nice,” Miles said, omitting the fact that he had not known to cook the lasagna noodles before assembling the lasagna, and the dish had emerged from the oven unappetizingly al dente.

“It’s very good, sir,” J.D. said, taking a taste.

“Ow! I burned my tongue!” Gates said, narrowing her eyes at her father as though that had been his plan.

“Glad you like it, J.D.,” Miles said.

Gates blew conspicuously on the steaming surface of her stew. For a few minutes, there was only the sound of clinking spoons and slurping mouths.

“So, J.D.,” Miles said.

“Can I—“ Gates said at the same time.

They paused.

“Go ahead,” Miles said to Gates.

“Oh, no. After *you*,” Gates insisted.

“It’s really okay,” Miles said. “What were you going to say?”

“Never mind,” Gates said. “What were *you* going to say?”

“I forgot,” Miles said.

Miles and Gates resumed their slurping. J.D. looked at the clock.

“Great job last week, Gates,” J.D. said. “You’re a real good marcher.”

“You’re a good drum major,” Gates said. “You can keep time.”

“Now if only those students will watch you, maybe we can get a handle on that phasing problem,” Miles said.

“What’s phasing?” Gates asked. She heard the word tossed around on the field but did not know its meaning. Her curiosity had gotten the best of her; she momentarily forgot that she was angry at her father.

Miles looked, pleased in the way he always was when explaining a music-related question. “Sound travels at an approximate rate of 770 feet per second. A football field is 360 feet long. Therefore, a sound of a drum struck at an endzone is heard roughly half a second later by a person at the opposite endzone. That’s why you can’t trust your ears to tell you where the beat is. You have to watch the drum major’s hands. Visual cues travel more quickly than auditory ones.”

Gates yawned conspicuously and intentionally, to remind her father how boring band was.

“Our phasing was of hand last year, sir,” J.D. said.

“Yes, indeed,” Miles replied. “Yes, indeed.”

Miles recognized the sort of displaced anxiety he felt. The dinner felt to him like an exercise in phasing—he and Gates were obeying some sort of cues used to orchestrate their relationship with each other, the only problem was they were not the same cue. Each listened

more attentively, but in his efforts to come in sync with her he was only falling more dismally behind. Miles needed some shared referent with which to calibrate his and Gates' interactions.

“So,” J.D. said. “Where’s Mrs. McCormick?”

“Excuse me,” Miles said, heading for the kitchen.

“She’s dead,” Gates said matter of factly, when her father had exited.

“Oh.” J.D. looked at his bowl, then at the window, then at the carpet. “Sorry.”

“She got run over. When I was really little,” Gates said.

“That’s...so random.”

“Yeah,” Gates said.

A time to dance

In the kitchen, Miles took the brownies out of the oven. The rag he used as a pot holder slipped and part of his thumb sizzled on the hot pan.

“Shoot,” he muttered and put his thumb under the faucet.

The cold stream evoked another flow of water, one from his youth. He had been drinking from the fountain after marching rehearsal when the girl approached him. He recognized her as one of the freshmen: a girl with hair the bland silvery brown that is commonly described as mousy, who played the trumpet (badly), always marched out of step, and never spoke to anyone.

“Go ahead,” he said, courteously stepping aside.

She shook her head and mumbled something that came out sounding like a single word: “IwaswonderingifyouwouldgotoHomecomingwithme,”

Miles asked her to repeat herself, not only because she had spoken so quickly, but because his shock at being asked out was so great he didn’t quite register the reality of the situation.

“I figured you had a date... you’re the drum major and all.” Her cheeks flushed and she turned to leave.

“No, no...” Miles wondered who this girl was and why she was asking him to a dance when they had never once spoken. But he did not wonder too long. She was cute. “I would love to go.”

“Good,” she said. “I’m glad.” She and Miles exchanged serious nods, as though they were fellow diplomats who had sealed a deal whose terms were agreeable to each. The moment

passed and they stood there, not knowing how to finalize the agreement that had been reached.

Sarah fiddled with her necklace and Miles scratched his nose, which had begun to itch.

“Are you thirsty?” Miles asked.

“What?”

“You know...” He gestured lamely at the water fountain.

“Oh,” she said, as though its presence had surprised her. “I don’t know. I mean, yes.”

Seeing Sarah momentarily flustered somehow helped Miles regain his composure.

“So I’ll pick you up at eight,” he said, the line rolling off his tongue smoothly, expertly.

He had heard it many times in movies.

“The dance starts at seven,” Sarah pointed out.

“Oh.” Miles’ nose began to itch again. Was it allergies? He had never had allergies before.

“Why don’t you come at six forty-five?” Sarah offered.

“Okay.” Miles felt the need to shake her hand and seal the deal. Sarah bent over to drink from the fountain. Miles courteously averted his eyes. He felt stupid standing there looking at a blob on the carpet that had probably once been fresh, sticky gum, now gray and downtrodden from sneakers. Sarah kept drinking. Why was she still drinking? Was the conversation over? Was this his cue to exit? Or should he stick around? Should he ask for her phone number? Miles fixation on the gum blob took on a tinge of envy. If he were a gum blob, he would never have to face this kind of anxiety

“See you later,” he yelled, retreating.

Away from Sarah, he began to wonder if his stomach had sprung a leak. The cold water seemed to have leaked into all his extremities, filling his toes and fingers with numbness. Even

his nose was numb, except for the itchy parts. *How is it possible for a nose to be itchy and numb all at once?*

Miles went into one of the sound-proof practice rooms. He did not turn on the light; he didn't want anyone to know he was in there. In the darkness, he played a few measures of Mozart's Turkish March. Standing up, he played the Coda, the only part he had memorized, a triumphant assembly of rolls, sixteenth and grace notes. He played as fast as he could, faster and faster, but he could not play fast enough to shake the surge of energy that elated and terrified him all at once.

Miles took his hands off the keyboard and yelled *Woohoo!* as loud as he could. Then he did a spastic jig that involved rapid running in place and windmill-like circles with his arms. The jig and the yelling helped him jettison his energy. He remembered where he was and was once again grateful that he had not turned on the light. He did not know if anyone had passed the practice room, but he did know that even if someone had, his jig would have been hidden by darkness. Relieved and slightly relaxed, he opened the door to fluorescent lit hallway.

She was fourteen years old and a devout Christian. To the dance, she wore a loose cotton dress that looked like something out of Little House on the Prairie with its puffed sleeves, high collar and blue cornflower print. Her hair was pulled back in its customary braid, but this night the braid was of the French variety and had baby's breath in it. After hours of dancing, her upper lip glistened with dew-like perspiration.

A time to hate

This burn is worse than I thought, Miles thought as it brought tears to his eyes.

He sliced the brownies gingerly, favoring his burned thumb, and took them to the dining room.

J.D and Gates sat conferring with low voices.

“Who wants dessert?” Miles asked brightly.

“No thanks,” Gates said,

“I’ll have some, sir,” J.D. answered.

Miles was struck with a wave of gratitude towards this courteous, compliant young man.

“So, J.D. Do you attend a youth group?”

“Yes, sir,” J.D. said around a mouthful of brownie.

“Really?” Miles looked at Gates pointedly. “At Broadmore?”

“No, sir. First Presbyterian.”

“How do you like it?” Miles asked.

“It’s great. We went to Disney World last summer.”

“Really?” Miles nodded. “Did you hear that, Gates?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Gates here is a little shy,” Miles said. “She doesn’t want to go to youth group.”

J.D. gave a neutral nod.

“Yeah, I’m *shy*,” Gates said. “That’s why I was so *scared* to acolyte in front of *hundreds and hundreds of people*.”

“I guess she’s not really shy,” Miles said to J.D. “She just doesn’t *want* to go.”

Gates mashed her brownie through the tines of her fork. Clumps of sticky brown squeezed through the metal.

“Even though the youth director personally invited her,” Miles said.

J.D. drained his glass of sparkling grape juice in one swig.

“Even though it’s what her mother would have wanted,” Miles added.

“You don’t know that!” Gates stood up abruptly; her fork clattered to the ground. “You don’t know *anything!*” She took her plate and headed for the kitchen.

Miles rolled his eyes knowingly at J.D. “Sorry about her. Puberty. Hormones. You know how girls get.”

“Oh my god!” Gates screeched. “I hate you!”

Gates retreated to her room. J.D. made a polite but hasty exit.

For some reason, Miles thought back to the moment Gates had asked about phasing during dinner. That had surprised him, her asking about that even though he knew she was not happy with him. Maybe he should have answered differently, given her a deeper explanation. He thought about phasing

In the early stages of phasing, the delay between sections of the band is miniscule, but over many measures, fractions of time accumulate—the band is out of sync by a half-beat, a whole beat, a measure. The melody fragments. It sounds chaotic as shoes in a dryer.

Phasing is a problem of time, Miles thought. *That’s what I should have told her.*

A time to refrain from embracing

Sunday at nine in the morning, Sarah was in a state of panic. She had the dress, but the shoe situation was dire. She dug through her closet, but all she unearthed were her sneakers or a pair of scuffed Mary Janes that had long lost their liquid black shine, and were at least a size too small. They were scuffed and crunchy with closet grit. Sarah knew the Mary Janes were more appropriate, but she didn't know if she could survive keeping her toes in such cramped quarters for the duration of the class. And what about the sock/pantyhose dilemma?

Sarah ultimately sacrificed comfort for appearance. She didn't want Dr. Drum seeing her in sneakers, thinking that she was making a mockery of his church with her inappropriate footwear. With an air of martyrdom that was quickly becoming second nature, she stuffed her feet into the Mary Janes. In a flash of inspiration, she decided to let her heels hang out the back, as though the shoes were mules. The smushed up leather did dig into her heel a bit, but it was still a small price to pay compared to her previous discomfort.

She and her father, during the drive to church, exchanged a few trite words about the weather and her upcoming geography test. Sarah smoothed her dress over her knees. She wondered, briefly, if her father even knew where the church was. He hadn't even been inside one for his wedding. Her parents had married in an arboretum. Then she dismissed the silliness of her worry. Parents innately knew the layout of their hometowns. Sarah figured this sense of direction would be bequeathed unto her when she was sixteen, along with a driver's ed course and keys to the family car.

“Well, here we are,” her dad said, shifting the car into neutral. Sarah looked out her window at the lawn in front of the church where a sea of women in cardigans, men in suits, boys in polo shirts, and girls in dresses that were mercifully similar to her own, congregated. She was suddenly uneager to leave the familiarity of the car.

“Here we are,” she repeated.

Her father looked down at her feet. “Honey, why didn’t you tell me you needed new shoes?”

“Oh, I...” she trailed off. “These are fine. This is how all the kids wear them.”

“My daughter, the trendsetter.” He smiled. “Meet you here at eleven?”

“Sure,” she said, hopping out.

“Have fun.” He pulled away.

Standing on the lawn, Sarah realized she had no idea where to go. In her mind, a church had been a rather monolithic concept: one central building where worshipers gathered. She was pretty sure there would be a stained glass window in there somewhere. But the reality of it was vast and sprawling as a suburban shopping center. She clearly saw the chapel area, but there were other buildings circling it, small satellites, circling like small moons, Io to the sanctuary’s Jupiter. Adult Study Building, Fellowship Hall, Gymnasium... Sarah pondered the irony of having spent a week in preparation for a Sunday School class she would never find. She wondered what she would tell her father when he came to pick her up.

At some random point in time, the chaotic swirl of congregants broke into disparate groups, and trekked off to the various buildings with purpose and direction. Sarah was left alone on the lawn. She heard the faint strains of an organ. If she could not find the Sunday School class, she could at least go into the sanctuary and hear the sermon.

She pulled open the heavy door. A squat, balding man gave her a piece of paper and a warm greeting. Beyond him, another man stood dispensing programs and smiles.

“Dr. Drum!” Sarah cried. It was strange to see him in a suit, without a face mask or latex gloves.

“Well, hello, Sarah!” he said. “Good to see you!”

“Good to see you too,” she said.

“You’re going to be late for Sunday school.”

“I couldn’t find it,” she mumbled, ashamed. She felt as though she had failed some sort of test.

“It’s a big church,” he said. He spoke a few words to the other usher, who nodded and smiled at Sarah again, and led her back out the door. Before she left, she saw two other children, a boy and a girl. The boy looked to be about her age, and the girl was a few years younger. What struck Sarah was their long, flowing robes. Were these junior ministers? Some sort of baby nun and monk? The girl yawned and the boy blew a big, pink bubble. Their demeanor did not suit their pious wardrobe.

“That’s a pretty dress,” he said, walking briskly. His shiny black oxfords (the equivalent of Mary Janes for grown men, Sarah thought) clicked authoritatively on the pavement.

“My dad got it for me.” She struggled to keep up with his long paces.

“Isn’t that nice!”

Sarah feared Dr. Drum would ask her where her father was, or why he hadn’t accompanied her to church. But he just kept walking. He opened the door of a long, rectangular two-story brick building, and a blast of air conditioning hit them. Sarah didn’t see any children anywhere. They climbed up a flight of stairs and walked down a long hall.

“What grade are you in, Sarah?” he asked.

“Fifth.”

“That’s what I thought,” he nodded. “Not too soon to start thinking about braces!” He opened one of the doors, stuck his head in, and waved at the teacher. She came out into the hall and talked quietly while Sarah examined the gold flecks in the flooring. She heard the words “atheists” and “lost souls” muttered by the teacher.

The Sunday School teacher was probably not older than her mid-twenties, and she had plump cheeks, a sharp, hooked nose, and beady eyes. Her features looked as though they would be more at home on the face of an eighty year old; it was easy to see the sort of old lady the teacher would become. She had to remind herself that the teacher really was young. It was an unsettling effect. Sarah decided she did not like the teacher.

“Sarah, this is Mrs. Poltzer,” said Dr. Drum.

“Welcome, dear!” Mrs. Poltzer gave her a hug. Sarah responded stiffly. She didn’t like to be touched or called “dear” by a woman she had just met, and to whom she was not related.

“Well, you have fun,” said Dr. Drum, turning on his shiny heels.

“You’re leaving?” asked Sarah, dismayed. She had expected him to stay and assist with teaching the class. Wasn’t that what a youth director did?

“He’s got to usher,” Mrs. Poltzer explained. “Don’t look so sad! We’ll have lots of fun!”

Sarah followed Mrs. Poltzer into the classroom.

She hadn’t known what she expected until she walked into the classroom, but upon entering she immediately recognized that she did have a preconceived notion, and this did not match it. Clumsy art projects in various stages of construction lay, half completed, on the tables, surrounded by noisy girls and boys. In the windows, the sun’s rays were blocked by a swarm of

butterflies with clothespins for thoraxes and coffee filters stained with food coloring for wings. The classroom looked more like a daycare center than a house of God.

Sarah shuddered when she saw the posters on the walls, cartoon depictions of Biblical scenes she had read about in her book. Though the book also featured illustrations, they photographs of oil paintings and thus of a more sophisticated nature, appropriate for the Bible. But their similarity to the posters was undeniable; in Sarah's mind the two became linked. Mrs. Poltzer put a hand on Sarah's shoulder.

“Boys and girls, we have a new student. I know you'll give her a warm welcome.”

The children looked up, and for a moment silence covered the classroom. Sarah wondered if she would be made to explain herself, or ridiculed for some infraction. But as quick and probing as the silence was, it passed in less time than it took to draw a single breath. Then the laughter and talking began again, as though it hadn't been interrupted at all. Sarah sighed with relief.

“Go find a seat at one of the tables, dear,” Mrs. Poltzer said.

She circled the tables and waited to be invited to take a seat. The children were busily cutting shapes out of felt: crosses- doves- and gluing them to larger felt banners. The boys' banner had a decidedly militaristic bend to it—tanks rolled under a bright red cross (invoking in Sarah a recollection of Nazi paraphernalia she had seen) under a slogan that read: Soldiers of Christ.

The girls had segregated themselves on the other side of the classroom. Their banner was pastel blue. A yellow square of felt, edges trimmed with jagged scissors, sat in the middle. Sarah had trouble deciphering its meaning until she read the half completed caption: The Golden Sunbeams. She picked up a bottle of glue and prepared to glue the letters to the banner.

“Hey, that’s mine,” said a girl whose golden curls framed her face and were accentuated with a single pink bow. She looked vaguely familiar.

Sarah had seen the girl’s face before, in her dental hygienist’s wallet. “Is your name Lindsey?”

Lindsey eyed her suspiciously. “How do you know that?”

“I’m Sarah. Your mom cleans my teeth.” Sarah paused. There was no look of recognition on Lindsey’s face. “Doesn’t she ever talk about me?”

The girl flung her blonde hair over one shoulder. “My mom cleans a *lot* of people’s teeth.”

Sarah looked down. The connection from which she had hoped to milk a friendship had failed her. Lindsey looked down, too, following Sarah’s gaze.

“What’s wrong with your shoes?” Lindsey asked.

“Nothing,” Sarah said. “They’re just a little small.”

“Are you, like...*a poor person?*” Lindsey looked at Sarah as though the only reason Sarah had come was to steal canned corn and biscuit mix from the food drive basket.

“No,” Sarah said, a little too emphatically. Lindsey looked as though she suspected the defiance was meant to cloak a lie.

“Let’s wrap it up, my doves, and sing some songs.” Mrs. Poltzer circled the classroom. She laid a hand on Lindsey’s shoulder. “Isn’t the new girl nice? I’m so glad you can be friends.”

Lindsey scowled at Sarah after Mrs. Poltzer retreated to the old upright piano. Sarah felt certain that, at that moment, she officially became Lindsey’s enemy. Sarah’s toes sweated in their tight, patent leather chambers.

The children arranged their chairs into half circles, shouting with jubilation. At first Sarah thought they were enthused about singing, but it later dawned on her that perhaps they were excited because, after the songs, it would be time to go home.

“All together now!” Mrs. Poltzer pounded out chords. “I am a C!”

“I am a C-H!” the children sang back. Lindsey sat up very straight, hands folded on her lap, allowing her voice to project. Sarah, inwardly, admitted that Lindsey had a very nice voice.

“I am a C-H-R-I-S-T-I-A-N!” Mrs. Poltzer and the children sang together.

Sarah sat quietly, trying to learn the words to the song while everyone sang. Eventually she gave up and just moved her mouth so that it looked like she was singing. By the time the songs were over, Sarah was certain that she would not return to church. Whatever she was, it was not a C-H-R-I-S-T-I-A-N.

When Sunday School was over, she ran outside to the curb to wait for her father, the damp grass making her white ankle socks all cold and soggy where her heels hung over the Mary Janes. She had never been so happy to see his dented red Honda with its GO VEG! bumper sticker.

“So?” he asked. “How was it?”

“They made fun of my shoes.”

“Did you learn anything?”

Sarah shook her head. She hadn’t learned the words to the song. “Oh wait... “ she remembered. “I learned that you can glue felt together and it sticks.”

She hadn’t thought what she said was funny, but her father laughed loud and surprised her. “So, you see why your mother and I never go to church?”

“Don’t grownups go to the real church service?”

“Yeah,” he said. “But it’s the same basic thing.”

While they drove home, Sarah thought about the book. She thought about the way reading it had made her feel, and the gentle glow around the man in the picture. Nothing at church had made her feel that way.

Her father pulled into their driveway. “Your mother didn’t want you to go to Sunday School,” he told Sarah.

“I know,” Sarah said.

“But I think it’s important to try new things, test new beliefs. And you did, and you saw for yourself. I’m proud of you.”

Sarah returned his hug, but as far as what he thought she had seen, she wasn’t sure. She wasn’t sure what she had seen there at all.

A time to rend

After dinner, Miles retired to his study, where he told himself he would think about anything except the events of the day. Instead, he sat watching old tapes of Drum Corps International finals. DCI was the marching band equivalent of the NFL, and Miles, along with his students, could run off facts about DCI like any devoted fan. He knew the history of each corps, tour and rehearsal schedules. He knew that Phantom Regiment always used classical music for their shows and the Santa Clara Vanguard always used jazz. He even kept his extra tapes in the bandroom, so that during their off periods students could come in and watch DCI finals.

DCI was the trendsetter for the marching band world. What happened in DCI inevitably trickled down to smaller, high school bands. When DCI bands had made the shift from amorphous, blob-like drill that was intended to have almost an Impressionistic effect to old-fashioned, rigidly symmetrical drill, Miles had his drill writer follow the trend.

Watching the DCI tapes was not only a pleasure but a necessity. Miles glanced over his office decorations: signed school pictures of his students, photographs of his band in last year's Homecoming parade, and a procession of nine banners. Each said the same thing: Hive Regiment: State Finalist. 2nd Place. Only the years varied. Before Miles had been director, the band had never made it to state finals. But even under his renowned leadership, the band had never won.

Of course, some factors extended beyond Miles' control. The band that continually won first place was Pomona High School. They not only exhibited crisp marching and flawlessly executed drill, but field shows that were elaborate enough to rival a Broadway musical. They

sometimes incorporated pyrotechnics, and their color guard's routines made the girls look like backup dancers for Janet Jackson. Miles disagreed with this flashiness, but the judges always awarded it high General Effect points.

But perhaps most strikingly in Pomona's favor was the fact their seasonal budget exceeded one hundred thousand dollars, more than three times what the Hive Regiment's was. They began teaching incoming freshmen to march while the kids were only in sixth grade. By the time they hit the field as freshmen, the newest members of the band were already marching like seniors. A band like that might even give Gates a run for her money in a drill-down.

Also, Pomona began learning its drill for the upcoming year the day after state finals. All winter, they rehearsed their marching band music and practiced their drill, marching in the gym when it was too cold outside. As a result, they were polishing their show and putting on the finishing touches when Miles' band was just learning the first bits of drill.

Miles knew he could go to a year-round marching schedule if he chose. But to do so, he would have to sacrifice concert band. That was not a sacrifice he was willing to make. So he resigned himself to a lifetime of second place. Still, when he looked out at the row of second place flags, he couldn't help but feel a little disappointed.

Even though he knew that budget and rehearsal constraints (and perhaps his own old-fashioned nature) made a winning spot impossible, Miles still agonized over his choice for drill. He had selected for the music some of Bach's organ works. It was an unorthodox choice and he doubted it would win much applause at the high school football games. The crowd preferred renditions of Sousa marches and America the Beautiful, marching band songs to whose charm Miles had long become inured. But he didn't care much for the reaction of the football audience. The audience he designed his show for was the audience of marching band aficionados that he

would be performing for at State Finals and the numerous competitions leading up to it. He and his band saw football games as a bother, a chore. They didn't even go to most of them. The real function of the band was to compete.

Now, his challenge was to come up with a concept for the drill. Of course, the drill writer in California was responsible for most of the drill work, but Miles still needed to give the writer some guidelines.

What would Bach's music look like as a field show? he wondered.

He sharpened a pencil and placed it in his mason jar. He took it back out and tested the sharpened lead against his thumb, then admired the muted grey point it left behind. He opened his Bible, then put it back on the shelf. He removed the Bible next to it, a small, worn volume that had once been white. The name *Sarah* was inscribed on the bottom right hand corner.

When he had first noticed the gleam of gold around Sarah's neck, he asked, in a flash of jealousy, "What's that?" He thought some other boyfriend might have given her his ring.

Sarah pulled a simple gold cross from underneath her Peter Pan collar.

"You're Christian?" Miles said with a touch of dismay. He had nothing against Christians, but all his one Christian friend had seemed to befriend him only in hopes of converting him. Miles accompanied his friend to church out of goodwill, but as soon as the latter determined Miles was a lost cause, he gradually quit calling. Miles did not want the same thing to happen with Sarah.

"I guess so," she shrugged, tucking the cross back under her shirt. Miles wondered if she hid the cross under her clothes because she was ashamed. Years later, on their wedding night, he would notice that the chain was long enough that it fell between Sarah's breasts, right over her heart.

Miles thumbed through her Bible. He had prayed about Gates. But so far he hadn't gotten any clear answer. Miles decided to resort to a method of prayer that was a little unorthodox. He took Sarah's Bible and hugged it next to the center of his chest while he thought about Gates. He thought about the problem, about how she had lost (or perhaps never had) her religion. When Miles could dwell on the problem purely, without relying on words to describe it to himself, and when he felt the center of his chest open up and connect with Heaven, he closed his eyes halfway and opened the Bible randomly. His finger sought a certain spot on the page with intelligence all its own, like a divining rod pointing to an underground well. He didn't know how the minister would respond to the fact that he used the Bible as an oracle, but in all the years that he had been doing it (roughly about as long as his wife had been dead) Miles had never once gotten false or misleading advice. In fact, the verses were often eerily accurate, so wise that he was certain Jesus himself was guiding Miles' finger.

Miles looked down at the verse he had selected. Matthew 21:21.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.

Miles wasn't sure how to interpret the verse. *Seek and you will find*—he wasn't looking for anything, was he? He only wanted Gates to have a strong faith. He had asked many times that Gates be a Christian.

He did not know what to do.

Gates sat at her desk, lamplight gleaming off the glass that protected its polished wood surface. Her math homework was in front of her, but she, too, had trouble concentrating. Under

the sixty watt bulb, Gates noticed specks of dust she hadn't seen before. She cleared the books, papers, music box, framed picture of her mother and lamp from the desk and wiped its surface with glass cleaner. Then she replaced all her materials. The pristine desk top now seemed too cluttered. So she re-arranged everything until all that was left was the lamp, some crisp sheets of graph paper, and her math book. Finally, she collected pencils from around the room, sharpened them, and placed them in a mason jar. She picked up one of the pencils, figured out the x-intercept, and plotted it on the graphing paper. Then she picked up her calculator to solve for the slope.

Gates had been excited about her calculator when she first received it. It seemed far too grand for a school supply. She treated it with the reverence a martial artist affords his sword, zipping it into its leatherette carrying case and then placing it in its own special compartment in her backpack. She shuddered when she saw other classmates dropping their calculators, carving their names into the plastic, and decorating the back with stickers.

Gates had never been anything other than a mediocre student. Her teachers did not often remember her name. She was unremarkable to them, a face in the crowd even when there was not a crowd. As an elementary student, she was always delegated to the back row of the choir, never the soloist's spotlight. She had accepted her destiny never to be a star student, until she tested remarkably high on an aptitude test and was placed in the advanced math class, Algebra.

Gates supposed she had always liked her math classes, though she wasn't aware of it. She just knew she did not dread Math the way she dreaded Language Arts, where the answers were murky and shape-shifting and seemed at times to not exist at all. Language Arts was like a sloppy acolyte wearing different colored robes and walking out of step. Each grammatical rule had a thousand different contradictions; each time they read a story each student selected a

different theme when asked to delineate what the theme was. Its inconsistency and inelegance irritated Gates, and so did the fact that she was bad at it.

Numbers, on the other hand, behaved themselves. Because they were willing to work with her, Gates was willing to work with them. But she had never considered herself good at math, only less bad at it.

That morning, Gates' algebra teacher had walked to the board and drawn a vertical slash from top to bottom. Then a horizontal line of equal distance, bisecting the vertical line right through the center.

"Anyone know what this is?" She stood with her legs more than shoulder width apart, burly, tanned forearms folded above her knee-length, navy blue shorts. She resembled a PE teacher more than a math teacher. Gates wondered if she would produce a whistle at some point during the lecture.

Gates examined the symbol. It reminded her of the cross. That made her think of the acolyting fiasco, which she was determined not to dwell on.

The teacher wrote X and a Y next to the horizontal and vertical lines, respectively.

"That's a little clue." She laughed either at her own cleverness or her students' collective stupidity.

A girl in the back timidly raised her hand. "Is it an X-Y axis?"

"Speak up," the teacher demanded. The girl repeated her question a bit louder. The teacher repeated it. "Is it an X-Y axis? Well? Anyone?" She had rendered the class completely mute. "You. What is this?" She pointed at Gates.

"Um," Gates said.

"Well?" This teacher was relentless.

“I don’t know,” Gates said.

“Of course you don’t. You don’t know anything about math. But you’re here—you’re *all* here, because you’re good at it.”

Gates was simultaneously hurt and elated by the speedball effect of compliment and accusation of ignorance. But both were technically true.

The teacher leaned in to Gates. “Tomorrow you’re going to tell me and the class everything about the X-Y axis.”

Gates wondered why she had been singled out for torture.

“And everyone else, give her hell. Throw as many questions as you can at her. Read that chapter. Trip her up. Hurl something at her that she doesn’t know. Be merciless. Day after that, someone else is up in front of the firing squad.”

Ms. Tanker, or The Tank, as her students affectionately referred to her, seemed to think the best way to teach kids was to pit them against each other in spirited competition, and so each class was more like a game of dodgeball than a lecture.

It was with this sense of dread and anticipation that Gates sat, trying to make sense of her homework. She flipped back to the explanatory notes at the beginning of the chapter, where she learned that parallel lines differed only in their X and Y intercepts. The slope was identical, yet ironically, these two lines, having so much in common, were destined never to intersect, but to keep running parallel with one another to infinity. If the two lines shared a slope and the same x-y intercepts, they were no longer considered separate lines—they became one line.

Does that mean, Gates wondered, that a single line potentially contains infinite lines, even as it stretches towards infinity?

The thought seemed to meld some juncture in her brain, like solder melting and fusing two previously unattached bits of metal. The ticking of her bedside clock, the motes sparkling in the lamplight, all seemed to vibrate with new meaning. They were no longer physical *things*, but manifestations of an orderly world from which they sprang—a world of numbers.

For a moment, Gates sat still while her newly stretched mind attempted to knit itself back together. Music went through her head—the sound of the benediction she had heard that morning.

While she bent over her homework, Miles, in his study across the hall, bent his head in prayer.

The next afternoon, students swarmed in and out of the band room, assembling instruments and loudly discussing the day's events. The boy who was fond of rehearsing shirtless was writing TUBAS RULE across his bare chest using short strips of black duct tape.

“You’re going to get tan lines around the words if you do that,” said a bronzed girl as she assembled her piccolo. Evidently, she had experience with tan lines.

“Duh. That’s the point,” the boy explained. “When I’m eighteen, I’m going to get it tattooed there, but with those fancy letters.”

“What do you want to do that for?” she asked.

“Cause then everyone’ll know that tubas rule!”

She denied his claim and asserted that piccolos could kick tubas’ asses any day, and a heated debate between the sections ensued.

Miles headed towards the field to set up the outdoor podium. On his way, he told J.D. to call the band to attention and lead them out to the field as soon as their instruments were assembled. Crossing the parking lot, he saw that the trees' leaves had already begun to lose their chlorophyll, revealing the first hints of red and yellow underneath. He remembered lessons from a long-ago biology class: The red and yellow pigment was always present in the leaves, but green chlorophyll masked its presence, just as the brightness of the sun camouflages the presence of the stars. Even though the days were just as hot as summer, they had begun to shorten, and the trees picked up on that, losing the vital, photosynthetic green. He supposed the oak in his front yard would be losing its leaves soon, too. The thought filled him with an unbearable melancholy.

Though Gates had betrayed no inward shift in her attitude towards church in the recent past, something had been changing inside her, something he was too unperceptive to notice. Only now that the change was fully evident did he notice it. Acolyting had been the green façade to the red of Gates' faithlessness. He wondered if it was too late to reverse this trend. Or whether, like the autumn leaves, he must watch his daughter wither and fall from the trunk of the church. Miles felt certain that this would not have happened if his wife had been alive.

The band's field was a substantial distance from the school, beyond the field where the football teams and other athletic teams practiced. The latter field was kept pristine, yardlines regularly painted. The field the band was confined to was in an area of cleared swamp, so the ground was often marshy, and the yardlines needed frequent re-spraying (not by the groundskeeper, whose only requirements were to maintain athletic fields.) Miles had repeatedly complained to the school administration about the unfair distribution of premium field time, but the principal maintained that marching band was not a sport and therefore not as deserving of the

good field. Miles countered by saying that band members did everything the sports team members did: they trained and they competed. But the principal, a reformed jock herself, refused his pleas every year. Miles thought she secretly wished to continue the natural antagonism between band geeks and jocks, and that she considered Miles a wimp.

As a child, Miles had not been unaware of the wimpy profile he cut. He played the clarinet, not the drums or tuba or any other traditionally masculine instrument, and so was considered, even by his fellow band nerds, a wimp. A wimp among wimps. He had not managed to shake this image until he started marching band, where his ability to stand at attention for hours on end earned him respect.

Miles would never forget his first exposure to marching band. His band director had invited the marching band to perform for his younger students, in the hopes that the latter would someday follow the latter's example and join the Regiment.

The one hundred and eighty members came in full dress. Twelve snares, five quads, and a six man bass line pounded out a cadence as a line of band members, seemingly unending, filed into the band room.

The middle school students were enraptured by the cadence, drumming along with palms on thighs, nodding heads. A few girls shimmied. By the time the cadence ended, the walls of the band room were lined with marching band members. The crispness of their uniforms, all gleaming buttons and bright braid, was rivaled only by the crispness of their posture. The cadence ended just as the last member took his place. The marching band yelled, "HUH!" as though to emphasize their arrival. Miles was deeply impressed. There was something atavistic yet systematic about their simultaneous expletive.

While the director talked about audition requirements, rehearsal schedules, Miles stared at the band members. They did not seem like teenagers. They barely seemed like humans. They all stood in the same position: legs spread into a V-shape of identical angles, instruments in their gloved hands, heads pointed at the ground. Their white plumes ruffled in the air conditioning but their facial expressions never wavered. Miles could not see their eyes, only jawlines. It was nearly impossible to determine the gender of a marching band member. They all seemed androgynous, perhaps robotic.

The band member wearing a uniform identical to the rest except for the color (it was white) yelled, “DETAIL TEN HUT!” The strength of his yell made every child in the room jump. The rest of the band yelled in response, “HIT!” while bringing their legs together, heads and instruments up, all at the same time. The drum major clapped his gloved hands four times. “DETAIL HORNS UP!” Every horn snapped up.

Miles was sure what happened next blasted every tiny, sound-sensitive hair from his cochlea. The sound, intended to fill a football stadium, crushed painfully and thrillingly against the childrens’ ears.

Many of the children planted fingers in ears. Miles took pride in keeping his ears unprotected, as though such an act signified his willingness to absorb all of the band’s sound and consequently, his willingness to someday contribute to it. Miles wondered if, all over the school, classes were being interrupted by the noise, if other children were wondering, “What’s *that?*” and wishing they, too, had a front row seat to the action.

When the songs finished, the band filed out the same way they had come, this time to a different cadence. This one, however, featured more yelling than the first. The band yelled “HUH!” again, and then something that sounded like “CHICKEN!” to Miles at first, but on the

second yell, it more closely resembled “KICK IT!” He noted the differences between marching and walking. The marchers’ upper bodies did not waver. They all walked in step, of course, but not only that; their heels hit the ground simultaneously, and their toes pointed skyward as though their feet wore invisible stirrups. Feet rolled smoothly from heel to toe.

The drum major stayed behind to answer questions.

“Why did you want to join marching band?” one of the students asked.

“Well, actually,” the drum major grinned. “I always saw a lot of cute girls at the practices, so I said, ‘Okay, I’ll join. Whatever.’ And it ended up being pretty cool.”

The kids all laughed. They were sold. Miles had been sold as soon as he saw the uniforms. He had already decided he would someday be drum major.

Miles climbed to the top of his bird’s nest, a tall, rickety structure that allowed him to enjoy a bird’s eye view of the action. Gates sat on the bleachers, her back towards the bird’s nest. His students socialized instead of standing at attention. He wished they could always be as diligent as the band Miles had seen when he was still a child.

“Okay, everyone,” Miles said through the megaphone. “Get your drill and find your first sets. I want to blow through the first five pages today.”

The band members consulted small, square pieces of paper on which their individual coordinates had been written. Only Miles held a sheet that showed the whole of the design; the responsibility to corral the kids into their places and make sure the pattern on the field matched the one on the page was his and his alone.

Miles glanced from the white order of the page to the jumble on the field. The drill he held in his hands was spare and elegant, dots representing each student in the design, diagonals crisp, curves rounded, each dot equally spaced from the others. Now, the drill had been

translated to the bodies of one hundred and fifty nine teenagers. As is often the case, much meaning and structure was lost in translation. A line started, then veered of in another direction, then broke entirely. Miles' directed the body of students until their combined forms roughly approximated his mental ideal of the drill. The task of refining or "cleaning" the drill would continue until State Finals. It was potentially endless.

"You should be off the *second* hash mark," he told a piccolo who had wandered into a crowd of trombones.

"Any time you're not with your section, stop and double check your drill. Make sure you've read it right," he continued, raising his voice so the command would carry to the whole band. They had all made that mistake at one time or another. Miles thought he saw the straggling piccolo cast a flirtatious smile at a trombone (or *tromboner*, as the boys were fond of calling themselves) before rejoining her section. But maybe he was too far away to discern the exact shade of meaning in the students' seemingly prolonged eye contact.

Probably just a friendly smile, Miles re-assured himself. He certainly hoped so. It was a little early in the semester for his students to have developed the intense romances that inevitably led to heartbreak right before State Finals.

No, he decided, noticing a distinctly coquettish sway of the piccolo player's hips as she walked, reluctantly, towards the second hash mark. He saw the trombone notice it, too. *That's definitely flirting.*

"Let's pick up the pace," he said through his megaphone. "I want to see everyone *running* back to position. Is that clear?"

It was evident to Miles that very few band members had internalized the concept of an 8-5 step. Instead of being spaced an even two paces apart, the band members either clustered together or spread

Miles climbed down from his bird stand and began marking off two paces between each band member, grabbing them by the shoulders and moving them manually when necessary, interrupting conversations and flirtations with impunity and perhaps a trace of spiteful satisfaction. They could flirt on their own time, not the band's time.

It was a funny thing, a marching band. As a young boy, Miles had wondered why groups of soldiers were referred to as "troops," but a single soldier was never a single "troop." Troop was an identity that could not be assumed in solitude. Miles was reminded of the Bible verse: "Where three or more are gathered in my name, there I am too." Somehow, quantity altered quality.

Similarly, Miles' students underwent a shift when, in aggregate, they formed a band. He did not even view them as agents in the marching experience. The marching band did not consist of one hundred fifty nine members. There were only two members of any marching band: the band and the director. The band had an aggregate personality all its own, arising from (but not the same as) the personalities of the individuals—their problems, complaints, strengths, virtues, or vices. The band became like one organic system. And like a body, a weakness in one section compromised the integrity of the whole.

Each band had a different personality. Miles had had subdued bands, pensive bands, exuberant bands—and the bands at any given point had different emotions. Miles could read the emotions of a band better than the emotions of his daughter. The slightest droop of an elbow told him the band needed a water break. And the upraised chin of a short, chubby alto

saxophone player told him the band was happy and content, borne across warm grass in rolling, 8-5 steps.

Miles' ultimate goal was to eliminate the human emotions that plagued a band. He had wondered before if this was possible, whether it was really desirable. He decided, ultimately, that it was both. A band, though composed of humans, was not itself a human. Human emotions were not only unnatural for a band, they were undesirable. Miles strained to tame the band thusly, because only when the band had eliminated human emotions could it be a pure, perfect vessel for the only emotions it should ever convey: those inarticulate yearnings embedded in music.

If Miles was not mistaken, this band had a personality, too.

"No talking when you're at attention," he said.

Cantankerous.

"You can eat that sandwich when practice is over."

Rebellious.

"I *told* you, you're with the flutes. Not the trombones!"

Headstrong.

As soon as he got one section of the band into formation, another moved and erased his last efforts. Miles felt he was practicing engraving on a sandy, wave-swept shore. The more he helped his students, the more they resisted. They grew impatient, bored, restless. He felt the first tendrils of frustration pushing insidiously into his mind, like hairy, buried roots into a house's foundation. He tried to quash the frustration. What was frustration but a lesser degree of anger? What was anger but the son of hatred? And hatred, Miles knew very well, fed the blind, hungry

worm. But he could not maintain his usual patient demeanor. The band's frustration was quick to rub off on him.

Or was it the other way around?

A time to keep silence

“So,” Miles said, craning his head over his shoulder as he backed out of his faculty parking spot. “How did we look today? Were you watching?”

Gates turned her face towards the passenger window, pointedly ignoring the question. She intended to maintain a silent front to her father and a Cold War scale of tension and anxiety, until he acceded to her demands by 1. Apologizing for the “hormone” comment and her ensuing duress. 2. Removing his Confirmation Class attendance policy. So far, her tactics had not had much visible effect on Miles, and Gates found the task of maintaining cold indifference and brutal silence unexpectedly taxing. Several times she almost spoke to her father before remembering that she was supposed to be mad at him.

No, not mad, she corrected herself. Well, sort of mad. Mad in the same way that the U.S. is mad at Cuba for being Communist.

So Gates kept the embargo on her love, and waited for her affection-starved father to come groveling.

“Well, you should watch the rehearsal,” Miles said. He had decided it was best to act normal around Gates, so as not to give her the pleasure of a reaction to her bratty, insolent behavior. If she thought she could wear him down with this silent treatment—well, she had something else coming!

She can act as cold as she wants. Be a little snowman for all I care, Miles thought. I’m a glacier—slow but relentless.

Gates reached into her backpack and retrieved her math book.

Miles turned on the radio. He found a country music station and sang loudly along. Because he knew neither the words nor the tune, his was a rather unpleasant interpretation of “Friends in Low Places.”

Gates scowled at her math book.

“I’m not big on social graces,” Miles sang. “Hey, I’m getting the hang of this chorus.”

Gates rolled down her window.

“If this is too loud for you, sweetheart, just say so,” Miles told her.

Gates leaned her head out, as far away from the speaker as possible.

“Oh, you want some fresh air,” Miles said. He used his power controls to roll down every window. “There you go, dear”

Brisk fall air blasted Miles and Gates. “Isn’t this nice.” Miles had to yell over the rushing air and country music. “So invigorating.”

Gates buttoned her cardigan and folded her arms so that her hands were in her armpits. Miles felt his hands on the steering wheel go numb. His ears ached with cold.

Miles pulled into Soaring Oaks. “Mmm, mmm. Nice, cold weather. Stew weather!”

Gates had closed her eyes and was feigning sleep as he turned into the driveway.

“I really like this new side I’m seeing of you, Gates,” Miles said as he put the car in park. “So agreeable. Never a contrary word.”

Instead of leaping out of the car and away from his presence, Gates sat motionless, not even unbuckling her seat belt. Her body remained still, while her head swiveled to make eye contact. She stared at Miles, but her eyes betrayed no thought, no flash of emotion. They were two dead ends, a show of surfaces. She had cut off even visual access to her inner life.

Miles detected a very slight movement out of the corner of his eye. In her lap, one of Gates' hands stirred. A single finger extended almost imperceptibly, like a balloon gradually filling with air, until it was upright. Miles did not have to look twice to see which finger it was.

Gates kept her eyes penny-flat and her body motionless as though she were standing at attention. The car made ticking noises as its engine cooled. Miles retreated, all the while feeling the finger as though it were poking him in the back.

I won. Gates felt a rush of delirious pride. She leaned back into her seat and retracted the finger.

She noticed motion, glinting. From the ignition, Miles' keys swayed like a pendulum.

Weird. Dad never forgets to take his keys. He didn't even put The Club on the steering wheel.

The arc of the key's back and forth swaying narrowed until they were still. Gates knew that if her father had forgotten his keys, he must be very upset indeed.

The pride evaporated, the rationalizations disappeared, like melting snow revealing a bitter, winter-ravaged landscape. Gates already had her hand on the door handle before she thought to stop herself from going after him with an apology. She reminded herself that he deserved the treatment.

But as she did so, she pressed her hand to the vinyl driver's seat, to her father's lingering warmth.

Gates and Miles were amazed not only by the force of their mutual antagonism, but the naturalness with which it came. Miles was astonished by the rapidity with which the little barbs rolled off his tongue, his surgeon-like dexterity in manipulating each of Gates' peeves. Gates was surprised by the effortless with which she turned away from her father, deflecting his missiles with a force field to rival the U.S.S. Enterprise's. When forced into close proximity with Miles, e.g., in the car on the way to school, she spirited her consciousness light years away. Warp Nine, engage!

Gates had not really intended the silent treatment to continue for this long. But she could not retreat. If she caved now, all the energy and time she had invested into resisting would be for naught.

Miles became slightly concerned after Gates' silence had passed the two week mark. He worried that it signaled some emotional or social deficit on her part. But Gates seemed perfectly happy and well-adjusted—when Miles was not around. He saw her chatting with his students during band rehearsal; it seemed to Miles that she was even more social than before her self-imposed silence at home. Gates' mid-semester progress report had been good. Her math teacher had even given her an A+ for class participation.

This too shall pass. Most girls Gates' age threw little tantrums like this. Gates just has more self-discipline than most of them, Miles thought, not without a touch of paternal pride.

So their conflict stretched on. For the most part, Gates and Miles were under a great deal of tension, remaining ever vigilant against the opponent. But the spheres in which they had traditionally interacted became less integral. Gates no longer went to church with Miles, and she had taken to studying in the band room rather than watching his rehearsals in the afternoon. When they were at home, Miles and Gates spent their time behind the closed and locked doors of

their respective rooms. For the most part, they were comfortable in their isolated, parallel lives. They had other things to think about. Gates studied her algebra. Miles fretted about the band.

He had a lot to be worried about. A larger than normal percentage of his freshmen had dropped out of band. Miles had overheard J.D. counseling a young student:

“Band sucks. I hate it. The teacher’s a dick,” the freshman had complained. “I *told* him I had to drive my girlfriend to get her wisdom teeth out, and he *still* bitched me out for being late!”

“How late were you?” J.D. asked diplomatically.

“That’s the thing-- I wasn’t late! I was on time. And Mr. McCormick goes, ‘If you’re on time, you’re late.’ And he made me do ten pushups!”

“Mr. McCormick’s usually cool,” J.D. said. “Maybe he was just having a bad day.”

When Miles looked at his band spread across the field in formation, he saw gaps in the drill that missing students would have filled. The designs on the field reminded him of a puzzle with crucial pieces missing. Each time a student dropped out of band, he left a “hole” behind on the field. The remaining members were affected by the absence of these students; they had to imagine these departed band members were still on the field, and march in line with where they would have been. Though Miles helped adjust their positions on the field to minimize the appearance of each hole, the problem of the holes could not be completely solved without a total re-write of the drill. And it was too late in the semester for that. State Finals loomed, only four weeks away.

Miles’ days became monotonous trudges, book-ended by ten, eleven hours of weighty, almost narcotic sleep. He woke from darkness, the sun rose, achieved its pinnacle, and in its waning light his band rehearsed. The days grew colder and the period of darkness longer. Feeling that the band’s show was not at the point it should have been by early October, Miles

scheduled rehearsals from eight a.m. to five p.m. every Saturday. He cancelled the band's appearances at pep rallies and football games so that they could rehearse the drill instead of stadium songs. And when he went home each night, in the few hours between dinner and bed, he sequestered himself in his study and worked on the drill for the show's closer.

Miles' "study" closely resembled a cell or isolation chamber. It was isolated from the rest of the house; its intended function was a utility room. The "study" had been designed to hold a washer and dryer and not much else. A tiny, windowless room shaped like a shoebox, it featured a desk that was really little more than an old door resting on cinderblocks, atop which band paraphernalia and office supplies intermingled: broken reeds, old drill, a stapler shaped like a mallard duck.

A small digital piano and a music stand occupied the other end of the room. Miles' original intent in inhabiting the utility room was to save the house from the noise of his practicing. At the time, he and Sarah had worried about waking their newborn daughter. They had also reasoned that it would be better to set up the office in the utility room, leaving the third bedroom free for a future son or daughter.

Little about Miles' office had changed in the nine years since Sarah's death. The stacks of drill had grown a little higher; the door supporting them sagged a little lower. But the fluorescent light had the same bluish flicker, and the space heater switched on and off at the same intervals. Miles turned on his keyboard and set the metronome ticking a brisk allegro—what he referred to as a Mozart allegro. A Mozart allegro was a little faster than a regular allegro. Allegro means a walking speed, he always told his students. Mozart must have been a fast worker.

A time to keep

Miles played Mozart's Turkish March. His mother, Bonnie, had taught him to play it when he was twelve years old. Before he began taking lessons, Miles had never been admitted to the parlor where the piano stood. She kept the door locked when she was not practicing or with a student, with the spurious claim that Miles might "hurt himself" on the piano. He remembered, vividly, his first time crossing the threshold: the deep, soft, sound-absorbing carpet. The drawn blinds, admitting only soft, yellow afternoon light, blocking out the rest of the world. Miles neither heard nor saw the world of honking cars, barking dogs, and squealing neighborhood children. Surrounded by this inner space, into which no intruder was admitted, Miles felt suspended in some embryonic state, enclosed in egglike solitude. He liked it.

Miles had felt irrational jealousy towards the stream of children who were privy to his mother's secret musical world. After Miles threw away his toy soldiers, his mother said he "needed a new hobby now that he had outgrown his little army phase." She suggested piano lessons.

For their first lesson, she played a demonstration piece. The shift that came over her as she sat on the piano bench was palpable. There was a loosening, a shaking off, in her face. It seemed as though she had removed some uncomfortable garment—a corset or girdle—and was now more fully herself. Her eyes glazed slightly and her jaw slackened. She would have looked like a person in a coma if it were not for her impeccable posture: hips directly under spine, wrists aligned, head upright as though suspended from the ceiling by an invisible thread.

The first note she played was a B flat. It would be Miles' favorite note for the rest of his life. He felt as though his bones were a tuning fork humming the B flat, that the B flat was the

resonance of his body, the way metal had a specific heat. The rest of the music he did not remember, only the way his mother looked playing it. It was hard for Miles to imagine his parents having a life in which they were assigned roles other than that of his mother and father—lives in which they were children, lovers, students, friends. When Bonnie played, though, he was able to look past this egocentrism to see Bonnie as she really was. Even at six years old, he knew his mother had showed him a very precious thing.

When she finished, she underwent the shift again. A look came down over her, like a velvet curtain cloaking a stage, a camel's clear, protective lid sliding down over an eye too delicate to be exposed to sand and desert winds.

“Well, Miles.” She smoothed her skirt. “What do you think?”

“Neat.” It was all Miles could think of to say.

Music was a funny thing, Miles thought as he reminisced. Like a day, a story, or a life, a piece of music unfolded in time. Playing the Turkish March, a piece Miles had learned when he was twelve years old, Miles felt that he was situated at the hub of a wheel: the center that neither moves nor changes, even as the wheel rolls on. The various points in time at which he had played the Turkish March—his piano lessons as a twelve year old, in his study while Sarah nursed young Gates, the present day—all presented themselves. While he played, Miles felt for just a moment that he could choose among them, use this nodal point to return himself to whatever juncture he liked best.

When one daydreams about the past more than one speculates about the future—is this a harbinger of old age? Miles wondered.

A time to break down

Miles reached the end, heeded the repeat sign, and went back to the March's beginning again.

After practicing for half an hour, Miles felt mentally limber enough to tackle the taxing work of writing drill. He sat at his desk/door and pressed the tip of his ballpoint pen into his thumb repeatedly, leaving a little constellation of blue ink stars on the Milky Way swirl of his thumbprint. Miles watched the dusty silk plant on his desk undulate ever so slightly every time the space heater switched on. A perpetual sense of déjà vu trailed him.

Maybe it's the lack of sleep, he thought. Like when I had those nightmares.

As a child, Miles had suffered a bout of prolonged insomnia shortly after unearthing his father's war pictures. Fear of the worm precipitated the insomnia—fear that the worm became active when his body was unconscious, eating and laying eggs as he slept. Miles had decided to avoid sleep, and thusly, the worm's nocturnal stirrings

He discovered that although it seemed like life was a compilation of many days and many nights, this was an illusion. There was only one day and only one night. He had learned this because he knew that 2:39 on Tuesday night was indistinguishable from 2:39 on Sunday night. And 11:02 on Wednesday morning was indistinguishable from 11:02 on Thursday morning. True, there might be other circumstances to foster the illusion that these were different days and different nights: a change in weather, a change in clothes, a change in dreams—but these changes did not alter the fundamental sameness of each day and each night. Like different

flavors added to a cup of clear water, these subtle differences altered the appearance but not the essence. Miles felt trapped in a sort of limbo, perpetually exhausted, in a day and night that never ended. He had only been able to sleep at night after starting the piano lessons. At night, when he felt the worm begin to stir, he practiced scales until his eyes felt hot and bleary. Sometimes he fell asleep under the grand piano. Eventually, his insomnia faded.

Now it was back. Miles drew a series of interlocking cubes in the margins of his paper. There were no commonalities between his childhood bout of insomnia and his current one, he decided. He had not been having nightmares lately. In fact, he had not been dreaming at all. He decided it was probably stress from the imminent band competition. That sort of thing. Maybe it was even possible that Gates' little tantrum was worrying him, too. Maybe.

A time to gather stones together

Gates sat at her desk, working on science homework. The textbook detailed the layers of the earth.

“Have you tried to dig a hole to China?” the book inquired.

“No,” Gates thought. “That’s stupid.” She had become more willing to engage in discourse with her study materials since beginning *The Silence*.

“If you have, you probably didn’t get very far! The Earth has a diameter of 12,700 kilometers!”

Gates quickly calculated the radius and then—just for kicks-- the area of the Earth. She frowned at her answer. This was the area for a flat surface. The Earth was a perfect sphere. How could she get the area for a sphere? She meditated on this for a while without success before returning to the science chapter.

She found it surprising that the center of the earth was so hot, like the sun’s polarity. The sun was hot, burning gas—the center of the earth was hot, burning stone. And only in a very thin slice between these two burning centers—a slice no more substantial than a microscope slide, really—could life arise. The surface of the earth was like a thin, translucent scrim, behind and before which all the real action took place.

“The mantle is made of solid stone and behaves like a viscous liquid,” the book informed her. “Wait a second, you are thinking. The mantle is a *solid* that *flows*? *I can’t be reading this right!*”

I was not thinking that, Gates thought. *Retard.*

“But you *are* reading that right!” The textbook continued, cheerfully oblivious. “The shape of the earth, along with other clues, tells us the stones beneath our feet flow and move. But you won’t sink like quicksand, so don’t worry!”

I wasn’t. Gates turned the page.

“The mantle stone is effectively solid if you think of days, years, or other decades. But the Earth doesn’t function in conventional time. Its life is measured in geological time, which spans many millions of years! That’s a lot of birthdays, huh? So even though the mantle flows like liquid, it happens very slowly!”

Geological time, Gates thought. *Does that mean there’s a different time for everything? Insect Time? Human Time? Star Time? If everything is on different time standards, is everything out of sync, like when the band phases?*

Gates had recently learned that a single line drawn thusly: _____ is not a line, but a segment. Drawn thusly: <-----> with arrows pointing in opposite directions, the segment becomes a line. A line stretches infinitely in each direction. Gates liked to think of the lines she drew on paper continuing off the page, even if they weren’t visually represented by her smudge of gray lead, and traveling on towards the infinite. She had figured that each line she drew must meet itself eventually, like the Earth’s equator. Was this the line’s secret—did all lines become circles? What if the progression taught in church—birth, aging, death, afterlife—only represented a segment of a greater and more mysterious line? What before this segment? And what after?

Gates remembered the exact moment her mother died. She had been in the front yard with Miles, lying on cool, prickly grass and watching an ant scale a blade of grass, when something flashed in the corner of her eye, like a spot of light reflected from a mirror. For a

moment, everything seemed to hang suspended, as raindrops seem temporarily to halt their fall when caught in a sudden flash of lightning. Then, just as suddenly, everything was normal again, but different—as though recalibrated by an unseen hand.

A time to mourn

The ant still scaled the blade of grass, and a plane still whined somewhere in the sky. But the difference was undeniable. A shift had taken place at the core. It would be a few minutes before the force rippled to the crust, forcing seismic plates apart in an earthquake. Gates tracked the evolution of the event: A phone call. Her father putting her in the car without fastening her into the car seat. Him telling her to stay there, stay there and don't dare move, while he joined a big crowd of people, some of them in uniforms, surrounded by big white trucks with flashing lights. And a few hours later, his red eyes and a wavery voice that told her mother was dead.

“This glove—“ he held up a yellow dishwashing glove. “This is Mommy's body. And this hand—“ he wiggled the fingers on his left hand. “Is Mommy's soul.”

He slid on the glove. “When Mommy was born, her soul went into her body.”

“What's a soul?” Gates asked.

“The part of us that never dies,” Miles said.

Gates nodded.

“Now that Mommy is dead, her soul isn't in her body any more.” Miles took off the glove and waved his hand over his head. “Now her soul is in Heaven.”

“Okay,” Gates said.

Miles told her that she would see her mother again someday, that it was going to be okay. Everything would be okay, he said.

“Don't be sad,” he told Gates.

“I'm not sad,” she said.

“You’ll be okay.” Miles’ face assumed a rubbery, wrinkled up position she had never seen before. Gates thought he was making a scary face like a Halloween mask because he thought she needed cheering up, and she chuckled dutifully. But this did not seem to be the response Miles was looking for. He covered his crumpled face with his hands and his whole body trembled. Gates did not know what to do.

“You’ll be okay,” she repeated. Gates felt a flash of understanding, similar to what she had experienced when her mother taught her to read simple words, when she connected the letters C A T with the creature that had four legs and pointy ears and a scratchy tongue. Miles had been telling *himself* not to be sad. He had been telling *himself* that Sarah was in Heaven.

Gates knew that something had made her father very sad. Not only sad, though. Afraid. Terrified. She sensed it in his every gesture. Gates did not really understand what her father had told her. But she could tell that her father did not really believe it. Otherwise, how could he have been afraid?

A time to cast away stones

Gates closed the science book and pulled on her sneakers. She taped a note (“Gone for a walk”) to the back door, where her father would see it if he ever emerged from his study. Gates pressed an ear to the closed study door. She heard her father playing a peppy, upbeat march on the piano; the sound both pleased and disappointed her. She would have felt guilty if his duress kept him from enjoying his normal activities. But she wanted to hear some sign of remorse—if not outright weeping, at least a song that was more melancholy and brooding. Maybe some Beethoven.

Gates smelled burning leaves. A stiff breeze pushed leaves down the street and seemed to scour the air, sweeping away summer pollen and humidity. Gates wished she had brought a windbreaker. Since she had stopped watching her father’s rehearsals, she had become less aware of the weather changes.

Gates quickened her pace and looked down at the cracks in the sidewalk. The old rhyme, *Step on a crack, break your mother’s back*, had always given her a pang of longing. Even though she wondered whether the superstition applied to her, Gates avoided every crack. Just now, she noticed that her strides were longer; she did not have to take two steps between every crack.

Look at that. I’m tall.

Gates had observed pimples and body odor and all the precursors to adolescence, but in a distracted, disjointed way, never really connecting them with their cause.

I’m growing up.

She recalled her father's words: "It'll be Advent before you know it." He was right, but she would not be donning the special Advent robes. From here on out, she would watch as liturgical season after liturgical season passed her by, unrepresented by her clothes.

Not many weeds sprouted from the tidy yards Gates passed. The trees looked spindly and weak without their leaves, like shorn sheep. Through their branches, Gates sat the church's steeple, topped with a crucifix. Trees obscured the bottom of the crucifix; the exposed part looked like a + symbol. Like an x-y diagram.

An x-y diagram has four quadrants, Gates thought. And the year has four seasons. Was there a correlation? The upper right hand quadrant—that was (+,+). What was the most positive season of the year? Gates only had to think for a second. Summer, of course—no school, no homework. Warmth and freedom. Moving clockwise around the x-y diagram, one came to the bottom right hand quadrant: (+,-). The positive waned; the negative waxed. Easy. Fall. Next came winter. Winter, cold and dead. Midterm exams. The flu. Winter was definitely (-,-). And above winter, upper lefthand quadrant: spring: (-,+). Things started to look up. Summer loomed; trees budded. From the negative came the positive. And then the cycle started again.

Gates folded her arms as the wind blasted her face. Her teeth had begun to chatter. She felt a distant rumbling—the sound of drums. The drumline must be having a sectional, she thought. She wondered if her father had ordered the sectional.

Those poor guys, Gates thought. All they ever do is rehearse.

She was close to the school, so she decided to head over to the football field and check out the rehearsal. Her father wouldn't be there, she knew—the section leader would be conducting the drumline's rehearsal. Despite herself, she wondered just how the band was progressing.

Gates hung back, not wanting any of the band members to see her lest they report to her father that she had watched the rehearsal. She settled herself near the brush on the outlying regions of the school grounds, feeling vaguely like a stalker.

The drumline made loop after loop around the track in parade formation, like an electric train, practicing a cadence. Gates figured they would play this cadence after each performance of the field show, as the band was leaving the field. Though the cadence was not judged, it was still best to leave the judges with a good impression.

Gates had heard this drum cadence enough to know it was named “Chicken- Oo-Noo,” and students enjoyed it for several reasons. For one thing, everyone agreed that the cadence kicked ass. Even jocks, stoners, and other natural antagonists towards the marching band began to bob their heads and slap their thighs when they Chicken-Oo-Noo. The band members enjoyed the cadence because of the vocal accompaniments. The cadence went as follows:

Drumline: DUN dun dun dun, dun dun DUN

Band:“HUH!”

Drumline: DUN dun dun dun, dun dun DUN

Band:“HUH!”

Drumline: DUN dun dun dun, dun dun DUN

Band:“CHICKEN!”

Oftentimes, hapless freshman either yelled CHICKEN when they should yell HUH or mistook the word CHICKEN for KICK IT. Their embarrassment was part of a subtle yet existent form of hazing.

“Guide left!” the section leader called, as the rows began to become wavy and unrecognizable. He called the drumline to a halt, because the combination of marching and music threatened to unravel the tightly regimented form

“You should always be watching to make sure you are in line. And make sure you aren’t too close to anyone else. The intervals between you, the people next to you, and the people in front and behind you should be exactly the same.” He demonstrated by moving five students out of the clump. One student stood in the center and he arranged the other students around her. “Like you’re standing in the center of a cross with sides of equal length.”

Gates had to cough, but she stifled it.

What am I doing here? she wondered, choking back the cough.

As soon as the drumline resumed their march, she crept away.

A time to cast away stones

Neither Sarah nor her parents mentioned that Sunday again. She thought about returning the dress, since she doubted she would ever wear it again, but decided against it because she had worn it once and it wouldn't be right to return a used dress. And there was always the spring class photo. In the meantime, the dress stayed in the closet, only emitting occasional sussurations from its tissue shroud. The sound nagged Sarah, making her want to do something, but she wasn't sure what.

The illustrations on Dr. Drum's Bible now seemed garish, childish. She hid the Bible behind the dress until she could return it with her next dentist appointment. She was ashamed of having it, the same way she was ashamed that she had once killed a beetle that was particularly nasty looking, the way she had stared a crippled people before she knew that wasn't polite. It was a kind of childish indiscretion. But then she felt another shame. She felt ashamed of hiding the Bible away like some embarrassing secret, ashamed of being ashamed. This wasn't enough for her to remove the Bible from the sticker and dirt encrusted floor of her closet, but she did wrap it in an old blouse. For protection, and because she thought she had heard that Bibles weren't supposed to touch the ground. Or was that American flags?

Sarah felt much older than eleven when her birthday came. She had her customary dinner out with her family. Her parents gave her a music box, watch and a calendar with kittens on it. They liked to discourage materialism. After they got home, her mother came up to her room and presented, to Sarah's mortification, a training bra and a box of maxi pads. She also brought Sarah a card from her grandparents that contained a ten dollar bill and the admonishment "not to spend it all on taffy and ribbon candy."

Sarah rode her bike to the bookstore. The right thing to do would be to buy some nice stationery to send her grandparents a thank-you note. But she didn't want to spend her birthday money on that. She found the kitten calendar her parents had gotten her in the aisle next to the stationery and avoided looking at the price tag. She wished they had gotten her the calendar with puppies instead.

Sarah perused the juvenile fiction. The books for girls her age were all about girls who liked babysitting, solving mysteries, and kissing boys. None of these fell within Sarah's interests. She passed the Philosophy section without flicking a single glance at the titles.

The book drew her eye like a nail to a magnet. She had to stand on her tiptoes and stretch her hand to pick it up. Its cover was pure white, simulated leather. It felt reassuringly solid and sturdy. Its spine was not overly stiff; it flopped open in her hand. Though the book was thick, it would not be hard to keep it open. The pages were translucent, almost membranous. There were no pictures, only a map in the back. As she flipped through, she noticed some of the words were in red. They looked like little fires, burning themselves off the page, images powered like hot air balloons, lifting themselves off the page. And when she read them, she was reminded of poetry: Shakespeare, Homer, except there was an esoteric, ancient wisdom in these words that all the writers she had read had only grazed. She looked at the back: Holy Bible, King James edition.

Sweating, heart palpitating as though she were about to steal the book, she headed towards the counter and placed it on the counter. She looked right and left to make sure nobody would recognize her. A few seconds elapsed. The man behind the counter didn't budge from his newspaper. She shifted from foot to foot and contemplated buying a decoy book. Perhaps one of those babysitting ones.

“Excuse me,” she said, a bit too quietly. The man cleared his throat and rustled the paper. “Excuse me!” she repeated. “I’d like to buy this.” She pushed the Bible forward. She wondered if there was an age limit on buying Bibles, like there was for R-rated movies, and whether she would be restricted to the illustrated variety until she turned eighteen.

“Oh, hello,” said the old man behind the counter. The way he peered down at her, moving his neck instead of his whole body, reminded Sarah of a turtle. “Engraving?”

“What?” she asked.

“You want this engraved?”

Sarah blinked at him. The man reached behind the desk and pulled out an old Bible he used as a model. “You can get your name on it for a buck extra.” This Bible belonged to a William Fensterstock, the gold letters in a graceful calligraphy attested. Next to it was a symbol that looked somewhat like a squashed O with two little tails. “That’s the fish,” the man explained. “You can get a cross, a fish, or a dove. And that’s me,” he said, pointing at the name and grinning.

Sarah scrutinized the Bible. It did look nice with the engraving. But if her parents saw it, they would immediately know the truth. They wouldn’t be angry or even outwardly disapproving. But inside, they would be disappointed that they had raised a daughter incapable of rational thought.

“You sure you want white?” William Fensterstock asked. “It smudges real fast. Especially with kids at Sunday school. We’ve got some nice illustrated ones—“

“No thanks,” Sarah said quickly. “I want this one. And I want it white.”

“The lady knows what she likes!” William Fensterstock smiled. “Well, you want me to ring this up for you? Or you want the engraving?”

Sarah looked at the clean white face of the Bible. The feeling of shame had vanished. She did not want it to come back. “My name. My full name. And I want the cross next to it.”

He printed her name carefully, making sure to include the “H” at the end, and let Sarah look over what he had written just to be sure he got it right before ringing up the total. It was half what Sarah expected.

“That’s all?” she asked.

“Student discount,” he said, winking.

“Thanks, Mr. Fensterstock.”

“Call me Bill,” he said. He picked up her Bible. “This’ll be ready in a few hours.”

Sarah wondered how to fill those hours. She didn’t want to ride all the way back home. She thought about going to the coffee shop where her dad had waited for her while she went to Sunday School. Though the idea of purchasing coffee and a newspaper was appealingly sophisticated, she could not stomach the taste of coffee and she doubted the comic section (which was all she read) would entertain her for two hours.

Sarah decided to get on her bike and hit the open sidewalk. It was a lovely day for a bike ride. She rang her bell a few times, for the fun of hearing the bell ring. Then she sang a song the kids had sung in Sunday School, just to see how it sounded: “The B-I-B-L-E! Yes, that’s the book for me!” She wondered if the children were exceptionally bad spellers, and whether some authority had decided it wouldn’t do to have the children misspelling their holy book and personal savior, and written those names into lyrics. It was the only reason Sarah could think of for the spelling-based nature of many Sunday School songs.

There were lots of fun things to do in the park, even if a child was alone, as Sarah was. Sometimes she watched people play tennis on the cracked, mildewing concrete courts. They wore stained, faded sweatpants that pilled at the knees, and T-shirts that advertised football games which had transpired before Sarah had been born. She wished the men wore those crisp, collared shirts and wristbands of professional tennis players, outfits that seemed vaguely like those of superheroes to Sarah. She also coveted the women's perky, pleated white skirts, wishing she had one of her own, that she could maneuver about the court with the effortless agility of a fish darting from current to another and send tennis balls flying like neon green bursts of lightning.

Today there were no tennis players; it had rained and there were puddles on the court. Sarah walked over to the old oak trees; she played a game in which she made circles around the biggest of them without ever touching the ground, stepping instead from root to knarled, pointy root. When she tired of that, she crossed the little bridge that went over the creek. Though the creek was nothing special (more of a drainage ditch than a creek) crossing that narrow bridge always made Sarah feel like she was in some special, enchanted kingdom. On the side of the bridge by the parking lots, people played tennis and had picnics. On the other side of the bridge, the grass grew taller, the trees were denser, and at any moment a unicorn might appear.

Sarah squatted by the creek's bank. She wanted to examine the minnows closely, to lift one out of the water and watch the palpitations of its gills, but they seemed as impossible to catch as the bright little snippets of rainbow that are tossed out from a prism. She gave up on the minnows and moved to a park bench.

The peeling bench was marked with graffiti by which Jackie proclaimed her love for Stan, and an anonymous tip was given that stated that Michelle was “easy.” There were also some other words there that Sarah didn’t understand. She knew that a lot of the high school kids would come to the bench to make out. Sarah and her elementary school peers had dubbed it “The Love Bench.” If any child was suspect of harboring a crush on his classmates, the “Love Bench” was immediately invoked, as all the other children would suggest that he and his crush had either recently visited the notorious bench or were in the act of planning such a rendezvous. These allegations were delivered with scorn and received with deep embarrassment and denial.

Sarah had never had the “Love Bench” levered against her in such accusations. She was so quiet no one could ever accuse her of having a crush. Yet, of all her classmates, she probably spent the most time at the Love Bench. However, the Love Bench was visited by teenagers, who were either unaware of its title or too in love to care that they would be met with derision by fifth graders for visiting it. High school students didn’t visit the Love Bench until long after most elementary school children had gone to bed, anyway. But their beer cans and cigarettes butts were silent testaments to their passing. Sarah always threw away the trash she found there. Once she had even found a lacy bra. She picked that up with the forked end of a twig and deposited it into the trash can that proclaimed, ungrammatically, “Help Keep Our Park’s Clean!”

Despite the bench’s shady reputation, Sarah enjoyed it for the same reasons the high schoolers did: it was surrounded by two trees whose dense foliage created a leafy enclosure and some privacy. It was flanked by two streetlights whose bulbs hadn’t burned as long as Sarah remembered. Sarah could watch the events of the park undetected. Though there had been many complaints about the density of the foliage (including some from her own mother) no one had been proactive enough to actually prune it.

She felt the lump of change and dollar bills in her pocket. Maybe she could get an ice cream. She didn't have enough to go to a movie. The movies her parents chose were boring, usually in grainy black and white, with the actors all speaking a foreign language. Sarah couldn't keep up with the subtitles, and she never knew what was going on. Her favorite part of a movie was listening to her parents debate its merits and weaknesses on the way home. They invariably disagreed.

"How could you not like it?" her mother would ask. "The cinematography... it was *stunning*."

"I'm not saying it wasn't," her father would reply in a tense tone. "It's the metaphoric *framework* that was weak."

Then, when they got home, her mother would say to Sarah, after they were alone: "Your father. I love him, but he's got no sense for films. He's an *idiot*."

And later her father would tell her, "Don't listen to anything your mother says about movies. She doesn't know what she's talking about, but she sure *thinks* she does." And the next weekend her parents would discuss movie reviews and choose the next film to fight over. Sarah often thought that the films were a way for her parents to let off marital steam, the way some people let off excess energy by watching college football. They never fought about real issues, preferring rational discussion, so perhaps these faux-arguments served a purpose after all.

Kids at school were always telling her that her parents were hippies and did drugs. It was true that her parents had been hippies, but Sarah knew for a fact that they didn't ever do drugs. Her mother and father often talked about the sacredness of the human mind (it was the only thing they considered sacred) and how drugs destroyed it. They said they would never touch anything that jeopardized their ability to think rationally. They rarely ever drank, and when they did it

was wine, never more than a glass or two. But when she tried to tell her classmates that once, they scoffed and pointed out her bag lunch.

“Look at *that*,” the boys said, pointing to Sarah’s cold, white squares of tofu. “You *have* to be on drugs to think that tastes good.”

“Ooh, I’m Sarah’s parents! I’m on pot! I have the munchies! Give me some yummy tofu!” Then the boys smashed the tofu into each other’s faces, starting a food fight that, to Sarah’s relief, had the effect of diverting everyone’s attention away from her meal.

Sarah’s parents had been vegetarians since well before Sarah was born. Sarah was breast fed for one year and after that she was fed a strictly meat free diet. When she grew old enough to decide what she wanted to eat, her parents told her, “Eat what you want. It’s your body. We just choose food that doesn’t cause suffering and pollute our bodies.”

Sarah didn’t care about suffering or pollution at her kindergarten picnic, only about satiating her hunger. She ate a grilled hamburger along with the rest of her classmates and thought it tasted pretty good. An hour later, she started vomiting in front of everybody and earned herself the nickname Barfy. The stomach cramps lasted for a week. She never ate meat again.

Sometimes, Sarah devoted thought to the topic of why she didn’t fit in with the other kids. She wondered if the vomiting incident had started it. Her school was small, and even five years later, her classmates still remembered and periodically brought it up. It was probably the first time a lot of them had experienced the group solidarity that comes from mutual disgust. Perhaps that incident had created a rift that had only widened over the years—it was the acorn that slid into a small fissure in a stone and grew and split the stone in two. That seemed a likely theory, but the problem Sarah saw with it (she had inherited her parent’s ability to look at an

argument from all angles, and to find the presuppositions on which it existed) was the assumption that, had she never vomited at the kindergarten picnic, she would have been accepted by her peers. But acceptance was never something Sarah particularly craved.

Her kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Prince, had thought Sarah's parents were displaying typical pride when they took her aside before school and told her Sarah was an "old soul" who might have trouble getting along with other children. If there was anything to blame for Sarah's lack of socialization, Mrs. Prince decided she would blame it on Mr. and Mrs. Burchfield, not "too much wisdom." But when she met Sarah, she discovered they had been right. The child was different. It wasn't that she was smart (she made average progress with her counting skills and wasn't in the advanced reading group) but that she seemed completely disconnected from the other children. When she met Sarah, Mrs. Prince instinctively offered her hand, shook Sarah's small one with confidence, the way she would shake a job interviewer's hand, and said, "I'm Barbara Prince. Nice to meet you," before remembering that this was a five year old girl.

Sarah herself had always felt older than she really was. She saw her classmates the way adults saw them: as children, not as peers. When she was in kindergarten, they seemed like preschoolers. Now, in fifth grade, they seemed like kindergartens. Like smaller beings who must be taken care of, whose whims must be indulged. Given this attitude, Sarah considered it quite impossible for her to ever have a close relationship with any of these children, yet she was not unfriendly to them. They sensed her difference, though, and shunned her for it under the guise of hippie parents, weird brown bag lunches. Sarah took their ridicule without complaint, paying it no more mind than a mother whose toddler says he hates her when she makes him go to bed.

Sarah realized she had been on her bike for a long time. Looking down at her new red watch, she saw that half an hour had passed-- long enough to cover considerable distance on her bike. She considered turning back and just waiting the remaining hour out at the shop, when she saw something sharp poking through the trees.

It was the church's spire. She had not realized she was so close to the church, that she had taken turns that would lead her to it even though she didn't consciously know the way. But there it was, and it answered the question that had been plaguing her. She touched her hand to the wad of change in her pocket and knew just what to do with it.

Sarah knew that the ushers, like Dr. Drum, collected money from the congregants. Her parents maintained that this was partly why religion held man in spiritual and financial bondage. But Sarah thought that giving her change to the church would be appropriate. Mr. Fensterstock had given her a discount. It wouldn't be right to hoard the savings, but to pass it on, to keep his generosity in circulation. It would also assuage the still lingering guilt she felt about hiding Dr. Drum's Bible. She supposed guilt was a sort of bondage and that her parents would not approve of this reasoning. She decided to just quit rationalizing. One thing she did not care for was her tendency to think everything to death.

Sarah left her bike on the curb, then, rethinking, leaned it against a tree lest some elderly congregant trip on it. She wished she had her chain and padlock, then admonished herself. It's a *church*, she thought.

She wondered what to do with her money. She realized she had no idea who to give it to, or if there was even anybody around on a Saturday afternoon. The green lawn was deserted. Swings hung motionless on their chains in the playground behind the children's ministry

building. It was empty, but the emptiness bore the suggestion of fullness and its function, like a cup waiting to be filled.

Sarah went to the children's ministry door, thinking she could leave the change in the food donation basket. It was locked. She knocked and nobody answered. She walked to the next building, marked Fellowship Hall, and saw some offices lining the large common room in which folding chairs and card tables were set up. If the door had been open, these would have been likely places to make a donation. Two familiar looking banners hung on the wall, "Soldiers of Christ" and "Golden Sunbeams," under a sign that said "Made by the Fifth Grade Class."

On her way back to her bike, Sarah passed the sanctuary doors. She noticed that the fellowship hall, adult education building, children's ministry, and gymnasium flanked the sanctuary to the north, south, east and west. The entire layout of the church was a cross. Now, standing outside the sanctuary, she was at the center of the cross. She felt an urge, a visceral one, and pulled the heavy sanctuary door open.

If the rest of the church had been an empty cup, this was a chalice. Millions of prayers and hymns and sermons had passed through this place and left their mark, as wine stains a porous jar. She felt them there, giving the place an almost palpable vibration, a quivering, like a tuning fork that has been struck and vibrates still, even though the sound is no longer audible to human ears.

Sarah sat in one of the front pews. There was a hymnal and a Bible in front of her. The Bible had been donated by a Mrs. Beatrice O'Brien. Sarah flipped through it and thought with eagerness of her own Bible. It opened to a page in the back:

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and him with me."

Sarah glanced behind her shoulder at the church door. For a second she expected to hear a knock. But there was silence. She wondered if Mrs. Poltzer had been speaking of this Bible verse when she urged the children to invite Jesus into their hearts. But this verse didn't say anything about the heart. And it didn't say anything about inviting. Jesus, apparently, needed no invitation. He would just come right in. That sounded right to Sarah. What perturbed her was that she did not know where to find the door. Was it a door on a church? Was it a door to her heart? Was it even a door on her physical body? Sarah wondered if this was one of those occasions in which she was thinking too much. Then she reconsidered. Jesus said there was a door, and she would find it. All she had to do was listen for his voice.

Sarah went to the altar and prayed for a long time. She prayed to be able to hear Jesus when he spoke, and she prayed to find the door. When she unfolded her hands, her watch told her she had been in the church for over an hour. Sarah ran halfway down the aisle, then turned and placed her money in one of the empty offering plates that stood on the altar table.

A time to build up

Miles found Gates' note on his door when he went inside to enjoy his latest Crock Pot concoction. He heard her come in when he was standing at the kitchen sink, wiping his bowl dry with a tattered yellow washcloth. Her cheeks were wind-reddened and her eyes looked big and luminous. She crossed the floor and peered in the refrigerator.

“You know you aren't allowed to go for walks after it's dark outside.”

Gates retrieved a carton of milk, sniffed it, and put it back in the refrigerator.

“There are still rules in this house. And if you don't follow them, there are still consequences.”

Gates took a banana and container of cottage cheese and headed towards her room.

“You're *grounded*. What do you have to say about that?”

Miles heard nothing but the sound of Gates' bedroom door closing.

Gates being grounded meant that she had to attend the few marching band rehearsals that were left before State Finals. Miles doubted she would remain dutifully sequestered in her room if he was not there to enforce the rules, so she would have to accompany him to rehearsals, like a reverse restraining order.

The next day, Miles and Gates drove across town so the band could practice in the stadium in which they would perform a few weeks later—a dress rehearsal of sorts, to get used to the acoustics, to familiarize the band with their future venue. The rehearsal did not go as badly as Miles had expected. Practicing in the stadium seemed to remind the students that they would

soon be judged and evaluated by a very large crowd. Miles' arduous rehearsal schedule was not nearly as motivating as stage fright.

"Remember," Miles said into his megaphone, pacing across springy, neon green Astroturf. "There's going to be judges on the field when you're doing your show."

"What do they look like?" asked a mellophone player.

"Middle aged guys, wearing khakis, talking into a tape recorder. At least, most of them are middle aged guys. Just don't let them psyche you out. Just keep marching."

"What if they're standing in our spot?" someone else asked.

"Your job is to follow the drill. Their job is to stay out of your way. Believe me, they've gotten smacked by tubas before. If there's a collision, they know it's their own fault," Miles said.

The band seemed to like this bit of news. Many bragged about how many judges they planned to "smash."

"All right, all right, all right," Miles interrupted. "Talk about it after rehearsal. Now let's run the show."

To run the show was to play the entire field show straight through, no stopping. Miles retreated from the field while J.D. called the band to attention. The music sounded okay. Not great, but good. At least they weren't phasing. Miles would have liked a fuller sound, but with the number of students who had dropped, that was impossible. They would just have to take a lower score in the music category.

What really troubled Miles was the state of the drill. So many had dropped that the forms were unrecognizable, like a connect the dots image with a third of the dots missing. The band's drill looked as chaotic and patternless as a cloud of gnats hovering in the air.

J.D. led the band off the field to the beat of Chicken Oo-Noo. When the last student had stepped off the field, Miles looked at his watch. Twelve minutes long. Good. The show had to be under fifteen. After that period of time, the band would be penalized a tenth of a point for every member remaining on the field.

“Looking good,” Miles told his students as they clustered around him for feedback. He did not want to discourage them so close to finals. Especially when there was nothing to be done. He may as well build up their confidence.

“Drumline—nice work. Those sectionals paid off. Flutes, watch your phrasing. I want a cleaner sound from you. Everyone, watch those dynamics. More forte in the forte. Let’s run it one more time.”

The students groaned; Miles was infamous for saying “one more time” when he meant “two more times” or “three more times.”

While the band ran the show, Gates opened her book bag and retrieved her homework. The math book’s cover was smooth, only a little bent at the corners, protected from wear and tear by generations of brown-bag covers made by diligent students. Gates had not covered the textbook yet, not because she wasn’t diligent, but because she loved to look at it.

It was a series of interlocking circles, rendered in soft pinks, purples, greens, blues, and yellows. Small print at the bottom said, Altair Design 1:2. The inside of the textbook gave its background: “This image was taken from the Altair design, a series of polygons, hexagons, and pentagons that is neither regular nor semi-regular. Its beauty lies in the fact that it springs from a special set of five touching circles, reflected around the hypotenuse of a right angled isosceles triangle.” It reminded Gates of the patterns made in a kaleidoscope, when the stones inside were reflected in patterns of symmetry, and indeed the drill had a similar basis.

Miles called his students and said a few words that he hoped were encouraging, things like *team* and *fun* and *good work*. He looked at his watch—only eight o'clock and it was pitch black outside. Floodlights washed the field in a white, industrial strength light. Around each floodlight, moths congregated, thick and swirling as little insectile blizzards.

Miles shook his head a little when he realized he was still talking about teamwork, even as he watched the moths battering themselves against each other.

“Okay. See you guys tomorrow,” he concluded.

“Mr. McCormick?” One of the members of the color guard raised her flag.

“Yes?”

“I thought we were going to have a drill-down tonight,” she said.

He frowned. “I don't remember saying that.”

“You did. You said when we had a dress rehearsal, we'd have a drilldown.”

“Really?”

The rest of the band nodded.

“Okay, go ahead. If you want to stay.”

“No, Mr. McCormick. It's the last drilldown of the season. So you have to march, too.”

Miles could not fathom why he would have suggested any drilldown in which he would be required to participate. His students all wore the same expression—that of a child approaching his father with a mitt and a baseball, angling for a game of catch. They all seemed ten years younger than they really were. Miles remembered that these were the good students, the dedicated ones. These students had stayed.

“Everyone in formation,” Miles said.

The band members showed more hustle than they had so far all semester. Miles situated himself near the center of the cube and assumed the parade rest position.

“Detail ten hut!”

Miles stood at attention. The muscles and ligaments in his body slid into position smoothly and efficiently, as though, like oiled piston and levers of a steam engine, they had been designed with this function in mind. Miles slipped into the mindset of a surgeon wielding a scalpel, focused but relaxed.

J.D. gave the command to mark time.

Miles’ heels tapped the ground, alternating left and right.

“Back march hut!”

Ten students were eliminated for forward marching, caught off guard by the unusual command. Miles marched backward smoothly, balanced on the balls of his feet. Backmarching was accomplished by marching on tiptoes. It was easier to avoid tripping that way, and it kept the upper body motionless.

“Forward march!”

Miles rocked back smoothly on his right foot and extended his left leg, landing on his heel and rolling into an eight-to-five step. The Astroturf felt elastic under his feet, launching his feet with the springiness of a diving board. It offered more traction than real grass. Miles noticed that his ankles were a little weaker, his joints a little stiffer, than they had been last year.

As he executed the commands, he felt the same thing he had when he had practiced the Turkish March—that he was in a nodal point. This drilldown was ostensibly indistinguishable from any other drill down in which he had participated. The students were the same ages. The yardlines were the same distance apart. The empty field possessed the same hushed, cathedral

like spaciousness. He felt like he was on a carousel that went round and round. Each drill down, each piano practicing session, was a brass ring, but he was the one who had become tarnished with age—receding hairline, crease down the forehead.

Still, he was outpacing his students. How many band members were left? Four? Three?

The act of marching still held him in thrall, as it had when he was in high school. He would stand at attention, waiting for the drum major's gloved hands to drop and signal the first beat of the field show. He knew exactly what would happen for the next fifteen minutes. He knew where he would stand. He knew how he would move. He knew what he would hear. He even knew when he would breathe. He felt a profoundly satisfying sense of order when he was literally, physically, in the right place at the right time. Marching band was rite-like, with a rite's power: its constancy offered the illusion of permanence. But even if the thing does not change, its agent must. The mirror of ritual had revealed his mortality.

J.D. had stepped up the tempo of his commands. As he backmarched, Miles heard only one other pair of feet scraping Astroturf behind him. J.D. ordered parade rest; Miles widened his stance and lowered his arms and head. He tried to look at the ground and examine the shadow of the marcher behind him for an identity clue. But lit front and back by floodlights, the marcher threw no shadow.

“Detail ten hut! About face!”

Miles pivoted on his heel. He stood facing Gates' braided hair. She turned her head slightly and looked back with her peripheral vision, avoiding direct eye contact.

Why had Gates decided to participate? Did she want to beat him, to show him up? Had she been bored? Why open the channels of communication? If there was ever a wrong time and a wrong place to resume speaking, this was it. You weren't even supposed to talk during a drill

down. Miles quashed these thoughts and redirected his mind to his marching. His movements became sharp as paper cuts.

Miles and Gates did right slides towards the endzone, upper bodies twisted in the direction of the audience.

The band members watched intently, as though witnessing Bobby Fischer and Kasparov compete in a chess tournament. Gates and Miles' concentration was the same as these chess masters: laser-like, unwavering, almost mystical. They moved across the field in unison, seeming less like father and daughter than a figure and its reflection (though who was the mirror and who was the image, no one knew.)

“This could go on forever.” Miles stood at parade rest.

“I know,” Gates said.

A time to speak

Miles' shock rippled outward. First, he was shocked because he did not realize he had spoken out loud. Second, he was shocked because Gates had spoken to him. Third, he was shocked because his earlier waves of shock had nearly resulted in him missing the next command. As Miles forward marched, a fourth, equally shocking implication arose: Had Gates *intended* to shock him into losing?

No, he decided. Gates had not initiated the conversation. Her response was therefore not a strategy move. Still, it wouldn't hurt to test the waters.

"You can really march," he said.

"So can you."

They executed a right flank.

"This doesn't mean I want to be in marching band," Gates said. "I just kind of like marching."

"It's fun."

"Like acolyting," Gates said.

"I guess."

They guided left; Miles saw Gates' braid swinging pendulously from the force with which she turned her head. Sarah had always worn her hair in a French braid, and as soon as Gates' hair was long enough, Sarah braided it, too. It was Gates' favorite hairstyle. Soon after Sarah died, Gates came to her father for help.

"Will you braid me?" the three year old had asked. He had never braided hair in his life, but thought maybe he could figure it out on his own.

“Ow!” Gates had said. “That pulls.”

“Sorry.” The thick, silky hair slipped through his fingers like water. He wondered how on earth Sarah had managed to plait it into complicated patterns. Her slim fingers held some knowledge he didn’t.

“Your mom used to braid her hair,” Miles said, still watching the back of Gates’ head.

“She wore it in a French braid,” Gates said. “This isn’t a French braid.”

“It’s a braid. It’s very similar. ”

“Not really. They’re totally different braids.”

“I guess,” Miles said. “She was so good at braiding. She made it look easy.”

“Get over it.”

They kept marching. At this rate, Miles thought, J.D. would have no voice left for State Finals. Miles yearned to lower his raised arms. He saw that many of his students had left. J.D. had settled down on the endzone. To preserve his vocal cords, he had started changing the commands every few minutes instead of every few seconds. Gates and Miles forward marched two laps around the football field. Then J.D. yelled at them to backmarch.

“Are you tired of this yet?” Gates asked.

“Are you?” Miles replied.

“Sort of,” Gates said. “Why don’t you quit?”

“I’ll lose if I quit.”

“So?” Gates said. “It’s not a big deal. You just quit. That’s how easy it is. Besides, aren’t you over this whole thing?”

“Are you?”

“I’m *so* over it,” Gates confirmed. “But you know who’s over it the most?”

“Who?”

“J.D.”

Miles glanced at J.D., who sat with his arms folded, bundled up in his letterman’s jacket. The boy looked cold. J.D. would not care if Miles quit. J.D. would probably be relieved. Miles had issued the command to himself; he was both slave and psychotic master. If it had been up to him, he would be wearing circles in the track all night.

This is ridiculous, Miles thought. But even the thought was not enough to compel his feet to cease their relentless forward motion.

“Do you just...stop?” he asked Gates.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’m stopping.”

“You’re marching.”

“I’m stopping...” Miles said. “Now.”

“Still marching,” Gates observed. “Just *stop!*”

But Miles did not stop. He wanted to, and he did not want to. As sore as he had become, the rhythm remained familiar and comfortable, the circular laps hypnotic, the beat of his feet on the ground steady, constant. What would remain if he stopped? No motion. No rhythm. No pattern. No beat.

“*Stop!*” Gates repeated.

“I’ll die!”

Blood rushed from his head to his lower body, like an hourglass’s draining sand. The bleachers rose up on each side and in the corners of his vision, the world grew dim and sparkly. He felt a sudden weightiness and lassitude in his limbs, but as he fought the urge to crumple, the

solidity of the ground bore him up. Everything was woozy and strange; the world seemed to have lost some vital dimension. He felt propelled forward as though on a conveyor belt, the sensation of forward motion even though he had stopped. Stopped? Yes—he checked his feet to verify. They were no longer moving. He was still.

Miles lowered his hands from the attention position. The floodlights switched off one by one; clouds of moths dispersed to wherever moths go.

“You’ll be okay,” Gates said.

A time to pluck up that which is planted

Dear Grammie and Gramps,

Thank you very much for the birthday money. I had a great birthday! I used your money to buy a book. It is very good and I haven't read the whole thing yet but I will soon. I like it ALOT! The extra money is being saved for something special. Thank you again! Love, Sarah

Sarah scrutinized the letter and decided it was factual enough. Though she doubted her grandparents would disapprove of the way she spent their money, they would pass the news on to her parents. Sarah knew her parents would learn the truth eventually, but she did not want them to find out like that.

In the end, Sarah chose a passive route. She left the Bible in plain sight, with her name gleaming gold for all to see. Her parents said nothing of it, but books began mysteriously migrating from her father's study to the table beside Sarah's favorite reading spot: Why I Am Not A Christian, by Bertrand Russell. Letters from the Earth, by Mark Twain. Atheism: The Case Against God, by George H. Smith. When Sarah failed to disturb the books from their resting places, the books appeared open, passages aggressively highlighted with ink the same green-yellow as tennis balls.

“Belief and nonbelief are two giant planets, the orbits of which don't touch. Everything about Christianity can be justified *within the context of Christian belief*. Faith is a logical door which locks behind you. What looks like a line of thought is steadily warping into a circle, one that closes with you inside,” argued a certain John Sullivan.

But Sarah thought that the same was true of nonbelief. Both belief and nonbelief were closed circles. Unlike Venn diagrams, they had no shared region. One could not be reasoned into or out of either circle. There was no logic involved in a transition from faith to faithlessness, or vice versa, at all. It was a reversal, a leap, a jump to the other side of the mirror, so that the former side looked backwards. Even if one did try to support one's belief through logical argument, the seed of the argument was immune to rationalization: either one did or did not believe. The argument did not move forward or back. Only one's mind had moved.

Sarah enjoyed the arguments of Russell and Smith and admired their air-tight logic. But these arguments were not beautiful. They shattered like porcelain against the wisdom of the prophets, the grace of the Psalms. It came down to choice. Both sides came down to choice. Which do you want to believe? Sarah chose beauty.

As a way of answering, Sarah began leaving her Bible open in strategic locations, highlighting and annotating significant verses. Her bait appeared untouched, but it was possible that her parents were being as stealthy as she was. It was also equally likely that they considered the Bible too repugnant to even consider. Sarah decided it would be best to use discourse with which they were familiar. She left books lying around, too. Kierkegaard's Practice in Christianity. C.S. Lewis's Mere Christianity.

One day, she found an article in her parents' philosophy journal in which the author compared the concept of God to a divine carrot, man to a stodgy mule. "How much better it would be if that beast of burden recognized the carrot as an illusion, unattainable, a construct of dominating parties to enslave the sluggish, the dull? The mule must recognize his own strength, his own ability. He can span great distance, he can move mountains, but he is limited as long as he fails to look beyond the divine carrot, to see the world as it really is. Only then can he

overcome the inertia of his own mind, which is the true source of all that is divine.” The author was her father.

In response, Sarah underlined a Czeslow Milosz poem:

“The human mind is splendid; lips powerful, and the summons so great it must open Paradise.”

Neither Sarah nor her parent’s arguments had the effects that were intended. In fact, both sides ended up more convinced than ever of the rightness of their beliefs. But, like her parent’s movie spats, the unspoken debate was not in vain. Sarah’s parents marveled that their daughter, who had never demonstrated any interest in philosophy, had been reading Russell, Nietzsche. And what was more, she understood their words, could formulate defenses against the arguments of the great minds! They had thought that Sarah’s religion signaled a mental deficit on her part. Now, they saw that it had developed her affinity for the analytic. Though they disagreed with her beliefs, they admired the logic behind them. They were proud of her.

Sarah continued to study her Bible in solitude, venturing once or twice a week to the sanctuary during deserted afternoon hours to pray and leave whatever money she had. She would not announce her destination to her parents when she was setting out, but if she was late coming home and they asked where she had been, she looked them in the eye and said calmly, “Church.” She did not ask to be driven to Sunday School, and they did not offer.

Her parents saw a shift in Sarah’s attitude. She was quicker to turn off the television or put down the Bible when her mother asked for help in the kitchen, and she no longer neglected her chores. Yet beneath the spirit of servitude was a thread of rebellion. Her parents sensed that her filial piety was not driven by some devotion to her parents, but to an ideal beyond them.

Sarah seemed to regard the events of her daily life as small, not worth the effort of emotional responses. A calm settled upon her. Grace and James spoke of it to each other in their bedroom, calling it “zombie-like.”

At night, Sarah read the scripture. She loved the sibilance of the delicate pages, their gilded edges. She loved, too, the page that was of thicker, glossier material: the family register. A series of horizontal lines was superimposed over a large oak tree. Each line had a spot for name and date of birth. Sarah carefully penned her parents’ names in ink in the lines under her grandparent’s names and above her own. Lines extended from her own with the captions “Spouse” and “Children.” She felt the first stirrings of the family she would create, whose names would be written in the holy book.

A time to heal

“So,” Miles said, as the car heater blasted frigid air. “What do you think?”

“About the band?” Gates asked.

“Sure,” he said.

“Well, you don’t have a show, for starters,” Gates said.

“Of course we do.”

“No, I mean, a field show. The drill is really bad. I mean, like, nobody’s on the field.”

“The drill’s a little thin. I’ll grant you that. But there’s still a design.”

Yellow stripes of fluorescent street light slid across Gates’ face. “Maybe to you.”

“It’s there,” Miles said, but even in his defensiveness he knew Gates was right.

Somewhere in its translation from his mind to the field, the show had gotten lost. “We do have a few holes,” Miles admitted.

“You can’t guide to holes!” Gates said. “That’s what you always say, isn’t it?”

“It’s true.” Miles cranked the heater even higher. The air held a dampness that suggested snow. That would be right on schedule. They usually got the first snow around October. “But there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Gates fiddled with the radio, searching for a top-forty station. “I guess.”

“Except re-write the show,” Miles said. He waited to hear some feedback from his daughter, since re-writing the show three weeks before State Finals was a ludicrous, impossible idea.

“Hmm,” she said noncommittally.

“But there’s not enough time for that,” Miles concluded.

Gates thumbed the edge of her math book.

“And I don’t have any ideas for new drill.”

Gates held up her math book.

“I thought your teacher told you to get covers on your textbooks.”

Gates shook her head. “I was thinking... for the drill.”

Her father looked at the images. They started with simple triangles and grew into unique, complex arrangements based on mathematical principles. Yet they packed the visceral thrill of a fireworks display. Miles looked at Gates, then down at the design. Then back at Gates. He didn’t seem to know what to focus on. He finally put his hand on Gates’ shoulder.

“This is wonderful. It’s just...wonderful.”

“Does that mean you’re going to use it?” Gates asked.

“It’s going to be tough,” Miles said excitedly. He had started driving little faster than usual—which for him, meant going the speed limit instead of five miles below (“Remember, it’s the speed *limit*,” he often reminded Gates when a frustrated tailgater zoomed around his stodgy car. “The *maximum* you can go, not the minimum. Just because the speed limit is a certain number doesn’t mean you have to go that fast.”)

“I mean, all these intersecting lines... that’s not easy,” Miles continued.

“Think of the GE,” Gates said.

“GE! It’s got GE in spades! I mean, it’s just... Pomona is going to be scared senseless when they see this closer.” Miles began to gesture with his hands before planting them back in the two and four o’ clock positions on the wheel. “How did you think of this, anyway?”

“I just happened to be looking at my math book and I saw the band.” Gates said. It wasn’t the whole truth. She wasn’t sure she could explain that. But Miles was quiet, waiting for the rest.

“In algebra, we’re learning about how to graph stuff. About slopes. And the slope of a line—if you want to get a line that’s perpendicular to it, you have to give it a slope that is the opposite—a negative reciprocal. And like, the X and Y axis are opposites. They’re sort of like negative reciprocals. And when you get negative reciprocals, it makes a cross. You know, like the ones at church.” Gates wondered where she was going with this. It didn’t make sense to her. But it made sense to Miles, or so he suggested with his thoughtful nods.

“So I keep seeing these crosses everywhere. The X-Y axis—that’s a cross. The marching band—the way you have the students guide in parade formation—that’s a cross. And at church, you know. That’s a cross too. The center of the X Y cross is (0,0) and think it means nothing. When you get two opposite lines they cancel each other out and become nothing.

“But it isn’t quite nothing. It’s nothing and it’s something too. And when I looked at the math book, and looked at you with your band, I sort of knew it. And the Altair design, when I saw how perfect it would be for your closer, that was like proof. I don’t know if any of that made sense,” she concluded, almost apologetically.

Miles scrutinized a stop sign from which red paint flakes had begun to chip. A car horn distracted him. He realized he had been waiting for the stop sign to turn green. “Gates, do you know why I’m a band director?”

She shook her head.

“The hippie kids at my school used to talk about dharma. They said it was like being stoned. They said time stood still, that it was a state of bliss—time slipped away because you

were in the right place, at the right time, doing the thing that was right for you. It was a state of ultimate order. In that second between raising the baton and lowering it to start the first beat, I knew I found my proper place.” Miles looked at his daughter nervously, as though she were a doctoral committee and he a nervous PhD candidate. “Is that sort of like... what you mean?”

“Sort of,” Gates said. She had never heard such a perfect description of the feeling she got after acolyting.

Miles turned down their street. “Your mother would have called that God.”

“You mean you don’t?”

“I never thought much about God until I met her,” Miles admitted.

“I thought you were always a Christian.”

“I wasn’t.”

“What were you?” Gates asked.

“A lot like you,” Miles replied.

“Really?” Gates was incredulous.

“Yes.” Miles pulled into their driveway.

“So does that mean I don’t have to go to confirmation classes?”

“I guess not,” Miles said.

“Are you mad?” Gates asked.

“No,” Miles said. Miles remembered their last time in the car, the raised finger. He was glad this was in the past, but he still retained the sense time looping back on itself, that *deja-vu* that’s not so much *deja vu* as the realization that one’s life is just a collection of cycles that inevitably bring one back to the same point, like a projector playing the same loop again and again.

I should do something profound —something I've never done before, so that this way, this loop will be different from all the rest. Say something deep. He turned off the car but they sat a minute longer, reluctant to depart from its lingering warmth.

Nothing profound came to Miles' mind. It was as perfectly blank as the (0,0) origin of an x-y axis.

“Well,” he said finally. “I better re-write that drill.”

A time to laugh

Sarah came home from school and announced that she was going to learn to play the trumpet. Her mother looked up from a magazine.

“Wait a second,” she said. “We haven’t discussed this.”

Sarah gave her a funny look. “Isn’t that what we’re doing now?”

“Well, yes, but I mean...” Her mother pressed a finger to her left temple. She did that when she was gathering her thoughts, as though she retrieved the sentences from her brain through osmosis. “I mean, your *father* and I haven’t discussed this.”

Sarah sat quietly. There was something stubborn about her silence. Grace wondered if Sarah had studied non-violent resistance. Did Jesus ever talk about that?

“You know,” Grace continued. “There’s money to think about. There’s the cost of the trumpet, of lessons...” She didn’t mention the *noise* factor.

Sarah explained the school’s music program. The trumpet she would use belonged to the school. There would be no charge for her to borrow it while she was enrolled. The lessons would be taught after school by high school volunteers, with the band director supervising. So there would be no cost at all.

“I just need you to sign this form,” Sarah said. It was a liability form in case something happened to the trumpet. Sarah extended a pen.

Her mother looked at the form. She hesitated. Sarah spoke again, “They have mutes, you know. For the trumpet. So it isn’t as loud when I practice.”

Sarah went upstairs and tucked the signed form into her bag. Then she re-read Psalm 150.

“Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp.”

To Sarah, the sound of the trumpet was bright and effervescent as laughter.

A time to love

In the gates leading out to the stadium, children begged their parents for nachos and frozen lemonade. Teenage couples navigated the crowds awkwardly, hands linked as though fusing them into a two-headed, amoeba-like creature. Vendors hawked programs and T-shirts.

Gates perused a program. Its cover featured a young man blowing a trumpet, eyes hidden beneath the brim of his hat, jawline cleanly shaved. The bands were depicted in the program in the order they had ranked the last year. Pomona appeared last; the Regiment second to last. The Regiment's staff was minimal: Miles McCormick, the percussion director, and the color guard directors. Pomona's staff totaled forty, including the director, design staff, brass staff, woodwind staff, percussion staff, guard staff, visual staff, and management. Gates wondered what the management's job was. She supposed it was like the band moms—to pack bag lunches for the kids and stuff. But she figured that since they were staff they probably did fancier things. Perhaps Pomona's band enjoyed catered lunches. She doubted they had ever endured the indignity of scraping horse dung from shoes.

Gates settled herself in a seat that was not so close to the field that she couldn't see the drill formations, and not so far that the acoustics weren't any good. She removed a pen from her pocket. In every program, a ballot was provided so that one could rank the bands individually and then compare one's scores to the judges'. Gates did that every year, and every year she and the judges distributed scores that were uncannily similar, except that Gates always awarded her father's band first place.

Gates' neighbors annoyed her. There was a little girl who was continually assaulted by needs, which she broadcast to the rest of the stadium: she *needed* a pretzel; she *needed* to go to the bathroom; they *needed* to turn the floodlights down because they hurt her eyes. To her left, a couple of high school boys appraised the body of each female who possessed attributes of feminine sexual maturity. Gates was glad she was not yet breasted and therefore escaped their scrutiny.

But most troubling was the profusion of families in black T-shirts that proclaimed: GO POMONA! They had even brought black and silver flags and a huge banner that had a huge heart symbol between the words "WE" and "POMONA". The T-shirts said: State Champs: 1997, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005!!!

Gates thought this was a little presumptuous, since the 2005 state finals had just begun. But she didn't point it out. She was too deep in Pomona Country. It was a hostile place. She zipped up her windbreaker over her incriminating yellow Regiment T-shirt. She didn't consider it an act of shame, but rather one of stealth. She was undercover.

Gates watched the other bands compete with some interest. To her, the shows seemed rather bland, perfunctory, as though the bands knew that they had no shot at the prize, that the real competition here was between Pomona and the Hive Regiment. But the Pomonians in Pomona Country seemed oblivious to the fact that their band had not yet won. They celebrated already.

It was true that Pomona had beaten the Regiment at every other competition leading up to State Finals. And, if the rumors were true, then Pomona had some secret weapon that would boost their winning scores even higher for state finals. Gates could figure out what it was pretty easily: a kick-ass closer.

The sun was setting, releasing its death aura in a fantastic blaze of feathery pinks and yellows. To her left, the sky was the deep blue of night; to the right, a profusion of hues that mimicked the tie-dyed T-shirts of the boys sitting next to her. The sky seemed to close over the stadium like a lid, like the curving dome of a planetarium.

“Oh,” a Pomonian mother with a fuzzy perm said. “It’s the Hive Regiment.”

Gates sat up a little straighter. Her father’s band assembled at the gate. They marched onto the field. If it had been a green lake of water instead of grass, the ripples from each foot would have rippled out at exactly the same rate. Each heel struck the ground in unison. The only sound was the *tap, tap, tap* of a single snare drum, each heel hitting the ground in unison on its beat.

The tension that settled over the stadium was palpable. It was the difference between the time an opening act plays and the time the diva takes the stage. Even in Pomona Country, the grumblings had ceased. Now the Pomonians were paying avid attention to see where the Regiment would fail. The small girl had ceased her endless inventory of needs.

“Now taking the field, the *R-r-r-regiment!*” The announcer took his job too seriously, rolling the R’s.

The Regiment stood, motionless. Everyone was in position in the first set of drill. After endless hours of rehearsal, the show was as close to being ready as it ever would be. Gates knew that every member of the band was nervous. She was nervous for them. Her father wasn’t nervous, though. He told his band the same thing before each competition: “Go out there and have fun.”

“Dr-r-um major J.D. Cooper, *IS* your band ready?”

J.D. raised his hand to his forehead, then crossed it his chest in his own salute. Every drum major had a unique salute. One year, Pomona's drum majors had done backflips as their salute. Gates thought that was gimmicky, but the crowd ate it up.

"Go J.D.!" yelled Gates' teenaged neighbors.

The announcer spoke again. "Regiment, you may now take the field... in competition!"

JD ascended his platform and removed his hat. His white-gloved hands counted out the 4/4 beat. Then, the rumble of tubas and trombones, like approaching thunder.

The band members moved over the field in amorphous shapes. When they reached their first hit point, the music roared to a crescendo, punctuated by the drumline, the drill assumed a forceful square, and the color guard unfurled bright flags. Hit by music, visuals, and intense color all at once, the audience stayed silent for a while, then erupted into a roar like a jet plane taking off.

The tempo was fast. Gates could tell the band members had to work to maintain the breakneck, double-time speed, but like Olympic figure skaters, they glided across the field seemingly effortlessly. The drill took on a life of its own, like some constantly evolving creature, ruffled plumes sticking out like weird antenna.

Miles had told Gates that marching bands were originally designed as military accompaniment, to give spirit to the troops. She noticed that even in the family atmosphere of the stadium, with nary a weapon in sight, the band had the ability to rouse something primal in the listener, something that enticed the nervous system to release endorphins and urged the heart to beat faster. Maybe that was why marching bands accompanied the violent game of football during half-time. The marching band had a greater capacity to thrill than a string quartet or choir.

Gates kept her enthusiasm in check, fearing that a real riot would break out. The Pomonians seemed easily provoked to violence.

The opener thrilled; the middle section provided a gentle, soothing contrast, replete with musical artistry. The drum solo snapped the audience back to the edge of their seats. But the closer... Gates was not sure how the crowd would respond to that.

The band launched into its final movement. The drill moved from simple to complex. The mathematical elegance, translated to a field, seemed almost 3-D.

“It’s like...” one of the boys sitting next to Gates whispered. “It’s like I’m seeing through *time*.”

“It’s like that time we ate those mushrooms. Remember that?”

“Whoa, man,” The boy said, in response to the patterns on the fields, not the psychedelic fungus. “*Whoa*.”

When the band finished with a final beat of drums, blare of brass, and flourish of huge, shimmery multi-colored flags, there was a stunned silence. The audience took a few moments to re-group, like a patient just awakening from a coma. Then applause rose from the crowd. Gates leaped to her feet. The teenagers and the little girl followed suit, even emitting appreciative yells. The Pomonians remained staunchly planted in their seats.

Gates penciled in her scores for general effect, visual performance, and music performance. She gave the band a 92.5 out of a possible 100, deducting a few points for brass performance and color guard (she saw a few flags get dropped, and overall the color guard was not as tight as she would have liked it to have been.) Ensemble music she gave a perfect score.

The Pomonians began yelling, blowing air horns, shaking pompoms, and wielding their sycophantic signs long before a single member of the Pomona band was in sight. When the band

took the field, the hullabaloo increased, which Gates hadn't thought was possible. She plugged her ears as a sign of protest. The little girl protected her ears, too. All the Pomonians stood up. This time, Gates was the one to maintain contact with her chair. Certainly no band deserved a standing ovation just for taking the field. Her teenaged neighbors took the opportunity to leave, perhaps to visit the restroom, purchase nachos, or indulge in some other refreshment.

Gates was shocked to see that the band wore new uniforms, all in black. Black plumes, black shoes, black pants, with bits of silver sequins sparking off the stadium seating. They had even replaced the brass instruments with silver plated ones. Gates wondered how much it all cost. But she inwardly admitted that it made a sharp impression.

“Pomona high school, is your band ready?”

The drum majors (there were three of them) hoisted the smallest of them and threw her into the air like a cheerleader. She did a split mid-air, and somehow managed to salute at the same time. This elicited more yelling from the Pomonians, as well as a few “GO SHANNON”s.

Gates had seen their show at prelims and been unimpressed. Like many of Pomona's shows, it relied heavily (too heavily, Gates thought) on theatricality rather than solid drill, marching, and musicianship.

The subject was Titanic, and the show was based on the ill-fated love affair outlined in James Cameron's 1997 blockbuster. A male and female member of the color guard were dressed as Jack and Rose, respectively. With the help of the other members, they were hoisted into the air while the rest of the band made a formation that mimicked the prow of a ship. The color guard ran past the ship holding long, blue streamers, evoking waves. The crowd oohed. Gates rolled her eyes.

The next movement was the unsettling iceberg collision. The band, still in ship formation, moved across the field, while guard members hid under silver tents, moving the tents so they floated around the field like icebergs. The largest and most intimidating of the 'bergs brushed the side of the "ship" in a screech of trumpets intended to mimick the scrape of ice on metal.

The color guard moved to the back of the field and began dragging something on. Gates hadn't seen it before. She supposed it was part of the spectacular closer, the secret weapon to which the Pomonians had alluded. It was a replica of the sinking Titanic's rear end, as though it were sticking straight out of the water. To Gates, it looked as though it was life size. Jack and Rose stood at the top, and as the music played, the replica gradually collapsed onto itself, creating the illusion of sinking into the field. Fireworks shot from its walls, and the audience screamed with delight. The Pomonians leapt to their feet.

"Now that," said an older man, "is called entertainment."

"It's the emotion of it," insisted his companion. "They really captured the *emotion*."

Gates took advantage of the time between the last performance and the full retreat to wander around. She saw the high school boys leaning against the wall with fluid, lazy grace.

"Hey, what was that last band playing?" the curly haired one asked.

"Titanic," she said.

"Titanic," the boy said with disdain. "That's chick shit."

"Told you we didn't miss anything," his friend said.

"Man... Chick shit," he repeated.

Gates moved on, pleased. She hoped the judges had a similar reaction. She found her father's band in formation behind the stadium, ready to take the field, along with all the other finalists, for the full retreat when winners would be announced.

Miles gave her a hug.

"Good job," she said.

"It wasn't me," he said, gesturing at his band.

"Titanic sucked," Gates said. "That's what the crowd said." She didn't mention that only two boys had been of that opinion, and that the rest of the crowd had been enraptured.

"Those Pomona kids work hard. They did a good job."

"I mean, is this Broadway, or a football field?" Gates was proud of what she thought was a clever remark.

"Their marching was solid. Their music was solid," Miles replied with a touch of disappointment. The truth was, Pomona had not allowed the finer points of marching to be overshadowed by theatricality.

"But aren't you pissed that they're going to win?"

Miles stopped regarding his band and looked at his daughter. He had always thought she favored her mother, physically, but now he saw that her movements, the stubborn set of her jaw, were like his. He wondered if parents ever saw their children as whole people instead of sorting them into disparate tendencies, habits, features, taking ownership of some and delegating others to the spouse. Wasn't that an extreme form of vanity, of self-centeredness? Parenting books said that infants saw the whole world, parents included, as extensions of themselves, and that they escaped that solipsism around three years of age. The parenting books never mentioned that it returned, in reverse, when these children grew to adults and had offspring of their own.

“Gates,” Miles said.

“What?”

“The P-word, Gates.”

“Oh. Sorry,” Gates said. “Well, *aren't* you, though?”

Miles reflected. “Not really. No. I guess not.” Really, the outcome seemed inconsequential to him. Gates frowned and went back to her seat while the all the bands took the field for retreat. Placements were about to be announced.

The bands, all ten of them, stood in parade formation on the field, arranged in rectangles of varying length and width. Pomona’s black uniforms glittered menacingly; the Regiment’s white pants practically glowed in the floodlights, as did the shoes. Gates took personal pride in the white luster of the shoes.

The announcer ranked the bands ranked the bands in tenth through third place. Then he listed the special awards: Best Drum Majors: Pomona. Best Color Guard: Pomona. Best Percussion: Pomona. Crowd Favorite: Pomona.

“In second place...” he said, giving frequent pauses, probably in an effort to heighten the suspense. But there was nothing suspenseful about it. Everyone already knew how it would turn out. “With a score of 93 points...”

Gates checked her score. That was 0.5 higher than she had ranked her father’s band. Perhaps she had been a little too harsh in her scoring.

“With 5.2 penalty points...”

Gates wondered how on earth they had managed to rack up that many penalty points. Her father was scrupulous about meeting requirements. But that meant that the original score must have been a 98.2. The truth dawned on her at the same time the announcer spoke.

“Pomona High School! And in first place, with a score of 93.5 and no penalty points...The Regiment!”

Miles later explained to Gates that Pomona’s extravagant closer had cost them first place. A band was allotted only fifteen minutes of time on the field; this included setting up and breaking down the elements of the show. If anybody was left on the field after fifteen minutes time elapsed, 0.1 points were deducted from the band’s final score for each person left on the field. Pomona had not factored in the time it would take to remove the massive false ship from the field. Fifty-one members remained on the field after time had run out. Pomona, it would seem, had just tried too hard.

Back home, Miles tacked the First Place banner in the hallway, across from the family pictures.

“Look at it,” Gates said breathlessly. “The letters are *gold*. I bet that’s real gold.”

“That banner’s going to look great in the bandroom.”

“It looks great here. The hall was so empty before.”

“We could always, I don’t know, hang some pictures or something,” Miles suggested, almost nervously.

“Pictures of what?”

“You know. Family pictures.”

“They’re all hanging already,” Gates said.

“I thought we could maybe get some new ones,” Miles said.

“Can we hang some pictures of the Altair design? The Altair design is so cool.”

“It made a pretty okay show.”

“*Okay?*” Gates repeated. “It was awesome.”

“Well,” Miles said. “I guess I thought so, too.”

A time to be born

Miles offered to pick up milk, but Sarah insisted on running the errand herself. Cloaked by her generosity was a sense of restlessness. Sarah loved taking care of her daughter and her home, but she considered her temperament more conducive to the lifestyle of a cloistered monk than that of a young mother. Opportunities to be alone were rare; the concept of solitude approached myth in its scarcity. Sarah paused at her car, turning the ignition key over and over in her hand before settling on a different, smaller key. She unlocked her bicycle and wheeled it down the driveway.

The streets were narrow and without sidewalks, the neighborhood planning commission having decided that it was more aesthetically pleasing to have lawns that stretched all the way to the street, their green expanse uninterrupted by white pavement. Very few adult trees shaded the street, and those that did had been imported from other neighborhoods. Sarah passed a tender shoot of a tree she and Gates and Miles had planted that fall.

In the four years that she and Miles had lived in Soaring Oaks, the surrounding area had been developed. Along with Gates, Sarah and Miles trekked into woods that would soon be mowed down.

“Take a good look at all these trees, Gates,” Sarah had instructed the chubby two year old. “Soon they’ll all be gone.”

Gates solemnly put a comforting thumb in her mouth.

“Well, which one do you want to take home?” Miles asked, pulling his little trowel from a leather pouch. He had asked for it one Christmas. In his mind it was the sort of ruggedly

masculine accessory a roofer or handyman might use. To Sarah it more closely resembled a fanny pack, albeit a rustic cowhide one, but she bought it for him, anyway.

Gates looked from tree to tree. The trees were so tall and dignified and beautiful. She thought surely what they were doing must be wrong, like raiding a museum. Gates looked from tree to tree. They had distinct personalities. One, with twisting, leafless branch and fat, warty protrusions of wood, looked positively witchy. A slender young birch with pale green leaves reminded Gates of her mother in the wedding pictures she had seen.

“That one,” she said, pointing. The tree she had chosen was a huge, thick oak, branches that were larger around than many of the trunks of the other trees.

“That one’s a little big, Gates,” Miles told her.

“That one,” she said, pointing a small sapling that had sprouted between its roots.

Miles saw that it was a good choice. The tree would be easily uprooted. It had probably sprung from a root dropped by the older tree. Left between its roots, the young tree would have withered, deprived of necessary nutrients and sunlight even if the woodcutters hadn’t been coming.

In a few moments, Miles had dug up the young tree. Gates examined its roots intently while Sarah explained their function. They brought the young tree back and planted it in their yard. It was a little taller than Gates.

“It’s little,” Gates said.

“It’s an oak. Oaks grow slowly,” Miles said. “How long until it’s grown, do you think?”

“At least twenty years,” Sarah said. “Oak trees don’t produce acorns until they’re at least twenty.”

“Twenty years?” asked Gates.

“It seem like a long time, doesn’t it?” agreed Sarah.

“A long time,” Gates repeated solemnly.

Even though that was just a year ago, the tree had grown considerably, flourishing under the frequent watering and fertilizer treatments that Gates lavished upon it with her little copper watering can. Sarah paused on her bike to look at the tree. She hoped that in five or six years it would be big enough for Gates to climb. Maybe its branches would harbor a tire swing, or a tree house. When Gates was in high school, they might wake up to find its foliage adorned with toilet paper. And maybe, in the almost unforeseeable future, Gates would be photographed underneath it in her wedding gown.

Sarah made a right onto a busier street. She made sure to signal with her arm when turning and rang her bell at a tabby cat that crossed her path. Sarah doubted the cat would heed her warning, but she seized any opportunity to ring the brass bell. Someday she would get a baby seat and strap Gates in there and they would ride around the quieter parts of the neighborhood.

Sarah leaned her bike against the wall of the corner store and didn’t bother to lock it up. She paid for the milk and bought some shaving cream for Miles, too, since she could tell he was getting low by the way he shook and shook the can, and put it in the bike’s flowered basket.

When she turned out of the parking lot, a bee settled on the plastic flower of the basket. Sarah stiffened. She rang the bell once, twice, but the bee kept stubbornly nosing the plastic flower. It lit on her arm. Sarah began to panic. There was a strange sound, like a foghorn, and then a squeal like a rubber sole on a wooden gymnasium floor.

She was on the ground, lying in something wet. *I've gone and spilled the milk. Oh well, no use crying over it*, she thought. She was glad she had enough cash to buy an extra gallon.

A man with a stubbly jawline and a trucker hat came out and spoke over her. The clerk from the gas station was there, too, but she couldn't understand the words they were saying. They looked at her urgently, and at one another, and then the man in the hat started dialing a cell phone.

I'm all right. I just lost my balance is all. Except, clearly, that wasn't all. Sarah could not make her mouth move to form the words. She remembered when they had planted the young tree, how careful she had been with its filament-like, almost translucent roots. She knew how the tree must have felt when it was neither potted nor planted in the earth.

Sarah looked past the ring of concerned faces. Far above her head, the bee flew on to more productive flowers. And past it, like a sun eclipsed by the moon, a white bird flew. A broken line became solid.

The center of the cross. Yes, I see.

Vita

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